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Analyze the Rebellious Character and Tragic Color of Fan Yi in "Thunderstorm"

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Abstract: This study focuses on the character Fan Yi in Cao Yu's classic play *Thunderstorm*, offering an in-depth analysis of her rebellious nature and tragic essence. Through meticulous textual interpretation and contextual examination of the historical social environment, the paper explores the manifestations and origins of Fan Yi's defiant actions, while examining the causes and impacts of her tragic fate. The research aims to reveal the profound implications of *Thunderstorm* in character portrayal and social issue reflection, providing a fresh perspective for understanding this literary masterpiece.

Keywords: thunderstorm; Fan Yi; rebellion; tragic color

1. Introduction

As a significant work of modern Chinese drama, Cao Yu's *Thunderstorm* is rooted in the early 20th-century intellectual enlightenment movement. Fan Yi is not merely a symbol of personal assertion but also a product of intertwined social tensions of the time. Her independence is primarily expressed through her refusal to accept medicine from Zhou Puyuan. Zhou Puyuan, as both head of the family and husband, exercises household authority, while Fan Yi's refusal represents a personal challenge to this control. Her emotional interactions further reveal her internal conflict: her relationship with Zhou Ping combines emotional dependence with attempts to assert agency within family dynamics. In the confined domestic space, she seeks to maintain self-awareness yet confronts ethical and emotional paradoxes. Tragedy emerges: her awakening lacks social support, her methods of assertion are confined to private emotional spaces, and ultimately, her actions are constrained by existing family structures.

This character reflects the struggles of early 20th-century educated women navigating family and societal roles, where the gap between awakening consciousness and available options renders her fate tragic. The symbolic rejection of authority, the clandestine pursuit of autonomy, and the inability to reconcile personal desires with external pressures demonstrate the depth of her dilemma. Through Fan Yi, *Thunderstorm* not only portrays an individual's tragedy but also highlights the broader conflicts between tradition and modernity, revealing how private emotions are deeply entangled with social and cultural transformation.

2. The Rebellious Expression of Fan Yi's Character

Within Zhou's strict household hierarchy, Fan Yi's presence represents a subtle disruption of the traditional family order. The enclosed space, surrounded by high walls, is permeated with family norms and authoritative expectations [1]. Every word and action of Fan Yi constitutes a challenge to this system. Her refusal to drink the medicine carries

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symbolic weight: as the steaming bowl was offered, Zhou Puyuan's stern gaze and command loomed, yet she pushed the bowl aside, her fingers steady, lips tightly closed, eyes silently meeting her husband's. This act is not merely physical resistance but an assertion of self—refusing to be molded into a compliant role and maintaining autonomy over her emotional and personal decisions [2].

Her emotional transgressions further highlight her inner awakening and pursuit of independence. On a sultry summer night, with the study door half-open and candlelight flickering, she whispers to Zhou Ping: "These years, I have been waiting alone, enduring alone." Her tone mixes grievance with a struggle to maintain agency in difficult circumstances. While this relationship defies contemporary social norms, it embodies the repressed subject's pursuit of emotional autonomy within specific contexts [3]. Despite knowing limited prospects, she continues to assert herself, risking personal loss to challenge rigid moral and social rules. Her passionate expression is not reckless indulgence but a cry for personal agency within constraining circumstances, reflecting the psychological tensions experienced by women in times of generational transition. Her actions serve both as a personal assertion and as a critique of restrictive family expectations [4].

This defiance also reveals the paradoxical nature of her struggle. Although Fan Yi's gestures often appear confined to private, almost invisible spaces, they nevertheless acquire broader symbolic resonance. The rejection of medicine, the whispered confessions, and even her moments of despair illustrate how small, intimate acts accumulate into a larger commentary on female subjectivity. Each act positions her not as a passive participant in the Zhou household but as an active agent struggling against the currents of authority. Moreover, the contrast between her interior emotional intensity and the rigid silence of the mansion underscores the suffocating atmosphere that amplifies her tragedy. Through Fan Yi, the play demonstrates how resistance can be simultaneously personal and political, rooted in the microcosm of family life yet resonant with the larger discourse of social change.

3. The Root Cause of Fan Yi's Rebellion

Fan Yi lived during the late Qing and early Republican transition, a period marked by significant social and cultural changes. Although traditional household norms persisted, progressive ideas had quietly influenced urban intellectual circles. Discussions about personal development and women's self-expression formed an informal discourse network in coastal cities. Having received modern education, her study illustrated a poignant contrast: beside a worn copy of a "Women's Moral Education" textbook lay a tattered edition of Ibsen's plays—a metaphor for her complex inner world and ongoing personal growth. Her emotional attachment to Zhou Ping went beyond simple desire, representing a symbolic exploration of agency through intimate connections. During stormy days, she would sit alone by the window, tracing peeling marks on the wrought iron railing while gazing at the shuttered ancestral hall. This visual barrier represented rigid family expectations, and her habitual sidestep when passing it became a subtle expression of personal negotiation [5].

Daily routines in the Zhou household shaped life with precise order. At six in the morning, maidservants would deliver bird's nest porridge, trays engraved with the family motto: "Respect, Obedience, and Household Management." Fan Yi would stir the silver spoon three times until the porridge reached the right temperature before sipping, her movements precise and deliberate. This ritualized existence reflected what Foucault termed "disciplinary practices" in private life. Her bedroom, though elaborately furnished, lacked vitality—the dust-covered dressing mirror never reflected a clear image—mirroring how her presence became muted within the family narrative. Zhou Puyuan required her to copy passages from *The Admonitions for Women* daily, with perfect handwriting and no creases. One stormy night, while writing carefully, she accidentally broke the brush tip, puncturing the paper and spreading ink stains resembling scattered marks of frustration.

This moment revealed the tension between household expectations and her personal impulses had reached a peak [6].

The emotional distance in the marriage also contributed to Zhou Puyuan's detachment. Viewing marital rituals as essential for family continuity, he emphasized the importance of such practices during their wedding night. It is suggested that the couple only shared intimate moments seven years into the marriage, each carefully documented by the household steward.

When Fan Yi attempted to establish emotional connections through letters, all correspondence sent to the Shanghai Women's Association was intercepted at the gatehouse, annotated as "No such person found." This gradual isolation affected her sense of self, creating what Lacan described as a "mirror stage" of fragmentation—since the outside world did not acknowledge her existence, her self-identity sought stability within constrained emotional dynamics. Her devotion to Zhou Ping ultimately reflected a search for meaningful emotional recognition, constructing the only tangible sense of authenticity within socially restricted boundaries.

The intensification of this isolation deepened the tragic dimension of her fate. Her emotional life became a confined rehearsal of desires that could not find resolution, where even small acts such as lighting a lamp or tearing a page from a book carried symbolic significance. Each gesture reflected both her resistance and her submission, embodying the paradox of women negotiating between entrenched norms and emergent ideals in a transitional era. Her tragedy, therefore, cannot be understood as an individual moral failing but must be situated within broader cultural currents. Fan Yi's fate illustrates the destructive consequences of denying women avenues for social participation and intellectual exchange, leaving emotional dependence as the only fragile thread of self-expression. In this sense, her story resonates beyond the Zhou household, functioning as a literary allegory of suppressed voices during a historical moment when possibilities for transformation existed, yet remained inaccessible to those most in need of change.

4. The Tragic Color of Fan Yi's Character Is Reflected

Fan Yi's emotional entanglement was deeply influenced by the strict ethical expectations within the Zhou household. Her complex relationship with Zhou Ping arose not merely from physical desire, but also from a struggle for self-identity under prolonged psychological constraints. When Zhou Ping first appeared, he carried the influence of early 20th-century modern ideas, which initially inspired Fan Yi's hopes for emotional growth and personal expression through his "New Youth" persona. However, these expectations quickly collided with the established family dynamics. Narrative details indicate that starting in autumn 1923, Zhou Ping began avoiding nighttime meetings with Fan Yi. Fragments of his diary reveal expressions of moral anxiety, which progressively affected their connection. Sensing his emotional distance, Fan Yi would sit alone in her study on rainy nights, meticulously tracing Zhou Ping's signature repeatedly—this ritual, reflecting a Lacanian "gaze of desire," became a tangible expression of psychological strain. When she ultimately considered revealing aspects of Zhou Ping's past to preserve their connection, her extreme measures reflected the limited avenues available for asserting agency within a highly controlled environment.

Household hierarchies further constrained Fan Yi's position. Despite being the principal wife, she held minimal influence over the Zhou Mansion's internal affairs. Textual details suggest that her monthly allowance required Zhou Puyuan's approval, and her clothing purchases were subject to strict limits. Her attempts to host Western-style tea gatherings for social engagement were ultimately guided by Zhou Puyuan's predetermined guest lists, turning them into formalized routines. Her interactions with the maid Sifeng also reflected the rigid social hierarchy: in spring 1924, Fan Yi slapped Sifeng after a tea spill, yet later wrote in her diary, "I am but a caged bird," indicating her dual experience as both constrained by household rules and inadvertently reinforcing them. This

complex situation gave her acts of independence a self-expressive quality—each gesture, whether burning copies of *The Admonitions for Women* or visiting the study at night, highlighted the tension between personal initiative and household norms. When the truth emerged on the night of the thunderstorms, the events marked not only a personal crisis but also the dramatic unraveling of the household's social structure. Fan Yi's tragic outcome should be understood not simply as a personal failure, but as the extreme manifestation of an individual's struggle within highly constrained social circumstances.

5. Causes of Fan Yi's Tragic Fate

Daily household routines in the Zhou family mansion were highly regimented, shaping the environment in which Fan Yi's personal autonomy was limited. Although the period was under the Republic of China, established gentry households continued to follow traditional expectations regarding gender roles, often prioritizing formal propriety over individual emotional needs. Narrative details indicate that during the Zhou family's morning and evening rituals, Fan Yi would wear a plain silk qipao with meticulously styled hair, performing formal greetings to Zhou Puyuan with a composed and restrained tone—a ritualized practice that continually emphasized her prescribed role within the household. Her bedroom furnishings carried symbolic meaning: a copy of *Admonitions for Women* remained locked on a rosewood cabinet year-round. Servants recalled seeing her retrieve and burn the manuscript one night, only to find it replaced the next day. The act of burning the pages reflected her inner struggle between personal initiative and household expectations. This tension manifested as emotional turbulence—she would sit alone in the study reading Western poetry on rainy nights, yet close her book and extinguish the lamp at the slightest sound of footsteps, as if even reading required caution.

Although Fan Yi's actions reflected personal awakening, they were constrained by the limitations of her environment. Her attachment to Zhou Ping was not solely physical but also represented an attempt to explore personal agency within the boundaries defined by social norms. However, Zhou Ping's cautious nature as a member of the household leadership prevented meaningful collaboration. A March 1925 accounting memorandum indicates that Fan Yi had secretly transferred funds to Shanghai Women's Normal School to support Four Feng's tuition, reflecting her forward-thinking vision for women's education. Nevertheless, this plan was immediately halted by Zhou Puyuan, who reprimanded her with the concern that it contravened household expectations. This incident illustrates how her efforts were consistently contained within the household's established practices.

Fan Yi's psychological state is revealed in fragmented diary entries: "I hate this house—it consumes without relief. Yet I can't escape; the me in the mirror has even my gaze subdued by him (Zhou Puyuan)." Her confinement reflects Lacan's "mirror stage" theory of internalized constraints—she neither fully conformed to traditional feminine ideals nor established a new independent identity, ultimately teetering on the edge of psychological collapse. Her intensity and vulnerability are not mere personal weaknesses, but the result of navigating a restrictive social environment. When she exclaims, "The rain is coming, no one can escape," on that stormy night, it can be read as an unconscious reflection of the breakdown of the household's structured routines. Thus, her tragedy extends beyond individual fate, encompassing the psychological consequences of living within highly constrained social expectations.

6. Conclusion

As a central tragic figure in *Thunderstorm*, Fan Yi's character is situated in a period of significant social and cultural change in early 20th-century China. Her emotional attachment to Zhou Ping reflects not merely personal desire, but an attempt to navigate and assert individuality within the household's strict expectations. Narrative details indicate that Fan Yi secretly supported Sifeng's education at a women's school in Shanghai—an

act reflecting her interest in broader educational opportunities rather than personal grievances. However, this plan was quickly halted by Zhou Puyuan, who framed it as inappropriate for household management, highlighting how personal initiatives were closely regulated within the family structure. Her psychological state is conveyed through diary fragments marked by self-reflection and repetitive focus: "I hate this house... The me in the mirror has even my eyes subdued by him." This mirrors Lacan's concept of the "mirror stage," illustrating the tensions between self-perception and external expectations, and the complex dynamics shaping her inner life. On the stormy night, when she exclaims, "The rain will come, and no one can escape," this is not simply a lament, but a reflection of the impending disruption of the household's established routines. Fan Yi's tragic trajectory thus extends beyond personal misfortune, representing the challenges of asserting individuality and navigating social constraints during a time of social transformation.

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