

An Interpretation of Nietzsche's Will to Power Thought in *The Razor's Edge*

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The Razor's Edge is one of the most important works of British postmodern novelist Somerset Maugham in his later years. It condenses Maugham's thinking about the meaning of life. Maugham created three typical characters in his novel *The Razor's Edge*. Larry is the incarnation of superman in Nietzsche's theory of the will to power. He transcends himself, successfully fights for the old moral shackles, and pursues freedom on a transcendental pilgrimage. And the other kind of people in the works are the late man who represent the social celebrities such as Eliot and Isabel who pursue money and fame to satisfy their vanity. When the Western economy fell into crisis, the spiritual crisis of the last man also intensified, which led to the alienation of human nature. In the study of *The Razor's Edge*, this paper tries to analyze the reasons why the different values of the protagonists, Eliot, Larry and Isabel, lead to their different endings through Nietzsche's theory of the will to power.

Keywords: the will to power, the blade, the superman spirit, Nietzsche

Introduction

The Razor's Edge is an important representative work of W. Somerset Maugham in his later years. It condenses Maugham's whole thinking about the meaning of life. There are many characters in the book, in which each has a story that Maugham tells vividly. After reading this book, you will see that different values lead to their different life endings. When the Western economy fell into crisis, the spiritual crisis of the late man also intensified, leading to the alienation of human nature. Facing the collapse of the Western spirit, Nietzsche proposed the idea of the death of God to wake up the sleeping people. Nietzsche put forward the theory of will to power, expecting the birth of superman spirit. In the study of *The Razor's Edge*, this paper tries to analyze the reasons why the different values of Eliot, Larry and Isabel lead to their different destiny through Nietzsche's theory of the will to power. In particular, Larry is confused because of the conflict between Eastern and Western values. He looks at the West through the Oriental spirit and uses the oriental culture to save the problems brought by the western culture. This may be another way Maugham is looking for for the "spiritual crisis" of Westerners.

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Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Will to Power

In the middle of the 20th century, Western irrationalism had a great influence on Maugham's understanding of human nature, psychological world and its relationship with the external world, and Nietzsche was one of the irrationalism philosophers. In the philosophical system of Nietzsche's irrationalism, the will to power replaces the role of reason. The will is primary. His division of will and representation is derived from Schopenhauer's theory of will. Schopenhauer's will is tragic, therefore "freedom must be obtained through negation of the will. It is related to the Hindu Brahmanic Upanishads." (Nietzsche, 1986, p. 174) Nietzsche transformed Schopenhauer's "will to live" into his own theory of "will to power", transferring the negative will to the positive will.

The Influence of Nietzsche's Philosophy on Maugham's Novel

Maugham loved to travel around the world, and he saw the human tragedy caused by national turmoil in the war, which deepened his idea of turning to philosophy and explore the meaning of life. Maugham's first contact with Nietzsche's theory of will to power should have been during his study at Heidelberg University in Germany (1892-1893). He wrote about his first experience reading the theory of will to power in his autobiographical novel *The Chains of Life*. Biographer Ted Morgan has pointed out that "Schopenhauer and Nietzsche were among Maugham's most influential philosophers" (Maugham, 1991, p. 35). Their philosophical theories undoubtedly provided a lot of nutrition and inspiration for Maugham's novels, among which *The Razor's Edge* is the main research object of this paper. The author tries to explore Nietzsche's theory on the impact of Maugham novels. How people struggle to live under the slavery of fate, grow from the last man to Superman, and how to transfer the negative will to the positive will through their own "will to power", so as to continuously enhance the strength of the will and seek liberation in the Eternal Recurrence, So as to achieve the unity and freedom of body and mind.

The Basic Value of Nietzsche's Theory of Will to Power

According to Nietzsche, the physical manifestation of the will to power is a strong body, abundant energy and strong desire, but he pays more attention to the spiritual aspect. He believes that the will to power is the essence of life: "Only where there is life, there is the will: but it is not the will to live, but—as I have been taught—the will to power" (Nietzsche, 2000, p. 290). Nietzsche uses the will to power to explain the decadence and spiritual wasteland of Western society. "It seems to me that life itself is the instinct to grow, to continue, to accumulate power, and to seek power: where there is a lack of will to power, there is decline" (Nietzsche, 2000, p. 287). That is to say, "the will to power advocated by Nietzsche does not pursue power and status, but the will to promote vitality itself" (Maugham, 1991, p. 312). Maugham had been reading Nietzsche's works since his youth, and Nietzsche's theory have influenced him deeply, especially in his later novels such as *The Chains of Life*, *The Moon and Sixpence*, and *The Razor's Edge*. These three works of Maugham revolve center on the same theme: the meaning of life and whether the spirit will last forever. The meaning of life is closely related to the will to vitality. The core thought of the will to power advocated by Nietzsche is the pursuit of spiritual transcendence. This is also the reason why this study chooses Nietzsche's theory of will to power to explore Maugham's works. It was on the journey of spiritual searching that Larry eventually found his spiritual perfection and the path to self-purification. This is what Nietzsche calls self-transcendence. For Maugham, the combination of Eastern and Western religious spirits brings a new kind of value, which is also the superman spirit proposed by Nietzsche.

The Theory of Will to Power in the Works

Nietzsche's philosophy began with the announcement that "God is dead." Is God dead? Was it really Nietzsche who killed him? In my opinion, not exactly. Bruno, Copernicus, Galileo, Kant and Hegel were all murders to kill God. Of course, Nietzsche's last cut was the most deadly. In Christian churches could we still hear the sound of prayers, suggesting that God was not yet dead. "God is dead, that means the Christian God is discredited. This is the biggest thing that has happened in recent times" (Deleuze, 2001, p. 323). It seems to be saying that God has lost his followers, because his divinity is questioned. Ultimately, God is dead when people no longer believe in Him.

From the Death of God to the Birth of Superman

To find out how Nietzsche's theory of superman came into being, we must understand it from the theory of "three spiritual changes". In Three Transformations of the Spirit, Zarathustra says: "I declare to you three transformations of the spirit; How the spirit becomes the camel, how the camel becomes the lion, and how the lion becomes the child" (Nietzsche, 2016, p. 245). Nietzsche clearly illustrates the process of creation of superman: spirit → camel → lion → child. Nietzsche describes to us three kinds of people in the world: the last man, the superior man and the superman. These three kinds of people can correspond to the protagonists in *The Razor's Edge* one by one. Larry is a kind of superman, a gentle man who constantly seeks to transcend the self; Isabel, her uncle Eliot and her husband Matulin are the same kind of characters, they are the representatives of the Last Man, all inevitably struggle and advance in the secular world, but their destinies are different. The spirit of the last man is a camel bearing heavy burdens. It is his mission to bear ceaseless pressure and to suppress himself. As for Sophia, she is the representative of the superior man. As Nietzsche said, "the superior man is the lion in battle, and the lion is transformed from the camel, who dares to challenge traditional values and old morals. If defeated, the spirit will degenerate into Superman and reach the perfect state of the spirit. If he is defeated, the master may return to the last man, but because he has experienced the baptism of battle, he cannot return to the origin to be a pure last man" (Zhao Dunhua, 2016, p. 129). Sophie's inner struggle, driven by Larry's sympathy for her and his desire to save her by marriage, is doomed. Here in Nietzsche, Superman spirit is the highest state of life. Its spirit of self transcendence and creation makes people live a full life rather than a camp. In Nietzsche's time, he believed that Superman had not been born. People expect superman to rescue people out of the spiritual stray, the reality can not meet, can only be shown in the fictional world. In *The Razor's Edge*, Maugham creates a superman image for readers, he is the hero Larry. Every door he knocks on is a symbol of hope. Maugham gave Larry the image of struggle, criticism, self-identity and transcendence.

The Spiritual Destruction of the Last Man

We discussed many characteristics of Superman before. But what is the last man? Don't Last Man know "what is love"? No, they know, they love God and their neighbors, but they don't know how to love themselves. The last man lived a simple, happy and permanent life. They are obedience, never want to be rebellious, never want to fight against fate. *The Razor's Edge* gives readers a detailed view of the social ecology of the late people. The novel tells two kinds of people's lifestyles: Larry is one kind, which is undoubtedly the center of the story. He is a gentle man who seeks to transcend the world; Isabel and her uncle Eliot, her husband are another kind. They are the representatives of the last man who inevitably struggle and forge ahead in the secular world. The

noble Eliot epitomizes the decadent state of the European upper class. *The Razor's Edge* vividly portrays the emptiness and the mass social psychology of that era. After the great depression in Europe, the Western world fell into spiritual crisis and cultural decline. The last man tried their best to avoid political life, so they directly created a drunken and decadent upper class society. The other is the aristocratic women like Isabel. First she lost herself for money. Isabel actually loved Larry very much and maintained a long-term relationship with him. It was precisely because Larry had no job that she broke up with him without hesitation. She soon married Gray, the son of the agent, and lived a comfortable and luxurious life. Many people think that the love tragedy between Larry and Isabel is only accidental. In fact, it is an irreparable result. We can make a reasonable interpretation with Nietzsche's will theory. The theory holds that society is not a whole. It is composed of three different interest groups: the last man, the superior and the superman. When different values begin to impact, it will lead to social conflict. Larry and Isabel's broken love essentially reveals the struggle between the Last Man and Superman in values.

Larry Achieved Self Transcendence

Nietzsche himself was not a superman, nor could he find a superman in the real world. So people start to question him, what is superman like? Heidegger once put forward an explanation of Nietzsche's superman, "The superman is the person who understands the will to power and eternal reincarnation" (Huang Ziquan, 2020, p. 45). The hero of *The Razor's Edge* deeply reveals the pain and misfortune caused by the lack of humanity. On the one hand, Larry's greatness lies in his pursuit of the spiritual world while completing a reflection on the value of life and human nature. The author's pursuit of aesthetic ideal and freedom more or less reflects the necessity of human awakening. On the other hand, Larry is a loyal person who advocates nature and returns to nature. Larry's friend died to save his life in the war. This experience completely changes his mind and attitude towards life. After the war, he was deeply uneasy about the value and meaning of life. He felt the need to explore the mysteries of the universe, to find a living space for himself, to find an answer to the meaning of life. He went to India and found the Philosophy of the Vedas, where his spirit found refuge and spiritual peace. Larry turned his attention to Indian mysticism. For Larry, the highest level of life was self-improvement, and happiness meant spiritual fulfillment and peace of mind. The author believes that Larry is the embodiment of Nietzsche's superman spirit. His task is not only to redeem himself, but to reveal the truth, save the whole world, pull people out of the state of degeneration and restore the human nature. He scattered his fortune and returned to the United States to preach. Obviously, Larry's image marks Maugham's improvement and progress in creative thought. He cares not only about the fate of the individual, but also the fate of the whole mankind.

Conclusion

Maugham created several typical characters in *The Razor's Edge*. Larry is the embodiment of superman in Nietzsche's theory of the will to power. He transcends himself, in order to get rid of his predicament, he successfully struggles to get off the shackles and seeks for freedom. He has an extraordinary pilgrimage path. The other kind of representatives of the last Man are celebrities like Eliot who pursue money, fame and wealth to meet vanity. When the Western economy is in crisis, the spiritual crisis of the late man also intensifies, leading to the alienation of human nature. Facing the collapse of the western spiritual support, Nietzsche proposed the idea of the death of God to wake up the sleeping people. He put forward the theory of will to power, expecting the birth

of superman spirit beyond self. Nietzsche always expected that the superman spirit could save the last Man from all kinds of troubles, enjoying a carefree life and finding his own spiritual home. For Maugham, the theory of will to power brings a new concept of value. So in *The Razor's Edge*, Maugham wants to save the West with the superman spirit, and to save the Western culture problems with the Eastern culture.

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