

A Religious Philosophical Study of Maugham's Works

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Abstract: Maugham's three representative works analyze the human nature in western society from an objective and sharp perspective, and create three typical protagonist images, and thoroughly analyze their good and evil. The experience of the three protagonists is a process of human transformation from evil to good, which fully reflects Maugham's yearning in his ideological system. In human nature, good and evil are both opposite and unified, coexisting and transforming each other. However, the conflict between good and evil is the root of life tragedy. This paper attempts to analyze the three typical characters in the novel from the perspective of religious philosophy, expounds the bumpy process of human nature from incomplete to perfect, and demonstrates that Maugham helped westerners to resolve their inner contradictions and reconcile with each other with the Oriental spirit.

Keywords: Maugham's novels, Religious philosophy, The complementation of eastern and Western cultures

1. Introduction

William Somerset Maugham is known as "England's Maupassant". His three masterpieces, *The Chains of Life*, *The Moon and Sixpence*, and *The Razor's Edge*, all revolve around 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. The protagonists' pursuit of freedom and ideal shows their awakening of humanity. They can complete the rough course of life with extraordinary will, realize the pursuit of perfection and beauty in human nature, and achieve the balance of the power of darkness and kindness in the world. Maugham's novels reveal that good and evil in human nature are not antagonistic, just as Yin and Yang represent the law of development of all things in the world. According to *Tao Teh king*, "Yin and Yang is a pair of concepts of the ancient people on the law of the universe. It can represent either two opposing things or two opposing aspects that exist within the same thing."^[1] Maugham's novels pursue religious freedom, emotional freedom and yearning to break the shackles of fate. Maugham lived in India and was deeply influenced by eastern culture. He recognized "the necessity of spiritual and cultural exchanges between the East and the West, and regarded eastern religions as healing medicine for the soul"^[2](Maugham, p. 234). This paper attempts to study the three classic novels of Maugham, *The Chains of Life*, *The Moon and Sixpence*, and *The Razor's Edge*, analyze three typical characters in the novels, and explain the rough course of their human nature from incomplete to complete.

2. The Influence of Religious thought on Maugham's Novel Creation

Maugham, having witnessed the brutality of the world war, was greatly moved by the sight of cruel war on the battlefield. Maugham, like so many young men in Britain at that time, went to war to serve his country under the call of the government. However, Maugham quickly recognized the truth of the war with keen insight, and then reflected on human nature and western civilization and resorted to write a series of novels: *The Chains of Life*, *The Moon and Sixpence*, and *The Razor's Edge*. When Larry can't help but express the question as "What is life for? Is life meaningful?" in *The Razor's Edge*^[2] (Maugham, p. 270), this inner interrogation prompts people to seek the answer. However, philosophy, literature and art cannot solve the confusion in Larry's mind on the meaning of ontology. For how to get out of this spiritual dilemma, modern people have been exploring tirelessly, Maugham is no exception.

Maugham said, "Fear and confusion make many people choose religion." Just as Jung said, modern people in spiritual crisis can only recover their spiritual health by relying on the higher wisdom of religion. ^[3] (Jung, p.76-77) is Western Christianity a good medicine for the world? Maugham was disagreed on it. He had lost his faith in Christianity when he was a teenager. He believed that Christianity taught people to love God but not themselves. As a result, people could not act according to their willingness and were forced to become hypocritical. Westerners are psychologically completely dependent on the grace of God. Because the grace of God is from the outside and belongs to the "absolute other", the spiritual power of self is so low that westerners do not dare to establish a spiritual connection with God. Under the influence of Christian culture, the western masses are bound to pursue all external things such as money and power. ^[3] (Jung, p. 76-77) then the western people may find another way out of the dilemma by virtue of Eastern spiritual power. Eastern Buddhism is a kind of religion that awakens the human spirit, and people can get salvation by relying on the inner strength. Since easterners can find what they need in their religion, it is possible for westerners to adopt these eastern religious beliefs for achieving salvation. Finally Maugham found what he needed in Indian Buddhism. Because only Indian Buddhism can help him rebuild the connection between human nature and the divinity of religious symbols.

3. Comparison of Religious Thoughts in Maugham's Novels

Since ancient Greece, the difference between Eastern and Western theology has been the biggest problem perplexing many scholars, writers and philosophers. Therefore, since the Renaissance, philosophers have shifted their focus from monotheism to polytheism. They have constantly studied the concepts of "God" and "human nature" between Christianity and Buddhism. Buddhism and Christianity have great influence on the world. The characteristic of Indian Buddhism was born with atheistic tendencies. The "meaning" of Upanishads is the unity of "Vatican" and "I". In short, the universe is the Brahman, and Brahman is me; By understanding the nature of the world, everyone can become a Buddha. The characteristic of Christianity is that the God is a "triune" God, God has three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The two sexes of Christ: Christ is both fully divine and fully human. It can be seen that Buddhism and Christianity have many similarities in the view of "god" and "man". At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, there appeared several famous writers in English literature, such as Lawrence and Maugham, who paid attention to the human nature in the western culture. Different from Lawrence, Maugham examined and analyzed the western human nature with an objective and sharp eye in his works, and explored the spiritual roots of western religions, rather than judging the evil and good from the standpoint of ethics and morality. The protagonists of his works could not bear the pain and suffering, and began their pursuit of meaning and perfection in life. After getting rid of all kinds of spiritual shackles and encountering difficulties, westerners finally realized the spiritual mystery in Indian Buddhism, which reflected the inevitable awakening of human nature.

3.1 Dualism of Greek Dionysian and Apollonian spirits

The concept of God appeared very early in European history. Homer's Epic is the first masterpiece to record Greek mythology. Homer's Epic is a kind of polytheism, for example, in Greek myth there are many gods corresponding to natural phenomena, such as the sun god and the sea god. The gap between God and man in Greece is very small. God and man not only have the same appearance and human emotions and desires, but also have distinct personality. They have distinct personality and are not as innocent as Christians. They often appear in the human world and are praised by people. The story of Greek God is familiar to ancient ancestors. It is not only the foundation of Greek literature, but also has a great impact on European literature. "Two artistic gods represented by Apollo and Dionysus, are the artistic spirit of unity of opposites as well as the source of Greek tragedy" ^[4] (Nietzsche, p.212). Nietzsche uses metaphors to describe two artistic spirits: "Apollo, the symbol of light and dream, and the light of the sun god, like a dream, quiet and deep. Sun god represents the Greek classical spirit, is the symbol of cognitive understanding and measure; Dionysus, representing the Greek non-classical spirit, is a symbol of intemperance and indulgence" ^[5] (Zhang Dian, p. 56). The Dionysian is irrational, the Apollonian is temperance. The Greeks, under the combination of Dionysian and Apollonian spirits, "pursued the essence and eternity of life" in the world of dream and intoxication ^[4] (Nietzsche, p. 231). The ups and downs of Larry, Eliot and Isabelle in Maugham's novel, in a sense, confirmed Nietzsche's interpretation of tragedy which was born in the combination of Apollo and Dionysus. Maugham endows the protagonists with the spirit of Apollo and Dionysus, reveals the contradiction between them,

and believes that it is a heavy shackle to bind human nature. The protagonist Eliot worships the Christian spirit of restraining rationality. However, through his painful experience he has witnessed, he found that the Bible said one thing and meant another.

In *The Razor's Edge*, Isabel actually loves Larry very much, but she doesn't hesitate to break up with him because he doesn't have a job. Isabel gave up love for the needs of material life. In *The Chains of Life*, the main character Philip falls in love with a waitress Mildred. Philip gave everything he had to win her favor. Mildred believed money was the most important thing to her. She ignored Philip's love, and easily agreed to marry Miller, a married man. Of course, marriage based on money is difficult to maintain for a long time, so she is inevitably abandoned by Miller. The writer Maugham placed the protagonists into the daydream of the sun god and endowed them with the sun god spirit. This social reality shows that the glory illusion of the sun god is ultimately false and nihilist and the pain of life is real. People need to wake up from the daydream and enter another state -- the drunken state of Dionysus spirit. Nietzsche's Dionysian spirit is regarded as an art symbol of power, points out that the Greek tragedy is not only presents beautiful appearance of the sun God, but it presents Dionysian spirit, breaking illusion, return to the essence. The essence is "the will of the almighty, which hidden behind the individual", "this is a forever eternal life" ^[4] (Nietzsche, p.78). In the state of intoxication, humanity is showed at its highest. This Dionysian passion reflects Maugham's tragic consciousness which echoes Nietzsche's tragic aesthetics, and brings readers a bright light and salvation to the suffering life. For Larry, his Dionysian spirit is to save the prostitute Sophie by marriage. However, Larry and Sophie's marriage was ruined by Isabel. Maugham composed the tragedy of Larry and Sophia into a symphony of the Apollonian and Dionysian spirits. Larry finally found the Indian Vedas, from which he also realized the mystery of life, and saved the human soul through self-sacrifice. This shows the victory of Dionysian spirit, that is, the destruction of daydream and the eternity of Dionysian spirit.

3.2 Superman thought in Nietzsche's Philosophy

Because western rationalism overemphasized the role of rationality, the value of human beings was completely covered under the influence of traditional metaphysics. Traditional Christian culture in this rational society gives enormous publicity to being all-knowing, all-powerful and all-good God which is a divine and inviolable master, and sets the standard for judging all good and evil, which advocates the "world of suffering" and "born guilty", ^[6] (Jill Deleuze, p. 189) inherits the original sin of Christianity, which regards people as slaves of "sin" and requires people to pray and make atonement without doubt in order to cleanse the SINS in previous lives, so as to achieve the hypocritical purpose of people. This stifles people's passion and will to break away from the darkness of reality and spiritual emptiness, and makes people lose their self. After seeing this situation, Nietzsche made no secret of his position of spiritual nobility, criticized the fictional rationalism and Christian philosophers, and tried to awaken the self of people to transcend the existing situation and developed the self in a higher and more meaningful direction, so as to achieve the state of "superman". As for the characteristics of superman, Chinese scholars, including Nietzsche enthusiasts, introduced Nietzsche's thought directly from the "Camel" in their papers, ignoring the "spirit" in the first place. Camel's spiritual experience lies in "the perseverance to bear"; the lion's spiritual experience lies in "the courage of independence and freedom"; the spiritual experience of infants lies in "active and vigorous creation". Ordinary people obey to "you should", only heroes dare to say "I want", and babies reach the situation of "I am" without external attention to express "I want"^[7] (Zhang Duanhua, p.129) Only when the spirit reaches this stage can we become a real person. In Nietzsche's view, the superman spirit is the highest state of life, and his spirit of self-transcendent and creative makes people live not in a camp but in a full life. The author thinks that Nietzsche's superman is an expression of spiritual force, which can be a kind of thought or a religious doctrine. As for the superman, in Nietzsche's time, he didn't think the superman had yet been born. People expect superman to rescue people out of the spiritual stray, but this wish, the reality can not meet, can only be shown in the fictional world of literature. In *The Razor's Edge*, Maugham creates such a superman image for readers; he is the hero, Larry. Larry, in particular, is a great character. Maugham gives Larry this image of belligerent, critical, self and transcendent symbols. Larry is completely independent in his life. Rather than being a portrait of Professor Wittgenstein, people would like to believe that Larry is essentially the embodiment of the superman spirit. Because Larry groped in the dark, looking for what he wanted, hoping to find some light in the darkness that would make life meaningful. After a long journey, he found the Indian Vedas, from which he also realized the mystery of life and achieved peaceful mind in the process of self-training. He cured Gray of his headache with the Vedas and restored him to a normal life. The author thinks that Larry is as great as Christ saving mankind, and he will suffer and sacrifice himself like Christ. "Remember how Christ was led by the

Spirit into the desert and fasted for forty days? When he was hungry, the devil sought him out and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread." But Christ rejected his temptation. ... The devil, being cunning, came to Christ and said, "If you will be dishonored, whipped, crowned with thorns, and crucified, you will save mankind, for to sacrifice one's life for your friend is the greatest love a man can show."^[8](Maugham, p.232)After his enlightenment, Larry returned to the material world, and lived peacefully, patiently, as an ordinary person. Finally, Larry managed to abandon the old-self, overcome himself and reach the spiritual realm beyond the secular world. He is the superman created by Maugham to readers.In *The Moon and Sixpence*, the hero Strickland's life experience is completely different from Larry and Philip's, he has a happy family, money, status. However, he always had a dream in his heart, that is, to be a painter. When he was in his forties, he suddenly had a desire for art. The narrator writes: "I felt as if the same fierce forces were struggling within him; It seemed to me strong and overwhelming, as if it were holding him against his own will. I don't understand."^[9](Maugham, p. 191)Strickland seemed captured by a force beyond his control his spirit. With this desire and impulse, his artistic dream was all for him, he did all for art, and those enjoyment, morality and ethics outside art became useless in his eyes. The pursuit of perfection is his highest ideal. Strickland has experienced the process from obedience to rebellion, from satisfaction to exploration, from inhibition to freedom, which is also a process to realize self-transcendence.

3.3 *The Decadence of the Spirit of Christ -- the Death of God*

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."^[8](Maugham, 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.

The Razor's Edge takes place at an era of losing faith. After the death of his friend, Larry begins to doubt God's mercy and question his existence, eventually leaving for India in search of spiritual support. Isabel, her uncle Elliot and her husband Mathurin are not as lucky as Larry. They are inevitably struggling with the world, but in the different degrees. As for Sophia, she had the opportunity to become a "pure" girl with a noble soul, who bravely fights with traditional values and old morals. But she can not resist Isabele's temptation, with her drinking; she returned to the previous erosion of life, waiting for her is the fate of death. In *The Chains of Life*, people have no faith, and lust is the root of Philip's degeneration, which also becomes the invisible shackle of his spirit. When the longing for Paris made Philip a slave of his sexuality, it made him even more degenerate. Just as Philip's aunt had described that: "Paris was a place of evil. There is no wicked city in the entire world than Paris, the whore of Babylon, who flaunts her SINS in public."^[9](Maugham, p.420)Maugham gives a representation of human nature, that is, sexual desire is the instinct of human nature, but also a weakness of human nature. This distortion of human nature is the true disclosure of the destruction of human nature by Western civilization.

3.4 *Enlightenment of Indian Buddhist thought*

Early Indian Buddhism had a relatively prominent atheism tendency. The view of early Buddhism on God was naturally affected by political position, so it did not praise divinity or talk about the myth of creation. Buddhism does not encourage believers to praise God's divine power. From the later Buddhist documents, It can be seen that Indian Buddhism is more inclined to pursue the inner spiritual world. Becoming a Buddha is to encourage people to abandon the mundane world and reach the same level of wisdom as Buddha. Maugham was deeply influenced by the pursuit of Buddhism. Maugham's travel in India in his later years and his contact with Indian culture had profound significance for his spiritual exploration, which can be seen in his masterpiece *The Razor's Edge*. Indian scholars believe that *The Razor's Edge* is "the product of Maugham's efforts to explore the soul. It is not only a paper on mystical thought, but also an attempt to explain India."^[10](Philip Holden, p.139)We can see two characteristics of Indian Buddhism created by Maugham in the process of the protagonist's self-redemption. Firstly, in the novel, almost all the characters except the protagonist Larry only care about money. "Indians believe that this is precisely what Westerners have not done; we have many inventions, many factories, machines and commodities. We always want to build happiness on material, but happiness does not depend on these, but on spirit. They believe that the path we have chosen is the

path of destruction."^[11](Maugham, p.326) So the contempt for external material and the attention to internal spirit are always adhered to by the Indians and become an important aspect of their national character. Secondly, the tolerance of good and evil, the pursuit of spiritual liberation. Before the war, Larry was full of ambition and had a good plan for life. This plan was based on the material supremacy at that time. It was a universal vision. Finally, under the influence of Indian philosophical saints, he got enlightenment. After the Epiphany, he no longer entangled in the original problem of evil. He suddenly realized that good and evil, beauty and ugliness are originally a part of the world. As he said: "when absolute is shown as good in this world, evil naturally appears together. Without the unimaginable fear of crustal catastrophe, you will never see the magnificent scenery of the Himalayas."^[11] (Maugham, p. 325) this philosophy of relativity is the essence of Buddhism in India. The goal of Indian religion is to seek self-transcendence and self liberation, which is proved by Buddhist sayings such as "brahma-atma-aikyam" and "karma Samsara". As the expression of Maugham's thought, the protagonist Larry's understanding of Indian liberation is "no longer falling into Samsara". The highest ideal for a person is self-improvement. Therefore, he finds the meaning of life and lives actively.

4. Conclusion

Human nature is an important and eternal theme in human life. Since ancient Greece, the difference between Eastern and Western theology has been the biggest problem perplexing many scholars, writers and philosophers. Therefore, since the Renaissance, philosophers have turned their attention to the comparison between the concepts of "God" and "human nature" in Christianity and Buddhism. Since the emergence of Buddhism, there has been an obvious tendency of atheism, and Christianity is a typical religion advocating theism. Although Buddhism and Christianity originated from different regions, they do have many similarities and differences in the relationship between "God" and "man". Maugham is different from Lawrence and other writers in that he analyzes the real essence of human nature with an objective and sharp eye. In his novels *The Chains of Life*, *The Moon and Sixpence*, and *The Razor's Edge*, the author truly shapes three typical hero images, and analyzes their good and evil very thoroughly. The experience of the three protagonists is a process of transformation from evil to good in the human nature, which fully reflects Maugham's yearning and human ideal in his ideological system. Good and evil in human nature are both opposite and unified, coexist and transform each other. However, the conflict between good and evil is the root of life tragedy. The "true self" in Indian Buddhism is a perfect blend of goodness and malice. In the history of Indian philosophy, "true self" is equivalent to "Brahma", the absolute basis of all living beings. Larry's understanding of "Brahman" in the novel: "It is absent and omnipresent. All things contain it and rely on it... It is above the long and the changing, the whole and the parts, the finite and the infinite"^[11] (Maugham, p.426) The world is made up of good and evil. Only through meditation can we liberate ourselves from their opposition. Larry, who had been plagued by this problem, finally realized: "all the beautiful and valuable things we cherish in this world can only exist together with ugly things."^[11](Maugham, p.113) At this time, Larry reunited the two conflicting sides in his personality, and the inner conflict ended. Oriental Spirit helps Westerners reconcile and complement their inner contradictions. Maugham used Eastern religion to save the problems brought by western culture. This may be another way out for the "spiritual crisis" of the West.

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