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The Ubermensch in Patricia Highsmith's "Ripley Under Ground": A Conceptual Analysis

A B S T R A C T

This study analyzes Patricia Highsmith's novel Ripley Under Ground (1970) in the light of the Ubermensch's suggested characteristics. The ideas set out by Friedrich Nietzsche in Thus Spoke Zarathustra (1883) was a major stream in the development of contemporary thought. Nietzsche suggests in his philosophy that the driving force behind man's existence is his ambition to realize his own potential as a creative entity. The willingness is symbolized by Nietzsche's ideas to remake the universe and its values in accordance with one's own desires and perceptions according to his own codes is central to his philosophy. According to the research presented, Patricia Highsmith's writings—particularly the Ripley Novels, which have become rather popular—implied several aspects of Nietzsche's philosophy.

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الرجل الخارق في رواية باتريشيا هايسمث "ريبلي تحت الأرض" : تحليل مفاهيمي

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الخلاصة:

تحلل هذه الدراسة رواية باتريشيا هايسمث "ريبلي تحت الأرض" (1970) في ضوء الخصائص التي اقترحتها نيتشه للرجل الخارق. تمثل الأفكار التي طرحها فريدرك نيتشه في كتابه "هكذا تكلم زرادشت" (1883) تياراً رئيسياً في تطور الفكر المعاصر حيث يقترح نيتشه في فلسفته بأن القوة الكامنة وراء وجود الإنسان تتمثل بطموحه لتحقيق إمكاناته الخاصة ككيان أبداعي. إن الرغبة التي ترمز إليها أفكار نيتشه لإعادة تشكيل الكون وقيمه وفقاً لرغبات الفرد وتصوراته الخاصة هي أمر أساسي لفلسفته. وفقاً للبحث المقدم، تضمنت كتابات باتريشيا هايسميث - خاصة روايات ريبلي، التي أصبحت شائعة إلى حد ما - عدة جوانب من فلسفة نيتشه.

الكلمات المفتاحية: السلوك الإجرامي، نيتشه، الرجل الخارق، الرجل الأمثل

Introduction

Friedrich Nietzsche is usually associated with the declaration that “God is dead”. Likewise, he is often linked to the concepts such as “Overman”, “Superman”, or “Übermensch”. Similarly, he is often connected with phrases such as “the will to power”. Moreover, his ideas “have sometimes been aligned with anti-Semitism and Nazism, and with both extreme individualism and self-annihilating mysticism” (Habib, 2011, p.182)

Central to the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche is the concept “Übermensch” which can be translated into English as “superman” or “overman”. According to Habib (2011), the overman is the one “who gloriously rises above the common herd mentality and morality promoted by modern liberal states” (p.182). Furthermore, Nietzsche admits that the Church and state were using coercion to force people into plain faith. As a result, he launches a brand-new philosophical movement in which he hopes to usher in a new understanding of humanity through the concepts of “self-creation, passion, power, and subjugation of one’s circumstances” (p.182)

As Stephen Knoblauch (2008) argues, Nietzsche's philosophy highlights the Dionysian component of human nature. According to Knoblauch, this Dionysian side is driven by involuntary impulses and excesses. The Apollonian side stands in stark contrast to the Dionysian. Habib assures that the Apollonian side is “conscious, rational, and individuated. It subverts conventional notions of truth; it unashamedly displays scorn for women; and it undermines modern liberal political visions of democracy” (p.182).

In similar fashion, Francesca Cauchi (2013) in *Rilke's Orpheus and Nietzsche's Übermensch* indicates, man's desire lies primarily in his will to recreate himself as a “self-creative force” (p.209). Further, the Übermensch of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* represents: “a willed re-creation of a radically revalued world at the centre of which the ever-shifting self resides” (p.209). In Nietzsche's philosophy, the new construction of man embraces the being by a will in which he desires a pro-active being. In this will of recreation, the “truth cannot be regarded as the higher power. The will to semblance, to illusion, to deception, to becoming, to change is to be regarded here as deeper, more original, more metaphysical than the will to Truth, reality and being” (Nietzsche, 1888, as cited in Baudrillard, 1996, p.9).

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883), Nietzsche starts paving the way to the imagined world to be created by the *Übermensch*, he states:

But let this mean will to truth unto you, that everything be transformed into the humanly conceivable, humanly visible, humanly palpable! Your own Judgment shall ye think out. And what you have called world shall first be created by you: your reason, your likeness, your will, your love shall itself become! (p. 87)

Nietzsche's statement seems to urge the human individual to interpret and recreate the world on "the foundations of his own understanding, and thereby bestow upon it the value he deems it to have, rather than submit to a table of values foisted upon him by the Church Fathers" (Cauchi, 2013, p.211). Moreover, this will to power needs to be accompanied by a sort of aggression in order to be gained. Cauchi states "the willed aggression and reasoned judgment ... [enable] Zarathustra to take possession of the world" (p.213). Similarly, Lee Spinks in *Friedrich Nietzsche* (2003) argues, the gift of the *Übermensch* represents a nightmare which foreshadows "an inhuman and totalitarian world of rapacity and violence" (p.115).

Released in 1970, *Ripley Under Ground* is a novel by Patricia Highsmith. It was the second novel in the series Ripley Novels. Highsmith's characterization of Tom Ripley seems to align the characteristics of the *Übermensch* for a great deal. Starting with his religious background, Tom Ripley indicates in *Ripley Under Ground* that "they [his parents] somehow ferreted out of Tom the fact that he hadn't been baptized in the United States" (Highsmith, 1985, p.339). Moreover, the luxurious life which he enjoys in the French countryside represents the joyful life that "for Nietzsche, true being is synonym with a joyful affirmation of becoming, of life's intrinsic flux" (Cauchi, 2013, p.219).

Likewise, the new life which Ripley creates in *Ripley Under Ground*, is the life in which "Ripley's new identity is anchored and his marriage staged. The mansion, with its rustic elegance, authenticates his new role as a gentle man residing in French countryside" (Cheng, 2019, p.5). Most in common with the *Übermensch* is the fact that he supports his lavish lifestyle through dishonest means, thereby overcoming the moral and social limitations placed on him by society. In a similar fashion, Andrew Wilson (2010) in *Beautiful Shadow* asserts, Tom "arguably represents a more successful and fully formed realization of the *Übermensch*. While Tom undertakes this transformation under his own name, his transcendence and reinterpretation of social codes is unrivalled in Patricia Highsmith's body of work" (p.212).

Tom goes through a major change in the earlier novel. His past hardships are crucial to his evolution into the *Übermensch*. More than that, the *Übermensch*'s sufferings are a defining feature of his character. Nietzsche (1883) declares: “creating – that is the great salvation from suffering, and the alleviation of life. But for the creator to exist, suffering itself is needed, and much transformation” (p.95). Moreover, once the *Übermensch* has surpassed these sufferings, he will find it exceedingly difficult to acquire any pains whatsoever. It is this aspect which makes Tom Ripley “kept his name and his reputation clean, amazingly clean” (Highsmith, 1985, p.223) in the second novel. Tom O’Brien (2020) insists, what makes Tom represents the *Übermensch*, “not only is he successful in reinventing his subjectivity, but his superiority and alternative perspective is consistently recognized and legitimated by the narrative and the reader” (p.188). Additionally, Cauchi (2013) states, Nietzsche portrays the *Übermensch* as “a hero whose greatness in the struggle of life lies not in the strength and determination of his will, nor in the unsightly battle-scars of his quest for truth, but in the grace and beauty of his effortless poise and self-possession” (p.217).

Nietzsche indicates, for the *Übermensch*, “the will to illusion is deeper, more original, more metaphysical than the will to truth, reality and being” (1922, as cited in Cuchi, 2013, p.2010). In *Ripley Under Ground*, forgery and deception occupy a central role. These forgeries, according to Cheng (2019) advance “into reality of its own... the fake, rather than parasitic and subordinate to the original, authenticates and prolongs its existence ” (p.6). In an instance, when Tom impersonates Derwatt, he tries to convince the attendants, who joined Derwatt press conference, about the originality of the forged paintings. He indicates: “If one paints more forgeries than one’s own paintings, wouldn’t the forgeries become more natural, more real, more genuine to oneself, even, than one’s own paintings?” (Highsmith, 1985, p.232)

Moreover, Tom Ripley tries to convince Murchison accepting the fake painting as a hobby. He tells Murchison: “have you ever thought of collecting forgeries? I know a man in Italy who collects them. First as a hobby, and now sells them, to other collectors at quite high prices” (p.265). Ripley’s statements treat the forgeries and deception as genius product if they were well-crafted. Cheng (2019) maintains: “Ripley is convinced that remarkable forgery, involving alteration, requires ingenuity, and that fabrication, if adeptly and continuously effected, will eventually yield genuineness. His entire life practices these two convictions” (p.6)

Investigating the scene in which Tom murders Murchison provides a number of characteristics which align Tom with the *Übermensch*. First of all, Tom desires an existence of being which is out of tension. Fiona Peters (2011) declares: “Tom, after the first novel ... often responds quickly and ingeniously to threatening situations” (p.189). Moreover, “it is true that Highsmith has imbued Tom with a flexibility of character, this surface pliability masks a persistent and unremitting drive to return as quickly as possible to an existence of zero tension” (p.189). In contrast, Murchison’s threats plague Tom with unbearable tension, that he spends the night in which he learns about Murchison’s threats “as he did most of his evenings, quietly and alone, but his thoughts were troubled” (Highsmith, 1985, p.224). Moreover, “that night, Tom could not fall asleep ... he felt it was a strange night” (p.226).

An intrinsic trait of the *Übermensch* for Nietzsche, according to Cauchi (2013), is that “the view of man as a being primarily endowed with the ability to judge, value and create, and whose virtue lies in the conversion of this ability into a rationally willed intent” (p.211). It is this aspect precisely which motivated Ripley to murder Murchison. When Tom and Murchison were walking in Tom’s property at Belle Ombre, Tom “was in an odd mood, or state of mind. In a burst of bare-faced friendliness, honesty, or whatever one might call it” (Highsmith, 1985, p.267). It seemed to Tom that the window of opportunity to convince Murchison to drop his charges against Derwatt Ltd. was closing fast. Tom believes Murchison to be dead right now. What makes Tom think about murdering Murchison is that he “himself does not acknowledge restraints on his desire nor does he conform to legal rules or social expectations of behavior, a feature central to his embodiment of the *Übermensch* figure” (O’Brien, 2020, p.196).

When Murchison realizes that Tom is the same man who impersonates Derwatt, and that Derwatt was dead since six years, he tells Tom: “I’m damned if I’ll keep my Mouth shut about it! No! Not even if you or anybody else offers me lot of money to keep my mouth shut” (Highsmith, 1985, p.271). Murchison's statement exemplifies the divergence between Murchison's formed and acquired ethics and Tom's alternative morals. Tom is urged to brutally murder Murchison because his morals and ethics don't align with Murchison's. Their morals and ethics are incompatible. Additionally, Tom intends to demonstrate his supremacy over Murchison and all other people by whatever means necessary. He:

Picked up the bottle almost at once and swung it at Murchison, hitting him on the side of the head. This time the bottle broke, wine splashed, and the base of the bottle fell to the floor.

Murchison reeled against the wine racks, jiggling it all. But nothing else fell, except Murchison ... Tom seized the first thing to hand – which happened to be an empty coal scuttle – and swung it at Murchison’s head. Tom struck a second blow (Highsmith, 1985, p.271).

Tom's motive in killing Murchison is to show that he, not Murchison, is the master manipulator in the group. Tom has no remorse following the murder scene. He “[tries] to get his breathing back to normal” (p.272). Moreover, he felt happy, that “despite the corpse in the cellar, despite the ghastly day, the nerve-racking afternoon, Tom was going to be very happy” (p.274). According to O’Brien (2020), “Tom’s capacity to commit crimes without conventional experiences of guilt or remorse indicate the Ubermensch qualities that underpin Highsmith’s construction of his character” (p.220). Tom personifies the Ubermensch ideal in that he creates his own set of values and morals apart from the standards set by society at large. Moreover, Nietzsche’s indication in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883) that “a change in values – that means a change in the creators of values. He who has to be a creator always has to destroy” (p.266) seems to align Tom for a great deal. He destroys anything which might represent an obstacle in his way.

Conclusion

Examining the Ubermensch concept in Patricia Highsmith's *Ripley Under Ground*, this paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the novel's primary themes. The individual can sometimes take on the traits of the Ubermensch, allowing him to go above the moral and ethical norms of his community. This sort of transcendence typically helps the individual in avoiding the remorse that comes from his wrongdoings.

The personification of the Ubermensch in *Ripley Under Ground* allowed him to kill Murchison without regret or guilt because Murchison did not accept the forgeries as genuine works of art in accordance with Tom Ripley's new moral norms. Tom kills Murchison as a result of Murchison's refusal to acknowledge his supremacy to him.

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