

Comparative Literary Analysis of “Will to Live”

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Abstract: Existentialism holds that human existence is meaningless, emphasizing the nature and value of human existence as well as individual freedom and choice. Sartre's existentialism holds that human existence exists before the essence. Since human existence itself is meaningless, to avoid falling into nothingness and despair, human beings must give meaning to their own life. In addition, Sartre also emphasized the human free will. He believes that people are free and can choose their own way of life and behavior, but they also have to bear the corresponding consequences and responsibilities. Many literary works feature *will to live* as the themes, such as Wieslaw Mysliwski's *A Treatise on Shelling Beans*, Yu Hua's *To Live*. Even though they have diverse cultural and historical contexts, the individual agency and resilience can be found in these works. The characters in these novels do not yield after encountering setbacks and actively pursue their personal ideals.

Keywords: Existentialism, will to live, resilience

1. Introduction

The focal point of this dissertation pivots around the literary exploration of the 'will to live' theme as depicted by contemporary authors across diverse cultural and historical contexts. This theme, entrenched in the human experience, has been a recurring subject of literary exploration, offering a lens through which the human spirit's resilience, tenacity, and existential quests are examined. Through a comparative literary analysis of Wieslaw Mysliwski's *A Treatise on Shelling Beans*, Yu Hua's *To Live*, this dissertation aims to unearth the multifaceted representations of the 'will to live' theme and its contextual relevance in the modern era. The rationale behind investigating this theme lies in its perennial relevance and rich potential for offering insight into the human condition amidst varying socio-political and cultural landscapes. Each of the selected works provides a unique narrative lens, mirroring the broader socio-political and cultural dynamics that shape individuals “*will to live*”.

2. Wieslaw Mysliwski's *A Treatise on Shelling Beans*

A Treatise on Shelling Beans is a soliloquy of an aging caretaker of cottages at a summer resort. He is the narrator and the hero. There are some cabins by the side of a lake in this summer resort, and the owners sojourn there only in season. But the old man lives there all the time like a voluntary watchman or keeper. The reason that left him here alone is sad. Before the wartime there was a village in this place, and this village was the old man's native place. The merciless massacre during the war took the lives of his relatives and other villagers, making him the sole survivor.

Back in the day, sure, a lot of people grew beans around here. Because as you might know, at one time beans used to take the place of meat. And when you work as hard as the folks hereabouts would work, from dawn till nighttime, you need your meat.

Before the tragedy, the villagers lived hard on this land to grow beans. Although they was hard, they also had a kind of calm happiness. While the old man was a child when the entire family were shelling beans the oldest ones used to tell stories recalling the past. Now, the old man share the story of his long life to a mysterious visitor: we witness a happy childhood cut short by the war, his hiding from the Nazis buried in a heap of potatoes, his plodding attempts to play the saxophone, the brutal murder of his family, loves lost but remembered, and footloose travels abroad. The old man told these stories while shelling beans. He became the oldest man in his childhood memories, but his loved ones were long gone because of war. This is reflecting the impermanence of things and the cruelty of war.[1]

As the war ended, everything seemed to have passed. But the old man still deeply remembered those who had died unfortunately. He stayed alone in his native place, continuing the presence of his relatives and other villagers in his own way.

Evidently I've been sitting too long staring at these nameplates. What are they? First and last names, dates, God rest their souls. Every year at this time I take them from the gravestones and repaint them. It's pretty time-consuming. The first name and last name alone's a lot of letters. And I have to mind every letter so the deceased won't think I repainted his nameplate any old how because, for instance, he was from the other side of the river. Folks here were always divided into this side and the other side of the river. When people can be divided by something they always will be. It doesn't have to be a river.

As the only survivor in the village, he knew that if he forgot the deceased, the traces of their presence in the world would be gradually erased. So he regularly managed the name plates of the deceased, even if it was a big project. He also detailed the people and things in his memory to the mysterious visitor. In this way, he poured out his lonely heart and strengthens his distant memories in his narration to others.

If you'd been him, you wouldn't have come to me for beans. How would you have known that someone like me exists.

He repeatedly asked the identity of the mysterious visitor, hoping that he had any connection with the deceased, so that he would not be so lonely.

Why do I think the dead have thoughts? Because we don't know that they don't.

The old man's inner persistence can be found in this sentence. In fact, the will to live is one of the themes running throughout the novel. Whether in the face of family responsibility, work pressure or illness, the hero shows a firm faith and tenacious spiritual strength. This spirit provides a power of example in the face of various difficulties in life.

Shelling beans plays an important role in writing the will to live. In the old man's fragmentary narrative, shelling beans connects a series of stories. It appears repeatedly in the old man's narrative. It not only reflects the local culture, but also expresses the feelings of the old man and other villagers.

Father, on the other hand, he would say that shelling beans was one of the lessons we should be learning: "And not just any lesson. It's one of the most important ones. Not just math or Polish. It's a lesson to last you your whole life long. Math and Polish, all that'll vanish from their heads anyway sooner or later. And when they're left on their own it's not math and Polish they'll be drawn to. No sir."

As the hero gets older, he still remembers many of the details about shelling beans. What he could never forget was a kind of warm life and hometown feelings represented by shelling beans. Moreover, shelling beans is also an anchor point in the novel's narrative. It is repeated in the story that has happened, and it is the action that the old man is doing when he tells the story. At the temporary end of

the past story, the old man tend to pull the time back to the present by saying something about shelling beans. This feature is repeated in the novel, such as at the beginning and at the end:

Did you want a lot in the way of beans? That much I think I might have. Though they're unshelled. But if you helped me we could shell them. You've never shelled beans before? It's not so hard. I'll show you. After a couple of pods you'll figure it out. I'll go fetch some.
Just keep shelling the beans.

The will to live seems to be contrasted with the idea of fate, which is portrayed as an external force that determines the worth and course of lives. This text suggests that life itself is a series of disconnected events, often driven by chance, and that existence is not inherently purposeful.

In *A Treatise on Shelling Beans*, Wieslaw Mysliwski explores the “will to live” through the lens of post-World War II Poland. The narrative delves into the personal reflections and memories of an unnamed protagonist, revealing the deep scars left by historical and personal traumas. [2] Mysliwski's work emphasizes the quiet resilience and determination of individuals to continue living despite the overwhelming weight of their past. The “will to live” emerges as a personal response to this apparent randomness and potential meaninglessness of life. It is the inner strength and determination to find value and purpose despite the unpredictability of fate. It is the choice to keep moving forward, to seek out joy and fulfillment, and to create one's own validation rather than waiting for it to be bestowed by an external force. This will to live is not necessarily contingent upon being young; it is a universal human experience that transcends age. As awareness sets in—the realization of life's fleeting nature and the finality of fate—the “will to live” may be tested, but it remains the driving force that propels people forward, seeking to make the most of the time they have.

3. Yu Hua's *To Live*

The hero of Yu Hua's novel *To Live*, Fugui, is also the narrator. But unlike the old man in *A Treatise on Shelling Beans*, Fugui is only one of the narrators, while the other narrator is the folk collector. The folk collector is the introduction of the story, and his narration is realistic, which provides an external perspective for the story. While Fugui is the subject and the main narrator of the story, he interweaves the past and the present together to present a complete story. [3]

Fugui has experienced the broken family, the death of his loved ones, the displacement of his life, and the endless suffering brought about by the social unrest. The will to live enables him to face the challenges of life stanchly, even in the most difficult times, but also never give up the hope and courage of to live. The story of Fugui is a profound interpretation of to live - no matter how difficult life is, as long as people maintain the quality of simplicity, tolerance and endurance, they can find the “will to live”. This will is not only the ability to fight against material poverty, but also the persistence and pursuit of the meaning of life on the spiritual level.

In this novel, a total of ten people died, and most of them are abnormal deaths, but Fugui himself survived in the hidden resistance to suffering and death. Death has shaped the life of Fugui suffering, and reflected the suffering of that era. [4] At the same time, it also reflects the thinking about the nature of life. Yu Hua deprived Fugui of everything to prove that man lived for the sake of living itself, not for anything but living.

In addition to the narrative of death, there is no lack of tenderness in the novel *To live*. Fugui lost the family property inherited because of gambling. This led to the death of his father and the illness of his mother. But after Fugui sincere confession and change, even if Fugui was arrested to join the army and whereabouts unknown, his mother still believed that the reason for Fugui's disappearance is not gambling until her death. These tender descriptions not only reflect the kindness of the little people in the bottom society, but also reflect the thinking of the will to live, especially on how to transcend the survival dilemma. [5] After experiencing hardships and feeling the plight of life, the indomitable

heart and the love from the family support Fugui. Even if Fugui eventually lost all his family, the love from the family became a part of his inner strength in the long years.

In the preface to the Chinese version of *To Live*, Yu Hua once made it clear that *To Live* was inspired by an American folk song called :Old Black Joe. The folk song is about the life of an old black slave. He went through a lifetime of suffering, his relatives have left him, but he treated the world kindly, without any complaints. Inspired by this will to live, Yu Hua wrote the novel *To Live*.

In addition to the individual's will to live, this novel also reflects the common living conditions and spiritual world of the Chinese people. Yu Hua also expressed this view in the following text:

Fugui comes from China's reality and history. But is there a Fugui prototype in real life? If there were, I believe there would be more than a thousand Fuguis, myself being one of them. This is the relationship between the writer and his characters.

In the face of suffering, Fugui chose to endure pain and live stanchly, and constantly pursue the meaning and value of life. The Chinese people's love of the land and the treasure of life are very significant in him. And this love of the land also exists in Wieslaw Mysliwski's *A Treatise on Shelling Beans*. People live on a certain land, farming and harvesting on it, and the will to live is constantly consolidated in the interweaving of ordinary daily life and capricious fate. Beans also appears in the novel *To Live* and plays a key role.

At the end of the novel *To Live*, after the death of his son, daughter, wife and son-in-law, Fugui, an older man, had to raise his grandson alone. His grandson is called 'Kugen', a name which in Chinese means a bitter root. This name is an omen of the tragic end of Kugen, but also reflects the bitter life of Kugen and even others. Before his son-in-law died unexpectedly at the construction site, Fugui also thought that he and his son-in-law could earn money to provide better living conditions for his grandson. However, after the death of their son-in-law and the fixing of farm output quotas for each household, Fugui and Kugen were too old or young to bear the work in the field, so their life became more and more difficult. [6] Fugui cooked the beans that are so precious to them for Kugen because he loved his grandson and Kugen was uncomfortable because of fatigue and hunger. After that, Fugui had to go out to work in the fields. Because Kugen was usually too hungry and rarely can eat good food, eat too many beans and dead. After the tragic and absurd death, Fugui said that Kugen was not greedy, but that his family was too poor, and Kugen lived too hard. Fugui also said that he blamed his old and stupid, cooking too many beans to kill his grandson.

Yu Hua's *To Live* presents a vivid depiction of the "will to live" within the context of 20th-century China, spanning several decades of significant socio-political upheaval. The protagonist, Fugui, navigates through numerous personal and national tragedies, embodying a relentless determination to survive. [7] Yu Hua's narrative captures the essence of human endurance amidst the relentless forces of history and fate. When asked by Helen Finken, "What motivated you to write *To Live* ?", Yu Hua made the following answer, which also reflects the will to live:

The phrase To live in Chinese (huo zhe) is charged with power. The power doesn't come from shouting or attacking, but enduring. To live is to endure the responsibilities life has thrust upon us, to endure the happiness and sufferings, the boring and banal, that reality has given us. To Live talks about the friendship between a person and his fate. It is a moving relationship because they appreciate each other and hate each other at the same time. They can't get rid of each other and they can't complain about each other. When they live, they walk together on the dusty roads. When they die, they turn together into rain and mud. To Live talks about how humans endure abysmal suffering, like a Chinese saying: To hang by a thread. You let a strand of hair withstand 30,000 jin and not break. 1 It talks about the capacity and multitude of tears, talks about the absence of desperation, talks about people living because they must. They live to live and for nothing else.

4. Conclusion

Through comparative literary analysis and combined with existentialism, this study explores the multidimensional expression of the theme of “will to live” in different cultural and historical backgrounds.

Set in post-World War II Poland, Wiesław Myśliwski’s *A Treatise on Shelling Beans* explores the effects of personal reflection and memory on the “will to live”. As the sole survivor, the protagonist shows a kind tenacity and determination in the face of family tragedy and personal trauma. The recurring “shelling beans” in the novel symbolizes a warm life and hometown emotion, and becomes an important anchor point for the protagonist’s memories. Despite the challenge of uncertain fate, the protagonist gradually strengthens the “will to live” through individual agency and resilience. Yu Hua’s *To Live* depicts the survival struggle of the protagonist, under the background of social unrest in China in the 20th century. The protagonist has experienced a broken family, the death of relatives and social changes, but always adheres to the “will to live”. The frequent occurrence of death plots in the novel reflects the suffering and absurdity of life, and also reveals the spiritual power of human beings to find the meaning of survival in despair.

In conclusion, the three works together show the tenacity and unyielding of human beings in the face of suffering and challenges, and provide a valuable perspective for understanding the human will to live in contemporary literature.

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