

# **“The Razor’s Edge” by W. Somerset Maugham [B2]**

Questo romanzo introspettivo, che tocca temi come l'esistenzialismo, il materialismo e l'illuminazione spirituale, è narrato dall'autore stesso, che diventa quindi un personaggio della storia.

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William Somerset Maugham was an English writer famed for his plays, novels and short stories. One of his most accessible novels, *The Razor’s Edge* takes its title from a verse in an ancient Hindu text called the *Katha Upanishad*. The meaning of the verse is that the path to salvation is arduous. Maugham's novel tells the story of Larry Darrell, a pilot from Chicago who is traumatised by his experiences in World War One. Maugham places himself in the story too, as a narrator and a passive participant in the action.

## **BIG QUESTIONS**

After the war, Larry becomes engaged to Isabel, a vivacious socialite. However, he does not believe in material success, does not want to work, and is tormented by philosophical questions: Why does evil exist? Is God really good? What is the purpose of life? Conventional responses do not convince him. “The fact that a great many people believe something is no guarantee of its truth.” “Il fatto che un gran numero di persone creda una cosa non ne garantisce la verità.”

## **SPIRITUAL PATH**

To find the truth, Larry travels to France, where he works in a mine. He meets Kosti, who introduces him to mysticism. They travel through Belgium and Germany and work on a farm. After an embarrassing situation with a young woman, Larry quickly leaves. He then meets a monk who suggests that the Catholic Church holds the answers. But Larry is disappointed by his experience. “I used to listen to the monks repeating the Lord’s Prayer; I wondered how they could continue to pray without misgiving to their

heavenly father to give them their daily bread. [...] It seemed to me that if an omnipotent creator was not prepared to provide for his creatures with the necessities, material and spiritual, of existence, he'd have done better not to create them." "Quando i monaci ripetevano il Pater noster mi domandavo come potessero continuare a chiedere con fiducia al loro Padre celeste il pane quotidiano. [...] Mi sembra che se un Creatore onnipotente non era disposto a provvedere alle necessità materiali e spirituali delle proprie creature, avrebbe fatto meglio a non crearle."

## INDIAN ADVENTURE

Larry returns to France, where he helps a friend recover from [typhoid](#). She repays him with sex. Travelling to Spain, he has an affair with a Spanish woman. He then travels to India, where he spends two years in a spiritual [retreat](#) called an ashram. In the Himalayan mountains, he learns that to achieve enlightenment he must renounce the world. "Nothing in the world is permanent, and we're foolish when we ask anything to last, but surely we're still more foolish not to take delight in it while we have it. If change is of the essence of existence, one would have thought it only sensible to make it the premise of our philosophy." "Niente è permanente nel mondo ed è irragionevole chiedere che qualche cosa duri; ma certo non è meno irragionevole non goderne finché l'abbiamo. Se il mutamento è nell'essenza stessa dell'esistenza, dovrebbe esser ragionevole farne la base della nostra filosofia."

## CHANGED FORTUNES

Having found a sense of [fulfilment](#) in Eastern philosophy, Larry returns to Paris, where he encounters Maugham, Isabel and her husband Gray. Gray has had a [nervous breakdown](#) after the 1929 Wall Street Crash, but Larry helps him recover through hypnosis. Isabel confesses to Maugham that she has always been in love with Larry, but married Gray, as he could give her the life she wanted. The three meet an old [acquaintance](#) called Sophie. Once a lively, intelligent girl, she is now addicted to alcohol, sex and drugs. Larry tries to help her, believing that circumstances made her this way. "For men

and women are not only themselves; they are also the region in which they are born, the city apartment or farm in which they learnt to walk, the games they played as children, the old wives' tales they overheard, the food they ate, the schools they attended, the sports they followed, the poets they read, and the God they believed in." "Gli uomini e le donne, infatti, non sono soltanto se stessi ma anche la regione in cui sono nati, l'appartamento in città o la casa di campagna dove impararono a camminare, i giochi che fecero da bambini, le vecchie favole che ascoltarono, i cibi che mangiarono, le scuole che frequentarono, gli sport che praticarono, i poeti che lessero e il Dio nel quale credettero."

## FILM ADAPTATIONS

Maughan leaves, and never sees Larry or Isabel again. He reflects that while he can't be sure that their lives will be fulfilling, at least they exercised their freedom to choose. The [Razor's Edge](#) has been twice adapted for the screen: first in 1946, in an Oscar-nominated film directed by Edmund Goulding, and then in 1984, in a movie directed by John Byrum and starring Bill Murray as Larry.

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# Glossary

- **monk** = monaco
- **typhoid** = tifo
- **nervous breakdown** = esaurimento nervoso
- **Razor's Edge** = filo del rasoio
- **becomes engaged** = fidanzarsi, promettersi matrimonio
- **retreat** = ritiro
- **fulfilment** = realizzazione personale
- **acquaintance** = conoscente
- **socialite** = membro dell'alta società
- **embarrassing** = imbarazzante