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Friedrich Nietzsche’s Conception of Greek Tragedy

& His Resounding Effect on Modern Art

At the end of the nineteenth century, it was well known that rational societies throughout Europe were suffering from inadequacies from across all facets of human nature. This particularly bleak period was in dire need of a new philosophy unlike anything anyone had encountered before. Ultimately, this change in conventional wisdom came in the form of modernist philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, who, for better or for worse, revolutionized the ideas of human nature and progress that had been ingrained in society for over a millenium. **Through his book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Friedrich Nietzsche ridiculed the rational ideas holding back progress for so long. His original notion of a superior human formed by instinctual behavior traces back, ironically, to his appreciation for the insight found in Greek tragedies, which, like Euripides’ *The Bacchae*, would soon be tainted by Socrates and his rational inquiry. Many artists, influenced by Nietzsche’s brave ideas, also revolutionized the modern scene in their respective fields. Most notably, Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring* garnered the eyes of many for its intensely different style and its attempt at recreating the Pre-Socratic mythical scene that Nietzsche had worshipped so extensively.**

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche was born on October 15th, 1844 into a German family of ministers and philologists. He too would pursue philology, soon departing to a rigorous academic adventure at Schulpforta, a monastery turned to a boarding school. During his teenage years, Nietzsche was exposed to books like David Strauss’ *Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, an oblique slant towards the conventional Christian values represented in his surrounding environment. While attending the University of Bonn, he continued studying ancient biblical texts. The validity of his future ideologies could be attributed to his knowledge on this basis he had developed in his development. Nietzsche was also enamored by Arthur Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Representation*, as it influenced the representational style in which he viewed the world as well as his love for the music and the arts that encaptured these essences. Around this time, when Nietzsche was beginning to develop himself as a philosopher, Europe was suffering a severe economic and politically inept depression. After centuries of liberal governments, the people spoke of change, and young Nietzsche was indeed ready to express his solution to the world’s problems. Furthermore, through a richly inspired background and a fortuitous decline in modern day government, Nietzsche’s first book *The Birth of Tragedy* would be released in the perfect conditions for success.

Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*, his first works, embodied the ever-changing philosophy at the core of modernism. In it, he wrote of the natural urges from within human beings prevalent since the times of the ancient Greeks and how it was and could be utilized to provide a better human species to the world. To begin, Nietzsche focused his argument on the idea that ancient Greece consisted of two different philosophies, one led by Dionysus and the other by Apollo. Much like Hegel’s conception of a dialectically evolving society, he believed that these two philosophies were clashing and evidently improving the flourishing civilization.  More specifically, Apollo was in charge of the visuals, while Dionysus preferred that which he could not see in real life: the fantasies and dream worlds contained within things like music. Ultimately, these two components combine to form an equally-distributed zenith of culture in Greek tragedy.

“we link our recognition that in the Greek world there exists a huge contrast, in origins and purposes, between visual (plastic) arts, the Apollonian, and the non-visual art of music, the Dionysian. Both very different drives go hand in hand, for the most part in open conflict with each other and simultaneously provoking each other all the time to new and more powerful offspring” ([Nietzsche](http://www.writewellgroup.com/Humanities_Project_2005-06/Primary_Sources/nietzsche_birth_of_tragedy_cut.htm#dionysianappolonianmix))

Evidently, as Nietzsche dove deeper into the history of human thinking, he professed his love for the irrational images from the Dionysian side of this commensurate duality, as he saw a greater need for its use in society. “Excess revealed itself as the truth. The contradictory ecstasy born from of pain spoke of itself right out of the heart of nature. And so the Apollonian was canceled and destroyed, above all where the Dionysian penetrated.” ([Nietzsche](http://www.writewellgroup.com/Humanities_Project_2005-06/Primary_Sources/nietzsche_birth_of_tragedy_cut.htm#dionysianappolonianmix)) He believed that the absurd content of these mystical dreams gave us insight into becoming a better society and progressing. After all, the rational ideas of the past century had not progressed society in any manner, so Nietzsche’s bold Dionysian preference had come almost out of necessity.

Nietzsche continued his argument of the progressive nature found in irrational Greek tragedies by instituting his ideas on the beauty of life’s chaos and how ambiguity is one of life’s truly remarkable assets. Since art was often narrowed just to Apollonian forms, many were not exposed to the beauties of Dionysus’ more intricate interpretations of art. They were not complex in nature, simply, they had no literal meaning and could be interpreted in many ways; that was the beauty that Nietzsche saw in Greek tragedy. “That reflection, which lacks imagery and concepts, of the original pain in music, together with its redemption in illusion, gives rise now to a second reflection as the particular metaphor or illustration.” ([Nietzsche](http://www.writewellgroup.com/Humanities_Project_2005-06/Primary_Sources/nietzsche_birth_of_tragedy_cut.htm#thenatureofsong)) The most vivid example of this chaotic beauty could be found in mythological beings prancing in Dionysian revels such as the satyr, who plays his lyre and lulls listeners into the realm of the unconscious. The satyr is also an indirect reference to Nietzsche’s dislike towards religions which he believed to be harmful for the liberation of the mind.  “The satyr as the Dionysian chorus member lives in a reality permitted by religion, sanctioned by myth and culture. The fact that tragedy begins with him, that out of him the Dionysian wisdom of tragedy speaks, is a phenomenon as foreign to us here as the development of tragedy out of the chorus generally.” ([Nietzsche](http://www.writewellgroup.com/Humanities_Project_2005-06/Primary_Sources/nietzsche_birth_of_tragedy_cut.htm#thesatyr)) At the core of what Nietzsche is saying, from the beauty of Greek tragedy to the analogies to life’s present day inadequacies, his overall point is that truth that ultimately leads to a successful society is clear as daylight and doesn’t have to be interpreted through reason; the truth should be construed irrationally. Furthermore, the Pre-Socratic Greeks were not tainted by the outside forces of rationale, which, in turn, gave them a direct connection to the truths of life and, as a result, a flourishing society.

“The metaphysical consolation, which as I have already indicated, true tragedy leaves us, that at the bottom of everything, in spite of all the transformations in phenomena, life is indestructibly power and delightful, this consolation appears in lively clarity as the chorus of satyrs, the chorus of natural beings, who live, as it were, behind civilization, who cannot disappear, and who, in spite of all the changes in generations and a people's history, always remain the same. With this chorus, the profound Greek, capable of the most delicate and the most severe suffering, consoled himself” ([Nietzsche](http://www.writewellgroup.com/Humanities_Project_2005-06/Primary_Sources/nietzsche_birth_of_tragedy_cut.htm#thesatyr))

At the end of this well-constructed argument, Nietzsche professed his admiration for Greek culture and wanted it to be applied to the struggling world he was living in. Ideally, this stage of Greek culture should have lasted for an eternity, but it didn’t, and once the rational inquiry took its course, tragedy would never be the same.

Nietzsche’s love for the Pre-Socratic period in Greek culture emanated through his complete and utter hatred towards the subsequent period of rational inquiry, which he called “The Suicide of Greek Tragedy”. To him, the dialectical Apollonian-Dionysian forms of tragedy no longer existed after the entrance of Socrates and reason into the irrationality of art. Particularly, it was Euripides who was one of the first to begin to show signs of an inferior tragedy to its flourishing predecessors. “This is the new opposition: the Dionysian and the Socratic. And from this contrast, Greek tragedy perished as a work of art. No matter now how much Euripides might seek to console us with his retraction, he was unsuccessful. The most magnificent temple lay in ruins.” ([Nietzsche](http://www.writewellgroup.com/Humanities_Project_2005-06/Primary_Sources/nietzsche_birth_of_tragedy_cut.htm#Socrates)) With this genuine dislike of the Socratic period of Greece, it’s only natural that he would dislike the man who ended such a beautiful time. Socrates, a man praised in liberal societies, was really being bashed for the first time, another testament to how oddly different Nietzsche’s ideas were. Socrates was essentially the murderer of the best forms of art, redefining what was previously considered beautiful, and in his effort to obtain an uncertain truth, he prevented others from reaching the actual truths from within their natural instincts.

“his un-Dionysian tendencies much rather led him astray into an inartistic naturalism, we are now able to move closer to the essential quality of his Socratic aesthetics, whose most important law runs something like this: "Everything must be understandable in order to be beautiful," a corollary to the Socratic saying, "Only the knowledgeable person is virtuous." With this canon at hand, Euripides measured all the individual features and justified them according to this principle: the language, characters, dramatic construction, the choral music.” ([Nietzsche](http://www.writewellgroup.com/Humanities_Project_2005-06/Primary_Sources/nietzsche_birth_of_tragedy_cut.htm#Socrates))

Another negative effect of reason to tragedy was its lack of freedom to be creative. Western civilization was built on the idea that reason could liberate the mind; the more one knew, the more likely one were to know the trials of life and be free from uncertainty. Unfortunately, this idea of uncertainty was used artistically for so long in tragedy, and taking out the suspense would ultimately diminish the thrill of the story.

“Nothing can be more offensive to our stage techniques than the prologue in Euripides's plays. That a single person should step forward at the beginning of a work and explain who he is, what has gone on before the action starts, what has happened up to this point, and even what will occur in the unfolding of the work, that would strike a modern poetical dramatist as a wanton, inexcusable abandonment of all the effects of suspense. If we know everything which is going to happen, who will want to sit around waiting to see that it really does happen? For here there is nothing like the stimulating relationship between a prophetic dream and a later real event.” ([Nietzsche](http://www.writewellgroup.com/Humanities_Project_2005-06/Primary_Sources/nietzsche_birth_of_tragedy_cut.htm#Socrates))

In all, the Socratic period in Greece was one of reason and intellect, but to Nietzsche those two were not helping solve common day issues, and the beautiful forms of tragedy should have subsequently been left untouched.

Euripides’ *The Bacchae* was truly the first Greek tragedy that had emphasized the rational principles of the Socratic age. As mentioned previously, it did not capture the serene essence associated with the most well-known Greek tragedies. Nietzsche utilized this ineptitude of rational inquiry to compare it to the same troubles occurring in his deteriorating zeitgeist. *The Bacchae*, like many tragedy before it, is a story that consists of a protagonist and tragic events that culminate to many deaths. What makes this story especially important to Nietzschean philosophy was its focus on sending rational messages to its readers; it wasn’t allowed to be art for the sake of art. The story itself is about Pentheus, king of Thebes, who rejects the irrational rites of Dionysus for their impracticality in his society. Later, a soothsayer, Tiresias, warns Pentheus of his terrible fate for his rejection of the company of Dionysus and his frenzies of maenads revelling through Thebes, not believing them to be truly divine.  “I will not lift mine arm to war with God, For thee nor all thy words. Madness most fell, Is on thee, madness wrought by some dread spell, But not by spell nor leechcraft to be cured!” ([Euripides](http://www.bartleby.com/8/8/1.html)) It’s safe to say that Nietzsche draws many parallels with what Tiresias is telling to this man of reason: that the “madness” can be used to enhance mankind. Being the figure of reason, Pentheus cannot let nature run its course, as Nietzscheans would prefer to do. He feels inclined to rid of the frenzies that were not causing any harm and he ends up paying for his mistake. As he ventured up the mountain where the revels were occurring, he was torn to shreds by his own mother.

Tyrannously hath he trod;

Marched him, in Law’s despite,

Against thy Light, O God,

Yea, and thy Mother’s Light;

Girded him, falsely bold,

Blinded in craft, to quell

And by man’s violence hold

Things unconquerable ([Euripides](http://www.bartleby.com/8/8/4.html))

While in the end, Euripides’ may have been trying to convey the message of the power of instincts, it certainly wasn’t a positive one. The shining figure in this story is subsequently ripped apart for seeking “justice” and the instinctual power of the Dionysian frenzies degrade him. Nietzsche just cannot come to terms with this, and Socrates is the one to blame here. “Should the Dionysian exist at all? Should we not eradicate it forcefully from Greek soil?...The most intelligent opponent, like Pentheus in the *Bacchae***,** is unexpectedly charmed by Dionysus and runs from him in this enchanted state to his destruction.” ([Nietzsche](http://www.writewellgroup.com/Humanities_Project_2005-06/Primary_Sources/nietzsche_birth_of_tragedy_cut.htm#Socrates)) *The Bacchae* was truly a sign of how Greek tragedy was discouraged from building upon of its most important forms, which, to Nietzsche, was a tragedy in it of itself.

As Nietzsche was truly inspired by Greek tragedy and the instinctual behavior that they adorned, he also inspired many people during his bleak time with his glaringly different style of philosophy. Considering the struggling economic times in which he instituted his philosophy, many people had no other hope than to follow the opposition of the government’s ideologies. Most notably, the artists of the time were tired of the Victorian ages in which they had to follow a certain mold and this transition from the bleak zeitgeist of the late nineteenth century to a new age benefited all artists no matter the expertise. In accordance with Nietzsche’s philosophy, these artists used their tools to construct things irrationally, with that being the purest way possible. From paintings to music to dances, Europe had sensed this zeitgeist on all interpretations of Nietzsche’s powerful words after such an extraordinarily bland time period led by reason. These artists felt like they were the supermen of the world, using irrational principals to progress humanity to its greater stage. While in theory, this new style would be embraced by desperate people throughout Europe, there were of course a few instances that it was not as appreciated back then as it is now.

Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring* perfectly captured this evolution in art during the early twentieth century, but it may have changed art’s landscape too abruptly for it to be successful in the viewers’ eyes. Nevertheless, the theme was a tribute to its inspirer, Nietzsche, and his inspiration from Greek tragedy.  Its unique components redefined art through an array of mediums whether it be through dance, through art, or through music. The dance, choreographed by Vaslav Nijinsky, was a revolution by itself, as it tested the limits of what was considered dance. By using extremely overt styles, Nijinsky had his dancers reenact the eroticism associated with Dionysian revels. The specific dance of ballet, once constrained to rigid arm and leg movements, was now freed to do anything, and in theory, it improved the expressional style of dance as a whole. Each dancer had now become a superman; this was a truly revolutionary feat in their eyes. The story itself followed the rites of Dionysus with sacrifice of a youth in his or her prime. This is the time when humans are most sexually active, so it is fitting that Nijinsky applied this idea to go along with the whole Nietzschean theme of being inspired by the Pre-Socratic irrational principles. To help enliven the scenes, Nicholas Roerich used his expertise in his fields to create a serene and primordial feeling amongst the members of the cast. With a beautifully painted array of nature stage art to help set the tone of each scene and various tribal costumes to emphasize the beauty of these rites, *The Rite of Spring* had caught the attention of fellow Nietzscheans hungry for a new style and inspiration to their lives. While the dances and stage art were critical to the revolution that was *The Rite of Spring*, it did not begin to scratch the surface of what had happened with its music.

Music, the most revolutionary form of art instituted in *The Rite of Spring*, was the true test of loyalty to the ideals of modernism. Igor Stravinsky, the mastermind behind these works, basically defied all aspects of music previously considered to be in the same category. There were no laws to his music; he did follow the standard rules of beat, but with this, he demonstrated art in its purest form. The music itself consisted of mere clashes and abrupt sounds to the point that it did not fall under the common definition of music. With this oddly different style, it received a varied response; some absolutely loved the idea of freedom in its purest form, and others despised it. In its premiere in Paris, most of the so-called "modernists" in attendance fled the scene, demanding a refund for having paid for such an atrocious performance. These attendees, like most of Europe, did not stand this test of modernism, since they were too used to conventional styles of music to see the beauty in the Nietzschean way. The idea that something so down-right disturbing could be beautiful was only seen in this modernist period. In all, Stravinsky’s style of music was revolutionary, and its impact on the spectrum of art in the late nineteenth century can only be recognized years after its premiere.

As the age of art truly transformed during the modern era, all ideologies point to Nietzsche and his stylistically different approach to answering life’s questions. Nietzsche himself had inherited all types of philosophies growing up, so his preference of Pre-Socratic Greece has to be taken seriously. After all, it would be the Greek Tragedy and its irrational ideas that provided the basis for Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*. Acknowledging where the Pre-Socratic philosophy met its end, Nietzsche was bound to not let reason impede the purest forms in which he revelled; he wouldn’t let his ideologies be tainted by Socrates like Euripides had fallen victim to with the first rational tragedy, *The Bacchae*. Moreover, Nietzsche’s conception of the liberation from reason sparked the modern era to a new age in artistic styles, redefining what was acceptable in each field respectively. *The Rite of Spring* captured all of these entities, especially with Stravinsky’s controversial premiere of his modern music. In the mid-twentieth century, Nietzsche’s ideologies could be seen resounding once again. This time, it was used as political propaganda in Nazi Germany as well as the driving force behind Hitler’s annihilation of the Jews. Here, Nietzsche’s philosophy was twisted around to justify the mass-murder of six million people, saying that only the “supermen” could live. In actuality, the Nazi party was more Neo-Darwinist than Nietzschean, but because of Nietzsche’s popularity in the modern scene as well as his German background, his ideology was often associated with the dark times of World War II. Despite this misconception, Nietzsche truly was the father of modern art, inspiring all who came across him as he forever changed the landscape of humanity in its present form.

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