

Nietzsche's Poems and *Zarathustra*: Theme of Animal Philosophy

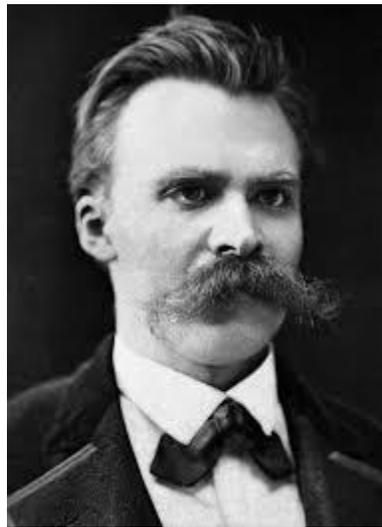
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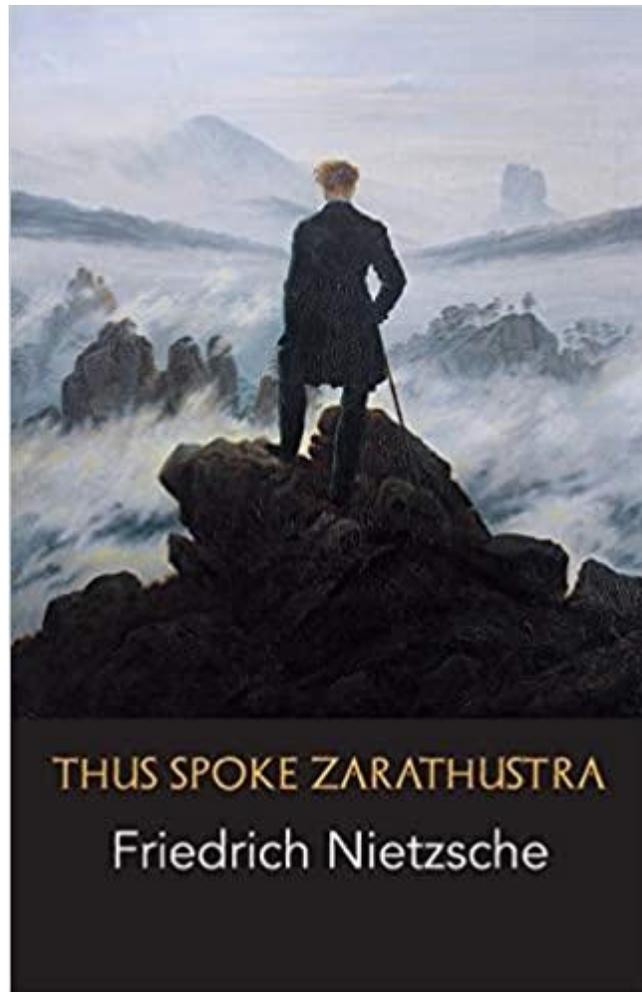
Friedrich Nietzsche

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Abstract

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) was a German philosopher and cultural critic who put forth criticisms of traditional European morality and religion, as well as of conventional philosophical ideas and social and political pieties associated with modernity. He exposed false consciousness of people's received ideas. He along with Marx and Freud are grouped as propagating "hermeneutics of suspicion" against traditional values. Nietzsche was born in Röcken, where his father was a Lutheran minister. Nietzsche had a brilliant school and university career, culminating in May 1869 when he was called to a chair in classical philology at Basel at a young age of 24. He was writing poetry from his school days and this paper aims at studying the themes of Friedrich Nietzsche's poems and his *Zarathustra*.

Keywords: Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, will, animal imagery.



Courtesy: https://www.amazon.com/Thus-Spoke-Zarathustra-Friedrich-Nietzsche/dp/1989201687/ref=sr_1_3?crd=PGGKIYLK0ZWL&keywords=zarathustra+nietzsche&qid=1584091739&s=books&sprefix=Zarathustra%2Caps%2C1198&sr=1-3

Friedrich Nietzsche was born in 1844 in Germany and died in 1900. He was a classical scholar, philosopher, critic of culture, and became one of the most influential of all modern thinkers from Europe. He examined humanity's religious belief, ethics, and philosophy which influenced theologians, philosophers, psychologists, poets, novelists, and playwrights. He saw through concepts of nationalism and anti-Semitism. Nietzsche's *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*) was published between 1883 and 1885 in four parts, the last of which was a private printing at his own expense. In 1886 he wrote *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* (*Beyond Good and Evil*) and in 1887 *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (*On the Genealogy of Morals*) was written. *Twilight of the Idols* appeared in 1889; *The Antichrist* and *Nietzsche contra Wagner* were published in 1895. His writings did not get much attention when he was alive (Magnus).

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Nietzsche keeps drawing inferences from the world of animals and their world of primitivism to symbolize energy and power. He investigates culture not as a rational element, but as something born out of man's irrational energy. Margot Norris calls this approach as "bio-centric." Nietzsche's concept of life is generally related to will to power and this in turn is related to memory and rationality. Lemm argues "that the notion of the will to power reflects an antagonism between memory and forgetfulness and can be reformulated through this antagonism." This can build a "relationship between animality and culture." In the writings of Nietzsche "the animal, the human, and the overhuman are tied to each other and cannot be separated into distinct stages of evolution" (Lemm 1-2).

This approach to the world of nature is found in his poems of the formative years to the rest of the poetic philosophical works of his later years.

The poem "Sweet Dreams Have Fled" was written by Nietzsche in 1862 when he was 18 years old. There is a hope in his mind about his future and he writes: "Sweet dreams have fled, / The past has fled, / The present is gloomy, / The far-off future bleak." He says that he has "never experienced / The joy and happiness of life," and therefore he looks "sadly / Upon long-vanished times." He has "neither peace nor rest" and does not know what he believes and asks: "Why I still live — for what?" At this point the poem breaks into a fantasy and Nietzsche writes:

I would like to die, die
Dozing upon a green meadow
Clouds drifting by above me,
Forest-solitude around me.

The universe's eternal wheels
Roll in a circular path —
The rusty spring of the globe
Constantly winds itself up.

How nice to fly about
Like air around the revolving ball
Creeping into every corner,
Subsiding in soaring space!

How nice to engulf the world
In universal intensity.
And then write a journal
About the world's circumference.

The young poet-philosopher wants to “constrain infinity, / Proving, then, with a thousand reasons, / That world and time are finite.” The argument is that this world and time are finite – entities that might have an end. A note written by Nietzsche and placed by an editor before the poem reads: “I’m more fond of the past than the present; but I believe in a better future.” (Nietzsche channel)

The poem “Without a Home” was written in 1859, when he was fifteen years old. The poem is a kind of reply to people who enquire about the poet’s home. He argues that “No one would dare” ask him about where his home is as he has “never been bound / To space and fleeting time, / Am as free as an eagle!” These formative years of his poetic self reflect a desire to free himself from the bondage of space and time.

“After a Nocturnal Thunderstorm” was written in 1871, when Nietzsche was twenty seven years old. The thunder hangs as “misty cover” around his window like a “goddess of dark cloud, / Ashen flakes eerily hover / To a roaring brook’s angry sound.” There are “sudden lightning flashes” and the “untamed thunder” booms in “valleys poisoned and noxious” and the poet tells the thunderstorm: “Your death-drink, sorceress, was brewed!” the storm howls and awakes him with a jolt and the poet wakes up to see it “with blazing eyes, / For a piercing thunderbolt.” It speaks:

"Now hear what I am!

I’m the Amazon, eternal and great,
Never dovelike, weak or womanly —
Warrioress full of scorn and manly hate,
The victress and the tigress, equally!

Where I tread, I trample corpses,
In my brain, poison thoughts do flow,
With fierce grim eyes, I hurl torches,
Now kneel, worm—pray! Or melt in my mad glow!"

The power of nature and its will and energy are portrayed vividly, and the poet celebrates this superhuman power of the elements.

“This is the autumn” was written in 1877, when the poet was thirty three years old. The description is picturesque and visual imagery is dominant: “The sun crawls along the mountain / And climbs up / And rests with every step. / Upon worn, strained threads / The wind plays its song.” And after this brief description, he breaks into worrying as “hope flees” and he begins

thinking about the fruit of the tree that falls on the ground when it is shaken. He is asking the fruit: “O fruit of the tree, / Shaken, you fall! / What lone secret did the night / Reveal to you, / That icy horror veiling your cheeks, / Your crimson cheeks?” The ice on the fruit is a horror, Nietzsche imagines visualizing the impact it must have had on the fruit. His gaze travels further on the ground and he notices starflowers and they speak to him: “I’m not beautiful /... But I love people, / And I comfort people, /They should see flowers now, / Bend down to me, /Alas! and break me —/ In their eyes then shines / Memory of more beautiful things / And happiness.” The positive note of the starflower redirects the poet to the aspect of living. People can get happiness not only by looking at the fruit on top of a tree which falls down and we interpret that as failure, whereas the star flower is always on the ground and that can bring happy memories to human minds. Even the star flower has to leave this world and hence it says: “I see it and then die, / And die gladly. After seeing people’s happiness the flowers happily leave this earth, after fulfilling their mission. Fruits and flowers have a purpose and after they fulfill it, they quietly leave and that is autumn.

“What lone secret did the night / Reveal to you, / That icy horror veiling your cheeks,” – the description refers to the knowledge pain and horror teach us or reveal to us – the lessons of strength that we absorb from life. This drawing of strength slowly develops into a system of will power.

The will to power is an essential conception in the thinking of Nietzsche. He views it as an irrational force. It guides the mind, body and spirit of the people. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* was regarded by Nietzsche as among his most significant of works, and it dealt with “the power of cats and wolves” – the power of wild animals. Nietzsche writes in *Zarathustra*:

Uncommon is the highest virtue, and unprofiting; beaming is it, and soft of luster:
a bestowing virtue is the highest virtue.
Verily, I divine you well, my disciples; ye strive like me for the bestowing virtue.
What should ye have in common with cats and wolves? (67)

Thirty years after its initial publication, 150,000 copies of the *Zarathustra* were printed by the German government and issued as inspirational reading, along with the Bible, to the young soldiers during the First World War. The book is a call to humanity to take charge of it, to command and live with zest and energy. *Zarathustra* is lyrical and uses a prophetic style of writing. It relies upon many Old and New Testament allusions. Nietzsche fills the work with nature metaphors. He invokes animals, earth, air, fire, water, celestial bodies and plants. He describes the spiritual development of *Zarathustra* who is portrayed as a solitary, reflective, exceedingly strong-willed, sage-like, laughing and dancing voice of heroic self-mastery.

Zarathustra is accompanied by a proud, sharp-eyed eagle and a wise snake. Nietzsche refers to this higher mode of being as “superhuman” (*übermenschlich*) (Wicks).

Who created for themselves such caves and penitence-stairs? Was it not those to conceal themselves, and were ashamed under the clear sky?
And only when the clear sky looketh again through ruined roofs, and down upon grass and red poppies on ruined walls – will I again turn my heart to the seats of this God. (*Thus Spake Zarathustra* 85)

The sheer poetry, tinged with philosophical questions, is the stamp of Nietzsche’s poetic style of writing giving scope to thought, analysis and interpretation. His method of writing philosophy in a literary style is problematic for interpretation. He uses the language of poetry that is loaded with metaphors and allusions to write philosophical truths, and that leads to complex interpretations.

We realize the development of the concept of power begins from his early poetry. We have to go back to his earlier poem written in 1871:

I’m the Amazon, eternal and great,
Never dovelike, weak or womanly —
Warrioress full of scorn and manly hate,
The victress and the tigress, equally!
- (“After a Nocturnal Thunderstorm”)

Zarathustra was written in 1883-85 and we can notice the development of the philosophy of power. The power of nature is invoked in the poem:

Where I tread, I trample corpses,
In my brain, poison thoughts do flow,
With fierce grim eyes, I hurl torches,
Now kneel, worm—pray! Or melt in my mad glow!"
- (“After a Nocturnal Thunderstorm”)

Nature imagery becomes a symbol of its power. “Out of your wild cats must tigers have evolved, and out of your prison-toads, crocodiles; for the good hunter shall have a good hunt,” (139) he says in *Zarathustra*. Human will is born out of its own nature, and the animal imagery invokes (later extensively employed by Ted Hughes as well) symbolizes the power of human or natural will.

Further, Nietzsche blurs truth with imagination and weaves out ideas which can create new patterns of approaching life.

When Zarathustra so spake, his disciple resented it, but was silent. And Zarathustra also was silent; and his eye directed itself inwardly, as if it gazed into the far distance. At last he sighed and drew breath –

I am of today and heretofore, said he thereupon; but something is in me that is of the morrow, and the day following, and the hereafter.

I became weary of the poets, of the old and of the new, superficial are they all unto me, and shallow seas.

They did not think sufficiently into the depth, therefore their feeling did not reach to the bottom....

Ah, I cast indeed my net into their sea, and meant to catch good fish; but always did I draw up the head of some ancient God. (*Zarathustra* 122-123)

With one stroke Zarathustra dismisses all the texts of the past, “old and the new” and condemns them as “superficial” – “shallow seas.” The metaphor of the sea implies that a poet has to write with deeper meanings that have to keep surfacing endlessly. Their works do not have enough inspiration to lead the readers. They end up explaining some religious text or the other, borrowing their ideologies from religious prophets. There is no independent will in them, no originality to explain the aspects of life. Nietzsche’s poems and his *Zarathustra* call for strengthening of human will, invoking the power of the animal in human beings – the power and zest to live.

Nietzsche influenced the thinking traditions of the 20th century. His poetic and metaphorical style influenced “Albert Camus, André Gide, D.H. Lawrence, Jack London, Thomas Mann, Yukio Mishima, Eugene O’Neill, William Butler Yeats, Wyndham Lewis and George Bernard Shaw” and his philosophy influenced “Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault.” Scholars agree unanimously that he is the “forefather of existentialism, critical theory, post-structuralism, deconstruction and postmodernism.” Nevertheless, his theory of will and self-fashioning was appropriated by the 20th century European nationalists to help them ascend political power, as Nietzsche’s writings contained inspirational elements commanding human to will to grow and establish its power on earth. (Drochon)

The fascists of the mid-20th century interpreted Nietzsche as celebrating their ideologies of power. They identified themselves with Nietzsche’s ideologies that “Hitler gifted Mussolini the complete works of Nietzsche for his birthday. The Nietzschean ideals of anti-egalitarianism,

the Superman, and the will to power inspired them to act” and the ideology of building human will became a tool for exciting the emotions of the masses. (Hendricks).

Nietzsche’s lines “something is in me that is of the morrow, and the day following, and the hereafter” (*Zarathustra* 122) that is immensely positive and reassuring, as Nietzsche points out, as the human will can come through the difficulties of everyday, was interpreted as the power of a particular race. It was captured in the frame of a linguistic and national ideology of purity. The ideology of will power in Nietzsche comes through his poems and *Zarathustra* as a search for the original power of man, unadulterated by any ideologies of culture and civilization.

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