

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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# Nietzsche

**Significance of the life of Friedrich Nietzsche.** Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) was a German philosopher, classical philologist, poet, and social critic who exercised great influence on such philosophical movements as Existentialism and Postmodernism, and more widely on educated readers worldwide who have attempted to make sense of such developments as the God is Dead movement or the paths to self-orientation in a world of radical individualism. As with many of the greatest German writers—Eckhart, Boehme, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Fichte—in Nietzsche too the borderline between rigorous philosophy and imaginative, even mythical thinking is porous, and constantly transgressed.

**The Life of Friedrich Nietzsche.** Friedrich Nietzsche was born in Ruecken-bei-Letzen in Prussia. His father was a Lutheran pastor, and the young Nietzsche was at first sent to the local boys' school. Then from 1858-64 he matriculated at the renowned Schulpforta gymnasium, where he got a conventional thorough grounding in chiefly classical languages—doing poorly only in Hebrew, and creating a minor scandal from time to time with his comrades and the bottle. At Schulpforta Nietzsche wrote poems, composed some interesting music, and discovered a favorite poet, Hoelderlin; in addition, and of eminent importance, he wrote one of his first serious essays, on his loss of Christian faith. (In a sharp letter to his sister, his other self in thinking through value issues, Nietzsche wrote that one can either have faith and be happy, or inquiry, suffer, and be honest.) From Schulpforta Nietzsche went to the University of Bonn, in 1864, to major in Classical Philology. During these years he slipped into the first stages of serious health issues, severe dysentery, migraines, what were to become debilitating mental issues, probably including schizophrenia; as well as into a serious accident on horseback, in which the muscles of his chest were badly ripped. He was however able to accept, in 1848, the unprecedented offer of a Chair in Classical Philology at the University of Basel—he was only 24—and was to remain a resident of Switzerland for the rest of his life—although his periods of travel for recuperation were unremitting. After a few years Nietzsche had to retire from this taxing teaching post, and devoted himself increasingly to his writings, and to his own recuperation. The period of intense creativity was about to commence; it would see *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), *Human, All Too Human* (1878), *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1882) and a spate of other passionate, driven, contentious texts written before madness took the requisite reason from his poetry.

**The Thought of Friedrich Nietzsche.** Scattered through the writings of Nietzsche are many themes that can be considered key works of the intellectual climate of the twentieth century and beyond. The outburst of feeling and vision that accompanied Romanticism had borne fruit in a 19th century for which a return to conservative values was widespread—in monarchies, in repressive or obscurantist policies such as those of Metternich and (in part) Bismarck), The implications of scientific investigation were making themselves unavoidable, and the challenges to orthodox religious were compelling believers to reformulate their positions. Into this turbulent mix Nietzsche arrived with a collection of perspectives which, expressed with poetic ardor and uncompromising rudeness, drove wedges into what positions still remained. Notions like the polarity of the Apollonian and Dionysias in drama—the basis of *The Birth of Tragedy*; like *The Will to Power*, a key exhortation to enslaved modern man—largely a victim of Christianity's servile propaganda—to affirm the life he finds himself in; The Death of God, the shibboleth with which Nietzsche compresses his sense that the world has outgrown its dependence on false father figures; and the notion, pervasive throughout Nietzsche's work, that the truth is undiscoverable, that all cognition is perspectival and dependent: such notions, developed with great power in Nietzsche's brief and often aphoristic works, inevitably exercised the strongest effect both on artists and intellectuals.

## Reading

### *Primary source reading*

*Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. Hollingdale, 1986.

### **Secondary source reading**

Gemes, Ken; May, Simon, *Nietzsche on Freedom and Authority*, 2009.

### **Further reading**

*Nietzsche: Philosophy and the Arts*, ed. Kemal, Salim; Gaskell, Ivan; Conway, Daniel, 1998.

### **Original language reading**

Breitschmid, Markus, *Nietzsche's Denkraum*, 2006.

### **Suggested paper topics**

How does Nietzsche deal with the origins and development of ancient Greek tragedy—which he claimed to understand better after his first meetings with Richard Wagner? How is Nietzsche's perspective onto classical culture different from that of the Weimar classicists like Goethe and Schiller? What would Nietzsche say of Winckelmann's idea, that Greek art reaches to a noble simplicity and dignified gravity?

Once again with Nietzsche we come to the boundaries between literature and philosophy. Do Nietzsche's texts, like *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, seem to lie on the side of imaginative literature? Or are they philosophical texts, with a discursive argument, but powered by imagination?

### **Excerpt** *en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Friedrich\_Nietzsche*

"Without music, life would be a mistake."

"It is not a lack of love, but a lack of friendship that makes unhappy marriages."

"That which does not kill us makes us stronger."

"I'm not upset that you lied to me, I'm upset that from now on I can't believe you."

"It is hard enough to remember my opinions, without also remembering my reasons for them!"

"And those who were seen dancing were thought to be insane by those who could not hear the music."

"There is always some madness in love. But there is also always some reason in madness."