



Friedrich Nietzsche.

Nietzsche, Friedrich (1844-1900)

by Tina Gianoulis

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Friedrich Nietzsche is both one of the most influential and one of the most misunderstood of modern philosophers. Born into a sexually repressed family in the earlier nineteenth century, and plagued with ill health, much of Nietzsche's work expresses a search for a primal *joie de vivre* that he felt had been squashed and distorted by the hypocritical religiosity and overbearing morality of his time.

Nietzsche himself fell victim to the same repressive forces. Although he had intimate and intense relationships with other men, he was never able to have an openly sexual relationship with either gender, and some historians believe he died in the mental torment of late-stage syphilis acquired from male prostitutes.

After his death, parts of his work were used by Nazis and other anti-Semites to reinforce their mythology of an Aryan super race. His writings unquestionably contain misogyny, racism, and anti-Jewish statements. However, Nietzsche's iconoclastic and individualistic ideas are too complex to fit comfortably within any ideology, and his influence extends far to the left as well as to the right.

Friedrich Nietzsche was born on October 15, 1844 in Roecken, Saxony. His father, Karl Ludwig Nietzsche, was a Lutheran minister who died from a painful brain disease when young Friedrich was only four.

Nietzsche was raised in a household of five women: his mother, sister, grandmother, and two aunts. However, it was not a warm home. His female relatives had a Prussian severity that caused them to be reserved with the young boy in their care.

When he was fourteen, Nietzsche received a scholarship to a boarding school called Schulpforta, near the town of Naumburg, where the family had moved after Karl Ludwig's death.

It was while studying at Schulpforta that Nietzsche experienced his first romantic relationship with a boy. He wrote poems about his love, and also discovered the poetry of such gay or bisexual literary figures as August von Platen and George Gordon, Lord Byron.

Nietzsche was a brilliant and creative student, and in 1864, he entered the university in Bonn to study theology and philology. At Bonn, he became a member of the Franconia fraternity, and may have had homoerotic relationships with other students. He also came under the influence of the philologist Friedrich Wilhelm Ritschl, who encouraged him to study classics.

A year later, Nietzsche followed Ritschl to the university in Leipzig, where he continued his studies. There he met and became intimate with another student, Erwin Rohde. He and Rohde shared a fascination with ancient Greek culture. At Leipzig, Nietzsche discovered the work of philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, whose atheistic view of the world greatly influenced him.

After graduating, Nietzsche entered an artillery regiment of the army, where he served for three years. In

1869, he accepted a position teaching Greek and Latin at the university in Basel. There he began to write. His first published book was *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*, released in 1872.

One of the most original books in the history of philosophy, *The Birth of Tragedy* emphasized (and celebrated) the irrational, instinctual, and emotional aspects of Greek culture rather than the rational and the logical. Nietzsche brought to the fore Dionysos as a leading figure in Greek culture, lamenting that the wild, amoral, deeply creative Dionysian life force had been weakened by the Apollonian forces of logic and order. The book created a scandal in philological and philosophical circles.

During the late 1860s, while teaching and writing in Basel, Nietzsche became involved with composer Richard Wagner. What started as a passionate infatuation for the composer's music and personality deteriorated into jealousy, intellectual argument, and bitterness. Nietzsche had become very close to fellow philosopher Paul Ree. Ree was Jewish, and the notorious anti-Semite Wagner snubbed him, further alienating Nietzsche. He withdrew his friendship with hostility, and Wagner spread rumors that hinted of Nietzsche's homosexuality.

The philosopher continued to teach, write, and travel, publishing *Untimely Meditations* (1873-76) and *Human, All Too Human* (1878-79), while making several visits to an area of Sicily that was home to a colony of expatriate homosexuals.

In 1879, Nietzsche's health forced him to retire from teaching, but he continued his social and intellectual life and his travels to Italy. He also continued to publish, producing such famous works as *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883-85), *The Gay Science* (1882-86), and *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886).

These works are especially significant for their challenge to Christian beliefs and assumptions. His bold proclamation that "God is Dead" and his idea of "eternal recurrence"--that one might be fated to relive every moment of one's life are principles that anticipate Existentialism.

In his work, Nietzsche takes the perspective that life is "beyond good and evil," and challenges the traditionally moral idea that exploitation and domination of others are universally objectionable. Rather, he argues that living things naturally aim to express a "will to power." Rejecting the idea that there is a universal morality to which all human beings are subject, he finds different moralities appropriate for different kinds of people, depending on whether they are strong and overflowing with life or whether they are weak and on the decline.

Nietzsche had just finished writing his intellectual autobiography *Ecce Homo* (published 1908) in late 1888, when he suffered a complete mental and physical breakdown, collapsing in a street in Turin, Italy.

He was brought back to Germany for treatment and lived with his sister for the rest of his life. Though he lived for ten more years, neither his mind nor his body ever recovered. His sister gained control over his work and used it selectively to support her own anti-Jewish, Aryan supremacist views.

There is still dissent among students of philosophy about whether Nietzsche's ideas of the *Übermensch*, or "superior man," who rises above society's restrictive morality, were actually founded on prejudice and racism or were misrepresented and misunderstood by his sister and, later, by Adolph Hitler himself. This controversy gives special poignancy to the last line of his biographical work, *Ecce Homo*: "Have I been understood?"

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About the Author

Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.