Richard Wagner’s Influence on Friedrich Nietzsche

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Richard Wagner and Friedrich Nietzsche were two cultural icons that lived during the same time period and developed a strong bond between each other. Wagner served as Nietzsche’s mentor figure for many years. As Walter Kaufmann puts it, “It was Wagner’s presence that convinced Nietzsche that greatness and genuine creation were still possible, and it was Wagner who inspired him with persistent longing first to equal and then to outdo his friend.” By 1868, Nietzsche had already met with Richard Wagner in Leipzig, Germany. He became a frequent guest in Wagner’s house, which was located in Tribschen. Both Richard Wagner and his wife Cosima brought Nietzsche into their closest circles and introduced him to all their colleagues. This essay will demonstrate how Wagner influenced Nietzsche’s will to power ideal, his perspective on morality, and his opinions of the arts, by analyzing Nietzsche’s reactions to Wagner’s characters in the Ring cycle, and his opera Tristan and Isolde.

The body of the paper will provide detailed descriptions of how Wagner’s Ring Cycle and Tristan and Isolde influenced Nietzsche. Towards the end of the paper, there will be a discussion of why Nietzsche drifted away from his mentor Wagner, and how they differed in certain ideals towards the end of their mentor-student relationship.

One connection that Wagner and Nietzsche had was their inherent interest in Schopenhauer’s philosophy. Schopenhauer believed that there was a bit of reality in every man known as Will. According to Schopenhauer, “Will is more important than and prior to intellect. Man is primarily an active and willing rather than a thinking being. The

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Intellect is the slave of the Will.”2 This common interest in Schopenhauer’s philosophy on life and Will sparked the relationship between the two revolutionaries.

Wagner’s multi-layered Ring cycle sparked Nietzsche to formulate a new philosophical ideal: the will to power. One of the main themes in Wagner’s cycle of operas is the conflict that arises between power and love. A deeper analysis of Wagner’s Ring cycle reveals the reasoning behind Nietzsche’s rejection of biological principals at the time, and the formation of his own ideal mentioned above.

Wagner, as displayed through his characters in his Ring cycle, had an extreme opposition towards power of any form. Almost all of his main characters contain a lust for power and end up having a tragic fall, a result that displays what Wagner believed happens when one becomes power hungry. Wotan’s desire for power—which could have been obtained by acquiring Alberich’s ring—is so dominant in Das Rheingold that there is no difference in morality between him and the tyrant Nibelheim in the final scene. Prior to this, in between scenes 1 and 2, instrumentation and technique were implemented to change the motif of Alberich’s ring to that of Wotan’s Valhalla3. The juxtaposition of the ring and Valhalla, both in the pursuit of power, were already expressed before Wotan even took the stage. When Wotan stole the ring from Alberich, the orchestra played a variation of the spear motif, “whose dramatic essence is bound up with the idea of Wotan as possessor of powers which, in contrast to those wielded by his antagonist, are at least limited by law”3. This motif is symbolic of Wotan’s infringement of his own restrictions,

which forebodes his ominous fate. After this, the orchestra played the music it did when Alberich stole the gold. At this point, Wotan became stubborn and was no longer willing to give up the ring— even for Freia, the representation of love. The refusal to exchange the ring for Freia demonstrates the strong clash between the lust for power and the power of love.

What Nietzsche took away from the character Wotan is that, even though it was not a necessity, Wotan had a strong determination to expand, conquer, and become omnipotent. For Nietzsche, the young and aspiring Wotan, rebellious against authority, was seen in somewhat of a positive light. According to Mark Berry, Wotan, in Nietzsche’s mind, “[stood] as an unacknowledged progenitor of his noble-race typology.” His thoughts of him as a “progenitor” indicate that he saw Wotan as a leader figure who was ready to accomplish his goals.

An analysis of the character Siegfried reveals that people have various motives for and sources of power, yet the result of their actions is always the same—tragic fall. Siegfried obtained power through his charisma. However, even though his power was based off of charisma, it was still power that he was after— for Wagner, all types of power led to ruin, thus making Siegfried’s eventual downfall expected. Nietzsche understood the relation between Siegfried’s desire for power and eventual ruin, but he also interpreted Wagner’s Siegfried to have “noble origin”. For example, Nietzsche took note that Siegfried never considered his enemies as evil, but merely bad. He also saw Siegfried’s numerous unacceptable qualities, such as having no shame in violating Brünnhilde. Thus in the eyes of Nietzsche, Siegfried

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was a precursor to the “blonde beasts” that he believed should both be feared and respected.

The character Wotan, Alberich, and Siegfried all contributed to the formation of Nietzsche’s will to power ideal. During the 19th century, Charles Darwin world famous Origin of Species was published. In this publication, the biologist argued that species are continuing to live based off the instinct to survive, and the most fit species will continue to reproduce and dominate the gene pool. However Nietzsche was not satisfied by the purely biological theory. After being exposed to Wagner’s Ring cycle, Nietzsche could not connect the biological theories to the character’s actions. Neither Wotan nor Siegfried needed optimal amounts of power to survive. In fact, their excessive desire for power led to their downfall. This led Nietzsche to create his own concept—coined the will to power. Nietzsche postulated that the will to power is the main component of a species struggle to live. In his concept, the will to power does not stem solely from the struggle for survival, but rather the will to expand and grow, which is the ultimate factor that motivates a certain species to live. Therefore, the Ring cycle influenced Nietzsche to reject the theories of contemporary biologists at the time, and formulate his own thoughts on a species motivation for survival.

Another important aspect of the Ring cycle for Nietzsche was the power of the erotic in some of the characters, which Wagner referred to as “liebesgelüste”. This desire was most prevalent in Alberich. His erotic desire for the Rhinemaidens was transformed to the desire for power. The Rhinemaidens rejection of him for his apparent ugliness combined with the sublime lifestyles of the Gods gleaming in his face, instigated

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5 Friedrich Nietzsche referred to aristocrats who transgressed moral boundaries and wrote society laws the “splendid blonde beast”
Alberich to cross his boundaries and steal for power. He knew that if he was willing to renounce love, he could obtain the ring of power. Just as Wotan had to deal with giving up the ring (power) for Frea (love), so did Alberich. Both characters decided that they would rather have the opportunity to become omnipotent than settle for the possibility of love. In this sequence of events, Nietzsche is not primarily interested in Wagner’s hostility towards power, but rather “the psychology depicted of the will to power; man is identified not as the unwitting tool of Hegel’s cunning of reason’, but by his concrete, historical self-creation as a subject: the product of his essential will to power”6. In other words, he was interested in the “psychology” related to obtaining power; he therefore wanted to understand the thought processes that went along with the sudden lust for all types of power. For Alberich, as mentioned above, there were numerous psychological factors that went along with his decision. If he decided that the ring was most important, he would lose the chance for love; however, giving up the ring did not guarantee him love, but did guarantee a lack of power. Alberich’s choice—to take the ring and become all-powerful—demonstrates a sudden shift form erotic desire to the desire for power. This shift can be explained not by biological principals from the time but by Nietzsche’s will to power theory mentioned above. If Alberich was interested solely in increasing his chances of survival, he would weigh his erotic desire as most important, since more erotic encounters ensures reproduction and offspring. However he ended up weighing his desire for ultimate power as higher, which bodes well with Nietzsche’s ideal.

The discussion thus far has mainly dealt with the will to power ideal. Nietzsche, through Wagner’s Ring cycle, also developed an important distinction between two

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6 Berry, M. "The Positive Influence of Wagner upon Nietzsche,” p.15.
perspectives of morality: *Sittlichkeit* and *Moralität*. The term *Sittlichkeit* refers to morality in terms of social and traditional conditioning, whereas *Moralität* dealt with morality in terms of the individual. Nietzsche came to favor the latter perspective, displaying his belief that morality pertained to the individual. The conflict between these perspectives is expressed through Wotan’s decision-making processes in the *Ring* cycle.

Wotan’s wife Fricka—the Goddess of hearth and family—demanded that Wotan have Siegmund die in the upcoming fight. For Wotan, Siegmund was his only chance for a hero to obtain the ring for him, which would bring him ultimate power. For Fricka, the incestuous relationship between Siegmund and Sieglinde both violated sacred marriage vows and went against customs. Wotan thus found himself in a “struggle between his own inclination and custom”7. Eventually, however, Fricka persuades Wotan by reasoning that giving Siegmund his sword removed any chance of Siegmund being considered independent from him, and thus made him ineligible to obtain the ring for Wotan anyway. Thus through Wotan’s decision of whether to have Siegmund killed, Nietzsche learned of the contrasting perspectives of morality and the stress that they can bring upon an individual.

The passion and “echo of Schopenhauer’s philosophy” in Richard Wagner’s *Tristan*9 led Friedrich Nietzsche to express his support for Wagner’s ideals in his novel *The Birth of Tragedy*. For Nietzsche, *Tristan* “represented Wagner’s highly successful attempt to incorporate his own music genius with his passion for Schopenhauer’s philosophy”8. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche openly demonstrates his support for

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7 Berry, M. "The Positive Influence of Wagner upon Nietzsche,” p.15.
Richard Wagner’s total artwork\textsuperscript{9} approach for music dramas. The support that Nietzsche provided for Wagner in this book stems mainly from religious motivations. A detailed analysis of Wagner’s theory of opera reveals some important elements that Nietzsche took away from Wagner’s works and what Nietzsche advocated for.

Wagner published numerous books that reflected his principals and ideals of the operatic form of art, the main ones being \textit{The Work of Art of the Future, Opera and Drama}, and \textit{A Message to my Friends}. In these books, Wagner proposed an innovative theory of opera. He believed that artistic excellence and creativity was reached in the midst of considering ancient Greek tragedy. There were five main reasons that he believed this was so. The first reason was that Greek tragedy encompassed various art forms used in conjunction with each other—music, dance, drama, and poetry. When these art forms were put together, they had more expressive power than did any of the individual pieces of art.\textsuperscript{10} Second, the subjects were \textit{myths}, which united the people and bettered human experience. Third, the content and occasion of the performances had a religious affiliation and thus were of great significance. Fourth, the spiritual nature was humanistic, meaning that it emphasized the importance of \textit{human} life in the world. Finally, the Greek people as a whole took part in these performances.

Unfortunately for Wagner, the success of the Greek tragedy was ephemeral, as the arrival of the Christian religion caused a shift in the content of drama from myths to Christian themes. The thoughts at the time started to become anti-artistic. Art changed from being a unifying element in everyone’s lives to a trivial form of entertainment. This

\textsuperscript{9} Wagner came up with \textit{Gesamtkunstwerk} (“total artwork”), which combined all aspects of visual and aural arts into an opera.

gradual shift in operas was saddening for Wagner, which is why he instigated change. Opera for Wagner “would become the comprehensive art form incorporating all the resources of drama, poetry, music, song, dance, costumes, scenery; it would recover and re-present the timeless themes about the deepest things in human experience; it would be far more than an evening of superficial entertainment, but rather would be a gathering of the entire community for seemingly religio-transcendent purposes.”¹¹ The great composer wanted to focus on the deep emotions and internal feelings of characters. In addition, he envisioned a change in the hierarchy of the drama—music would become a supplement to the drama itself. This new perspective would later provide hope for Nietzsche.

Nietzsche could have had to comply with the Christian societal norms and accepted the shift of art from being a uniting element to a useless form of entertainment. However his mentor, Wagner, provided him with a new ideal as described above. Nietzsche ended up becoming a fond believer in and proponent of this radical change in perspective of operas, and when analyzing his books, there is an overt Wagnerian influence prevalent. Julian Young provides a summary of The Birth of Tragedy that demonstrates this apparent influence:

“If one attempted to summarize the essence of its complex argument the following might be offered. We stand in need of a solution to the suffering and absurdity of life. The Greeks found such a solution in the art of their great tragedians. Our only hope for a solution—given the untenability of Christianity in

the modern age—lies in the rebirth of such art in the music-dramas of Richard Wagner.”

Nietzsche gained from Wagner the idea that there was a sequence of creation, then fall, followed by the necessity of redemption in the arts. For Wagner, Greek tragedy was at its pinnacle, but then it fell due to anti-artistic vibes coming off Christianity. His radical change in opera could create redemption itself. Nietzsche tweaked Wagner’s idea a bit. For him, the combination of Apollonian and Dionysian elements created the successful Greek tragedy. These tragedies helped Greeks reduce the horrible terrors in life. Socrates however implemented rationalism, which caused the famous Greek tragedy to fall. The redemption, in Nietzsche’s mind, would come about with the new and improved musical dramas of Richard Wagner.

There were many concrete themes in Nietzsche’s Birth of Tragedy that demonstrate the philosopher’s strong belief in Wagner’s principals and that reflect some of Nietzsche’s takeaways from Wagner’s works. The first theme prevalent in the novel is that art is one of the only ways people can overcome the horrors of existence in life. What Nietzsche meant by “horrors” is the negative effects of nihilism and pessimism that flooded the people. According to Nietzsche, there was a solution to overcome the negative elements above—art. He stated “art approaches as a saving sorceress, expert at healing. She alone knows how to turn these nauseous thoughts about the horror or absurdity of existence into notions with which one can live.”

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12 Naugle, Dr. David. "Richard Wagner's Tristan and Isolde, and Fredrich Nietzsche's the Birth of Tragedy." p. 11.
Another important theme of Nietzsche was that in the nineteenth-century, a period in which the opera started to fall, the revival of the tragedy in its Greek form was necessary and would be found in the new opera perspective of Richard Wagner. Nietzsche writes:

“Out of the Dionysian root of the German spirit a power has arisen which, having nothing in common with the primitive conditions of Socratic culture, can neither be explained nor excused by it, but which is rather felt by this culture as something terribly inexplicable and overwhelmingly hostile—German music as we must understand it, particularly in its vast solar orbit from Bach to Beethoven, from Beethoven to Wagner”\(^\text{14}\)

In the last line of the quote, Nietzsche expresses his thoughts that Wagner’s revolutionary music dramas have reached greatness.

Nietzsche’s hope for redemption and the revival of tragedy highly relied on Wagner and his *Tristan and Isolde*. Wagner influenced Nietzsche such that he gave the German philosopher a sense of hope that the tragedy can reemerge, but this time in an ever so stronger way. Without the radical ideas put forth by his mentor, Nietzsche could have easily succumbed to the pressures of the Christian perspective on art. The opera was written based off Gottfried von Strassborg’s poem, which dealt with the fusion of love and death. Love was portrayed “not merely an urgent force in life, but the compelling higher reality of our spiritual universe”\(^\text{15}\). The opera draws lovers together to understand this fact and to submit to the ideal. These themes and the hidden mysteries of life are what Nietzsche found captivating in this work. In a letter to Erwin Rohde, Nietzsche

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\(^{15}\) Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*. 1967
stated that “I simply cannot bring myself to remain critically aloof from this music; every nerve in me is atwitch, and it has been a long time since I had such a lasting sense of ecstasy as with this overture”\(^\text{16}\) Thus Wagner, in his *Tristan and Isolde*, sparked in Nietzsche a hope for revival, redemption, and “a lasting sense of ecstasy”.

Nietzsche also learned from Wagner a life lesson—people can change, and in this case it was his mentor Wagner who changed. Although Nietzsche admired his mentor for a great deal of time, he later began to despise him and most of his operas, after he learned of Wagner’s influences on ethics and politics. This sudden change of perspective for Nietzsche had to do with the Bayreuth Festival, and Nietzsche’s encounter with Wagner in Sorrento. When Nietzsche reached the Festival Theatre, he did not see an ennobling event aimed at the advancement of culture. Rather, “[he] found Bayreuth filled with a crowd of cosmopolitan pleasure seekers, men and women of the idle rich class, who were attracted thither for the same reasons that have made the opera in the leading cities of the world an excuse for fashionable gatherings.”\(^\text{17}\) This shocked Nietzsche on a moral perspective. However, what would aggravate him more was his unplanned encounter with his mentor on vacation in Sorrento, Italy. During their talk along the coast Wagner spoke of “Parsifal”, but not as an artistic conception, but rather as a religious one in order to be accepted with the Christian rulers of Germany. Previously, Wagner looked down upon the Christian revamping of art—the change from an element that unified people to a trivial source of entertainment and gatherings. He had proposed a new form of drama that encompassed all forms of art—music, singing, theatre, etc. This rejection of “Christian

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“art” and radical idealism is what Nietzsche admired in Wagner, and is what made him dedicate his Birth of Tragedy to Wagner. However years later after the positive influence he had on Nietzsche, Wagner changed by succumbing to the forces of Christianity.

Nietzsche returned to Wagner’s previous works and saw them in a different light. He ended up writing two pieces that opposed Wagner’s operas and his influence on people: the Case of Wagner and Nietzsche Contra Wagner. In these pieces, Nietzsche details the relationship between aesthetics to ethics and politics. He came to believe that Wagner’s works “embodied a decadent morality that would encourage individuals to embrace particular types of politics”. Thus in addition to the philosophical, moral, and artistic influences Wagner had on Nietzsche, he also disillusioned Nietzsche and taught him that sometimes people are not always who they seem to be. In Nietzsche’s eyes, Wagner once used to be a mentor and revolutionist—at the end, he was nothing more than a conformist.

In conclusion, the analysis above demonstrates a few of the many ways Wagner influenced Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophies and ideals. Wagner’s Ring cycle led Nietzsche to formulate his own theory of the will to power, and to understand the differing perspectives on morality. The characters Wotan, Siegfried, and Alberich were essential in Nietzsche’s philosophical ideal. All three characters desired power, and eventually this excessive desire for power led to their ruin. Analyzing the downfall of these characters and the psychology of their desires, Nietzsche claimed that humans are constantly inflicting their will upon others. In his new conception, any action towards another human occurred due to the desire to bring that person under his or her power.

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Regardless of whether a person was giving gifts, asserting his love, congratulating, or harming someone, the psychological motive would be the same—exerting will to subjugate others and gain power.

The decisions the characters, such as Wotan, had to make also helped Nietzsche separate two moral perspectives: Sittlichkeit and Moralität, with Sittlichkeit referring to morality in terms of social conditioning, and Moralität referring to morality in terms of the individual.

As mentioned above, Wagner’s rejection of Christian imposed art and his famous opera Tristan and Isolde also influenced Nietzsche by inspiring him that there was hope for the revival of tragedy. Nietzsche ended up writing about his beliefs and hopes of revival in The Birth of Tragedy, which he dedicated to his mentor—at the time—Richard Wagner. Therefore, Richard Wagner had a tremendous influence on Friedrich Nietzsche with respect to philosophy, morality, the arts, and as a person.
Bibliography


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