

Nietzsche's Forgotten Spirit: Woman in Nietzsche's Philosophy

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	2
A Caution.....	3
Nietzsche's Truths	5
Analysis of Common Interpretive Methods.....	11
Critical Interpretations	15
The Gay Science: Introduction to Book Two	16
Beyond Good and Evil.....	28
Conclusion	35

Introduction

An excerpt from Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*:

“Oh, what dangerous, insidious, subterranean little beasts of prey they are! And so pleasant into the bargain! A little woman in search of revenge would knock down fate itself. - Woman is incomparably more evil than man, cleverer too; goodness in woman is a form of *degeneration*.”¹

This is an example of the type of aphorism that has gotten Nietzsche the reputation of being a paradigm example of misogynistic philosophers. In terms of provoking controversial discourse, Nietzsche can't be beaten; his philosophy attacks everything ranging from individual philosophers to morality, religion, and God. These are some of the more widely known and understood themes in Nietzsche's works. Nietzsche's perceived misogyny, although perhaps as widely known, is, I argue, much less understood. In this thesis, I will attempt first to show how some major themes in Nietzsche's philosophy such as the rejection of dualisms and capital-T truths make room for an interpretation that suggests many of the same ideas that have become central to contemporary feminism such as the embracing of a multiplicity of types as opposed to standard dualistic understandings of gender and a move toward self-definition. Secondly, I will turn to the major passages in Nietzsche's works that address issues surrounding “woman” directly and do a close reading in an attempt to show that Nietzsche's philosophy allows for a feminist interpretation that counters the immediate negative reaction readers might have when first reading Nietzsche. Many passages that at surface level are read as chauvinistic leave space for subtle interpretations that address issues such as the nature of reality, the social origins of essence, woman in the eyes of man, woman's experience in man's world, the persistence of

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley, Judith Norman, trans. Judith Norman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 105.

biases, the fragility of man's illusion of woman, and Nietzsche's own deep-seated tension between anti-essentialist thought and his own bias toward the "essential woman." If I can achieve both of these goals I will have shown that Nietzsche's treatment of women in his philosophy is consistent with the rest of his work and that his convictions were significantly ahead of his time. If I achieve only the first, I will still have shown that Nietzsche's philosophy transcends his own mistakes, which will allow it to be read in good conscience by readers concerned with feminist issues as well as affirm the timelessness of Nietzsche's philosophy. As Nietzsche himself wrote:

"The value of the world lies in our interpretation... every elevation of man brings with it the overcoming of narrower interpretations...every strengthening and increase of power opens up new perspectives and means believing in new horizons – this idea permeates my writings. (The world) is 'in flux,' as something in a state of becoming, as a falsehood always changing but never getting near the truth: for--there is no "truth."²

This thesis will offer a *re*interpretation that does justice to the spirit of Nietzsche's philosophy, and will perhaps even help create more support for a perspective that has not yet fully found its footing.

A Caution

Before beginning I would like to address two possible limitations to my argument that my readers may be concerned about: (1) There is a certain distance inherent in my perspective with respect to issues of gender, feminism, and sexism. Simone Beauvoir illuminates this point: "Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. Walter Kaufmann, R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), section 616.

truth.”³ I have made efforts to overcome the barrier this represents. Primarily, I have taken special care to ask those who have provided me with feedback throughout the writing process to be critical and honest with me about flaws in my views concerning my perspective. I have grown and found a better understanding through this process. Additionally, I have turned to a number of feminist authors that have written on Nietzsche as guides in my interpretation. They include primarily Kelly Oliver, Kathleen Higgins, Linda Singer, Maudemarie Clark, and Lynne Tirrell. The intended effect of my writing is to illuminate the possibility of interpreting Nietzsche in a way that supports, rather than contradicts, the aims of modern feminism. Being a man myself, reading a philosopher who is often seen as exceptionally misogynistic, this is likely a controversial claim. In light of this, I appeal to my reader to take into account that for Nietzsche, all “truth” was merely interpretation and that my interpretation, similarly, is not representative of a “truth” about Nietzsche, but a different way of looking at his philosophy that invites discussion and possibly a deeper understanding of what he wrote.

(2) Another unavoidable issue is the necessary reliance on translation rather than original text. In my analysis of syntactical subtleties I risk misconstruing meaning by virtue of the fact that the translation may not convey what was originally intended. To minimize the impact this might have on my interpretations I have avoided when possible any analysis contingent on the meaning of only one or a few words. Additionally, I used some of the most popular and favorably reviewed English translations of the original texts cited. For important words and phrases that were ambiguous in English or that the authors chose

³ Simone De. Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde, Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009), 161.

to leave in German, I consulted with my advisor who is fluent in German to determine the appropriate reading.⁴

Nietzsche's Truths

During my initial studies of Nietzsche my then professor, perhaps mercifully, perhaps merely to allow us to have a conversation, suggested that I ignore Nietzsche's remarks on women. I view Nietzsche's writing as a call to freedom and independence, a rejection of beliefs and truths, and more than anything, as a universally applicable appeal to seize and make the most of life itself as it exists to us here and now. The liberating nature of these sentiments need not be limited to one gender, and as I see it any belief in inherent differences between genders would be a stark contradiction to Nietzsche's rejection of truths.⁵ Naturally, I grew to be skeptical that Nietzsche's "woman" ought to be ignored.

⁴ See: *weibchen*, woman *an sich*, and *übermensch*.

⁵ The reader might be considering at this point that under this interpretation sex and gender issues are not the only subjects that seem not to line up with Nietzsche's philosophy. Well, how is the problem of gender in Nietzsche different from others? Nietzsche's philosophy reputedly served as one of the primary sources of inspiration for the German Nazi movement, yet he also conspicuously despises his native German culture as well as the culture of most of Europe. Some of these beliefs are rooted in misconceptions while others are simply not analogous to his treatment of women and gender. I will address these concerns briefly and make clear the distinction between the issue of gender and these other issues.

The notion that Nietzsche was an anti-Semite is simply false. His association with Nazism is an unfortunate one. Nietzsche hated Christianity (hence the infamous "God is dead") and was especially interested in how it developed out of Judaism. Nietzsche believed that Christianity was a result of the inversion of master-morality values and that the Jews were chiefly responsible for this shift: "the Jews have achieved that miraculous thing, an inversion of values, thanks to which life on earth has had a new and dangerous charm for several millennia... the significance of the Jewish people lies in this inversion of values... the *slave revolt in morality* begins with the Jews" (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Judith Norman [New York: Cambridge University Press 2002] 84). It was statements like this that enabled Hitler to use Nietzsche's writing as fuel to incite nationwide hatred against the Jewish people. Nietzsche, however, did not hate Jews, in fact, he was outspoken in his opposition to anti-Semite modes of thinking and his actions speak to that truth. For instance, he broke off his long-time friendship with composer Richard Wagner and criticized the beliefs of his publisher, Theodor Fritsch, for their intolerance toward Jews. A letter to Fritsch from 1887 demonstrates:

Reconciling the contradiction in Nietzsche's philosophy is made difficult by the many passages that seem to transparently demonstrate Nietzsche, in fact, did believe women to be fundamentally different and, for the most part, inferior beings. In part two of this essay I will show that these passages leave room for more favorable interpretations, but first I will demonstrate that Nietzsche's philosophy as found outside of those passages suggests the socially constructed idea of "woman" falls into the category of false-truths that Nietzsche wants to dismantle. The following will be an analysis of Nietzsche's philosophy that considers the implications for gender before taking into account any interpretation of his direct references to "woman."

Dear sir,

Herewith I am returning to you the three issues of your correspondence sheet... I ask in the future not to provide me with these [anti-Semitic] mailings: I fear, in the end, for my patience. Believe me: this abominable "wanting to have a say" of noisy dilettantes about the value of people and races, this subjection to "authorities" who are utterly rejected with cold contempt by every sensible mind... these constant, absurd falsifications and rationalizations of vague concepts "Germanic," "Semitic," "Aryan," "Christian," "German" - all of that could in the long run cause me to lose my temper and bring me out of the ironic benevolence with which I have hitherto observed the virtuous velleities and pharisaism of modern Germans.

And finally, how do you think I feel when the name Zarathustra is mouthed by anti-Semites?...

*Yours most sincerely
Dr. Fr. Nietzsche*

This brief letter (found in: "Briefe von Nietzsche [1887]" Nietzsche Source, #823, <http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/BVN-1887>; translation: "Nietzsche's Letters: 1887," The Nietzsche Channel, <http://www.thenietzschechannel.com/correspondence/eng/nlett-1887.htm>; both sources accessed April 03, 2016.) is a warning from Nietzsche that he has no patience for his editor's anti-Semitic beliefs. The point is clear that Nietzsche does not approve of such thoughts, and he even expresses his shock that *Zarathustra* (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*) would be used so backwardly to support anti-Semitism.

Nietzsche also attacks various religions and nationalities almost constantly in his books. Though at first this also may not seem to align with his thought, such views can easily be reconciled or at least distinguished from the issue sex presents. At the most basic level, sex and religion/nationality are different because sex is a consequence of nature whereas religion and nationality are products of nurture. Nietzsche viewed nurture as an illegitimate foundation for truth as exemplified by this statement concerning morality: "The issue needs to be re-examined in the same way heredity and innate characteristics have been" (*Beyond Good and Evil*, 7). Gender, however, falls in with the rest of the culturally learned behavior and is thus subject to the same attacks thrown at religion and morality. With this distinction made I can now move on to the issue of gender, one of the strangest inconsistencies in Nietzsche's writing, and attempt to prove that Nietzsche's philosophy is not actually misogynistic.

At times, Nietzsche's remarks seem so aptly in line with modern feminism that one can only but gawk in astonished confusion at some of the more offensive statements he makes: "Finally, let us think how naïve it is to say 'this is the way people should be!' Reality shows us an enchanting abundance of types, a lavish profusion of forms in change and at play: and some worthless idiot of a moralist sees all this and says: 'no! People should be different from the way they are!'"⁶ This quote is representative of Nietzsche's belief that, although they may be greatly shaped by it, people are not defined by factors such as race, religion, or even gender, but are of a multitude of types and have the capacity for self-determination. The resemblance this bears to the desire voiced by Rebecca Walker in *Becoming Third Wave*, "(to) search for personal clarity in the midst of systemic destruction... (and) to understand power structures with the intention of challenging them,"⁷ demonstrates the foundational beliefs that align Nietzsche's philosophy with contemporary feminism. Nietzsche viewed dualisms and capital T "Truths" as the means through which populations are oppressed and denied the possibility of self-definition, and he sought to dismantle them accordingly. From my perspective, gender falls into these categories. The following will be a brief explanation of Nietzsche's philosophy on dualism and truth.

In the opening passages of *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche addresses the idea of dualism head on. His first assertion is that metaphysicians ubiquitously make the error of failing to doubt dualism, and he calls on his readers to (1) doubt whether opposites exist

⁶ *Twilight of the Idols* in Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ Etc.*, 175.

⁷ Rebecca Walker, "Becoming the Third Wave," *Ms. Magazine*. 11, no. 2 (1992): 2, <http://www.msmagazine.com/spring2002/BecomingThirdWaveRebeccaWalker.pdf>. This is half of Walker's definition of what it is to be a feminist. The other half: "To be a feminist is to integrate an ideology of equality and female empowerment into the very fiber of my life....to join in sisterhood with women when often we are divided" (Ibid.) is beyond the scope of Nietzsche's philosophy.

and (2) doubt whether popular values and value oppositions have been understood as good or bad in a legitimate way.⁸ Nietzsche's intuition is that what are popularized as opposites are actually variations, or refinements, of just one thing. "It could even be possible that whatever gives value to those good and honorable things (virtues) has an incriminating link, bond, or tie to the very things that look like their evil opposites; perhaps they are even essentially the same. Perhaps!"⁹ Nietzsche makes this assertion mainly having in mind oppositions such as good/evil, mind/body, truth/falsity, and purity/impurity, but it is easy to see how the same reasoning can also be applied to gender.¹⁰ This is true not only because gender mirrors the dualistic structure of these other polarities, but because gender is importantly associated with one or the other side of each of them. Good, truth, purity, and mind are classically male associated characteristics, whereas body, falsity, impurity, and evil are associated with the female.¹¹ The conclusion drawn is that by considering the possibility that these characteristics typically considered as opposites might be variations of the same thing, the genders they are associated with might also be similarly monadic.

Even more fundamental to Nietzsche's philosophy than skepticism toward dualism is his rejection of the idea of absolute truth, which he believed nearly all philosophers were guilty of promoting. His attacks on his peers on these grounds were prolific and pointed: "regarding all philosophers... they are all spokesmen for prejudices that they christen as

⁸ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 5-6.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Lynne Tirrell "Sexual Dualism and Women's Self-Creation: On the Advantages and Disadvantages of Reading Nietzsche for Feminists," in *Feminist Interpretations of Friedrich Nietzsche*, eds. Kelly Oliver and Marilyn Pearsall (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 204.

¹¹ Elizabeth Spelman, "Woman as Body: Ancient and Contemporary Views," *Feminist Studies*, 8, no. 1 (1982): 121. Spelman, like Nietzsche, points to Plato as one of the original sources for this mode of thinking.

'truths'."¹² Nietzsche traces the trend of dogmatic philosophy to Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, which he believes is an error that produced a disbelief in experienced reality in exchange for universal forms (morality and virtues), otherwise referred to as the "Platonic error." One of Nietzsche's most distinct objectives was to demonstrate how this type of dogmatic truth is related to morality and in so doing dismantle the popular conception of morality as an immutable form. His arguments on this point are unequivocal: "*there are absolutely no moral facts... Morality is just an interpretation of certain phenomena or (more accurately) a misinterpretation.*"¹³ For Nietzsche, morality is a misrepresentation of the symptoms of existence as absolute truth. Although morality was a primary target, it was only one symptom of a larger dogmatic disease, which Nietzsche rejected and used as grounds for countless attacks. The arguments Nietzsche uses against morality on the premise that "Truth" does not exist are relevant to gender as well.

Even today the majority of societies value the absolute truth of gender in such a profound way that many people feel the need to go to great lengths to make sure they fit one or the other ideal form when they don't naturally line up. The result of this behavior is social proof of gender-fitting so prevalent that it seems gendered behavior is ingrained in people's DNA. Feminist philosopher Marilyn Frye articulates this point: "The redundancy of sex-marking and sex-announcing serves not only to make the topic seem transcendently important, but to make the sex-duality it advertises seem transcendently and unquestionably *true*."¹⁴ The themes Nietzsche writes about are clearly echoed in this

¹² Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 8.

¹³ *Twilight of the Idols* in Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ Etc.*, 183.

¹⁴ Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality*, (Trumansburg, New York: Crossing Press, 1983), 29.

statement. The acceptance of any perspective as transcendentally true is in clear contradiction with the philosophical angle Nietzsche advocated.

Although Nietzsche never developed his philosophy on sex and gender in any significant way, what he argued helped create a foundation that modern feminist philosophers could build on. Frye, being one such philosopher, is especially interested in the role of dualism in gender. She states that people's behavior is not only a result of social values but also serves to create and reinforce them: "(The result of the adherence to gender-roles is) the creation of a world in which the apparent dimorphism of the sexes is so extreme that one can only think there is a great gulf between female and male, that the two are, essentially and fundamentally and naturally, utterly different."¹⁵ Some of what Nietzsche writes echoes this sentiment closely. For example, a passage from Book Two of *The Gay Science*:

"Only as creators! - This has given me the greatest trouble and still does: to realize that what things *are called* is incomparably more important than what they are. (The names and conceptions of things are) almost always wrong and arbitrary...all this grows from generation unto generation, merely because people believe in it... What at first was appearance becomes in the end, almost invariably, the essence and is effective as such."¹⁶

The point these two philosophers are making is essentially the same: the creation of essentialist truths is a product not of a strong foundation in reality but of reinforcement of such values over long periods of time. It is a flawed human tendency to arbitrarily take regular social conventions and see them not just as second nature but as nature itself. I argue that gender-dualism fits neatly into the framework Nietzsche creates; the fact that

¹⁵ Ibid., 26.

¹⁶ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 121-122.

male and female are generally considered as opposite (what is not masculine is feminine and vice versa) is likely the result of a long history of transcendently positing dualisms.

Analysis of Common Interpretive Methods

Regardless of whether or not Nietzsche's philosophy suggests or allows for an attack on accepted gender norms, the fact remains that some of Nietzsche's writing can be viewed as a misogynist attack on woman, which suggests the opposite. Everyone that reads Nietzsche makes a decision, knowingly or not, on how to deal with this paradox. There are at least five possible approaches. (1) Ignore the problem. (2) Read Nietzsche as a misogynist that was aware of the inconsistency this created but could not or would not reconcile it. (3) Read Nietzsche as a misogynist that created the inconsistency unintentionally and unknowingly (a "product of his time"). (4) Do not read Nietzsche as a misogynist and interpret the troublesome passages as rhetorical devices, such as irony or sarcasm, used to spark discussion of gender. (5) Find another interpretation that is neither irony/sarcasm nor misogyny. In all likelihood there is value and accuracy in all of these approaches. Eventually I will present an argument that leans toward the last of these, but first I will take a moment to discuss the merits of the first four.

(1) Perhaps the easiest way to deal with Nietzsche's misogyny is to ignore the sections (which are many) in which Nietzsche speaks on the topic of women. Walter Kauffman is a primary target for feminist philosophers that reject this method; he stated that Nietzsche's judgments about women are "philosophically irrelevant" and that arguments against him on these grounds are "trivial." This approach is reckless with

respect to women and gender issues.¹⁷ If one takes into account the equal place of both genders in philosophy, then Nietzsche's writing on women is important. To say otherwise is a maneuver that shows either the reader is unconcerned about the equality of genders or has not fully comprehended the importance of taking it into account. Such an interpretation is not illustrative of Nietzsche's philosophy but rather demonstrates a sexist bias, conscious or not, that deems the issue unimportant.

(2-3) Interestingly, it has been argued, and I find it compelling, that belief in gender dualism is necessary for misogyny. Frances Oppel makes this assertion in the introduction to her book that explores Nietzsche's possible intentions: "Misogyny, woman-hating, depends on woman's existence in relation to man's; it stems from a clear sense of gender dichotomy."¹⁸ If this is true, and if Nietzsche is a misogynist, then there exists a contradiction in Nietzsche's thought.¹⁹ There are two possible explanations for this inconsistency. The first: Nietzsche was aware of the hypocrisy his views on dualism and gender created. He sensed the tension between his views on women and the greater body of his philosophy but chose or was unable to reconcile it. The second: Nietzsche was hypocritical unintentionally. He really believed a fundamental difference existed between genders and failed to notice the contradiction this creates.

These views are, in some popular opinions, partially related to the conception that Nietzsche had troubled relationships with his mother and sister. The conflict is evident in the texts themselves; in one of the opening sections of his final book, *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche

¹⁷ Linda Singer, "Nietzschean Mythologies: The Inversion of Value and the War Against Women," in *Feminist Interpretations of Friedrich Nietzsche*, eds. Kelly Oliver and Marilyn Pearsall (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 174. Singer remarks that Kauffman's interpretation is "unacceptable to women in philosophy" (174).

¹⁸ Frances Nesbitt Oppel, *Nietzsche on Gender: Beyond Man and Woman*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005) X.

¹⁹ See above for discussion on Nietzsche's dualisms.

writes: “When I look for my diametric opposite, an immeasurably shabby instinct, I always think of my mother and sister, - it would blaspheme my divinity to think that I am related to this sort of riff-raff. The way my mother and sister treat me to this very day is a source of unspeakable horror...”²⁰ Evidence like this is sometimes used to explain Nietzsche’s seemingly misogynist claims by assuming that he generalized his perception of the women closest to him to women in general. Sarah Kofman writes: “(aphorisms referring to Nietzsche’s mother) invite us to try to define Nietzsche’s own image of his mother as decisive to the question of his relation to women.”²¹ It is possible that this is true to some extent, but it would be an error to allow this to be the only evidence supporting the belief that Nietzsche contradicted himself. Many of the passages that discuss women, such as those already listed above, provide clear examples that Nietzsche’s texts are too complex and subtle to allow such an easy classification.

As for the “product of his time” argument, this is almost certainly true to some extent. Oppel cites Thomas Laqueur’s *Making Sex* in describing the prevailing idea of sex and gender in Nietzsche’s time; Laqueur described general understanding in terms of a “two-sex model” that was based on “empirical” evidence (physical evidence based on

²⁰ *Ecce Homo* in Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ Etc.*, 77. Part of the reason for the bitter animosity between Nietzsche and his family grew out of the conflict that occurred in 1886 between Nietzsche, his sister Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, and Lou Solomé, with whom Nietzsche was desperately in love. Elisabeth, jealous of Lou and feeling that she was inappropriately overstepping the sexual conventions of the time, continuously tried to sabotage Lou and Nietzsche’s pseudo-relationship, eventually demanding that Nietzsche choose between Lou or his sister. Nietzsche, despite this, was able to maintain some peace through the conflict, and continued to show interest in Lou, but she never reciprocated Nietzsche’s romantic feelings and eventually left him in despair; in a letter to a friend concerning the philosopher, Nietzsche’s long-time friend, Franz Overbeck, wrote: “This summer and autumn he has experienced the worst time of his life, the result of which is that he is now condemned to a new kind of loneliness that even he can’t bear... his future is a very dark place” (Julian Young, *Friedrich Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography*, [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010], 353.).

²¹ Sarah Kofman, “A Fantastical Genealogy: Nietzsche’s Family Romance,” in *Nietzsche and the Feminine*, ed. Peter Burgard, trans. Deborah Jensen, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), 38. See also for a scathing review of Nietzsche’s psychological tendencies.

biological sex characteristics) and supported by numerous major figures such as Schopenhauer and Darwin.²² Nietzsche was progressive and had substantial foresight in many ways but his judgment was not infallible, and he tended to treat the gender divide in a similar way that his peers did. Linda Singer is a proponent of this view: “The substance of his remarks is for the most part representative of views of women which were current in his age, views which he seems to have appropriated uncritically.”²³ One source of evidence for this view is in Nietzsche’s use of pronouns. In the vast majority of his writing he uses male pronouns as the default. As a counterexample, however, it is difficult to find a passage that explicitly ties the idea of the free spirit to one gender; more often than not it is talked about in abstract or gender-neutral terms: “This is the type of people we are, we free spirits! And perhaps *you* are something of this yourselves, you who are approaching? You *new* philosophers.”²⁴ Furthermore, Nietzsche’s idealized individual of the future, the *übermensch*, the embodiment of all Nietzschean values, is not a gendered term. The German “*mensch*” translates to “human” in English. The tendency to translate “*übermensch*” to “overman” is a result of the historical acceptance of “man” as representative of all humans. Whether or not Nietzsche did this intentionally is unclear; admittedly, this would have been an extremely insightful move. The most likely scenario is that Nietzsche was situated somewhere in the middle ground between foresight and culturally developed bias.

(4) It is also possible, however, to explain the hypocrisy without assuming Nietzsche was a misogynist. If this were the case Nietzsche would be intentionally hypocritical but with the goal of being provocative, using irony and sarcasm to spark discussion about the

²² Nesbitt Opper, *Nietzsche on Gender*, 6.

²³ Singer, “Nietzschean Mythologies,” 174.

²⁴ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 42.

issues he addresses; his animosity was directed not only toward women but the concepts of man and woman equally, meaning he was both a misogynist and a misandrist, challenging, not succumbing to, the gender-dualism of his time. Oppel argues for this last explanation, an interpretive approach that is overwhelmingly in the minority.

(5) The final approach I will put forward posits that Nietzsche was intentional in his treatment of women in a way that is consistent with the rest of his philosophy. Oppel's argument on this point follows along the lines of how I intend to show that Nietzsche's texts can be read for feminist purposes but where she turns to rhetorical device to explain apparent misogyny I seek to prove through the text that Nietzsche was in many instances straightforwardly not a misogynist in the sense that we have come to know him. Given the context of his argument, his extensive knowledge on many other topics, and his reputation for being excruciatingly concerned with the quality of his work, it is at least plausible that Nietzsche would not have overlooked such a glaring hole in his logic.²⁵ It is possible that the incongruity between Nietzsche's philosophy and his seeming misogyny is an important and deliberate one.

Critical Interpretations

What I will now explore is the possibility that Nietzsche was not a misogynist, or was to a much lesser degree than is typically thought. My interpretation of this, however, will leave room for some flex in the direction of all the above interpretations. This is the position I will defend for the remainder of my thesis. Support of this reading requires a

²⁵ Julian Young, *Friedrich Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 343. Young mentions Nietzsche's concern with the quality of work at the expense of other aspects of his life frequently.

close analysis of the relevant texts. In what follows I will turn to two of the most well-known and frequently cited excerpts from Nietzsche on the topic of woman; they come from *The Gay Science* and *Beyond Good and Evil*. In each of these books there are passages that deal explicitly and consistently with women. For many parts of my analysis I will present various authors' thoughts on the passages in addition to my own.

The Gay Science: Introduction to Book Two

The introduction to Book Two of *The Gay Science*, sections 57-75, is essentially a unit on woman. The first two sections set up the philosophical context of what Nietzsche wants to talk about while passage 59 is the first actual mention of women. The introduction to this section, I will argue, is crucial to understanding what follows it. Taken on its own, passages 59-75 are irredeemably sexist. How Nietzsche frames what he says, however, allows for an interpretation that is not. I will unpack the introduction and then analyze the passages that directly reference gender.

Sections 57 and 58 (the first aphorisms in Book Two) are remarkable in two ways: they remind the reader what Nietzsche's thoughts on reality and essence are and they build an open-ended argumentative structure that allows the reader to interpret what follows from their own perspective, meaning we need not take Nietzsche's further claims as an essentialist truth but view them as an expression of his philosophy which is consistent with his previously stated ideas that allow him to be read through a feminist lens. Nietzsche first states again that reality is a myth:

“You call yourselves realists and hint that the world really is the way it appears to you. As if reality stood unveiled before you only...subtract the

phantasm and every human *contribution* from it, my sober friends!...
There is no reality for us...We are not nearly as different as you think..."²⁶

This passage addresses the believers in reality, the "realists." Echoing what was shown earlier on the point of absolute truth, Nietzsche explicitly claims that there is no reality behind what appears to us, rather, appearance is the only reality. Additionally, in the last line, Nietzsche's remark undermines the idea of essential differences that will soon become relevant in further passages. What follows in passage 58 is a commentary on the creation of "essence" and the difficulties involved in separating the bias associated with a word from what it really is. I mentioned this quote before in "Nietzsche's Truths" but it is worth repeating again in its entirety.

"Only as creators! - This has given me the greatest trouble and still does: to realize that what things *are called* is incomparably more important than what they are. (The names and conceptions of things are) almost always wrong and arbitrary...all this grows from generation unto generation, merely because people believe in it... What at first was appearance becomes in the end, almost invariably, the essence and is effective as such."²⁷

Nietzsche believes that a thing's essence is a result of beliefs that have evolved over time and is represented by that thing's name. One example might be the word "father": For many, this word carries a whole host of associations, connotations, and expectations. Developing in a primarily patriarchal society the word "father" has become symbolic of some sort of essence: leading a household, having a wife, providing for a family. Nietzsche points out that these beliefs develop out of use over time rather than any ultimate truth. Eventually, the word "father" gains significance beyond its arbitrary beginnings and comes to be known as something that transcends the word itself. It is difficult to distance oneself

²⁶ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 121.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 121-122.

from one's biases; Nietzsche is not free of this difficulty, but clearly places value on the ability to overcome biases and is frustrated by his inability to do so. This critical reflection surely carries meaning relevant to the gender analysis that follows it seeing as words like "man" and "woman" fall into this same category of arbitrarily assigned names that have become essences.

Nietzsche did not see an easy way around these difficulties: "How foolish it would be to suppose that one only needs to point out this origin and this misty shroud of delusion in order to *destroy* the world that counts for real, so called '*reality*'."²⁸ His frustration is tangible as he grapples with the problem of tearing down "reality." Nietzsche does not think an etymological story, the explanation of the origin of the word "father" for example, can undo the type of strongly held convictions a lifetime of conditioning develops. What might help undo this system, however, is to become a creator oneself and rename things, which will bring to life new ideas and perceptions. He finishes the aphorism with this comment: "We can destroy only as creators... it is enough to create new names and estimations and probabilities in order to create in the long run new 'things'."²⁹ Nietzsche offers a solution to his riddle that is familiar to those concerned with renaming gender-biased words such as "fireman" and "policeman."

This introduction, as I mentioned, is critical in understanding what follows. As Oppel put it: "The discussion of 'woman' follows next, and surely the juxtaposition of woman with themes of reality, subjectivity, and language's tyranny and creativity is not an accident."³⁰ Oppel goes on to relate Nietzsche's ideas on the power of words to feminist-

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 122.

³⁰ Nesbitt Oppel, *Nietzsche on Gender*, 92.

driven campaigns to remove sexist bias from language. Beyond this, I think the introduction is important in another way: it sets an expectation. If fictional news articles were not disclosed as fictional from the beginning people would be outraged, but because an expectation is set that what follows will be a representation of reality that serves as a commentary people are able to find value in such pieces. Nietzsche's introduction should set the tone in a similar way.

Passages 59-75

To make an example of the interpretations I want to prove are insufficient, I will demonstrate where they each take us with this short passage.

*"We artists – when we love a woman, we easily conceive a hatred for nature on account of all the repulsive natural functions to which every woman is subject. We prefer not to think of all this; but when our soul touches on these matters for once... we feel insulted; nature seems to encroach on our possessions... 'The human being under the skin' is for all lovers a horror and unthinkable...We artists! We ignore what is natural."*³¹

Ignoring woman in this passage makes the meaning nonsensical and excludes the next 15 aphorisms from interpretation as well. Nietzsche frequently radically changes subjects from one aphorism to the next, so the fact that this section maintains its focus is noteworthy. An added disadvantage of this interpretation is that it makes incomprehensible the many peripheral thoughts that accompany and make whole his arguments. Ignoring this part of his work would be a huge oversight.

³¹ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 122.

Kelly Oliver interprets this passage as a manifestation of the male repulsion of female bodily functions, claiming: "Nietzsche fears the body."³² I argue that what Nietzsche says in this passage challenges this interpretation. He writes: "...we refuse to pay any heed to physiology and decree secretly: 'I want to hear nothing about the fact that a human being is something more than *soul and form*.'" Here Nietzsche makes clear that men fear the body but this is not necessarily true for Nietzsche, in fact it is unlikely given that Nietzsche's "we" in this quotation values primarily "soul and form." Nietzsche goes on to state that things said about nature by "astronomers, geologists, physiologists, or physicians" strike the lover as a threat and attack against his possessions because they turn their ideas, which can exist as forms, into concrete objects which are imperfect and troublingly familiar in their makeup. In a similar vein, for Nietzsche, lovers' hold on to the idea of woman as a possession and are made defensive by any attack that threatens this way of thinking. Coming into view from this reading is a depiction of woman as an illusion created and defended by man as one of the last fighting grounds of "reality." The "human being under the skin" is not necessarily the observable bodily functions of woman, but might actually be the undeniable biological and physiological similarity that binds us to each other and to all living organisms.

Following this in passage 60 Nietzsche continues his assault on the truth of woman through the metaphor of "distance." Nietzsche calls on the motif of an offshore sailboat as a symbol of how distance can make what is in reality quite chaotic seem tranquil. The tranquility of the object at a distance offers a respite from the obvious chaos of the shore,

³² Kelly Oliver, "Who is Nietzsche's Woman?" In *Modern Engendering: Critical Feminist Readings in Modern Western Philosophy*, ed. Bat-Ami Bar On (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994) 203.

the “flaming surf whose white tongues are licking at my feet.”³³ For Nietzsche, the turbulence of the shore is something to be embraced; it is symbolic of the entire spectrum of human experience that Nietzsche believes is necessary to embrace in order to rise above the false reality created by society. Anything that seems perfect, ideal, or undeniably true is for Nietzsche suspect.

In the same way that a platonic ideal offers peace of mind in an uncertain world, woman, tranquil as a ship off the coast, offers a tangible “reality” that man can hold on to, even idealize. Speaking about the boat, Nietzsche asks: “Does my happiness itself sit in this quiet place - my happier ego, my second, departed self?”³⁴ He describes the boat as a “spirit-like intermediate being” but soon destroys this picture claiming that the noise (of the shore) “had led me to fantasies.” If my reader is now wondering how certain one can be that Nietzsche really means to draw the comparison between the “intermediate being,” the sailboat, and the concept of woman, I remind them that the title of this aphorism is “Woman and their action at a distance.” Nietzsche’s undertaking with this passage is to illuminate and delegitimize the superimposition of man’s idealism on woman. The implication that man’s idealized woman is false is the root of the artists’ horror in the above aphorism. The “human being under the skin,” is irrefutable evidence that the ship off the coast is, in fact charging through chaos as well; there is no relief. Through this lens Nietzsche’s concluding declaration, “We artists! We ignore what is natural” makes a bit more sense; Nietzsche’s artists reject nature on account of their desire to maintain woman as an ideal.

³³ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 123.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

In her assessment of these passages of *The Gay Science*, Kathleen Higgins writes: “Nietzsche insists that women’s reality is quite different from traditional male fabrications, and he jars his readers into sensing the discrepancy between their habitual thinking and actual women’s points of view.”³⁵ The concept of woman being a projection of an ideal explains much about Nietzsche’s writing on the nature of man and woman and their interactions. Mirroring the analogy of watching the ship off the coast Nietzsche explains: “What seduces men most surely is a certain secretive and phlegmatic tenderness,”³⁶ and coming from the opposing perspective: “All women are subtle in exaggerating their weaknesses... in order to appear as utterly fragile ornaments... their existence is supposed to make men feel clumsy, and guilty on that score.”³⁷ For man, the ideal nature of woman is peaceful serenity, most aptly seen from a distance and hence removed from any fine detail whether it be noise (speech) or “natural functions.” Woman, in response to this expectation, tries to adopt these characteristics, sometimes successfully, sometimes not, by appearing fragile and exaggerating qualities that men want to believe exist in their idealized woman. Thus, woman makes man feel clumsy and guilty not from her evil essentialist nature, but out of man’s own desire.

In the proceeding aphorisms, Nietzsche offers thoughts on friendship and love that are not particularly troubling but then changes pace beginning with Passage 64 and starts to address the repercussions for women that believe in man’s idealized conception of women. Although it is not the original order, I believe an analysis beginning with 71 will make the most sense of this thought. The aphorism is about the education of women and

³⁵ Kathleen Higgins, “Nietzsche’s Use of Women,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Friedrich Nietzsche*, eds. Kelly Oliver and Marilyn Pearsall (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 145.

³⁶ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 129-30.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 125.

the subsequent disillusionment a woman faces when that reality is shattered through marriage. Nietzsche comments that “all the world is agreed that they (women of higher class) are to be brought up as ignorant as possible of erotic matters,” but then, in marriage, are “hurled... into reality and knowledge” and forced into a contradiction of values and realities: love, shame, delight, surrender, duty, pity, terror.³⁸ What follows is sympathy: “Even the compassionate curiosity of the wisest student of humanity is inadequate for guessing how this or that woman manages to accommodate herself to this solution of the riddle...she closes her eyes to herself...in sum, one cannot be too kind about women.”³⁹ Nietzsche’s sympathy for the troubling position women are forced into by his culture is clear.

Jumping back now to Passage 64, *Skeptics*, what appears to be an attack on the virtue of woman is now read as a compassionate account of the repercussions of an injustice. Nietzsche writes:

“I am afraid that old women are more skeptical in their most secret heart of hearts than any man: they consider the superficiality of existence its essence, and all virtue and profundity is to them merely a veil over this “truth,” a very welcome veil over a pudendum.”⁴⁰

The skepticism referred to here is different from the skepticism Nietzsche values as a necessary tool for overcoming the bias toward truth of his time. This skepticism is misplaced, directed at existence itself rather than man’s interpretation of it. The result is a complete inversion of value, which leads to mistrust. The reason these skeptics are “old” is because they have experienced and lived with the repercussions of the contradiction discussed in Passage 71, and, not finding answers, use skepticism as a defense against the

³⁸ Ibid., 127-28.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 125.

absurdity. The pudendum, made into the primary source of shame, becomes associated with the “virtue and profundity” that makes it shameful and thus virtue loses all value for the skeptical woman.⁴¹

Passages 69 and 70, rather than discussing the contradiction between values and reality that women inevitably confront, begins to address the virtues Nietzsche believes women have. Passage 69 states that women are equal to men regarding their capacity for revenge, which is part of the reason women are able to “hold” or “enthral” men. In other words, there is an element of fear that is fundamental in the male-female relationship. Passage 70, perhaps building on this easy to agree with assertion of male-female equality, draws an analogy between a woman’s alto voice in a theater and the potential for women to “master the masters.”⁴² The language used here implies two important notions, (1) that there is a different type of being that is not quite woman but not quite man, and (2) that woman has the capacity to become the “overman” as well. Nietzsche writes: “a deep and powerful alto voice... can suddenly raise the curtain upon possibilities in which we usually do not believe.”⁴³ The selection of “alto” is important here, because it is both the highest adult male singing voice and the lowest female singing voice; it is the middle ground between genders, or perhaps even genderless. According to Nietzsche, a “voice” of this kind makes us “believe that somewhere in the world there could be women with lofty, heroic, and royal souls, capable of and ready for grandiose responses, resolutions, and

⁴¹ The reader unfamiliar with Nietzsche might wonder whether or not a destruction of virtue is inconsistent with Nietzsche’s philosophy. Nietzsche indeed writes scathingly at times against the virtue of his time, but his attack is against the sources of the virtues, not the virtues themselves. Nietzsche placed a high value on virtue, and can even be seen as desiring stricter adherence to a virtuous life than what the idea of living virtuously was at the time he was writing.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 127.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

sacrifices, capable of and ready for rule over men.”⁴⁴ The language used here mirrors the language Nietzsche uses to describe the *übermensch* in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and, importantly, both are described as ruling “over” man. Though in Nietzsche’s eyes it might be less likely that woman will take up this task before man, the description implies that sex is not essential to fulfill this role.

Section 68 is one of the most important aphorisms on women found in Nietzsche’s writing. Walter Kaufmann, who is generally conservative with the credit he gives to Nietzsche on this topic, writes in a footnote that Nietzsche “makes a point that was not widely accepted until more than eighty years later: that women have lost out by modeling themselves on man’s image of women.”⁴⁵ I present the aphorism unabridged:

“Someone took a youth to a sage and said: ‘Look, he is being corrupted by women.’ The sage shook his head and smiled. ‘It is men,’ said he, ‘that corrupt women; and all the failings of women should be atoned by and improved in men. For it is man who creates for himself the image of woman, and woman forms herself according to this image.’ ‘You are too kind-hearted about women,’ said one of those present; ‘you do not know them.’ The sage replied: “Will is the manner of men; willingness that of women. That is the law of the sexes - truly, a hard law for women. All of humanity is innocent of its existence; but women are doubly innocent. Who could have oil and kindness enough for them?’ ‘Damn oil! Damn kindness!’ someone shouted out of the crowd; ‘Women need to be educated better!’ – ‘Men need to be educated better,’ said the sage and beckoned to the youth to follow him. - The youth, however, did not follow him.”⁴⁶

Lynne Tirrell, echoing Kauffman, interprets this passage similarly as “a recognition of the invisibility of the coerciveness of sexual dualism” that “offers a lament that others seem unable to recognize this situation.”⁴⁷ To unpack this a bit more requires a breakdown of the

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 126 (Footnote 5).

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Tirrell, “Sexual Dualism and Women’s Self Creation,” 209.

perspectives Nietzsche uses to convey his point; there are at least four in total: the sage, the youth, the youth's companion and the person in the crowd. Given Nietzsche's history of opinions about the general population, it is unlikely that either the companion or the crowd member is representative of his message.⁴⁸ The youth, likely, is representative of Nietzsche's belief (perhaps founded) that much of his writing was misunderstood, as he neither succumbs to nor rejects the sage's words.⁴⁹ The sage, then, is likely the voice through which Nietzsche speaks.

The first claim made, that women are the corrupters of the youth, is a manifestation of the gender bias of Nietzsche's era and the type of thinking that Nietzsche tries to oppose. The Sage's initial response is insightful but not quite a direct hit on the power disparity existing between genders. Lynne Tirrell, offering thoughts on Nietzsche's treatment of gender overall, makes a comment relevant to this point: "although Nietzsche is aware that "woman" is a category created through social interpretation he does not think through all the complexities of the power issues associated with the sexual dualism that defines that category. (He does, however, seem to react to them.)"⁵⁰ Through the sage Nietzsche reacts to sexual dualism but in claiming that it is men's duty alone to atone for the failings of women is also an affirmation that there exists an innate inequality between the genders. "Will" being the manner of men and "willingness" being that of women might also be

⁴⁸ There is an abundance of examples that serve to illustrate this point. "*the great majority of people lacks an intellectual conscience*. Indeed, it has often seemed to me as if anyone calling for an intellectual conscience were as lonely in the most densely populated cities as if he were in a desert." (*The Gay Science*, 76) "After such vistas and with such a burning hunger in our conscience and science, how could we still be satisfied with our *present-day man*?" (*The Gay Science*, 347)

⁴⁹ In the opening pages of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* Nietzsche laments this point: "When Zarathustra had spoken these words he beheld the people again and was silent. 'There they stand,' he said to his heart; 'there they laugh. They do not understand me; I am not the mouth for these ears.'" (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 128)

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

construed as an essentialist or power-riddled claim but it is more likely Nietzsche was simply describing the nature of cultural relationships between the sexes in his time. Higgins writes: “he is probably not overstepping the facts to describe the style of nineteenth-century males as expressing will and that of their female counterparts as turning on willingness.”⁵¹ What surrounds these potentially ambiguous statements, however, is a reaffirmation of the themes of the opening sections of Book Two, the cultural nature of the education and expectations of women, the concept of woman being a projection of the idealized nature of man, and sympathy toward women for having to endure such a life. Though by no account is his message completely free of sexist bias, it is, as Kauffman suggests, impressively ahead of his time in terms of progressing discussion of gender issues.

In an argument echoing the tone of passage 70, “*Women who master the masters*,” Nietzsche concludes his thoughts on “woman” in an aphorism titled “*The third sex*.”

“A small man is a paradox but still a man; but small females seem to me to belong to another sex than tall women,’ said an old dancing master. A small woman is never beautiful – said old Aristotle.”⁵²

In the confusing two sentences that make up this section, Nietzsche alludes to Aristotle claiming that small people are not beautiful and adds his own absurd prejudices - that small men are paradoxes and small women of an altogether different sex, the “third” sex. Opiel interprets this aphorism as irony with the intent of making the reader reassess the rationality of their beliefs. She states: “Of what matter is size, the age, or the sex of a person who is ‘great’ of soul? If Aristotle was consistent, a great soul might be housed in a small

⁵¹ Higgins, “Nietzsche’s Use of Women,” 144.

⁵² Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 130.

female body. Nietzsche's irony leads us... to ask how rational (our categories) are."⁵³ This might be true. However, I believe the important take-away from this section is found in its position and its title. Being the conclusion of the topic, it is important inherently. The title is representative of the conclusion that should be drawn from a close reading of the previous aphorisms - gender dualism is a fiction that when discovered leaves the possibility of an "alto," a genderless "third" sex.

Beyond Good and Evil

Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* is as often cited if not more cited in feminist literature than *The Gay Science*. Nietzsche's opening sentence in the preface asks: "Suppose that truth is a woman - and why not? Aren't there reasons for suspecting that all philosophers, to the extent that they have been dogmatists, have not really understood women?"⁵⁴ Regardless of the jesting nature of this question, this positioning of woman as the first introduction to the work demonstrates that the topic is undeniably important. Many of the passages about "woman" found in *Beyond Good and Evil* seem less subtle in their meaning and come across as blatantly and irredeemably misogynistic, and hence make up the driving force behind popular perceptions of Nietzsche's misogyny. Some of these passages are not easy to reconcile with the rest of Nietzsche's thought. Others, controversial as they may be, retain the capacity for multiple interpretations. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, just as in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche devotes a small but continuous portion of the book solely to his philosophy on "woman." This, aphorisms 231-239 (the end of the

⁵³ Nesbitt Opper, *Nietzsche on Gender*, 97.

⁵⁴ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 3.

chapter entitled “*Our Virtues*”), will be the central focus of my analysis with other mentions pulled in when relevant.

Before embarking on his apparent diatribe against women, Nietzsche again contextualizes what he is about to say before saying it, in aphorism 231.⁵⁵ His concern here, rather than the way in which truths are formed, is the tenacity of ideas, particularly biases, to persist:

“Learning transforms us, it acts like all other forms of nourishment...but at our foundation, ‘at the very bottom,’ there is clearly something that will not learn, a brick wall... of predetermined decisions and answers to selected, predetermined questions...When it comes to men and women, for instance, a thinker cannot change his views but only reinforce them, only finish discovering what, to his mind, ‘is established.’”⁵⁶

This is a clear acknowledgement of the effects persistent biases have on people’s views of the world and their convictions and a direct link to the way people think about gender and sex. Nietzsche does not fail to include himself in his analysis of the human psyche when he coins our convictions as “signposts... to the great stupidity that we are” and laments that people “*will not learn*.”⁵⁷ His final warning before he alienates modern readers is a lighthearted claim that the “abundant civility I have just extended to myself” will make it possible for him to say whatever he likes about “the ‘woman *an sich*’ (‘in itself’ or ‘as such’)” on account of his claims being only his truths and likely not, in fact almost guaranteed not to be, universal or “right” truths.⁵⁸ Essentially, Nietzsche presents us here with a tension in

⁵⁵ I remind the reader of Nietzsche’s comments at the beginning of Book Two in *The Gay Science*.

⁵⁶ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 123.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Nietzsche’s use of “woman as such” is a noteworthy articulation here as it ties his statement to a host of meaning developed in a number of his works. Judith Norman, in a footnote on the term, comments: “I have left the term in German because any English rendering is clumsy, and the German retains both the gender neutrality and the philosophical connotations of the term.” This leaves the non-German speaker high and dry at a crucial point. Nietzsche’s use of the term likely comes from Kant’s “noumenon” or “thing

his philosophy. The use of woman “an sich” is an acknowledgement that “woman” is at least to a degree part of the category of “essence” that Nietzsche rejects, and yet Nietzsche finds himself unable to rid himself of his bias “that will not learn.” What follows, as I will show, is a representation of this internal tension.

Much of what Nietzsche writes in the next eight aphorisms consists of ad hominem attacks on “women.” I will present some examples in order to demonstrate the nature of his attack and then focus on the ambiguities and inconsistencies within these aphorisms. Aphorism 232 wastes no time in making controversial assertions: “Women have so much cause for shame; they contain so much that is pedantic, superficial, and schoolmarish as well as narrow-mindedly arrogant, presumptuous and lacking in restraint... all of which has been most successfully restrained and kept under control by their *fear* of men.”⁵⁹ This is a straightforward attack on women in general. This is the type of writing that creates tension within Nietzsche’s philosophy. To further my analysis I turn to the interpretation Linda Singer gives in “Nietzschean Mythologies.”

Singer states, with respect to Nietzsche’s assertions that females are more vengeful than males, that “female vengefulness often takes the form of self-hatred, expressed as contempt and hostility for other women.”⁶⁰ She goes on to describe how Nietzsche

in itself.” The “thing in itself” is distinct from a thing knowable by the senses through phenomena. Nietzsche’s rejection of this idea in every other aspect gives the reader reason to believe he is hinting at a similar rejection of “woman” as a thing in itself, or at least distinguishing between the idea of “woman in itself” and “woman” as experienced phenomenologically. Maudemarie Clark supports this interpretation in her essay “Nietzsche’s Misogyny”: “In fact, however, he is writing not about women, but about ‘woman as such,’ which he also calls ‘the eternal feminine.’ He is referring to the feminine essence, a social construction that individual women need not exemplify” (Maudemarie Clark, “Nietzsche’s Misogyny,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Friedrich Nietzsche*, eds. Kelly Oliver and Marilyn Pearsall [University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998], 192).

Nietzsche’s acknowledgement of his own “stupidity” is almost certainly a direct reference to his biases toward women, and even suggests his frustration at not being able to rid himself of such biases.

⁵⁹ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 232.

⁶⁰ Singer, “Nietzschean Mythologies” 178.

interprets this as woman's acknowledgement of her own inferiorities and then claims Nietzsche's phenomenon of woman's self-hatred is not a new idea but a misrepresented one - a refusal of existence rather than a refusal of circumstance. "(Woman's self-hatred) is her way of refusing a nexus of structures which places her in a disadvantaged position... the refusal of women to accept this situation is a sign of their strength."⁶¹ Although I agree with Singer in her description of woman's self-hatred, her assertion that Nietzsche misattributes self-hatred to nature rather than circumstance, I believe, is only a half-truth.

Singer's reading presumes that Nietzsche's "woman" is essentialist and focuses her critique on this flawed reasoning.⁶² On this topic, she states: "The move to the natural...implies that woman's situation need not be examined or explored...both women and men are doomed to continual frustration and disappointment with each other."⁶³ I agree that this would be the case if Nietzsche were explicitly claiming essentialist truths about women, but the evidence implies that he is not. In fact, it appears that rather than implying the situation need not be explored, Nietzsche is, in fact, exploring the situation by presenting the tension he feels within himself. Singer's reading of these types of passages is appropriate; part of Nietzsche, as he acknowledged, holds these biases and he should be held accountable for them. However, that is only part of the story.

There is an arc in tone and meaning noticeable through sections 231-239 that speaks to the presence of a deeper meaning than Singer suggests. Section 234 begins the transition, it is similar in tone but the message is ambiguous:

⁶¹ Ibid., 179.

⁶² As opposed to Clark, Singer interprets Nietzsche's "Eternal Feminine" literally as the eternal nature of woman rather than deriving the more common philosophical meaning that Kant popularized. Pointing out that there is no "Eternal Masculine" Singer cites this as evidence that "for Nietzsche it is only feminine destiny that is written in the timeless rhythms of nature." (Ibid., 175).

⁶³ Ibid., 177.

“Stupidity in the kitchen; woman as cook; the spine-chilling thoughtlessness in the feeding of the family and the head of the house... Bad cooking and the complete absence of reason in the kitchen have caused the longest delays and the worst damage to the development of humanity...a speech for young ladies.”⁶⁴

This can be read as an attack on woman’s nature or an attack on the thoughtless redundancy that is forced on women which inhibits them from pursuing more meaningful endeavors. This is a sentiment Simone Beauvoir was similarly appalled by: “Few tasks are more similar to the torment of Sisyphus than those of the housewife; day after day, one must wash dishes, dust furniture... she does nothing; she only perpetuates the present.”⁶⁵ This notion would indeed be a hindrance to the development of humanity. Nietzsche’s directed call to “young ladies” solidifies the possibility of this interpretation as an appeal to future generations to rethink the accepted societal norms imposed on women.

Aphorism 237 states: “So far men have been treating women like birds that have lost their way... like something finer, more vulnerable, wilder, stranger, sweeter, more soulful, - but also like something that has to be locked up to keep it from flying away.”⁶⁶ This might be an unjustified imposition of characteristics on women, but it is no longer a diatribe. This quotation suggests the insecurity and fragility of man’s “woman” and is reminiscent of the illusion “distance” gives man of “woman” in *The Gay Science*.

I have until now avoided making claims about irony and sarcasm in my reading of Nietzsche because in many instances I view them as weakly supported, but the last aphorism of this chapter is so contrived and rife with contradiction it appears this type of rhetorical device is almost certainly at play. The underlying message in section 239 may, in

⁶⁴ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 125-126.

⁶⁵ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 474.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 127.

fact, be that women are going about their pursuit of equality in the wrong way. However, this sentiment is veiled in insults and sarcasm. Because the aphorism is very long, I will try to demonstrate my point without superfluous use of quotation.

In the first half of the aphorism Nietzsche describes the repercussions of women “striving for the economic and legal independence of a clerk.” He exclaims (in the event that this happens): “Enough, woman loses her shame. Let us immediately add that she also loses her taste. She forgets her *fear* of man: but the woman who ‘forgets fear’ abandons her most feminine instincts...in the process - women degenerate.”⁶⁷ “Fear” again comes up. Fear, in aphorism 232, was what kept all of woman’s causes for shame under control, fear of man. In her forgetting, woman loses her feminine “instincts” and “degenerates.” The meaning of degeneration, for Nietzsche, is very unclear, it could even be a positive development. The meaning of the claim is not developed, possibly intentionally. Furthermore, the loss of “instincts” is a strange contradiction; instincts are typically thought of as innate, fixed behaviors, just as “woman” is thought to be natural. If one can lose their instincts, they likely were never instincts to begin with, which undermines the idea that any of what Nietzsche has implied as woman’s “natural” propensities are actually fixed. Instead they might be revealed as byproducts of conditioning. Nothing Nietzsche says here is actually necessarily negative, it only reads that way initially.

Following this, Nietzsche begins to describe his opinions about the methods by which women aim to achieve “equality”: “The stupidity in this movement, an almost masculine stupidity, is enough to make any woman who has turned out well (which always means a clever woman) thoroughly ashamed. To lose your sense for which ground best

⁶⁷ Ibid., 128.

insures your victory.”⁶⁸ The stupidity being referenced lies in the idea that women want to become more like men. Again the passage reads as an insult, but the subject being referenced isn’t “woman”, or even the goal (although the goal becomes unclear here), it is the means by which “woman” pursues the goal. Nietzsche actually suggests that “women” will succeed in their victory, which in all likelihood is a form of overcoming man, if they use the virtues they already have to their advantage because they are superior to man’s. The following quote will demonstrate this point:

“To collect together, in an inept and indignant manner, everything slavish and serf-like that was and still is intrinsic to the position of women in the present social order... what does all this mean except a crumbling away of feminine instincts, a defeminization? Of course, there are plenty of idiotic friends and corrupters of women among the scholarly asses of the male sex who recommend that women defeminize themselves like this and copy all the stupidities that the ‘man’ in Europe, that European ‘manliness’ suffers from.”⁶⁹

Although woman’s methods are clearly being insulted again, the focus of ridicule now seems clearly to be on man. Nietzsche holds feminine instincts up against “manliness” this time implying that the aspects of femininity associated with being female are superior to those associated with “manliness.”

As a final point on this passage I look at this quote that directly addresses the issue of woman as free spirit, one of Nietzsche’s most important themes.⁷⁰ “Every now and then, people even want to make free spirits and literati out of women: as if a woman without piety were anything other than absolutely repugnant or ludicrous to a profound and

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 129.

⁷⁰ Many readers consider Nietzsche’s depiction of the free spirit as a purely masculine potentiality; the following quote suggests this might not be the case.

godless man-.”⁷¹ The statements made here are a clear contradiction. The idea of a woman as free spirit, which entails an absence of piety, is to the godless man repugnant. But why would the godless man desire that woman be god-fearing? Nietzsche’s profound and godless man will not be concerned about anyone’s piety; rather he will likely fight against it. This contradiction leads me to believe this statement must be sarcastic, and an affirmation that woman can, in fact, be a free spirit.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have endeavored to shed a new light on Nietzsche’s philosophy that allows a reading, which is free of gender bias and misogyny. First, I demonstrated that some of Nietzsche’s major philosophical points, rejections of dualism and absolute truth, suggest a reading that supports various arguments being made in current feminist philosophy. Not only is Nietzsche still relevant in a modern context, he is relevant in an area of study which views his philosophy as symptomatic of the type of thinking that is outdated. The rejection of dualism and essentialist truths and belief in the ability of individuals to hold creative license over their own lives suggests that “woman” can and should overcome the confines of culturally formed expectations. As Linda Singer puts it: “in so doing, we will be led to envision ourselves and our activity in ways which exceed the limits of Nietzsche’s vision, and yet proceed in the spirit of his philosophy.”⁷² This interpretation demonstrates the value in reading Nietzsche and the relevance of his texts in today’s context.

⁷¹ Ibid., 129.

⁷² Singer, “Nietzschean Mythologies,” 185.

That Nietzsche's philosophy should have taken the dualistic nature of "woman" into account is easy enough to see. In the second part of this thesis I argued that, although there are various other methods of interpretation that are valuable to varying degrees, the best interpretation of the passages in Nietzsche's texts that discuss issues relating to gender depicts Nietzsche as conflicted in his views on women, but not outright misogynist. A close reading of the most relevant passages shows that Nietzsche in did in fact think critically about gender in the context of his greater philosophical project.

Some of the issues Nietzsche explores through "woman" include the creation of "essences" by the continuous use of names, the difficulty in undoing the biases resulting from this, and the possibility of changing accepted "realities" through the creation of new names and ideas. Nietzsche discusses the nature of woman as an idealized construct of man, and woman's behaviors and experiences in terms of the expectations set by man. He also makes references to the possibility of a "third sex," which might be neither man nor woman. In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche acknowledges the tension between his own biases and his arguments that reject essence. His opening statements demonstrate a self-criticism of his own stubborn biases and the biases of society that serve to build perceptions of essentialist truths. His diatribe toward women is short lived; he shifts away from ad hominem attacks on women and begins to criticize the idea of male-female equality on account of "manliness" not being a worthwhile goal. Finally, Nietzsche indirectly hints at the possibility that woman is as capable of becoming a "free spirit" as man.

My reading of Nietzsche should provide the reader with the means to consider a view, if they do not already, of Nietzsche's philosophy that is not misogynistic but

considerate of gender issues with regard to his greater thought. Even if this goal is not accomplished it should be clear that Nietzsche's philosophy rises above his possible mistakes.

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