

# Pain · Redemption · Regeneration: An Interpretation of Oedipus the King under Nietzsche's "Apollo-Dionysus" Paradigm

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**Abstract:** Sophocles' masterpiece, Oedipus Rex, is a timeless classic in the history of Western drama. Aristotle hailed it as the "perfect tragedy". The Birth of Tragedy is an important early work by Nietzsche. In this work, he proposed the theory of the opposition between the Apollonian and Dionysian dual impulses. This theory is of epoch - making significance. In this book, Nietzsche uses language full of metaphors. He not only talks about the aesthetic meaning of Greek art but also shows the metaphysical thinking about life. At the same time, Oedipus the King is a typical tragic art piece from ancient Greece. In this tragedy, the Apollonian spirit and the Dionysian spirit are mixed together. This combination helps to reconstruct the meaning of life metaphysically.

**keywords:** Apollonian Spirit; Dionysian Spirit; Nietzsche; Oedipus the King

**Published:** May 26, 2025

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.62177/chst.v2i2.396>

## 1.The enchanted mirage of dreams

In The Birth of Tragedy, the ideas of Apollo and Dionysus are really important for understanding Nietzsche's thoughts about art. Nietzsche said, "These names are borrowed from the Greeks who revealed the profound secret doctrines of their view of art to the discerning mind precisely not in concepts but rather in the insistently clear forms of their pantheon." It's clear that these two ideas are connected in a way that they work together, not that they're against each other.

The spirit of Apollo shouldn't be simply seen as rationality or order. Similarly, the spirit of Dionysus can't be just thought of as frenzy or desire. Nietzsche uses the "interaction" of these two principles to break down the artistic forms of the Greek world. Two different instincts exist together. They're often in obvious conflict. They stimulate each other to create more powerful expressions while still keeping their opposing tension.

The word 'art' seems to bring this duality together on the surface. But through a kind of Greek 'will' in a more abstract sense, these forces finally come together. In the end, this leads to the Attic tragedy<sup>[1]</sup>. The Attic tragedy is an artwork that has both Dionysian and Apollonian elements.

At ancient Greek tragedy performances, the lines between the chorus, actors, and the audience were probably not as clear. The audience actively "took part" in the drama that was happening on stage. The illusory quality of Apollo could protect the audience from the strong influence of Dionysus or make it less intense. When these three elements came together, the presence of Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, showed up.

His mystical power made Apollo's emotional resonance even stronger. It reached a really high - level state, but at the same time, it also hit its limit. In this way, it showed the symbolic manifestation of the inner radiance of Apollo.

The tragedy Oedipus the King can be seen as an Apollonian symbol of the Dionysian experience. As you gradually uncover the layers of Apollo's symbolism, you'll find the underlying Dionysian essence. This finally leads to the experience of "the One." Oedipus goes through extreme suffering and falls apart, but he achieves self - redemption. This process shows Nietzsche's support for the eternal instinct of life, which is a spirit of sublation.

Although Oedipus can't go beyond the limitations of human beings or get over human weakness. In fact, he fails to reach the "superman" ideal that Nietzsche put forward in "Thus Spoke Zarathustra". However, he still shows the Dionysian spirit under the veil of death and shows a tough vitality.

## 2.The enchanted mirage of dreams

In The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche explains the relationship between the Apollonian and Dionysian spirits. He does this through the states of "dream" and "intoxication". Dreams are the most direct way the Apollonian spirit shows itself. When people are dreaming, they can get away from the pain of reality for a short time. They enter a world of illusions and beauty. In this world, everyone can be an artist.

Apollo is the god of form and beauty. He governs these illusions. He embodies reason, order, and idealized aesthetics. The illusions that come from dreams give people a short break from suffering. They also give meaning to life. All of this is because of Apollo's influence. Apollo is the "shining, radiant one." His gaze is as bright as the sun. Even when he is angry, he still keeps his solemn beauty. But there is an important limit in Apollo's dreams. It is the "principle of individuation."

Dreams let people see beauty, but they stop people from really dealing with the pain and danger in real life. As Schopenhauer says, dreams are just illusions. It's like a dream inside a dream, and human consciousness gets wrapped up in these illusions<sup>[2]</sup>. The Apollonian spirit depends on these illusions and shows beauty and wisdom through art and music. However, staying in the world of dreams for a long time isn't a good thing.

As Nietzsche said, when people get lost in the illusory veil of dreams, the Dionysian impulse wakes up. It tries to go beyond this false appearance.

In Oedipus the King, Oedipus shows the Apollonian spirit. A quote says, "So a worldly solution to the tragic dissonance was sought; the hero, after undergoing sufficient torture at the hands of fate, harvested his well-deserved reward in a stately marriage, in divine attestations of honour." In the light of Apollo, Oedipus is a perfect hero. To avoid the prophecy of the oracle, he leaves his adoptive parents. On the way, he kills an unreasonable passer - by. Then he solves the riddle of the Sphinx and becomes a hero in Thebes.

Yet, it's exactly this wisdom and perfection of Apollo that hides his inner destiny. Here, the principle of individuation shows its cruel dialectic. Oedipus leaves Corinth. This symbolizes his rejection of his "adopted son" identity and his pursuit of his "true self." Ironically, this leads him onto the path of fate that was already decided.

This "rational" choice paradox supports Schopenhauer's claim of "the self - devouring of the will". When individuation reaches its peak, it turns into a tool for self - destruction<sup>[3]</sup>.

Under the influence of the oracle, Oedipus gets caught in a dreamy illusion. He is too confident in his own wisdom and ignores the unchangeable plan of fate. When he solves the Sphinx's riddle, Oedipus wins honor and glory. It seems that he has affirmed the victory of the Apollonian ideal. But the answer to the riddle, which is "man", is just an abstract idea of wisdom. It doesn't show its deeper meaning. Just like his answer to the riddle shows his intelligence, Oedipus misses the external factor of his "fate".

He is under the glow of wisdom, but he doesn't understand how serious fate can be. The Sphinx's riddle quietly shows how fragile humans are. It also replaces the real meaning of fate with the idea of "man." Oedipus's wisdom hides this important understanding from him. When Oedipus finds out that he has killed his father and married his mother, he gets into a situation where he destroys himself. In the end, his wisdom works against him. His rational thinking and his focus on "dreams" make him unable to get away from his final fate.

He tries hard to govern the city - state. He firmly faces the terrifying plague. He tries to fit what he thinks of as the "world"

into the “rational” framework he understands. It’s like a sculptor turning messy marble into art. He creates and at the same time cuts out the basic nature of life.

During Oedipus’s self - destruction, the pin breaks through Apollo’s peaceful dream. It slowly shows us a very ancient and deep abyss. It suggests a more real rhythm of life.

### **3.The Ecstasy of Intoxication**

The core symbol of the Dionysian spirit is music. As Welles points out, a symbol isn’t just a one - time metaphor. It forms a system by being repeated and reproduced, and it becomes an important part of myth. The music of Dionysus is very different from that of Apollo. Apollo’s music brings tranquility and rationality, while Dionysus’ music makes people feel fear and get intoxicated. Music is an expression of will. To go beyond its own desires and reach the world of pure art, it has to capture concrete images.

You can never use language to fully express how deep music is. Instead, music goes beyond language. It becomes a kind of indescribable power that shows the deep essence of the Dionysian spirit. In ancient Greek tragedy, the Dionysian spirit is shown not only in music but also in the performance of the satyr chorus.

The satyr chorus shows the ultimate release of the Dionysian spirit. It blurs the lines between actors and the audience. All the participants are immersed in the Dionysian worship ceremony. They break free from the limits of daily life. In this process, the satyrs are not just followers of the Dionysian spirit. They are also the embodiment of it.

When the actors perform, the audience stops being passive spectators. Instead, they establish a direct connection with Dionysus through the actors. They can experience the deep expression of nature and instinct. The choral odes in the play are not just emotional decorations. They are the expressions of the Dionysian spirit. When Oedipus’ rational story falls apart, the choral polyphony shows the many - sided nature of fate. It breaks down the false wholeness of the Apollonian monologue.

Nietzsche says that the Dionysian spirit means going beyond individuality, society, and reality. It means entering a deeper and more complicated state. This state tries to understand the overall features of life. The Dionysian spirit strongly affirms life. It does this even when there is pain and conflict. It celebrates all of life. It also admits that birth and destruction, creation and annihilation, are one.

In a tragic world, the power of Dionysus allows artists, actors, and audiences to experience pain and joy together. They can find a kind of joy that goes beyond individuality in collective ecstasy. This experience challenges the attitude of pessimistic resignation. It also shows a deep affirmation of the vitality of life.

The Dionysian spirit isn’t just a symbol of having a wild time and giving in to desires. It’s also a deep - seated philosophy about how we exist. It stresses that people need to face and really get involved in every single moment of life. This includes the parts that are super painful and tragic.

In Oedipus the King, the Dionysian spirit and fate interact in a special way. Oedipus tries to use his wisdom to change his fate. However, he can’t get away from the oracle’s plan. The unstoppable nature of fate makes his trust in wisdom useless. This shows the limits of Apollonian rationality. His parents’ fates, the oracle’s prediction, and his own wisdom are all closely connected to the Dionysian spirit.

Oedipus wakes up from a dreamy illusion and finally gets into the Dionysian state of being drunk. He blinds himself. He doesn’t choose to follow Jocasta’s way of suicide as atonement. Instead, he endures physical pain and spiritual torment in the darkness. This is a deep act of self - destruction and rebirth. Oedipus’ story is a classic symbol of the conflict and fusion between the Apollonian and Dionysian spirits.

As Dodds points out, “Oedipus’ greatness doesn’t come from his important position in the secular world. It comes from his courage and determination when he faces the truth.” When Oedipus blinds himself, this act seems to be the end of Apollonian visual understanding on the surface. But in essence, it shows a Dionysian awakening. Under his mask that seems to be full of wisdom, there is an inescapable fate and the wild power of Dionysus.

The Dionysian impulse finally breaks through Apollo’s rational constraints. This allows Oedipus to wake up from the illusion. He can then have a deep understanding of himself and his fate. His self - destruction and rebirth show the Dionysian spirit. They also reflect Nietzsche’s strong affirmation of life’s instincts and the essence of existence. Through this extreme

experience, Oedipus achieves a transcendent self - awakening. He gains a full understanding of the essence of fate and the Dionysian spirit.

Oedipus the King is a classic work of ancient Greek tragedy. It fully includes the main elements of the tragic spirit. The tragic spirit is not just about showing how fate can be unpredictable. It's also a deep description of how humans struggle and resist when they face a destiny that can't be changed. Oedipus can't change his fate. But his journey of self - destruction and then regeneration shows the dignity and strength that humans have when they face forces they can't overcome.

This tragic spirit isn't just about admitting that there is suffering. It's a strong affirmation of the natural vitality of life. The wild celebration of the Dionysian spirit sets people free from restrictions<sup>[4]</sup>. It makes them fully affirm life. In the story of Oedipus, the Dionysian spirit finally goes beyond the illusions of the Apollonian. It solves the conflict between wisdom and fate. It shows a deep understanding and acceptance of the real nature of life.

#### **4.The Clash and Convergence of Apollo and Dionysus**

The unique charm of ancient Greek tragedy lies in its ability. It can turn the essence of existence shown by the Dionysian spirit into an aesthetic experience. Humans can bear this experience. And this transformation is mediated by the elegant forms created by the Apollonian spirit.

In Sophocles' Oedipus the King, the story follows the three unities. The whole narrative happens within one day. The setting always stays at the palace in Thebes. And the conflicts are solved through looking back and having conversations. This creates a strict dramatic structure, which is an example of Apollonian form. This structure is like a prism. It takes the messy forces of fate and turns them into a causal chain that we can understand.

Oedipus' search for truth seems like a victory of logical thinking. But actually, it's a plan set by fate. In the book, he shouts, "Let the storm that destroys me come even more fiercely!" Then, the harsh truth (Dionysian) hidden in beautiful words (Apollonian) breaks out completely.

The odes sung by the chorus make this dialectical tension even more obvious. When the priests sing in harmony, saying, "The happiness of humans is as short - lived as the morning dew," the beautiful hexameter, which is a sign of Apollonian order, is very different from the lyrics that show life's impermanence, which is a Dionysian idea. This "dance in chains" is an example of Nietzsche's idea of "the mixing of dream and intoxication." The audience is calmed by the Apollonian beauty at the same time as they are shocked by the Dionysian power.

Just like the violent scenes shown on ancient Greek vases with geometric patterns, the formal restraint makes the content's brutality more obvious. This makes the artistic view of the abyss even more incisive.

It's important to notice that although the Dionysian element stands out in Greek tragedies, it doesn't make the Apollonian element less important. Apollo's presence brings clarity and definition. It allows the chaos and passion of Dionysus to be shown in real artistic forms. Apollo turns the universality of Dionysus into specific artistic images. He also sets limits for Dionysian energy. This makes sure that the energy stays strong without taking over the whole work.

Furthermore, Apollo's intervention makes sure that the Dionysian force doesn't make the audience feel despair or be overwhelmed. Instead, it allows the audience to experience the profound pain and destructiveness of life from an aesthetic distance. This distance lets the audience watch the tragedy safely and keeps them from being swallowed up by primal forces. In ancient Greek tragedies, the opposition and fusion of Apollo and Dionysus show the complexity of the will to live.

This binary dynamic shows that humans are always struggling between reason and emotion, order and chaos. It also emphasizes that art has a special role in expressing the will to live. When the audience sees the artistic way of showing this opposition and combination, they can think about their own existence. They can also explore the deeper meaning of life. In the end, they can really understand and accept the essence of life.

Just like the war scenes on ancient Greek vases, they are drawn with simple patterns and single colors. These vases can show the brutality of the war well. Similarly, when artists use restraint in their work, it can make their observations seem deeper.

The greatness of tragic art is that it creates a "third space" where both Apollonian and Dionysian elements exist together. In this space, Apollo weaves Oedipus' story into a complex dramatic structure. It's like a veil that partly covers a face.

On the other hand, Dionysus keeps tearing at this thin veil. He makes us face the absurdity of existence directly. The smarter

Oedipus gets, the more caught up he is in the web of fate. The more he looks for light, the darker his way becomes. This two-sided view doesn't solve any contradictions<sup>[5]</sup>. Instead, it shows the dance of paradoxes, just like the wave - particle duality in quantum physics. Apollo and Dionysus together give us a full understanding of existence.

Modern characters like Kafka's K, who might never get into the castle, and Camus' Sisyphus, who keeps doing the same task forever, are like the Oedipal cycles of "pursuing truth - falling into absurdity." But the art of tragedy shows that absurdity can be a source of poetry. Even when we face the most confusing and difficult questions in life, we have to give a positive answer. Paradoxically, when we realize the limits of existence, we can better embrace the present moment.

## 5. Conclusion

Greek tragedy looks into the meaning of life through how the Apollonian and Dionysian principles show up. In this way, it examines the metaphysical aspects of existence. Human life for each person is limited. But according to Nietzsche's philosophy, the life - will, which is the essence of the world, is limitless. Trying to pursue the limitless with the limited is clearly absurd and tragic. Actually, as Nietzsche's work suggests, artistic instinct might be the key to understanding the mystery of life.

Consequently, when we're trying to explore the endless depths of life, we can't be separated from the gods of artistic instinct—the Apollonian and Dionysian forces.

## Funding

no

## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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