The Dionysiac in *The Birth of Tragedy*

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*The Birth of Tragedy* published by Nietzsche marks the origin of his philosophy. Dionysiac spirit and the aestheticism attitude toward life are the most discussed topics among scholars home and abroad. They are talking about the essence of Dionysiac spirit, its influence on literary works and critics, or its value in aestheticism and art. In one word, there are multiple critics about the metaphysical questions in *The Birth of Tragedy*. But what is the psyche condition of a person who holds an aesthetic attitude toward life like? Thus, this paper intends to analyze the reflection of Dionysiac spirit in individual through means of dream interpretation, and then the authors try to reveal the position and proposition of Nietzsche related to the aesthetic attitude toward life in *The Birth of Tragedy*. The authors try to put forward that the Dionysiac in *The Birth of Tragedy* is the appreciation of music, Dionysiac festival and tragedy. It is the abandon of individuality, becoming oneness with nature and fulfillment of unconscious wish. Besides, the authors also point out that the aesthetic attitude toward life put forward by Nietzsche is the condition when wish is fulfilled.

*Keywords*: Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Dionysia

1. Introduction

Mainly as a philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche’s ideas have exerted great influence in the 20th century. Nietzsche’s key ideas include perspectivism, the will to power, the death of God, the over-man and eternal recurrence, out of which one of the main tenets is “life affirmation.” And this idea first comes into being in Nietzsche’s first published book, *The Birth of Tragedy*. This paper will focus on one of the two important elements in this book, Dionysiac and Apolline. Dionysiac and Apolline are two drives or tendencies, in Nietzsche’s view that are responsible for the retrace and combination of the origin of tragedy. Apolline, named after Apollo, a beautiful male, is a beauty led tendency. It is responsible for the representation of a world of “dream,” or in more precise words, a world of image and illusion. In correspondence with Apolline, Dionysiac is named after Greek god of wine, Dionysus. Strictly speaking, Dionysus is a foreigner to the Olympian theogony since Hera’s persecution in the early years in his life. Due to the vagrant life experience, Dionysus is more like an earthly bohemian than a god. Hence Dionysiac is the emblem of “intoxication.”

From Nietzsche’s perspective, Dionysiac is definitely superior to Apolline, for Dionysiac leads man to the truth, the unity with nature in a state of ecstasy. Thus, mankind can cultivate an aestheticism attitude toward life. Following Nietzsche’s declaration, there are many researches in literature to study Dionysiac and Apolline home and abroad. George Crandell uses the characteristics of Dionysian and Apollines to find the echoes of
Nietzsche in *A Streetcar Named Desire* by American playwright Tennessee Williams, and denies the Aristotelian tragedy feature in this play. Heather Marcovitch also finds the influence of Nietzsche’s Dionysiac in Arthur Symons’s *London Nights*. And Adam Ellwanger talks about the possibility of the aesthetic life in modern society. In China, Nietzsche’s Dionysiac has an obvious influence on many writers, including Lu Xun, Mao Dun, and Guo Moruo. Zhang Hui has given a comprehensive overview of the influence of Nietzsche’s Dionysiac or aestheticism on modern China. In “Nietzsche’s Aesthetics and Modern China,” Zhang Hui points out that people should see Nietzsche’s idea from a perspective of art and aestheticism and Chinese should cultivate the spirit of Dionysiac. In “Dionysian: The Origin of Nietzsche’s Humanity,” Liang Zhongxian and Zhou Lina point out that the Dionysiac is the origin of Nietzsche’s thought of humanity. Among these researches, there is little study about the psychological condition of the individual who can lead an aesthetic life. And this thesis intends to observe the psychological conditions of the Greeks, who are able to enjoy life guided by Dionysiac.

There are three influential thinkers in the late 19th century and the early 20th century, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud. In Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*, which was published in 1900, he put forward that dream could be interpreted and “the content of the dream is thus the fulfillment of a wish; its motive is a wish” (Freud 1997, 31). In the process of dream interpretation, the latent and manifest dream content is presented. The manifest content is regarded as different levels of disguise of latent content, the wish or desire of an individual. Meanwhile, in Nietzsche’s life, he tended to lead a solitary life, which marked a hint of self-interpretation in his work. Hence, in this paper, the authors intend to observe the Dionysiac from a psychological perspective by transplanting the latent and manifest content in dream to Dionysiac. The latent content is Dionysiac, which stands for transgression of limits, boundary, and advocates excess; others related to Dionysiac is viewed as different levels of manifest content, thus to get a closer observation of Dionysiac in Greek culture.

2. The Artistry of Dionysia in *The Birth of Tragedy*

This part will discuss the artistry of Dionysiac in *The Birth of Tragedy* from three aspects, music, Dionysiac festival, and lyric. They are three important artistic elements related to Dionysiac in *The Birth of Tragedy* as well as works of creativity out of Dionysiac. In the progress of the interpretation of dreams, Freud points out a phenomenon similar to the creativity of Dionysiac. In order to find the latent content of a dream, the patient (here it refers to the healthy person who is required to recall his dream) is required to use a means named “free association.” This method requires the patient to catch any thoughts that cross his mind and not to judge whether it is right or wrong. Many people find it difficult to adopt the attitude without any criticism. Freud points out that “the ‘undesired ideas’ habitually evoke the most violent resistance, which seeks to prevent them from coming to the surface” (Freud 1997, 16). He then credits to the poet-philosopher, Friedrich Schiller that the essential condition of poetical creation includes a similar attitude. “You worthy critics, or whatever you may call yourselves, are ashamed or afraid of the momentary and passing madness which is found in all real creators, the longer or shorter duration of which distinguishes the thinking artist from the dreamer” (Freud 1997, 17). Therefore, music, Dionysiac festival, and lyric are regarded as different levels of manifest contents, or work of creativity, of the latent content, Dionysiac.
2.1. Music

Music is the very start of Nietzsche’s exploration of seeing human life from a perspective of aesthetism. It is also the first level of disguise of Dionysiac, because for Nietzsche, music, as a highly abstract form of art, is the most direct way through which Dionysiac can affect mankind. In Greek festivals, “Dionysiac music in particular elicited terror and horror from them” (Nietzsche 1999, 21). And the precursor of Nietzsche’s thought, Schopenhauer, also claims that “music both gives us virtually direct access to ultimate reality, and is also one of the best ways available to us of distancing ourselves from the relentless throb of the Will” (Freud 1997, VII). This high valued music refers to the dithyramb sung by satyrs in Dionysiac festival and is very special that it cannot be presented by image, which is the trait of Apolline music. Regarding of Apolline artists, “they only knew it, strictly speaking, in the form of a wave-like rhythm with an image making power which they developed to represent Apolline states” (Nietzsche 1997, 21). In the festival, satyrs will sing dithyramb wholeheartedly. They seem like to pour all their passion of life, their happiness and worship of Dionysus to dithyramb. It is like the burst of their natural desires and instincts and energy at the festival. Thus, Dionysiac music, the song of satyrs, can awake the followers of Dionysus, and can lure them to join the ecstasy shared by mankind who have Dionysiac spirit. It is under the call of this music that people can feel the power of nature.

From the perspective of Freud’s theory of dream, Dionysiac is the latent content, the wish waiting to be fulfilled. As for the first level of manifest content, there are three aspects from which the music’s role can be assured. First, in order to prove that Dionysiac music is the first level of manifest content, a closer investigation of Dionysiac and music need to be taken. Dionysiac is the name of a kind of spirit, which is a very abstract conception and there is no identical form of a certain type of Dionysiac in the Greeks. Dionysiac music, especially when it denies the representation of images, is also quite abstract. When a musician composes a piece of music, he always needs “inspiration.” To some extent, that “inspiration” can correspond to Dionysiac. The second aspect is to take Nietzsche’s talent and interest in music and his quiet and observatory personality in childhood into consideration. He can compose his own music independently at an early age. Accompanied with these traits, it is not difficult to explain his obsession with music. The third aspect is his acquaintance with Schopenhauer and Wagner. Schopenhauer informs him the unearthly function of music and its relation with will in The World as Will and Representation, the book that he likes very much and reads through it without rest. Meanwhile, he also shares many opinions about music with Wagner, who is a famous musician. In a certain period of his life, Nietzsche’s admiration of Wagner and his music influenced him a lot. More importantly, according to Raymond Guess, “he and Wagner shared an enthusiasm for the philosophical pessimism of Arthur Schopenhauer” (Nietzsche 1997, VII).

Based on the similarity of Dionysiac and music, Nietzsche’s passion and gift in music and the influence from both Schopenhauer and Wagner in philosophical theory and music, it is natural to interpret music as the first level of manifest content of Dionysiac and the highest form of art in Nietzsche’s mind.

2.2. Dionysiac Festival

The Dionysiac festival which was born from Dionysiac music is the second level of manifest content of Dionysiac. The Dionysiac festival consists of satyrs and the Greeks, who sing and dance at the guidance of satyrs. They are all manifest contents of Dionysiac music. The music is something arosed from the instinct of human beings, thus it is primal and primitive, more like the uncivilized world ages ago. So is the Dionysiac festival.
In the festival, satyrs, driven by the Dionysiac music, become the appearance of music. The concretized feature of Dionysiac music is presented by the image of satyrs. When Nietzsche talked about satyr in *The Birth of Tragedy*, he compared satyr with shepherd in recent age. At first, he pointed out the identical essence of these two: “Both the satyr and the idyllic shepherd of modern times were born of a longing for what is original and natural” (Nietzsche 1997, 41). But they have different appearances in the minds of the Greeks and modern man. In Nietzsche’s comparison, the Greeks show their respect to satyr and see the original image of man in satyr. Satyrs thus are the archetype of man, the expression of his “highest and most intense emotions.” As for modern man, they are “cultured man who generally thinks of himself as the only reality” (Nietzsche 1997, 41). And they don’t treat shepherd seriously. In their mind, shepherd is just the image of a shepherd. Through this comparison, Nietzsche had showed the special features of satyrs, thus explained the manifest role of satyr.

Following satyr, the Greeks also become the manifest content of Dionysiac music, “Dionysiac man,” who can dwelt in the world of Dionysiac rather than world of appearance. In other words, they can face the “authentic, natural truth” and the “primal relationship between things.” According to Marcovitch Heather, dance can bring people back to “a more conscious connection to the universe and, as such, the means to transcend the banalities of everyday modern existence” (Heather 2013, 462). As part of most cultural and a ritual event, dance is a universal and common way to express a person’s feeling. Arthur Symons, a British poet, points out in his *Studies in the Seven Arts* that dance most often reveals the essence that he believes “underlies and transcends all existence.” Thus together with satyrs, the Greeks become the manifest content of Dionysiac music.

2.3. Lyric

Like Dionysiac festival, lyric is also the manifest content of Dionysiac music, the second level of manifest content of Dionysiac. Dionysiac festival is a concretized form of Dionysiac music, while lyric poetry is the visualized form. Actually, lyric is the world of image or Apolline culture. Thus, the Apolline world is born from Dionysiac.

For the purpose of proving the manifest role of lyric, what should be confirmed is that, as the first level manifest content of Dionysiac, Dionysiac music is embodied with the image-less primal suffering and truth of life. For some artists, when they are confronted with Dionysiac music (in this case, music become the latent content of those artist), they can remove the critical idea in their minds and let the image-less truth of life that depressed in unconscious state become conscious. In this process, according to the condensation of dream work, they cannot get the full meaning of Dionysiac music and the truth of life. When those artists become conscious about the suffering of life, they become excitement and eager to express them. Then due to their “free association,” they see a world of image that carries the meaning of Dionysiac music. They work through this world of image, create the gods of Olympians, give them a life style that they can endure and worship, make up stories that manifest the suffering of life, the inevitable obstacle of fate, the power of nature. When those artists write down the image world they create, just like the disguise of a certain wish is finished, the lyric will be born.

From the perspective of “free association,” which is elicited from Freud’s theory of dream interpretation, Dionysiac is observed as the latent content of a dream; while music is the first level disguise of Dionysiac, Dionysiac festival and lyric are the second level disguise of Dionysiac. Music, Dionysiac festival, and lyric are three forms of art derived from Dionysiac spirit through the means of “free association,” which is achieved through the removal of criticism ideas.
3. The Unity of Dionysiac in The Birth of Tragedy

This part presents three forms of unity derived from the unity of Dionysiac in The Birth of Tragedy. They are the unity of man and nature in satyr chorus, unity of spectator and actor in Greek tragedy, and unity of Dionysiac and Apolline on the Greeks. Greek tragedy is the summit of Greek culture. People’s ecstasy state in Dionysiac festival, the metaphysical solace embodied in Greek tragedy and the positive life attitude of the Greeks, should ascribe to a key element, Dionysiac. It is Dionysiac, through its artistic works, including music, Dionysiac festival, and lyric that lead mankind to transgress the boundaries in different aspects and different level. This progress is just like the interpretation of their dream. Guided by the creativity work of Dionysiac, the Greeks know what their wish is; thus they know what meaning each piece of Apolline dream stands for; then they can interpreter their dream; their wish can be fulfilled. The fulfillment of wish is presented in their satisfactory life. Thus, mankind can manage to achieve the unity of man and nature in satyr chorus, the unity of spectator and actor in Greek tragedy, and the unity of Dionysiac and Apolline spirit in the Greeks. The three forms of unity will be discussed in detail as follows.

3.1. Unity of Man and Nature in Satyr Chorus

Initially, the satyr is born from Greek people’s primal desire and natural instinct, “both the satyr and the idyllic shepherd of modern times were born of a longing for what is original and natural” (41). In other words, the image and story of satyr, which is the symbol of Dionysiac, is the projection of man’s desire, the visualization of man’s fantasy, and the manifestation of latent content. “The Dionysian Greek wants truth and nature at full strength and sees himself transformed by magic into a satyr” (Nietzsche 1997, 42). And Freud also insists that dream does possess some meaning and the meaning is the truth of human experience. Thus, the manifested satyr is the manifest content of the hidden wish or Dionysiac spirit of Greek artists.

The satyr chorus has three means to unite man and nature, sing dithyramb, dance, and the appearance of satyr. In this case, the content of dithyramb is not discussed by Nietzsche, and rather it is the form that matter. The form is the manifest content of a much higher status of music, Dionysiac music, which is much different from the music that is familiar to the Greeks as Apolline art, for “they only knew it, strictly speaking, in the form of a wave-like rhythm with an image making power which they developed to represent Apolline states” (Nietzsche 1997, 21). The Dionysiac music is the natural instinct of human beings, like the calling of infantile desire in Freud’s theory. Now this content is deprived of its camouflage, including words, image and morality, and present in satyr’s song, dance. Under the call of latent content, man is hypnotized; the criticism in mind is completely removed; the manifest material is blurred and lost; the wish and desire that is depressed in a deeper place emerged to reality. Man becomes the same as animal, who is part of nature.

Except for singing, dancing is another symbol of manifest content for the Greeks to lure out their latent content. When man is obsessed with Dionysiac festival, in a state of hypnosis, the expression of nature requires a kind of symbol, “the symbolism of the entire body, not just of the mouth, the face, the word, but the full gesture of dance with its rhythmical movement of every limb” (Nietzsche 1997, 21).

The appearance of satyr, half man and half goat, is the distortion of man like the distortion of dream due to the censorship. In this case, the censorship is Nietzsche’s intention to choose satyr as the mediator of Dionysiac and human. According to the note given by Raymond Geuss, neither silenus nor satyrs have originally any connection with Dionysos, nor do they have any goat-like properties. In post-classical period, Silenus is
horse-like and the forest daemon; Pan, is goat-like, while the image of satyr, who is in the service of Dionysus, is unclear. It is under the distortion of Nietzsche that the goat-like satyr comes into being.

Due to the combination of singing dithyramb, dancing and the appearance of satyr, man successfully abandon their individuality and become oneness with nature. Just like what Huang Shiquan depicted in his essay about Dionysiac and carnivalesque: With the removal of distance and horror, man and man, man and nature are all in a state of coherence, thus life is affirmed and highly valued.

3.2. Unity of Spectator and Actor in Greek Tragedy

The unity of spectator and actor in Greek tragedy should be traced back to the origin of tragedy. In Nietzsche’s word, “tragedy arose from the tragic chorus and was originally chorus and nothing but chorus” (Nietzsche 1997, 36). Thus, to trace the qualified spectator and actor, it is inevitable to refer to the satyr chorus.

Here, the latent content is the truth the Greeks longing for. In ancient Greek, out of their sensitivity, it is their instinct and ability to perceive the truth and primal force of human being. Once the original magic bestowed by nature has been grasped, it is condensed into the image of satyr chorus, which is the first step of dream work. The second step, displacement, is proceeding in Dionysiac festival, where the individual principle is broken. In a state of unconsciousness, man sees the total different image of himself, which is presented in other Dionysiac followers. By now, the second step is finished. In this process, the obtainment of image relies on man’s transformation to satyr, resembling with the transformation between spectator and actor. The third step is considerations of representability, which refers to the “the Apolline perfection of his state” and with this new vision the drama is completed. The last step is secondary elaboration that is to exert editing and revision to drama to emphasize or further disguise certain elements. The final manifest content is tragedy.

Thus, the spectators are the Dionysiac followers in Dionysiac festival, and actors are satyr chorus. The qualified spectator of Greek tragedy is this kind of people whose desire and wish can be triggered involuntarily by the masked actors on stage and who project their innermost drive on characters’ suffering. For example, when a person is watching Greek tragedy, Oedipus the King, the spectators are fully attracted by the mysterious prophesy bestowed on Oedipus. Everything around them seems irrelevant. Besides, since the tragedy is stem from Greek mythology, at the moment the audience step into theater, to some extent, their critical idea is removed. Therefore, they are able to become sympathetic with the protagonist, Oedipus. As a result, the audience can feel the power of nature and fate. So, only if the spectator forgets the whole civilization around him, removes his critical ideas, sees the actor as himself, and becomes a unity with the actor, can a person get metaphysical solace from Greek tragedy.

3.3. Unity of Dionysiac and Apolline on the Greeks

The Dionysiac discussed here is man’s wish, and as for Apolline, it is the art of image created by artists out of their Dionysiac drive. Hence, essentially, Apolline culture was born from Dionysiac culture. Dionysiac spirit is the deep hidden desire or wish of the Greeks. The successful removal of critical ideas in artists’ “free association” makes it possible for them to sense this intense wish. In order to fulfill their wish, the Greeks unleashed Dionysiac spirit in multiple manifest content forms, including music, Dionysiac festival, and lyric poem. And the perfect combination of those three manifest contents is Greek tragedy. So when watching Greek tragedy, the qualified spectator, who can become oneness with actors, will feel the pleasure of wish fulfillment, which is, in Nietzsche’s words, the metaphysical solace.
After the discussion of music, Dionysiac festival and the formation of mythology, it is not difficult to draw a clear picture of Dionysiac spirit. Raymond Geuss provides a precise description of Dionysiac spirit: “The Dionysiac is the drive towards the transgression of limits, the dissolution of boundaries, the destruction of individuality, and excess. The purest artistic expression of the Dionysiac was quasi-orgiastic forms of music, especially of choral singing and dancing” (Nietzsche 1997, XI). Though there is no straightforward discussion of Apolline spirit in this paper, it is embodied in the disguised manifest content in world of image, which is a safe and mediate way to unleash Dionysiac wish. So the Apolline spirit is “the drive toward distinction, discreteness and individuality, toward the drawing and respecting of boundaries and limits; he teaches an ethic of moderation and self-control” (Nietzsche 1997, XI). For the sake of the flourish, Greek culture and happy life of the Greeks, only let the Dionysiac desire be fulfilled in an Apolline way; it can be a suitable society for people to live.

In conclusion, the unity of Dionysiac is the unity of artists with their wish, the Dionysiac spirit in *The Birth of Tragedy*. When the uniting is finished, the wish is fulfilled. This fulfillment of wish reappears respectively in forms of disguises, the unity of man and nature in satyr chorus, unity of spectator and actor in Greek tragedy, and unity of Dionysiac and Apolline on the Greeks.

**4. The Distortion of Dionysiac in *The Birth of Tragedy***

This part discusses the distortion of Dionysiac under the influence of Socratism from three aspects, the distortion of tragedy, music, and mythology. Due to the creativity of lyric geniuses, they have created a beautiful world of image, an Apolline world. Based on the illusion, the Greeks endow multiple meanings to their life. Then this sweet dream is broken by the participation of Socratism. The wisdom of Socratism advocates human being to think logically, to establish cause-effect relationship between different things. They can use logic to find and then master all kinds of relationship. In Nietzsche’s opinion, it is just this optimism and advocate of logic thinking that ruins Dionysiac, the abundant Greek culture and lead to the unhappy life of the Greeks. When analyzed from the perspective of dream interpretation, it is because the wish, Dionysiac, is distorted when it pass the censorship, Socratism. Since the appearing of the censorship, two elements of Dionysiac, tragedy and music, are distorted and mythology is to some extent, stopped by censorship and failed to show up. The complex disguise makes it difficult for people to interpret this element, which leads to the failure to reveal their wish and the wish cannot be fulfilled. The distortion of Dionysiac is shown in three aspects: the distortion of tragedy, mythology, and music.

**4.1. The Distortion of Tragedy***

Since the original form of tragedy is already presented, then in order to have a clear picture of the distortion of tragedy, the question is how the censorship influences tragedy and what the disguise is.

The censorship, Socratism, exerts its influence on tragedy through Euripides, for Socrates has a close relationship with Euripides. In Greece, there was a rumor that Socrates often helps Euripides write poems and since Socrates’ dislike of tragedy, he refuses to watch any tragedy except for Euripides’ new play. In their communication, Euripides is deeply influenced by Socratic tendency. This tendency advocates reason and logic and regards knowledge as the most important thing in life, for everything in life can be known or even changed by knowledge. Socrates believes that only he who knows is virtuous. Therefore, Socrates condemns existing art and existing ethics in equal measure and claims that Greek artists know little about their profession and they performs it “only by instinct.”
Being influenced by Socratism, Euripides begins to change the form of tragedy. The content of tragedy is more about public life, whose language is easier to understand. The outcome is that tragedy becomes dramatic epic and the mythical power of tragedy is lost. Since everyday life can be presented on stage, it can be said that “Euripides brought the spectator on to the stage” (Nietzsche 1997, 55). Driven by this urge, Euripides even adds prologue to tragedy. Spectators are informed about the plot through prologue, the uncertainty of fate that embodied in tragedy is lost, and thus the Dionysiac tendency disappears.

4.2. The Distortion of Music

As the first level of manifest content of Dionysiac, music is inevitably distorted by Socratism. The distortion of music happens in two places, new Attic dithyramb and opera. Dithyramb used to lead the Greeks to become a unity with nature and find the eternal truth of life. Guided by reason, the music has already set a certain relationship with something. Music has become symbolic; it has a certain settled meaning. For Freud, a person can’t interpret dreams according to a list of symbols. Thus, it is impossible for the Greeks to feel Dionysiac through new Attic dithyramb.

Another place is the recitative of the culture of opera. In Nietzsche’s view, music is the highest form of art which stands for the innermost core of life, the direct reflection of will. But opera stems from an unaesthetic need, that is “the optimistic glorification of mankind as such, in the view that primal man was both good and artistic by nature” (Nietzsche 1997, 91). It is not the product of artist but the product “of theoretical man, of the layman as critic.” Theoretical man and critic know little about art and there is no doubt that they can’t grasp the spirit of Dionysiac music. Hence in order to understand opera, to fulfill their wish of reason and logic, they ask for the understanding of words. So in recitative, singers pay more attention to the clarity of words and sometimes purposely strengthen certain emotion elements to make it easier for audience to understand. This behavior just erases the half-music in recitative. In addition, “poet” also helps to drive this process by adding “lyrical interjections” to recitative.

4.3. The Distortion of Mythology

Mythology is the outcome of pure imagination and artistic drive which seems without solid evidence, so it is the most vulnerable one when attacked by Socratism. Then what features of mythology make Socratism so angry that mythology is erased from mankind’s life?

The first one is that mythology is the material of tragedy, so the distortion of tragedy partakes the degeneration of mythology. Based on the Greek mythology, Sophocles and Aeschylus shaped their tragic hero, Oedipus and Prometheus, separately. From the time he is informed about his fate, Oedipus uses all his wisdom to escape. But his every deed against nature is to send himself further on the road to his destiny. And Nietzsche draws such a conclusion: “The sharp point of wisdom turns against the wise man; wisdom is an offence against nature” (Nietzsche 1997, 48). This conclusion is obviously opposed with Socrates’ “only he who knows is virtuous.” In the tragedy of Prometheus, the protagonist brings fire to human being and enriches human life. What he has done is out of titanic individual drive. And Nietzsche takes this titanic urge as “the common feature shared by the Promethean and Dionysiac” (Nietzsche 1997, 51). The Greek artists have a special relationship with those Olympian gods who coexist and are interdependent in Greek culture. Euripides, the producer of new Attic comedy, the follower of Socrates, regards reason as the root of all creation. Therefore, he can’t get the reason of the creativity of Greek artists. Then Euripides himself and his works become the obstacle of mythology.
The second one is that mythology stems from Dionysiac music, so the distortion of music speeds up the degeneration of mythology. The Dionysiac music can give lyric genius inspiration for art creation: “what the word-poet failed to achieve, namely the highest spiritualization and idealization of myth, he could accomplish successfully at any moment as a creative musician” (Nietzsche 1997, 81). But as what has been stated in last section, the new Attic dithyramb and opera turn music into the slave of appearance. According to reasonable deduction, music becomes the imitation of image; hence the myth-making power of music is deprived.

The third one is the direct attack by un-Dionysiac spirit, or scientific understanding. The degeneration of mythology is presented in “the excessive growth in the presentation of character and of psychological refinement in tragedy from Sophocles onwards” (Nietzsche 1997, 83). Artists care more and more about theory, techniques in depicting character, and other scientific understanding rather than “the artistic reflection of a universal rule.” In Sophocles’ time, he can present characters in a quite natural way with less scientific analysis of characters’ personality and, in Nietzsche’s view, he can paint “whole characters” with multiple features. When it comes to Euripides, characters are painted with intentional artificial passions. Artists give up their awe of nature and mythology bit by bit and turn to their own analysis based on reason and scientific methods. As what is pointed out by Linda Leavell, behind Nietzsche’s dramatic theories, is “the presupposition that contemporary society lacks cultural unity and that cultural unity is directly dependent upon a fundamental myth” (Leavell 1985, 113). When myth is left behind, problems in culture may occur. This progress is pushed further and further by Socratism. As a result, mythology is doomed to disappear from mankind’s life.

Due to the censorship of Socratism, the reason, logic and understanding, Dionysiac spirit is distorted severely in tragedy, music, and mythology. The Greeks enjoy predicting the plot of tragedy, decoding the symbolic meaning in music and laughing at the ridiculous of mythology.

5. Conclusion

The Birth of Tragedy deals with the Dionysiac spirit from three aspects. The first aspect is to find the artistic creativity in Dionysiac. From the perspective of Freudian theory of dream interpretation, the Dionysiac is regarded as the wish hidden in a dream. In the process of reaching Dionysiac, the artists can remove their critical idea for a moment, and thus confront with Dionysiac, during which, they are in a state of hypnosis; they can compose music and submerge in the ecstasy state in Dionysiac festival. When they come to consciousness, some artists express their feelings in words, in world of image, which is lyric. The second aspect is to present the unity brought by Dionysiac. In Dionysiac festival, man abandons his individuality and blends with nature. In Greek tragedy, the spectator is deeply affected and moved by the performance, and they feel the same as the protagonists. The third aspect is the distortion of Dionysiac under the influence of Socratism. The reason, understanding, and the belief that everything can be known advocated by Socratism break up the work of Dionysiac, tragedy, music, and mythology.

Overall, the Dionysiac in The Birth of Tragedy is the appreciation of music, Dionysiac festival, and Greek tragedy; the abandonment of individuality becomes oneness with nature; the fulfillment of hidden wishes. And the aestheticism attitude toward life put forward by Nietzsche is the state when wish is fulfilled.
Works Cited


