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ZaratHOUSEtra



As The Philosopher Nietzsche Once Said

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Introduction

Many things have been written about the character of Dr. House, and numerous analogies have been made in particular between him and Sherlock Holmes. David Shore himself did not hide the fact that he modelled his character on that of Conan Doyle, by 'transposing' him into the world of medicine.

But as more episodes pass, more analogies with another character become obvious: the character of the Superman as he is described by Friedrich Nietzsche in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. The thesis that "man exists to be overcome" finds itself, in effect, at the heart of this series, revealing a solitary being questing for truth in each of the patients that he treats. He doesn't act to heal the sick, but to resolve the mysteries posed by rare diseases or carefully hidden by lies, silence, or the hypocrisy of the afflicted people or their entourage.

The Superman's characteristics described in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* are all found--with perhaps one exception--in the character of Dr. House. There is certainly his solitary and isolated nature, his refusal to mix with others and avoiding 'the masses' in order to do his work better. But there is also his philosophy about the disappearance of God and the "new tables" that must be written in order to find

oneself.¹ The ethical questions that are regularly broached in the different seasons of the series examine Dr. House's free will, and never fail to show Dr. House's determination to place himself beyond good and evil in order to attain a truth that otherwise escapes him.

The first four articles aim to show that House is a sort of Zarathustra, a creator who has managed to surpass himself in order to find himself. They evoke the nature of the knowledge that the diagnostician passes on to his team, the locations where the Solitary evolves, as well as his *modus operandi* and the consequences of "the death of God". The fifth article presents evidence for a flaw in the character.

¹ Nietzsche, Friedrich. "Third Part: Old and New Tables." *Thus Spake Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*. Random House: New York, 1917. Trans. Thomas Common. *Project Gutenberg*. Web. Oct 7 2009. All further references to *Thus Spake Zarathustra* reference this edition.

The "Wild Wisdom" of Dr. House

I am weary of my wisdom, like the bee that hath gathered too much honey.
Thus Spake Zarathustra: First Part, Prologue

Like the sail trembling with the violence of the spirit, doth my wisdom cross the sea--my wild wisdom!
Thus Spake Zarathustra: Second Part, "The Famous Wise Ones"

The prologue of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, by Friedrich Nietzsche, begins with these words:

When Zarathustra was thirty years old, he left his home and the lake of his home, and went into the mountains. There he enjoyed his spirit and solitude, and for ten years did not weary of it. But at last his heart changed,--and rising one morning with the rosy dawn, he went before the sun, and spake thus unto it:

Thou great star! What would be thy happiness if thou hadst not those for whom thou shinest!

For ten years hast thou climbed hither unto my cave: thou wouldst have wearied of thy light and of the journey, had it not been for me, mine eagle, and my serpent.

But we awaited thee every morning, took from thee thine overflow and blessed thee for it.

Lo! I am weary of my wisdom, like the bee that hath gathered too much honey; I need hands outstretched to take it.²

And therefore Zarathustra decided to descend from his mountain to dispense his wisdom to the people.

House did not spend ten years in absolute isolation, as Zarathustra did, before deciding to rejoin society and pass on his wisdom. He has always lived among people, and he even works at the heart of a hive: a hospital where thousands of individuals work and are treated for their illnesses. He has not "descend[ed] into the deep"³; he is permanently in those depths. This image of the deep, which Nietzsche employs to designate the world of men, is hardly insignificant. It highlights the intellectual superiority of the Superman. He possesses the Light; he is the sun that illuminates the Earth. He possesses the Wisdom of a man who, in his solitude, discovered how to rise above worldly distractions

² *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, First Part: Prologue, 1.

³ *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, First Part: Prologue, 1.

in order to study and learn. But which wisdom, which type of knowledge, are we speaking of exactly?

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House's office is filled with books, and we know that House is fluent in several languages, including Mandarin and Hindi--and perhaps even canine, if we believe Dr. Cameron.⁴ Languages pose no barrier to his understanding. As well, we often see him in front of his computer late at night, clearly concerned, probably connected to medical sites, entrusted with finding the key to the mystery he must solve. (When he doesn't appear concerned, he's looking at a pornographic site or pretending to do so.) He has therefore acquired and continues to acquire knowledge as a result of his studies, all while deprecating the act of reading. He happily uses his copy of the enormous *Anatomy of the Human Body* by Henry Gray in the place of a pillow. He has little respect for book learning even though it serves him well.

House even finds it necessary to insult books for his audience's sake. "Read less. More TV," he says to Dr. Cameron.⁵ He holds out a medical dictionary to a medical student searching desperately for a diagnosis, with the hint that the condition she is looking for starts with C. The student's first mistake is opening the book. House immediately rebukes her, saying that answers will never be found in dictionaries, but through uncovering the facts and nothing but the facts, that is, by observing the patient's symptoms. Besides which, the disease that she was looking for starts with a K. Oops!⁶

Worse, we often see House watching an insipid medical soap opera or playing handheld video games. And beware the person who interrupts him or tries to stop him! House is hardly the archetype of the Sage meditating on the world from a remote mountaintop. His soap operas and video games haven't increased his knowledge, but they do serve as pressure valves for his constantly cogitating brain. Thus,

⁴ "Sleeping Dogs Lie." *House, Season 2*. Written by Sara Hess, directed by Greg Yaitanes. FOX. Original airdate Apr 4 2006.

HOUSE:

You talked to the dog?

CAMERON:

We're not as up on foreign languages as you are.

⁵ "Control." *House, Season 1*. Written by Laurence Kaplow, directed by Randall Zisk. FOX. Original airdate Mar 15 2005.

⁶ "Histories." *House, Season 1*. Written by Joel Thompson, directed by Daniel Attias. FOX. Original airdate Feb 8 2005.

they can be considered indispensable elements of House's practice. Undoubtedly that is the reason House is incensed when, for example, Dr. Cuddy, the Dean of Medicine, confiscates his television or his remote on the pretext that he is wasting time. Practicing music--House plays both the piano and the guitar--is another element of House's strategy of escapism. However, he needs no punching bags when his team, Wilson, or most of all, Cuddy, will do nicely.

House's wisdom is "wild" in the sense that it breaks free of the habitual obsessions of intellectual activity. When we imagine a great medical doctor, we don't ordinarily picture someone sitting on a coma patient's bed watching daytime television and snacking on chips! Yet would House be as successful once he returns to his office if he hadn't made that detour to the coma patient's room?



2.01 "Acceptance"

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In addition to House's theoretical philosophies, balanced by his vapid pastimes, practice certainly comes into play. Yet here too, Dr. House's practice hardly resembles that of an ordinary physician.

David Shore, the character's creator, never hid the fact that he wanted House to be the Sherlock Holmes of medicine. Even though House never makes a direct reference to his prototype (he prefers to see himself as the Mick Jagger of medicine), his street number is 221B, he proceeds in the same manner as Holmes, and he considers his calling to be solving mysteries, not treating patients. Therefore, he pursues his investigation like a detective, for example, by sending his team to the scene,

not of the crime, but of the disease. He has them search through his patients' homes, breaking and entering if necessary, in search of "the usual suspects." Occasionally, he goes further, rifling through his patients' grey matter as easily as their homes. Living by the principle that everyone lies, House is willing to put the patient through severe psychological or physical treatments to get to the truth.

In "Role Model"⁷, House's patient is a black senator who has decided to run for president. He shows all the symptoms of AIDS without having AIDS. House reaches the conclusion that the symptoms are a side effect of an anti-epilepsy medication that the senator took as a child. But in order to confirm his hypothesis, House needs the senator to confess. The senator carefully concealed what he considered to be a long-ago weakness, believing that if it was revealed, his political image would be tarnished. House takes the senator off the assisted ventilation he needs to breathe, torturing him morally and physically until the senator admits that as a child, he received anti-epileptic medication, as House suspected, and even remembers an approximation of its name. The scene is shot in such a fashion (with the music enhancing the effect) that the viewer can't help but hope that the senator's suffering will be cut short when the truth is unveiled. Once House replaces the mask, allowing the patient to breathe normally, the relief is complete: for House who now knows that he was right and who is certain of arriving at the answer that he was searching for all along, for the patient who recovers his breath...and for the viewer who, at the same moment, recovers theirs in sympathy.



1.17 "Role Model"

⁷ "Role Model." *House, Season 1*. Written by Matt Witten, directed by Peter O'Fallon. FOX. Original airdate Apr 12 2005.

Scenes of quasi-torture such as this are found in abundance throughout the series. House believes that the end of uncovering the truth and finding the possibility of a cure justifies any means, including, but not limited to, physical torture. House has a dead cat disinterred in order to perform a necropsy on it⁸, which allows him to diagnose a patient with naphthalene poisoning.

House even forces the candidates for his new team of fellows to exhume a man's body because his current patient presented with the same symptoms that the man displayed before he died.⁹ House wants to confirm his hypothesis of Creutzfeld-Jakob disease through biopsying the man's brain, but perhaps he also wants to see how far his candidates are willing to go in order to secure a job with him. When Dr. Taub declares that he won't exhume a corpse without a court order, House responds: "Don't think of it as digging up a body. Think of it as keeping another one from being buried."¹⁰ When it comes to saving a patient's life, House will go to any length, including desecrating a grave.



4.04 "Guardian Angels"

House teaches his 'disciples' to use any means necessary to obtain the truth. He ignores words such as 'professional ethics.' He places his actions beyond good or evil. For example, while he's in transit, House helps his team solve a mystery over the phone, but when Dr. Foreman explains that they

⁸ "Detox." *House, Season 1*. Written by Lawrence Kaplow & Thomas L. Moran, directed by Nelson McCormick. FOX. Original airdate Feb 15 2005.

⁹ "Guardian Angels." *House, Season 4*. Written by David Aselton, directed by Deran Serafian. FOX. Original airdate Oct 23 2007.

¹⁰ "Guardian Angels." *House, Season 4*. Written by David Aselton, directed by Deran Serafian. FOX. Original airdate Oct 23 2007.

haven't yet been allowed to use the MRI, a diagnostic imaging tool in demand by all the doctors in the hospital, House is irritated: "I teach you to lie, and cheat, and steal, and as soon as my back is turned you wait in line?"¹¹

House isn't content to simply go his own way. He wants his fellows to be just as effective as he is, and thus capable of anything, including the worst, to achieve their ends. "I would fain bestow and distribute," Zarathustra says,¹² and similarly, House feels the need to relay his knowledge, but above all, his methods, to others. At all times, his disciples must show themselves to be equal to the task. They must learn to lie, cheat, and steal whenever House deems it necessary. "Destroyers, will they be called, and despisers of good and evil."¹³ Acquisition of knowledge, of true knowledge, happens through the destruction of ordinary moral values.

House's wisdom is wild because it doesn't respond to the ordinary criteria of Good and Evil. House creates his own values. By that essential characteristic, he can be recognized as the Superman, defined by Nietzsche as follows: "He, however, hath discovered himself who saith: This is *my* good and evil: therewith hath he silenced the mole and the dwarf, who say: "Good for all, evil for all."¹⁴

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In the end, theory must be validated by experience. Unlike Zarathustra, House did not spend ten years "enjoy[ing] his spirit and solitude."¹⁵ Meditation and solitude are certainly essential to him, but experience is fundamental; it is what he can share most easily with his 'disciples.'

Thus, House can refer to a bygone case to find the solution for a new case that is strangely

¹¹ "Failure To Communicate." *House, Season 2*. Written by Doris Egan, directed by Jace Alexander. FOX. Original airdate Jan 10 2006.

¹² *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, First Part: Prologue, 1.

¹³ *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, First Part: Prologue, 9.

¹⁴ *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Third Part: The Spirit of Gravity, 2.

¹⁵ *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, First Part: Prologue, 1.

similar. In "All In" (2.17)¹⁶, House bases his diagnosis of a young child on the case of a patient who died twelve years ago. Persuaded that his patient is suffering from Erdheim-Chester syndrome, House takes the risk, at the end of the episode, to bet on his experience. He orders his team to use the tiny sample of the tumour that they excised with a biopsy to confirm his diagnosis, even though the patient tested negative for Erdheim-Chester in an earlier attempt. House's team is appalled: they only have one sample left and several theories, which, by the process of elimination, must be more plausible than the one House proposes. Wasting the sample means risking the patient's life. But they don't have a choice; House is sure of himself, convinced by his experience and certain that, twelve years ago, he made the right diagnosis too late. He wasn't able to save Esther, but he can save Ian.



2.17 "All In"

House's decision resembles a hand of poker, but this hand is played by a master, echoing his friend Wilson's triumph only a short time before. Significantly, just before House makes his apparently risky decision, Wilson tells him how he won the poker tournament organized by the hospital as a benefit function for a charitable organization.

With only one opponent left, Wilson was dealt two aces. By not betting heavily, he made the other player believe that he had better cards than Wilson. Little by little, Wilson closed the trap and finished the hand by going all in. He pocketed all his opponent's money, and in the same blow, won the tournament. This story triggers--as, in the series, anecdotes thematically related to the medical cases

¹⁶ "All In." *House, Season 2*. Written by David Foster, directed by Fred Gerber. FOX. Original airdate Apr 11 2006.

often do--an epiphany for House. Even though the first clinical tests had given false negatives for Erdheim-Chester's, he orders the last test that finally permits him to confirm his initial hypothesis. The disease was there from the beginning, just like Wilson's aces.

Poker is not simply a game of chance. Once enough cards are dealt, the players can adopt a strategy that allows them to trap their opponents. Wilson and House won their respective hands because they had enough information and they never doubted themselves. The entire episode revolves around the metaphor of the poker hand, including the title ("All In"), which, incidentally, is more apt than the French title ("Twelve Years Later"). Understanding the metaphor means understanding the theme of the episode, which gives a masterly demonstration that House's intuitions aren't based on chance, but on experience, the information at his disposal, and above all *self-confidence*, a characteristic that is essential to both House and Zarathustra.

House's wisdom is wild because it isn't regimented by reason. If he had been reasonable, he would have used the final sample to check a theory that hadn't yet been tested. *Insane* is the adjective that is most often used to characterize Gregory House. But, following Shakespeare, we know that it is the Fool who has the true wisdom. Nietzsche knows it too: "Go away! or ye will learn that a sage is also a fool."¹⁷

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If Zarathustra's decline can be traced to the moment when he decides to "again [...] be a man"¹⁸, so House's decline begins once he chooses his team. Like Zarathustra, House recognizes that he can distribute his honey only to individuals capable of comprehension. If Drs. Cameron, Foreman, and Chase occasionally had trouble following House's logic, and if the team disbanded at the end of season three, without a doubt it is because the honey that House had gathered and that he wished to share with

¹⁷ *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Fourth Part: The Drunken Song, 10.

¹⁸ *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, First Part: Prologue, 1.

them was no banal acacia honey with no particular flavour. It was a honey made from chestnut trees, acerbic, very bitter, somber and thick, and perhaps a touch too strong for beings who, though they wish to follow the Superman, prove to be too weak to survive to the end. Not everyone is prepared to exhume the dead to save the life of a patient. Not everyone is prepared, either, to undergo the verbal attacks and constant mockery of an individual, who, at the very least, is far from ordinary.

"Yea, ye also, my friends, will be alarmed by my wild wisdom; and perhaps ye will flee therefrom, along with mine enemies."¹⁹



3.17 "Fetal Position"

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¹⁹ *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Second Part: The Child with the Mirror.