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# ZaratHOUSEtra



## As The Philosopher Nietzsche Once Said

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## The Flawed Character?

*So learn to laugh beyond yourselves.  
Lift up your hearts, ye good dancers, high!  
Higher! And do not forget the good laughter.*  
Thus Spake Zarathustra, Fourth Part: The Higher Man.

The Superman must be joyous. Because he is beyond man, even his joy must be greater: "Learn to laugh beyond yourselves!"<sup>1</sup> In all of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, we find recurring references to laughter, to singing, and to dance. They are among the fundamental characteristics of the Superman. Conversely, House is anything but a character who is happy to be alive. The adjective that is most often used to describe him is "miserable." Suffering from chronic pain in his leg, he can never dance. Neither does he sing. He hums only when, by chance, he is content. He laughs rarely, and even more rarely "laughs beyond himself." Does the comparison between House and the Nietzschean Superman no longer apply on a point as fundamental as this? As House would say, "It doesn't fit."

To find the solution to this puzzle, we must act like House and start by facing the facts. Who is House? According to Wilson (and if there is anyone we can believe when he speaks of House, it is certainly Wilson), since House is more than capable of lying about himself, "what he does is who he is."<sup>2</sup> House defines himself by his work above all else. He isn't Mr. House, he is Dr. House. People

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<sup>1</sup> *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Fourth Part: The Higher Man.

<sup>2</sup> "The Greater Good." *House*, Season 5. Written by Sara Hess, directed by Lesli Linka Glatter. FOX. Original airdate Feb

consult him because they know he is probably the best diagnostician in the world. There are even Cubans who risk their lives to come and see him in New Jersey.<sup>3</sup> But House's character is also what the series' producers have decided to make of him: a medical genius, certainly, but also a misanthrope and a cripple, and those two traits are intrinsically linked.

It's impossible to picture House without his cane. Books could be written on its use alone. To an extent, it is House's emblem. He won't exchange it for a different, more efficient one. He makes Wilson buy him a new one after Wilson breaks the one he had. His cane, like his office, is part of him. House's other indispensable accessory, his Vicodin bottle, is also associated with his personality. His character starts to emerge: he defines himself by his medical acumen, but also by the physical handicap that makes him a bad-tempered addict.

The "addict" side of House could seem disturbing if he himself didn't demonstrate that his worth disappears without his pills. Without his regular dose of analgesics, his ability to think critically is reduced. That is the case in the ninth episode of season three. House eventually becomes violent, punching Chase in the face, and is no longer able to think clearly. As a result, Chase finds the origin of the young patient's disease when she might otherwise have had her leg and arm amputated if House's instructions had been followed to the letter.

But House also recognizes that no longer being miserable would also prevent him from thinking clearly. In an attempt to end his suffering, he replaces his Vicodin with methadone.<sup>4</sup> The effect is spectacular: his pain disappears, he's no longer bad-tempered, and he even *accepts a request* by the patient's parents to perform a pointless procedure with no benefit to the patient. However, because the patient was suffering from nothing worse than dehydration to start with, the child falls gravely ill as a result of the test. At first, House is so relieved not to be in pain that he would rather leave his job than

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<sup>3</sup> "Human Error." *House, Season 3*. Written by Lawrence Kaplow & Thomas L. Moran, directed by Katie Jacobs. FOX. Original airdate May 29 2007.

<sup>4</sup> "The Softer Side." *House, Season 5*. Written by Liz Friedman, directed by Deran Serafian. FOX. Original airdate Feb 23 2009.

stop taking methadone, when Cuddy confronts him with that choice. But House sees that when he's cheerful instead of miserable, he loses his touch, and so he renounces the treatment.



5.16 "The Softer Side"

Cuddy, who eventually accepted House's treatment decision, nearly begs him to continue it. She knows that House will suffer again, and she has trouble supporting his decision. She says: "You don't need your pain to be a good doctor." But House responds like the Superman: "I'm not interested in good." And, holding up his cane to show Cuddy, he declares: "This is the only me you get."

There, too, the point is made. Without suffering, House is no longer exceptional. He needs his pain to go beyond himself. Physical pain--and the misery it leads to--is not anecdotal to House. It is part of him, and it makes him the genius that he is. By giving up methadone, he renounces the softer side of life, but not mediocrity. Make no mistake, this is not an absolute sacrifice of self. God is dead, it must not be forgotten, and with him, all notion of sacrifice. If House had continued taking methadone, then he would be sacrificing himself, with Cuddy playing the role of Eve in the Garden of Eden. But no, the Superman must continue to "become who he is" and never succumb to the temptation of ease. In this precise moment, House takes another step along the bridge. Let us take up Nietzsche's text again.

The apparition of the Superman is never sudden. The Superman is not born somewhere; he is built piece by piece. He is not unique. Zarathustra represents something like the first Superman, but he

"teaches" others how to become the Superman as well; he tempts those who are ready to listen to learn how to be like him. Zarathustra himself, at the beginning of the text, has not fully achieved the status of the Superman. Several times, he must return to his mountain to meditate, then redescend to society to dispense the honey he has in abundance. During this time, the Superman slowly matures and his spirit undergoes metamorphosis:

Three metamorphoses of the spirit do I designate to you: how the spirit becometh a camel, the camel a lion, and the lion at last a child.<sup>5</sup>

In the first instance, the spirit measures its power. It trumpets its challenge, puts itself to the test, and charges toward all possible difficulties: this is the camel stage. Then the spirit becomes a lion. From this moment on, it is capable of free will. It does not obey any rules imposed on it:

To create itself freedom, and give a holy Nay even unto duty: for that, my brethren, there is need of the lion.<sup>6</sup>

And finally, the third metamorphosis of the spirit produces the child.

Why hath the preying lion still to become a child?  
Innocence is the child, and forgetfulness, a new beginning, a game, a self-rolling wheel, a first movement, a holy Yea.<sup>7</sup>

Curiously enough, Nietzsche's text ends with the second metamorphosis of Zarathustra's spirit, once he has become the lion. So what can we read from the final page of Zarathustra?

My suffering and my fellow-suffering--what matter about them!  
Do I then strive after happiness? I strive after my work!  
Well! The lion hath come, my children are nigh, Zarathustra hath grown ripe, mine hour hath come:--  
This is my morning, my day beginneth: arise now, arise, thou great noontide!<sup>8</sup>

Thus, House embodies the Superman after the second metamorphosis, not the first. Doubtless, the third is not far off, for there is something of the child in House: he sucks endlessly on lollipops; he sneaks all

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<sup>5</sup> *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, First Part: The Three Metamorphoses.

<sup>6</sup> *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, First Part: The Three Metamorphoses.

<sup>7</sup> *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Fourth Part: The Sign.

<sup>8</sup> *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Fourth Part: The Sign.

he can from Wilson's dinner plate, not to mention from the plates of the patients who pass him in the cafeteria; he plays practical jokes and makes faces at everyone. These are always brief moments, as if House's childlike side is at the threshold of existence and surfaces at the least provocation. And it is true that the image of the "self-rolling wheel" is the one that best summarizes House's character. He is not, therefore, the figure of an evolving Superman, but rather a Superman who has very nearly been realized. At this stage, the Superman's happiness has no importance; all that matters is the task set for him to accomplish. How many times have Cuddy or Wilson come to speak with House about his happiness, and how many times has he shrugged his shoulders or rolled his eyes? For him, as for Zarathustra after the second metamorphosis, the problem is immaterial. The time at his disposal should not be sacrificed to the pursuit of happiness but to the fulfilment of his calling, and if that must happen through suffering, then House will give the methadone a pass. Sainthood isn't for him. Happiness would destroy him, make him a "good" doctor, and nothing else. "This is the only me you get"? But it's certainly that "me" who interests Cuddy, and outside the characters of the series, who interests the audience: an extraordinary individual who manages to transform his weakness into a supplementary power. And if "to discern: that is *delight* to the lion-willed!"<sup>9</sup>, then that delight is accessible to him, thanks to the methods worthy both of a Sherlock Holmes and a Zarathustra. These are the very methods that Zarathustra's shadow summarizes when it addresses Zarathustra:

With thee have I pushed into all the forbidden, all the worst and the furthest: and if there be anything of virtue in me, it is that I have had no fear of any prohibition.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Third Part: Old and New Tables.

<sup>10</sup> *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Fourth Part: The Shadow.

## Conclusion

The sixth season of House premieres on September 21, 2009. The promotional campaign centers around a photograph of House--or simply his cane--with two serpents twined around it, and eagle's wings sprouting from his back.



"This is not a caduceus."

Obviously, the photo alludes to the caduceus. The tag-line reads "Incurably himself." What can be deduced from this? That House will be a doctor more than ever? The caduceus is unmistakably the

symbol of medicine, after all.

But might we not also see the image of the Superman himself, accompanied by his loyal animals, "the proudest animal under the sun, and the wisest animal under the sun"?<sup>11</sup> The eagle and the serpent are mentioned regularly in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. They are named the companions of the Superman. What the audience expects from this character is not simply that he is medicine incarnate, but that he is an individual outside the norm, obeying no law, submitting to no one, using all the possible tricks to solve the puzzles that he finds, and evolving in the highest peaks of intelligence and reason.

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**A patient:** You don't have a family, do you?

**House:** Left them all back on Krypton.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, First Part: Prologue.

<sup>12</sup> "Painless." *House, Season 5*. Written by Thomas L. Moran & Eli Attie, directed by Andrew Bernstein. FOX. Original airdate Jan 19 2009.