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English 101 (H)
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4/27/09

More than Just Mardi Gras

In March of last year I finally decided where I would go to college. Proud of my choice, the next day I walked through the halls of my high school with a forest green shirt declaring “Tulane” in bold white letters. I then spent the rest of the day explaining to people where the school was, how to pronounce its name, and desperately trying to convince them that Tulane was not in fact part of LSU. Only a handful of students in my grade were going to school outside of our home state of Iowa, and no one from my high school had ever been to New Orleans for longer than a week’s vacation. But this did not stop everyone from offering opinions of the city. The reaction that I elicited when I told people where I was headed was much stronger than if I had chosen any other city in the United States. Even though many had no real experience with New Orleans, everyone seemed to have an idea about what the city was like: a bastion of wild, drunken partying against the backdrop of hurricane-ravaged and dangerous streets.

Was New Orleans truly this chaotic, almost primal place that “care forgot,” devoid of self-control? Why did so many people, myself included to a certain extent, view New Orleans in this manner? After several months here, I have learned much more about this city and have seen firsthand that the common preconceptions are unfounded. New Orleans is not a modern day Sodom or Gomorrah. Like most societies, New Orleans strives to balance its prominent and passionate Dionysian nature and the self-controlled order associated with Apollonian thought. Though New Orleans may tend toward the Dionysian more than most Western cities, it is not a place absent of any Apollonian rational structure as outsiders widely believe, and neither does it stray dangerously close to one extreme or the other as different societies have.

The terms for these two extremes, *Dionysian* and *Apollonian*, come from the ancient Greek gods of passion and reason, respectively. Since classical times, these two contradictory forces have been prominent components of the analyses of behavior and thought. In his article entitled “Psychoanalytic Perspectives on the Dionysiac and the Apollonian in Euripides’s *Bacchae*,” author David Bell attributes “order, logos, understanding” to the Apollonian, while “the elemental, passion, chaos, disorder” are all Dionysian traits (227). In the play there are two main characters that come into conflict with one another: Dionysus, a foreign god whose followers practice chaotic rituals of intoxication and wild dance to honor him, and King Pentheus, a young king concerned with maintaining order in his city. The wild god represents the Dionysian, while the restrained King Pentheus, on the other hand, is a product of Apollonian thought. Both characters in the play demonstrate the complexities and interactions between these two different but inextricably linked natures (Bell 227). One fights for law and total order while the other embraces passion and imagination.

The general terms *Apollonian* and *Dionysian* need not be restricted to this type of literary analysis or to the psychoanalysis of individuals but can also be extrapolated to apply to people’s attitudes about cultures and cities. As a prime example of a city in which the Dionysian and Apollonian are easily visible and in constant tension, New Orleans exhibits both openly. Mardi Gras, for example, displays the city’s strong Dionysian tendencies, complete with intoxicated processions named after the god himself. Evidence of New Orleans’ stronger connection to the Dionysian than most cities also includes its lax alcohol policies, celebrated nightlife, and almost-weekly festivals. Certainly, the Dionysian draws of New Orleans fuels the city’s substantial tourism industry, as well as many aspects of local citizens’ lives.

The Apollonian side of New Orleans, however, while perhaps not as flashy or obvious as the city’s passionate nature, is also alive and well. Though New Orleans is more used to crime

and corruption than most cities, its citizens still demand and generally receive the rule of logical, restrained law. The city carries out the same civic functions present in most American cities that would be impossible to maintain if it were not for reasoned and organized thought. While not the capital of Louisiana, New Orleans is still a center of governmental power, as it is the seat of the Fifth Circuit of the U.S. Court of Appeals. The city's convention centers also bring many professionals in pursuit of Apollonian, rather than chaotic Dionysian goals. New Orleans has the same legal, civic, and commercial infrastructure as any other American city; the Apollonian core of the community is as solid, if not as obvious, as the city's Dionysian side.

The tension between the passionate and the ordered in New Orleans is almost palpable when these two natures collide in the form of the culture's native music--jazz. The city's current legendary music scene, with its foundation in jazz, may provide the best example of the balance and interaction between the Dionysian and the Apollonian. While wild trumpet playing seems to belong firmly to the former school of thought, creating a whole new genre of music takes as much reason as passion, as much organization as creativity. According Kathy Ogren in *The Jazz Revolution*, this style of music surged from the streets of New Orleans to the forefront of American musical culture in the first half of the twentieth century (21-22). Its founding musicians used syncopation, described as "delayed or misplaced accents," to produce a sound seldom heard outside of the predominantly African American streets of the Southeast (Ogren 15). This impulsive and very passionate style of music flourished in New Orleans and soon developed its own set of rules and organization. Therefore jazz, one of the city's most recognizable features, is actually a product and a demonstration of the interaction of between the Apollonian and the Dionysian.

From jazz to Mardi Gras to commonplace civic systems, it is apparent that New Orleans enjoys a rich culture that stems from both the Dionysian and the Apollonian. Why, then, is the

city's connection to the chaotic so much more prominent in the eyes of outsiders? While it may be true that New Orleans is more in touch with its Dionysian side than many other American cities, this link is often exaggerated or even condemned by outside societies. New Orleans is known as "The Big Easy" and "The City that Care Forgot." To many people with whom I have spoken, the city is viewed as a haven for incessant partying at its best, and a den of chaotic sin at its worst. Not many people seem to give much thought to the normalcy of the daily lives of its residents. Some even speak of the city in a disdainful manner, as if to look down upon a culture that puts so much emphasis on perceived frivolity. Yet much of the outside world is simultaneously obsessed, repulsed, and drawn to New Orleans' Dionysian side, while remaining blind to its Apollonian nature.

The answer to this enigma may lie with a component of psychoanalysis referred to as "splitting" and the subsequent "projection." Richard Wollheim, contributing to Bell's article, explains: "[as a result of projective identification] the person finds himself surrounded by others – that is those into whom he has projected his unwanted dispositions" (Bell 231). Freud and other psychoanalysts have argued that when one is confronted with a part of one's nature that the individual would rather not acknowledge, one splits this image from the self and then projects it onto someone or something else (Bell 231). Bell speculates that in *The Bacchae*, this is what may have subconsciously happened to King Pentheus, as he projects his repressed chaotic side onto the god Dionysus and then is mysteriously drawn to him (229-32). The same logic may apply to outsiders' perceptions of New Orleans, especially if these views are coming from rather conservative cultures where disorder is likely feared. These are societies in which, for whatever reason, the Dionysian is repressed, and then collectively projected onto a different city in which passion and chaotic release is more acceptable.

If this is true, then the common preconceptions of “The City that Care Forgot” divulge more about the societies that hold these beliefs than it actually reveals about New Orleans. Perhaps these other cultures are too repressive of the Dionysian, and therefore their citizens *need* a city about which to fantasize or even travel to in order to release this basic side of human nature. For example, most of the revelers on the famed Bourbon Street are generally not locals, but rather out-of-town visitors. During Mardi Gras, many of the men and women exposing themselves and binge drinking are outsiders doing so in the safety and anonymity of a foreign city where this is acceptable for a few days. People may be drawn to New Orleans’ image of a chaotic, passionate city because that is exactly what they need to find release. If this is the case, then the problem is not with New Orleans’ affinity for the Dionysian but rather other societies’ repressions of it.

While it would be difficult to describe New Orleans in this overly-restrictive manner, history has seen numerous examples of destructive societies that have pushed their citizens to the limits of the Apollonian. Nazism in Hitler’s Germany, Stalin’s iron-fisted reign over the U.S.S.R., and Kim Jong-il’s current control of North Korea are testaments to the horrors that can arise from a totalitarian society in which everything is governed according to the order and logic of its rulers, that is, where everything has shifted too far toward the Apollonian. Societies that are on the opposite end of the spectrum, that exist only in an impulsive and chaotic lack of order, are equally dangerous.

New Orleans immediately after Hurricane Katrina could be viewed as a city that *temporarily* strayed too close to the totally Dionysian. Following one of the most devastating natural disasters in the history of the nation, the lack of immediate government assistance left the citizens of New Orleans to fend for themselves as they tried to escape the floodwaters. Accounts from D.M. Brown’s Hurricane Katrina: The First Seven Days of America’s Worst Natural

Disaster reveal that it took almost a week to evacuate most of the storm victims, and that during those several days chaos reigned supreme (21-25). As shelters ran out of resources and the streets became more dangerous, the small remaining police force was overwhelmed by looting and violence, as “Some of the refugees had guns. People fought for critical resources, like drinks removed from broken vending machines. Stab wounds and other injuries resulted” (Brown 24). While many evacuees remained in a calm, reasoned state, others panicked or saw opportunities for gain and acted in an entirely impulsive manner. New Orleans was turned into a chaotic city lacking self-control and order, the definition of a society governed only by the Dionysian.

However, the dire circumstances that bred the frenzied situation in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina are not normal, and therefore the fully-Dionysian city that resulted is likewise atypical. During the storm, the Apollonian restrictions that are normally present in the city were removed as some people, struggling to survive, reverted to primal behavior. Starting weeks after the storm, however, normal life was dictated once again by the ordered rule of law. The dire conditions in New Orleans immediately after the hurricane highlight that the *natural* state of the city tends to exist in a balance between the Dionysian and the Apollonian, rather than in a constant Dionysian state as many outsiders perceive. Instead of succumbing fully to one nature at the repression of the other, as some totalitarian societies have, and King Pentheus does in *The Bacchae*, New Orleans strives to maintain a mix between the passionate and the ordered.

Author Mark Pizzato, writing on the works and ideas of the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, says “In 1871, Nietzsche described the Apollonian and Dionysian aspects of ancient Greek theater, arguing that they applied to modern culture as well” (186). The ideas of the Apollonian and the Dionysian, though originating with the ancient Greeks and embodied in such plays as Euripides’s *The Bacchae*, can be used to analyze modern cultures and cities. When New Orleans is examined closely, aspects of both the wild Dionysian and the ordered Apollonian are

apparent, and the reality does not completely match outsiders' preconceptions of a chaotic city. This may be a warning to other societies not to stray down the path of the overly-Apollonian to the extent that their citizens need a separate place to go and release the Dionysian. But if you aren't a local of "The Big Easy" and you *do* choose to indulge in a wild Dionysian release in New Orleans, please remember this: No, I can't recommend the best bars on Bourbon Street just because I live here now, Mardi Gras parades are mostly family-friendly affairs, I didn't do anything regrettable to get that boxful of beads, and for the last time it is pronounced "Two-Lane."

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