Spring 2007

Synthesizing Gauguin: A Comparative Look at Cultural Contexts And Gauguin's Tahitian Paintings

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Senior Thesis

Submitted to the Honors Program of
Western Kentucky University

Spring 2007

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Abstract

When a plethora of primary sources exist from an artist, a tendency persists for the art historian to focus on an artist's personality when analyzing or interpreting that artist's work. In the case of Paul Gauguin and his Tahitian works, his personality faults, extreme character, and uncouth notions and motivations become the concentration of much scholarship and can lead to a misjudgment of the artist's depiction of the Tahitian natives and culture. This paper examines how Gauguin represented a foreign peoples and met the goals he pursued under Primitivism, Symbolism, and Synthetism by analyzing the cultural contexts of *Fin-de-siecle* France and Tahiti and the synthesis of these contexts into his paintings. Gauguin was influenced and driven to travel by the modernist and imperialist views of the Universal Exposition of 1889, the shift in style and ideology from Naturalism and Impressionism to Symbolism, the Roussean focus on the primitive, and the exotic and romantic literature of colonial pamphlets and voyager writings. Gauguin fully adapted these ideas and notions, yet was taken aback by the unexpected, Europeanized, Tahitian actuality, as seen through his letters and shift in style. Gauguin's involvement and awareness of the remnants of traditional Polynesian culture allowed for a new complex image of Tahiti to emerge. A sampling of Gauguin's work, *Manao Tupapa'u*, *Te Tamari no Atua*, and *O. Tahiti*, can illustrate the artist's way of incorporating these complexities into his paintings, producing a unique and accurate depiction of Tahitian culture.

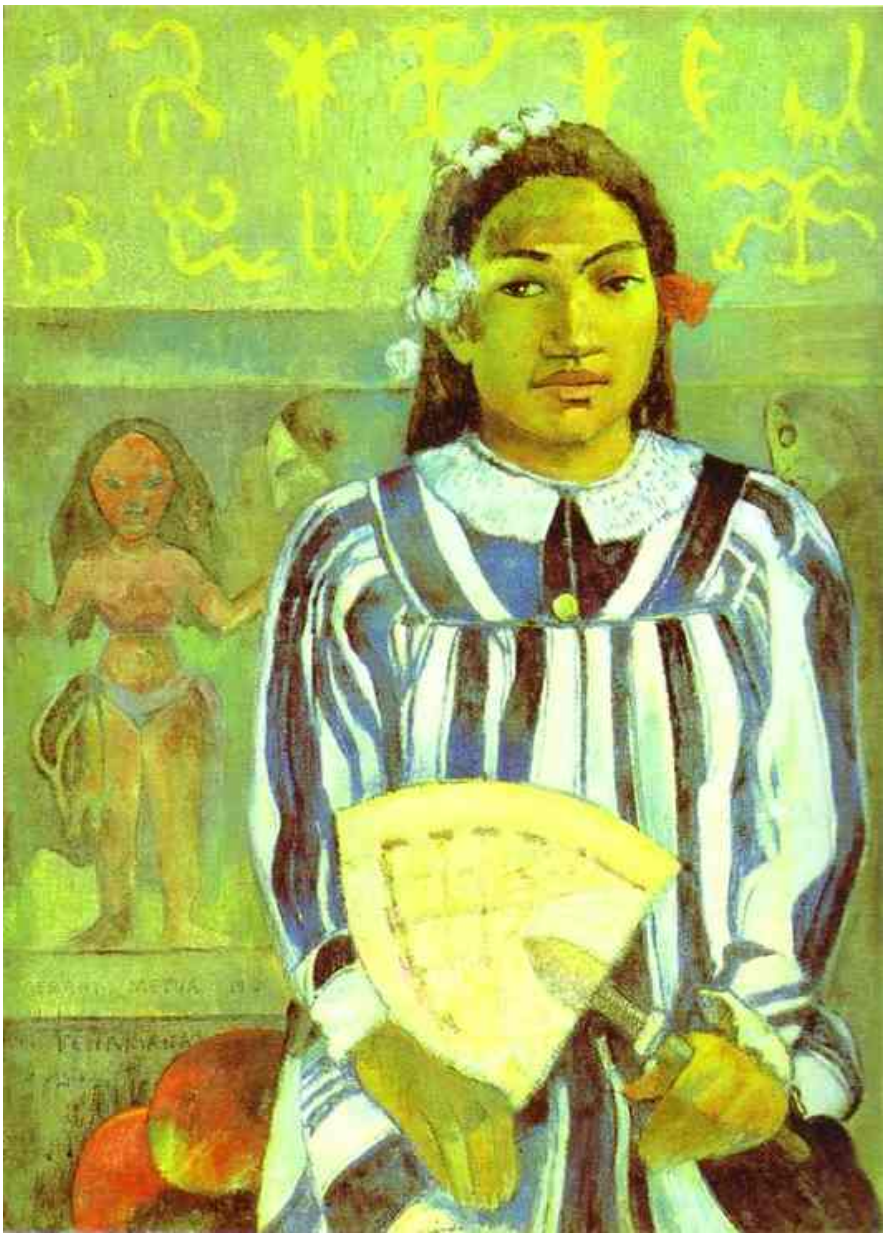

Figure 1: *Merahi Metua no Tehamana (Tehamana Has Many Ancestors)*, 1893. The Art Institute of Chicago.

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Chapter One: Introduction

> I am down but not yet vanquished. Is the Indian who smiles under torture vanquished? Emphatically the savage is better than we are. You were mistaken in saying that I was wrong to call myself a savage. This is nevertheless true: I am a savage. And civilized people have an inkling of this, for in my works there is nothing that surprises or upsets if it is not this "savage in spite of myself." This is why it is inimitable.[1]
>
> -- Paul Gauguin, 1903

French writer, Emile Zola, is often quoted as defining art as "nature as seen through a temperament."[2] Paul Gauguin left many imprints of his personality in his letters, notebooks, articles, and published journals. These imprints of his disposition have been very important in the critique and interpretations of his artwork by twentieth-century and present day art historians. No doubt exists that these records paint him, truthfully, as an arrogant and pompous egotist. This calls into question the motives of his sojourn to Tahiti, where his most famous paintings were created, and furthermore, the representation of a culture that was to provide his salvation from the "mediocrity"[3] and "bewilderment"[4] of his contemporaries in Europe.

Full, at times, of exotic and romantic ideals, Gauguin's writings, in combination with the foreign and often sexual subjects of his artworks, provide ample artillery for art historians in analyzing his work. Hailed by many as one of the fathers of Modernism, criticized by some as merely a perpetuator of the racist, sexist, and imperialistic views of

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[1] A letter to Charles Morice, Atuanna, April, 1903. Paul Gauguin, *Letters to His wife and Friends,* edited by Maurice Malingue (New York, 1949), 240.

[2] Elenore Welles, *Amy Ellingson and Jaq Chartier*, http://artscenecal.com/ArticlesFile/Archive/Articles2002/ Articles0102/AEllingsonA.html

[3] "What would you rather have, a mediocrity which pleases everybody or a talent which breaks new ground." A letter to Emile Bernard, November, 1889. Malingue, 129.

[4] "In art we have just passed through a very long period of bewilderment caused by physics, mechanical chemistry and the study of nature. Artists have lost all their savagery, no longer having instinct…" A letter to Charles Morice, Atuanna, April, 1903. Malingue, 241.

European white males, and used by others to allure readers and glamorize the discipline, Gauguin's personality has often taken a front seat to his artwork.[5] An objective look at cultural contexts, as well as Gauguin's personal ambition and style, can provide an analysis focused more on the artwork itself. Through this lens, the accuracy or authenticity of his depiction of Tahitian life at the turn of the twentieth-century can be evaluated.

Gauguin's connection to what he believed to be "savage" started from his infancy. His mother, of Peruvian descent, and his father, a French journalist, took a young Gauguin to live in Lima, Peru. His father died during the journey, and Gauguin lived with his mother's family there until the age of seven. He took much pride in his mixed heritage, what he referred to as "Inca blood,"[6] and made many attempts to find or develop this savagery. He traveled throughout his youth, finally settling as a stockbroker in Paris. In his thirties, he left his wife, Mette, his family, and brokerage to pursue painting. He developed his style in Brittany and Arles where he joined the avant-garde painting communities, always in pursuit of something unique and revolutionary.

Gauguin learned to paint as an Impressionist but developed as an artist in the Symbolist and Synthetic styles. With the ambitious pursuit of advancing this style further and the personal desire to travel and find his utopia, Gauguin set out for Tahiti in 1891. His sojourn involved the production of many paintings, carvings, and prints as well as sexual forays with young female natives. Health problems, a difficulty that plagued most

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[5] Francoise Cachin and Kirk Varnedoe praise his influence on modernism; early twentieth-century writers like Robert Ray, Wayne Anderson, and Charles Morice over romanticized the artist; feminist writers such as Griselda Pollock and Solomon Godeau critique him; Francoise Cachin and Kirk Varnedoe praise his influence on modernism; Peter Brooks, Stephen Eisenman, and Lee Wallace use sexual interpretations to catch readers. These are only a few authors of many who have similar viewpoints.

[6] Roger Kimball, *The Rape of the Masters: How Political Correctness Sabotages Art* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, *), 129.

of his journeys, forced him to return to Paris in 1893. He returned to Tahiti in 1895 and stayed abroad till his death in 1903, moving to the nearby Marquesas Islands for the last three years of his life.

The paintings Gauguin produced while in Tahiti focused on what many saw as the *primitive*. He sought a *primitive* people and examples of their art for inspiration, example, and illumination. The expression *primitive* is one of many terms that breach the 21st century idea of political correctness, yet must be explained due to its use in the discipline. The use of *primitive, savage*, and *the other* all occur in the vocabulary of the *Fin de siècle*[7]. Gauguin painted during a time of colonialism, technical advances, and modernization at the turn of the century. Social Darwinism plagued most common thought, producing the notion that illiterate peoples or indigenous societies were in some way less evolved. This is one aspect of the *Fin de siècle* idea of the primitive, but there exists other connotations that deal with a group or individual's closeness to nature, absence of materialism, and pureness of being untouched by civilization that also surrounded the use of the term.

Kirk Varnedoe describes in '*Primitivism' In 20th Century Art* what he believes is the *Fin de siècle* perception of the *noble savage*: "an unspoiled being, innocent yet wise, sometimes ascetically hardened and in other versions gracefully sensual, whose purer virtues and simpler thoughts were held up as damning contrasts to the shallow and weakened artificiality of civilized Europe."[8] The *savage* exists as the antithesis to the

[7] These terms will also be used in this paper due to the lack of vocabulary on the subject and the focus on the view point of Gauguin..

[8] Kirk Varnedoe, "Gauguin," *Primitivism in 20th Century Art*, edited by William Rubins (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 180.

civilized, modern man. The idea of *the other* is similar, yet may imply simply "that which is foreign."

In light of the above notions, present day scholarship has developed the term *Primitivism* to describe the style of Gauguin and other artists who use primitive cultures and their art for direction either idealistically or technically.[9] Varnedoe defines it basically as an admiration of the "virtues of early or less materially developed societies,"[10] but also describes it as existing within the polarities of "heathen vs. Christian, natural vs. artificial, irrational vs. rational, etc., each in turn implying hierarchies of high and low, normative and aberrant, good and bad."[11]

Gauguin himself would not have applied the term Primitivism to his style; the word is a twentieth-century construction to bring many individual artists under one definable category. Gauguin did however call himself, or aligned himself, with the Symbolist and Synthetist movements. The principles of Symbolism were borrowed from a movement by the same name already occurring in literature. The nineteenth-century art critic Albert Aurier defined Symbolism simply as the "painting of ideas."[12] This allowed for forms, colors, and lines to be exaggerated or distorted to allow an artist to mold his symbols into a better representation of an idea.[13]

Synthetism concentrated on this abstraction of reality in the name of expression. It emerged as a movement with the "Exhibition of the Impressionist and Synthetist

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[9] Emile Bernard, Pablo Picasso, and the Fauves: Andre Derain, Henri Matisse, and Maurice Vlaminck are a few examples

[10] Varnedoe, "Gauguin," 180.

[11] *Ibid*., 181.

[12] Petra ten-Doessenate Chu, *Nineteenth Century European Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003), 470.

[13] Albert Aurier, "Symbolisme en peinture: Paul Gauguin," *Mercure de France*, March 1891. *Gauguin: A Retrospective*, edited by Marla Prather and Charles F. Stuckey (New York: Hugh Lauter Levin Associates, 1987), 150-156.

Group" at *Café des Arts* in Paris in 1889. The style synthesizes different principles to form a unique canvas, "conveying to the viewer something about the real appearance of the subject; expressing the poetry the artist sees within it; and creating works that have a 'decorative' quality."[14] Maurice Denis, who exhibited with Gauguin, best illustrated the concept around Synthetism – "It is well to remember that a picture before being a battle horse, a nude woman or some anecdote, is essentially a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order."[15]

Both Synthetism and Symbolism reacted against other movements of the time period like Naturalism and Impressionism, whose central theme was not the conception of ideas but the capturing of moments in nature from direct observation. Making few political or social statements, Naturalist artists painted realistic, almost photographic scenes and Impressionist painters, paying attention to atmospheric perspective, light, and movement, focused on the life of the bourgeoisie.

Gauguin aligned himself with the avant-garde in France in the effort to paint in a more progressive manner. His Primitivist, Symbolist style was the next step in the advance of modernism. His work relied on expression and abstraction; it did not just relay a pictorial representation of the physical world. His use of another culture to find and express themes and ideas was unique. Only before had the Romantics, such as Delacroix, attempted to paint another culture, yet their themes focused on European issues, not native. This aspect of Gauguin's work then provides a distinctive and interesting subject matter for art historians.

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[14] Chu, *Nineteenth Century*, 463.
[15] *Ibid*., 463.

Art historians often neglected contemporary artists before the twentieth century. With the advent of Modernism, critics and art historians began to focus on artists of their own time or recent past. Modernism was so different than the cyclical phases found in past styles that the break with tradition created a need for artists and styles to be structuralized.[16] The methodologies of early and mid twentieth-century art historians often led to the focus on the individual lives of artists and creating a place for them in the history of great artists. The label genius was applied often to artists who broke away from the norm. Gauguin obtains such a status from scholars such as Charles Morice (1919), Robert Rey (1924), and Wayne Anderson (1971).[17] His escapades overseas and his foreign images provided ample subjects for romantic waxing. Bengt Danielsson (1966) provides an exception with his more anthropological viewpoint, writing honestly and realistically about Gauguin's life but not understanding his art.[18]

In the late twentieth-century, many different art history methodologies emerged, yet they were all critical of the opinions of earlier art historians on modern artists. Believing they focused too much on connoisseurship and biography,[19] scholars such as Griselda Pollock (1993) and Abigail Solomon-Godeau (1989), produced more critical approaches. Feminist ideology worked to challenge the patriarchal systems, which some believed Gauguin represented. Feminists goals were lofty: "To change at least the intellectual direction of the history of art, or its institutional context and even in some cases the form and ideology of Western Society."[20] These art historians took it upon

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[16] Eric Fernie, *Art History and Its Methods: A Critical Anthology* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1995), 16.
[17] Stephen Eisenmen, *Gauguin's Skirt* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 15-16.
[18] Bengt Danielsson, *Gauguin in the South Seas* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1966).
[19] *Ibid*., 18.
[20] *Ibid*., 20.

themselves to then remove the genius status from Gauguin, as Pollock does in *Avant-Garde Gambits 1888-1893: Gender and the Color of Art History*.

Being the colorful and often ambiguous character that he is, Gauguin opens himself to scrutiny and extreme interpretation. More recent writers such as Peter Brooks (1992), Stephen Eisenman (1997), and Lee Wallace (2003) have taken these aspects and provided fantastical interpretations of Gauguin's life and art, often focusing more on sexuality and psychology than art history. Roger Kimball describes the focus of current and late art historians on Gauguin's personality and extremisms in his book, *The Rape of the Masters: How Political Correctness Sabotages Art*:

> What makes him interesting, however, is not his human, all-too-human flaws: his narcissism, his utopianism, or his fondness for women who were (as he put in his Journal) "Fat, vicious, and stupid with nothing spiritual." On the contrary, what makes Gauguin of interest was his artistic achievement. Gauguin's art was undoubtly fed by his life – the impossible egotism, rage, and yearning. But there are plenty of impossible egotists abroad. Not many manage to produce memorable works of art."[21]

With regards to Gauguin's Tahitian paintings, such interpretations as Kimball describes often misjudge the artist's depictions of the Tahitian natives and culture. This paper hopes to lay aside political correctness and 21st century ethnocentrism and look at how Gauguin represented a foreign peoples and met the goals he pursued under the focus of Primitivism, Symbolism, and Synthetism. Chapter two looks at the cultural context of Gauguin's *Fin de siècle* France. These ideologies and philosophies can give insight into the use of particular styles and motives. Chapter three will look at how Gauguin embodied the cultural notions of his day and how his actual experiences in Tahiti may have affected his viewpoint. Chapter four discusses major works of art, looking at how

[21] Kimball, *The Rape of the Masters*, 133, 134.

Gauguin synthesized his European notions and his Tahitian observations to produce a unique and symbolic image of the Tahitian landscape and people. Chapter five presents a more contextually based interpretation of Gauguin's work, showing how Gauguin produced important works despite his imperfect personality.

Chapter 2: The Culture of *Fin de siècle*

Paul Gauguin's Tahitian works show the inspiration of tropical landscapes; young, female natives; and Marquesian tribal artifacts. But these inspirations would never have been realized if it were not for the motivations of *Fin de siècle* France. Gauguin's foreign scenes are not complete without the knowledge and understanding of the native culture of the artist. The politics of colonialism and the air of progress in France would provide drive and motivation for Gauguin's work. Stylistic movements leading up to Gauguin's time and those in effect while he painted had a large impact on how and why Gauguin painted as well. The push of the avant-garde would also play a large role in the necessity for change and progress seen in his decisions. With the cultural context to his work understood, Gauguin's art may be more fully examined.

The atmosphere in France at the time that Gauguin's style developed was one of modernization and expansion. Technology, such as factory and farm equipment, had advanced in Europe, giving way to new industries, like steel and concrete, and expansion of the population into urban areas. Imperialism became an issue of national pride, with many European nations establishing colonies overseas. Themes of progress, revolution, and renewal were very important in the late nineteenth-century for France, particularly with the institution of the Third Republic in the 1880s.[22] These ideas all seemed to culminate in the Universal Exposition of 1889 in Paris, France.

Paris' World's Fair was set to celebrate the centennial anniversary of the beginning of the French Revolution. Lasting for seven months, the exposition was visited

[22] Chu, *Nineteenth Century*, 429.

by an estimated two million people.[23] The organization of the Universal Exposition of 1889 indicates the culture and worldview of France during Gauguin's time. The building of the Eiffel tower was done in honor of the Exposition and modern France. Its creation focused around the use of new mechanics and materials, as seen in the Gallery of Machines, which exhibited new technology, such as Edison's phonograph. In addition to the focus on modernism, exhibits that displayed the lives of Non-European groups could be found. The "History of Habitation" exhibit showed the progress of humanity in the form of dwellings. It contrasted dead civilizations with current Western ones as well as suggesting a hierarchy of advancement, with European nations depicted as superior to those of Oceania and Africa.[24]

Gauguin visited the Universal Exposition many times. Danielson attributes Gauguin's continual interest not only to the exotic sites, but also to his unofficial exhibition in a café near the Official Art Pavilion at the Exposition.[25] *Cafe des Arts,* owned by Volpini, showcased works by lesser known Symbolist and Impressionist artists such as Gauguin and Emile Bernard. In at least four letters, Gauguin discusses his trips to the Exposition. The content of the letters implies that he visited it often and was drawn to what he thought was exotic: "You missed something in not coming the other day. In the Java village there are Hindoo dances. All the art of India can be seen there, and it is exactly like the photos I have. I go there again on Thursday as I have an appointment with a mulatto girl."[26]

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[23] *Ibid*., 429.
[24] *Ibid*., 431.
[25] Danielsson, *Gauguin,* 25.
[26] A letter to Emile Bernard, Paris, March, 1889. Gauguin, *Letters,* 118.

Many scholars believe that the Colonial Palaces, or the "live" exhibits, influenced Gauguin greatly and adequately represented the feelings of *Fin de siècle*.[27] The various countries that possessed colonies or protectorates set up these exhibits. Photographs, tools, costumes, art objects, and "live examples" of the colonized cultures were on display for millions of visitors. Reconstructions of villages were filled with imported natives who acted out their daily routine for the European public.[28]

The contrast of advanced technology and primitive cultures on display provided an interesting dichotomy that did not go unnoticed by French artists. Tim Benton, in his essay in *The Challenge of the Avant-Garde* suggests that there were two responses in the avant-garde to the modernization found exhibited at the 1889 Universal Exhibition and exemplified in the creation of the Eiffel tower. Where as some artists embraced the new technologies and ideas as a great mechanism to propel culture and society forward, others responded negatively to the materialism, conformity, and bourgeois society they saw as a part of modernity.[29] This latter group of artists looked towards all that opposed the modern, and one of those views focused on the primitive.

Things primitive stood for authenticity in a world deemed as artificial by many artists. To find a truer subject, theme, or style meant that one's art would be more pure and expressive.[30] These ideas coincided with the French Symbolist movement and the work of poet Jean Moreas. Symbolism began as a movement in literature in 1886 and spread to visual art in response to naturalism. It focused on the rejection of traditional

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[27] Chu, Danielson, Eisenman, Thomson.
[28] Chu, *Nineteenth Century*, 433.
[29] Tim Benton, "Exhibiting Modernity: The 1889 Universal Exhibition and the Eiffel Tower." *The Challenge of the Avant-Garde*, edited by Paul Wood (London: The Open University, 1999), 163.
[30] Gill Perry, "Exhibiting 'les Idependants:' Gauguin and the Café Volpini Show." *The Challenge of the Avant-Garde*, edited by Paul Wood (London: The Open University, 1999), 174.

forms of art, literature, and poetry that were idealic or naturalistic so as to find deep feeling and expression in abstraction.[31] Robert Goldwater defines the symbolist artist and his style as emphasizing allegory and emotion:

> But the artist wants to do more…He wishes to induce a reflective mood, to indicate a wider frame of reference. So allegory with its conventional attributes will not longer do…it no longer captures feeling. Therefore, relations within the painting – and in consequence its ideas – must be expressed through a series of interior states, generalized in figures and settings of a congruent mood that at once embody the old sense, and convey, in the new, that are (allegorically) and suggest (emotionally) the states of feeling they portray.[32]

This move towards abstraction can be seen in the painting of Gauguin, Gustave Moreau, Puvis de Chavanes, Odilon Redon, and Emile Bernard. Bernard and Gauguin worked together closely and shared friendship for many years.[33] Gauguin was introduced to Bernard and his style of *Cloisonnism* while they painted together in Brittany in 1888. Bernard began working in a style in "which dark contours outlined areas of flat, unbroken color." It did not attempt to allude to a three-dimensional reality but meant to be expressive of "inner poetry and mystery of reality" through the use of color and form.[34] Bernard's style showed the influence that Japanese art had in Europe in the late nineteenth-century. The Oriental use of flat forms and strong outlines is one example.

In 1888, Gauguin wrote to Emile Bernard about his admiration of Oriental style, emphasizing its radical difference from European work at the time. Gauguin cited the way the Japanese used flat forms without shadows:

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[31] *Ibid*., 170.

[32] Jehanne Teilhet-Fisk, *Paradise Reviewed: An Interpretation of Gauguin's Polynesian Symbolism* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983), 13.

[33] This friendship deteriorated after Gauguin's move to Tahiti, when Gauguin's letters to him seem to stop. Bernard writes in the preface of "Letters de Paul Gauguin A Emile Bernard," ca. 1911, that he believes he was robbed of the credits for developing the Symbolists style by Gauguin.

[34] Chu, *Nineteenth*, 461.

> Look at the Japanese who are certainly excellent draughtsmen, and you will see life depicted in the open air and in the sunshine without shadows, colour being used only as a combination of tones, diverse harmonies, giving the impression of warmth, etc… Besides, I regard impressionism as an altogether new research, absolutely removed from everything mechanical, such as photography, etc… That is why I would avoid as much as possible that which gives the illusion of a thing, and as shadow is the *trompe l' oeil* of the sun, I am constrained to suppress it."[35]

Along with Oriental and primitive influences, the art of children presented itself as a model for the style and vision that Gauguin and other avant-garde artists wanted to capture. Gauguin looked at primitive artists and children's art not to copy it, but to paint in the manner of their conception of reality. "Their representation is based on their experienced reality of what they know of the object; it has its own structure and meaning, and therefore appears abstract or conceptual." [36] The issue of literacy, according to Teilhet-Fisk, is at the core of the difference between how children and primitive peoples view reality and is a matter that interested Gauguin greatly. With those that are illiterate, all their senses are being utilized and evaluated, while those that are literate tend to organize experiences in a conformed, technical manner, making them less expressive. The Symbolists took on this view, trying to "invoke all the senses through the means of musicality, mysticism, dream, and myth."[37]

Jean –Jacques Rousseau, a philosopher of the 18th-century enlightenment, perpetuated this idea of a primitive people having a more pure outlook on the world. He wrote about the dichotomy between primitive peoples and the civilized world. Rousseau saw man in his primitive/natural/savage state as being ultimately good. His evaluation of modern societies placed them far away from this goodness, with a perverted view of

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[35] A letter to Emile Bernard, 1888. Gauguin, *Letters*, 112.
[36] Teilhet-Fisk, *Paradise*, 15.
[37] *Ibid*., 16.

honor and virtue.[38] Rousseau discussed "la societe naissante" in *Discours de l'inegalite parmi les hommes (1753),* which Peter Brooks defines as "a people emerged from barbarism, and entered into a social compact which has not yet been adulterated." Rousseau called this "the true youth of the world."[39] Primitive peoples were painted in the light of naïve children who were still innocent and had not reached the corruption that other, more advanced civilizations, had obtained. Brooks eloquently describes the view of Oceania as not only physically, but temporally removed from Europe.[40] To travel to Tahiti would be to travel back in time.

> If Tahiti appeared to many as the realization of Rousseau's speculations about the earliest forms of social organization, a primitive utopia which had instituted harmony and order but not succumbed to the division of property and the twin despotisms of church and state, it was most remarkably a sexual paradise, a place where the surplus repression that had created the discontents of European civilization simply had no currency, and the pleasure principle dominated without censorship.[41]

Rousseau's writings were very popular and played a large role in the way the public viewed uncivilized countries, specifically those being colonized by Western cultures. Gauguin's interest was sparked by Rousseau's philosophies, the emergent avant-garde in France, and by what he saw at the Exposition. His feelings were further enticed by the literature being passed out at the Exposition, romantically explaining the tropical locations of these primitive groups, and popular novels and accounts about travels to these lands. The colonial pamphlets and writings like *The Marriage of Loti* and *Supplement au voyage de Bougainville* illustrate the stereotypical views of the French

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[38] Eisenmen, *Gauguin's Skirt,* 81.
[39] Peter Brooks, "Gauguin's Tahitian Body," *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History,* edited by Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), 332.
[40] *Ibid.,* 332.
[41] *Ibid*., 331.

towards their colonies and other exotic locations during the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Literature at the time labeled the French colonies as beautiful destinations, where there was constant sunshine and exciting cultures to observe. Early settlers provided texts with enticing descriptions, promoting others to move to the colonies.[42] The indigenous, colonized populations were romanticized with myths about cannibalism and violence, as well as sexual desires and fulfillment. Novels and pamphlets implied the presence of sexually open women who fawned over European men, advertising the colonies to males.[43]

The Marriage of Loti, a novel written by Julian Viaud (Pierre Loti), had a profound effect on Gauguin. Viaud inspired Gauguin to find exotic love and excitement like its protagonist, Loti, who ran away to live in the tropics. He often lifted motifs from the novel in his letters before arriving in Tahiti.[44] Viaud's diary-like novel emphasized the exotic nature of Tahiti and the supposed immense differences between Loti and the natives.

Gauguin also had access to writings of captains and sailors who helped establish the colony in Tahiti: Captain Wallis, Cook, Bogainville and many others. Like the above-cited descriptions, these sailors wrote about the affection of Tahitian women for French lovers. In most of their writings, these men emphasized the body and its uniqueness. The Polynesian body was neither black, white, nor yellow – the main racial

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[42] Eisenmen, *Gauguin's Skirt*, 29.

[43] Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Going Native," *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, edited by Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), 321.

[44] Gauguin talked about the book to Emile Bernard and wrote to his sister, Wilhelmina, recommending the book for her to read. Eisenmen, *Gauguin's Skirt*, 47, 56.

categories at that time.[45] This gave an even more exotic and mysterious image to the Islands.

Louis-Antione de Bogainville wrote a very popular account of his voyage to Tahiti in 1769 (*Voyage autour du monde, suivi du Supplement de Diderot*). Bogainville's tales about the island agreed with the exotic nature of Oceania discussed in other such literature. He wrote about Tahitian men who brought women, or "nymphs," to his sailors. These women were described as sexually provocative. His first meeting with the native population involved the gift of a woman, which he describes enticingly "where she negligently let fall the wrap that covered her."[46]

Captain Samuel Wallis of HMS *Dolphin,* the first European to find the island, also left an account of the islands. His tale can be supplemented by the master of the ship, George Robertson, who left a journal giving a similar sexual label to Tahiti. Both men's writings told of a carnal trade occurring between the European sailors and the Tahitian men – one of sex for nails and iron.[47] This trade was so significant that Robertson found his ship almost demobilized because of the amount of nails, spikes, and other such materials removed from his ship by his sailors. These stories allude to the use of the Tahitian body as a natural resource to be traded for European modernity. Brooks suggests that this may have influenced the "golden" bodies found in Gauguin's paintings.[48]

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[45] Solomon-Godeau, "Going Native," 321.
[46] Brooks, "Gauguin's Tahitian Body," 332.
[47] Brooks examines the truth of these accusations, suggesting that there may have truly been such a trade, and, it may have occurred partly out of fear from the Tahitians after experiencing violent attacks from the Europeans.
[48] *Ibid*., 333.

Such images surrounded Gauguin in France. As Europe grew more modern at the turn of the century, ideas and notions about the surrounding world could be shared more easily and on larger scales. He could not escape the mold of his culture. He witnessed changes in industry and design, gathered ideas from growing art movements, and experienced the pull of the exotic. Gauguin's frame of reference fused into his artwork. It is important to understand this cultural context so that his motivations and influences can be subsequently deciphered.

Chapter 3: Gauguin's Search For *Other*

The cultural context surrounding Gauguin provided motives for his journeying outside of Europe to find a model, vision, and life that were ideal. The works of Rousseau in *Fin de siècle* France and the symbolist reaction to modernization influenced Gauguin's decision to seek out the primitive and eventually travel to Tahiti. His exotic ambitions were well documented in his letters before his first journey in 1891. These romantic and utopian aspirations were further fueled by his adventurous past and his struggle with money.

Gauguin envisioned the tropics in complete opposition to European society. Inspired by Rousseau, he wrote about the purity and simplicity of the primitive world. The dichotomy between what he saw as a restrictive Europe and a free and sensuous *other* is evident in his use of exotic terminology reminiscent of the Colonial Department's pamphlets, Viaud's *Loti*, and sailor's journals. In a letter to his wife Gauguin wrote:

> May the day come – and perhaps soon – when I can flee to the woods on a South Sea island, and live there in ecstacy [*sic*], in peace and for art. With a new family, far from this European struggle for money. There in Tahiti, in the silence of the lovely tropical night, I can listen to the sweet murmuring music of my heart, beating in amorous harmony with the mysterious beings of my environment. Free at last, with no money troubles, and able to love, to sing and to die.[49]

This is also evident in Gauguin's letter to J.F. Willumsen, "For them, living means singing and loving."[50] Gauguin copied these words straight from *Loti* and the

[49] A letter to his wife, undated, Paris, Feb. 1890, Gauguin, *Letters*, 137.
[50] Eisenmen, *Gauguin's Skirt*, 56.

official handbook for Tahiti from the Colonial Department.[51] The exotic sensuality found in guidebooks, journals and in novels like Viaud's, appealed to him. He saw the primitive woman as a naturally free model who could possibly service other needs – "A woman out there is, so to speak, obligator, which will provide me with an everyday model. And I can assure you that a Madagascar woman has a heart just as much as a Frenchwoman, with far less calculation in it." [52]

Gauguin sought new subjects and an inspiration for a new style. He called himself a "pioneer artist." The art of *the tropics* offered him "rejuvenation." [53] It was art free of the corruption he associated with European art. He wrote many letters that stated such sentiments to Emile Bernard from 1888 to 1891. Solomon-Godeau suggests that Gauguin was not just searching for new subjects but for a new vision, one that would release the "savage" inside of him. As she explains:

> …the structural paradox on which Gauguin's brand of primitivism depends is that one leaves home to discover one's real self; the journey out, as writers such as Conrad have insisted, is, in fact, always a journey in; similarly, and from the perspective of a more formally conceived criticism, the artist "recognizes" in the primitive artifact that which was immanent, but inchoate; the object from "out there" enables the expression of what is thought to be "in there."[54]

His disapproval of civilized life and the limits it placed on his creativity can be seen in a letter to Odilon Redon in 1890, where he states that he wishes to "cultivate in [himself] a state of primitiveness and savagery." [55]

Gauguin was searching for an untouched utopia. France had a class structure and material culture that created a nation fueled by money. In a sample of thirty-six letters

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[51] Danielsson, *Gauguin*, 33. The Colonial Department's writer probably borrowed his ideas from *Loti* as well.
[52] A letter to Emile Bernard, undated, June 1890, Gauguin, *Letters*, 143.
[53] *Ibid.*, 144.
[54] Solomon-Godeau, "Going Native," 315
[55] Eisenmen, *Gauguin's Skirt*, 84.

from Maurice Malingue's edition of Gauguin's letters, ranging from December 1888 through May 1893, his first stay in Tahiti,[56] Gauguin mentioned his lack of money in more than one third of them. In this same sampling, he directly tied his enthusiasm for moving to a primitive society to what he viewed as their "free" way of living – residing in a hand-built hut in a community in which subsistence farming and hunting were utilized. Gauguin wrote to Emile Bernard:

> What I want to do is to set up a studio in the *Tropics*. With the money I shall have I can buy a hut of the kind you saw at the Universal Exhibition. An affair of wood and clay, thatched, near the town but in the country. This would cost almost nothing. I should extend it by felling trees and make of it a dwelling to our liking, with cows, poultry and fruit, the chief articles of food, and eventually it ought to cost us nothing to live. Free…[57]

Gauguin's personal adaptations of the conventional notions concerning exoticism, romanticism, and primitivism were supplemented by his past experiences with travel and exotic locations. Born in 1848, he lived in Lima from age two to seven with his mother, who was of Peruvian descent. This was the beginning of his identification as a savage. He went to a Jesuit seminary, then a pre-naval college in Paris. Joining the Merchant Marine at age seventeen, he traveled to ports in Europe, America, Peru, and New Zealand. Ultimately, he moved to Paris in 1872, took a job as a stockbroker, and married Mette Sophie Gad – beginning a ten-year period of stability and family life.[58] He experimented with amateur painting during this time and decided to dedicate his life entirely to art in 1884.

Before sojourning in Tahiti, Gauguin traveled to Panama and Martinique in 1887, Arles in 1888, and to Brittany in 1886, 1888, 1889, and 1894 in search of a primitive

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[56] This date range was picked because Dec. 1888 showed his first signs of wanting to travel to *the tropics*.
[57] Gauguin, *Letters*, 142.
[58] Bernard Denvir, *Gauguin: Letters from Brittany and the South Seas, The Search for Paradise* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1992), 154 and 155

subject. He abandoned his family in pursuit of his art, a move he defended until he died. He wrote multiple times to Mette, championing his actions by insisting, "a famous father may prove a valuable asset."[59] Gauguin's arrogant personality is one of many character flaws that feminist art historians such as Abigail Solomon-Godeau and Griselda Pollock use to discredit his work as an artist. Both art historians point to the fact that Gauguin adopted the views of nineteenth-century Europe, suggesting that it made him racist, egotistical, sexually driven, and ignorant. He is then viewed as one-dimensional, without the possibility of growth. Pollock looks at Gauguin as merely a tourist, with his art capable of only fiction:

> The moment of the production of this painting, the conditions of its possibility, are those of the modernity of the West. It is a European man looking under that gaze and the desire it writes upon the body of the woman bought to service the artist in bed and on it, Tahiti is but a dead phantom evoked by Gauguin to muddle and confuse, and alibi which does not wash.[60]

It seems certain that Gauguin left for Tahiti in June 1891 with the expectation of an idealistic, primitive destination ahead of him. Docked in the capital city of Papeete, he found that his exotic notions and utopian dreams may only have been dreams. The reality of this French protectorate was that it had been greatly Europeanized. Missionaries, sailors, and traders had all greatly affected the lives and culture of the native Tahitians. At the time of Gauguin's journey, Calvinist missionaries had been on the island for about one hundred years, Roman Catholic and Mormon missionaries for fifty.[61]

In Papeete, Gauguin did not find the half-nude natives and wooden huts described in Viaud's book. Papeete consisted of stores and taverns made of bricks and houses with

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[59] A letter to his wife, undated, LePouldu, June, 1889, Gauguin, *Letters*, 119.
[60] Pollock, *Avant-Garde*, 60 and 72.
[61] Danielsson, Bengt. *Gauguin in the South Seas*. New York, 1966. p. 84

iron roofs. The native women wore figure-hiding, rectangular-cut, ankle-length dresses; the men wore skirts with white shirts and straw hats.[62] He found a rigid class structure in Papeete, with elite French officials and military officers who looked down on the lower-class French settlers and natives. Danielsson records Gauguin's disappointment: "It was Europe – the Europe I thought I had finished with – in a form even worse, with colonial snobbery and aping of our customs, fashions, vices, and crazes in a manner so grotesque that it bordered on caricature."[63]

Some scholars, like Solomon-Godeau, are very critical of Gauguin's depiction of Tahitian natives because of the lack of traditional culture available to Gauguin. With the presence of European lifeways and the influence of Christianity, many signs of traditional Polynesian arts, crafts, and religion had faded from the island. Danielsson's research reveals the extent of the change in the natives religion – "Few natives even remembered the names of their old pagan gods and – owing to disparagement by the missionaries – were exceedingly ashamed of the ignorance and savagery of their ancestors. Instead they knew by heart an incredible number of biblical texts, prayers, and hymns."[64]

With this new religious outlook came the displacement of traditional Tahitian art works. The visual stimulus that Gauguin was searching for had been consciously destroyed due to its connection to pagan idols and temples.[65] The production of crafts waned also with the availability of European goods.[66] Factory goods replaced hand-made tools and European fabric and designs wrapped around the natives for skirts instead of

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[62] *Ibid.*, p. 61
[63] Danielsson, Bengt. *Gauguin in the South Seas*. New York, 1966. p. 71 Danielsson does not give his source for this quote.
[64] *Ibid.*, 84.
[65] Teilhet-Fisk, *Paradise*, 25.
[66] Danielsson, *Gauguin*, 85.

traditional loincloth material.[67] The unavailability of these traditional items opens the door for criticism of an artist who wished to paint the *savage* and *untouched*. Gauguin's access to the utopic and exotic influences turned out to be much less than he had expected.

The make up of Papeete illustrates the absence of native presence on the island, with a population of 3,000 consisting of no fewer than one hundred French officials, two hundred French settlers that were mostly male sailors and soldiers (who, when retired, stayed and married Tahitian women), three hundred British and American planters and businessmen, three hundred Chinese lower class workers, and 2,000 permanent natives. These natives were mostly the women who married Europeans and their subsequent families.[68] Gauguin saw few examples of traditional Tahitian living or families while living in Papeete. The native population of Tahiti as a whole had fallen drastically since colonization as well. Sixty-six percent of the population was killed by disease spread because of European influence[69] and the introduction of alcohol was extremely detrimental to the health of the island.[70]

Gauguin's objectives of finding new subjects and inspirations while living in the capital city could not be fully met. His letters to his wife, Mette, began optimistically discussing the new things he has seen, but slowly, through the weeks and months, turned to complaints about poverty and difficulties.[71] Having little money, he set his sights on finding work with the French colonists and officials painting portraits. The French elite

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[67] Solomon-Godeau, "Going Native," 324.
[68] Danielsson, *Gauguin*, 69.
[69] Solomon-Godeau, "Going Native," 324.
[70] Danielsson, *Gauguin*, 88.
[71] Take for example letter 126 in July 1891 compared to letter 128 in May of 1892.

did not want Gauguin's business because of his socialization with the lower-class, and the British and American businessmen and French settlers did not want portraits because of his reputation of rebelliousness and Synthetist style. So after a three-month stay in Papeete, without money or business, Gauguin decided to move further inland with the intention of seeing and painting the "true" native culture and people.[72]

In September, he moved thirteen miles away to Paea, and then twenty-five miles away to Mataiea.[73] Gauguin's actions suggest that he had sincere intentions of seeking an authentic Tahitian culture. If he were merely in Tahiti to exploit the natives and provide an exotic subject to the French art market[74], he may have just stayed in Papeete and used the willing Tahitian models. He had enough around him to provide some inspiration. Papeete was the scene of dances and choirs. Gauguin also would have seen fewer Europeanized natives during the King's funeral, in June 1891 and the French National Day celebrations when natives from surrounding areas came to the port.[75] He did attempt to make a living there by painting portraits, but this seems only out of necessity. The fact that he was willing to move and search for his ideal seems to suggest that his aims were artistic and ethnographic.

The move to Mataiea shows evidence that Gauguin's exotic and racist viewpoints were changing as he stayed on the island. Even though he still wished to find a more

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[72] *Ibid*., 83.

[73] Eisenmen, Stephan. *Gauguin's Skirt*. London 1997. p. 61

[74] One of the main arguments that Pollock uses is that Gauguin was only looking for subjects that would appeal to the art market in France. She suggests that he was not particularly looking for an authentic culture or true inspiration, but tantalizing scenes that would give him unique standing in the Salon and water the mouths of sexually repressed French businessmen.

[75] Danielsson, *Gauguin*, 79 and 80. The celebration of the July 14th holiday lasted for several weeks and doubled the number of people in Papeete. Gauguin would have seen traditional customs such as dances, music performances, and contests like stilt racing and canoeing. It has been documented that Gauguin made sketches during these events.

primitive culture, his ignorant view of the natives seemed to evolve into a more understanding and sympathetic one. He purposefully searched out traditional Tahitian culture and artifacts. He also began to shed the Europeanized view of the natives. He had originally referred to the natives as "savages," in his writings before journeying to Tahiti, but in a letter to Mette in July of 1891, there is evidence that he began to see the negativity of such words and the fallibility of European views:

> All these people roam about everywhere, no matter into what village, no matter by what road, sleeping in any house, eating etc., without even returning thanks, being equally ready to reciprocate. And these people are called savages!...They sing ; they never steal; my door is never closed; they do not kill. Two Tahitian words describe them: Iorama (good morning), good-bye, thanks, etc….and Onatu (I don't care, what does it matter, etc.) and they are called savages![76]

It is obvious that Gauguin continued to hold a somewhat romantic view of Tahiti, waxing on about its simplicity and beauty. He still wanted to escape from a modern, busy, restrictive, and, in his opinion, dull world. Tahiti was his answer to finding an alternative inspiration. He pursued this through his move to Mataiea, his inquiries about traditional art, and religious practices.

One of the main objections scholars point out about Gauguin's work is that he depicted a culture that did not really exist. The imperialists of the previous decades, and the missionary presence on the island for over one hundred years, altered the traditional Tahitian culture that he had hoped to find. Gauguin sought out the remnants of tradition that remained.

Gauguin looked for insights into the old religious systems by reading Jacques Antoine Moerenhout's book, *Voyage au Iles du Grand Ocean*. Teilhet-Fisk believes that a change in content occurs in Gauguin's work after his introduction to Moerenhout's text

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[76] A letter to his wife, Tahiti, July 1891. Gauguin, *Letters,* 163.

in March of 1892.[77] In *Noa Noa* Gauguin attributes his knowledge of Tahitian religion to his mistress Teha'amana, a fact that is contradicted by the extreme similarities in his writings to Moerenhout's.[78] But whichever the source, the evidence still exists that Gauguin made the effort to learn the ancient religion and from a credible source.

Gauguin found less resources when it came to searching for Tahitian art works. Lieutenant Jenot, a close friend of Gauguin's in Papeete, wrote of Gauguin's interest in Polynesian art and his inquiriers of the whereabouts of stone or wooden sculptures. Gauguin sought homes of collectors and curio shops to find objects. The Catholic mission also preserved some art objects that were available to him in a type of mini-museum. Danielsson writes that Gauguin "had seen at the house of the chief of gendarmerie a large collection of beautifully carved Marquesan stone statues, ornaments, battle clubs, and wooden bowls."[79] Most of Gauguin's examples ended up coming from the nearby Marquesas Islands.

Gauguin was also able to witness handicraft production that had survived the Europeanization of the colony. The Tahitians still practiced the tradition of weaving with bark, making hats, mats, and cloth.[80] Eisenman contrasts the 1896 photograph, *Young Tahitians Making Straw Hats* (Figure 2), to Gauguin's 1891 painting of the same subject, *Two Women on the Beach* (Figure 3), and finds that the artist's depiction is accurate. Two women sit on a yellow platform with the ocean behind them. One woman, in missionary dress, holds eight palm leaf strings between two fingers.[81]

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[77] Teilhet-Fisk, *Paradise*, 41.
[78] Solomon-Godeau, "Going Native," 326.
[79] Teilhet-Fisk, *Paradise*, 31.
[8080] Danielsson, *Gauguin*, 85.
[81] Eisenman, *Gauguin's Skirt*, 64.

Another aspect of traditional native life still being practiced included self-sufficient food production. The natives grew yams and taro; gathered bananas, breadfruit, and coconuts; fished; and owned poultry and pigs.[82] Gauguin, himself, struggled with the native lifestyle:

> Two days later I had exhausted my provisions; I had assumed that with money I would find all the food I needed. Food can certainly be found – in the trees, in the mountains, in the sea; but you have to know how to climb up a tall tree, how to go into the mountains and come back bearing heavy burdens, how to catch fish, how to dive to the bottom of the sea and there wrest shellfish from the stones to which they are sturdily attached. So there I was, I, the civilized man, for the time being inferior to the savage…."[83]

Rural Tahitians also preserved basic ideas on ancestors, marriage, adoption, music, sex, dance and politics. Despite the prohibition by missionaries, the natives continued to dance in, as viewed to outsiders, an erotic fashion. The *upaupa* dance was such a dance that featured a type of belly dance with "wriggling and waggling."[84] The legal and official systems in Tahiti were French, but as with the dance restrictions, the natives were not confined to them. Most natives did not follow many laws or reforms partly because of their ignorance of them. Most natives lived in country districts far away from the authorities in Papeete. This population continued to settle disputes with the old tribal law.[85] The native majority also spoke the Tahitian language. The French language, though taught, was not a part of the natives' everyday tongue and was usually forgotten into adulthood.[86] Gauguin made an attempt to learn the language, using it in his titles. Many scholars, though, point to his misuse of the language, instead of his efforts.

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[82] Teilhet-Fisk, *Paradise, 25.*
[83] An excerpt of *Noa Noa* found in Teilhet-Fisk, *Paradise*, 37.
[84] Danielsson, *Gauguin*, 86.
[85] *Ibid*, 86 and 87.
[86] *Ibid*, 87.

Another aspect of Polynesian culture that survived Europeanization that Gauguin became familiar with was the society's third-gender roles. *Mahus* and *Raeraes*, two examples of Tahitian third genders, are roles taken by members of the male sex that differ from the traditional male gender positions in society. *Raeraes* are male transvestites, who often prostitute themselves to male clientele.[87] *Mahus* are males who participate in women's jobs and dress, socialize with and talk as women, and do not live with the opposite sex.[88] They provide other males (usually young men) with sexual services. These subjects are found in Gauguin's *The Bathers* and *The Magician of Hivao* (Figure 4). They depict longhaired male natives in feminine dress with gossiping women in background. Third gender members occupy a complex position in Tahitian society – they are held in high regard at times, as well as ridiculed.[89] Gauguin seems to grasp this in the two paintings by showing strong, forward men with hints of opposition from the gossiping women.

Gauguin not only sought out examples of traditional Tahitian culture, but he also made attempts to live in such a manner. As already shown, he struggled with learning the local language and customs of food collecting. After moving to Mataiea, he began wearing a *pareu* or wrap-around skirt and eating with his fingers in the Tahitian style.[90] The artist also made his studio and home in a traditional hut with native mistresses or, in terms of the local customs, wives. These facts seem to paint Gauguin as less of a "tourist," as Pollock would believe, and more of an ethnographer. Though he combines many traditions along with European and Polynesian ideas in his paintings, there is still

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[87] Eisenman, *Gauguin's Skirt*, 106.
[88] *Ibid.*, 104.
[89] *Ibid*., 109.
[90] Teilhet-Fisk, *Paradise*, 38.

evidence that something authentic about the culture can be deciphered and that this personal knowledge may give depth to his symbols.

Chapter 4: Painting Tahiti

Gauguin was diligent while attempting to discover traditional Tahitian culture. The precise nature of his endeavors to find examples of native artifacts and people did not always parallel his painting of a Tahitian scene. His paintings show mixed symbols of Christianity and Hinduism, Egyptian and European tradition, Eastern and Western thought. His scenes often do not portray the Tahitians in accurate, traditional, or colonial settings. Many scholars use this fact as an invitation to discredit his work or to produce exotic interpretations of them.[91] There exists an ambiguity in his paintings that, combined with the history of his provocative personality, allows for this wide range of opinions.

In recent scholarship, there has been a tendency to assume that Gauguin's painting should portray the Tahitians according to a later twentieth-century conception of "political correctness" and "scientific objectivity." The result is the type of interpretation that Pollock provides: Gauguin as only a tourist driven by male fantasies.[92] Yet Gauguin did not go to Tahiti to be a documentarian; he never claimed to take on that challenge. The question can be asked, "Why did he travel, live with, and pursue a culture, if he was only going to represent it ambiguously?" The answer may lie in the study of his Tahitian paintings without the subjective projection of certain aspects of his personality or views. By stripping away such opinions and by objectively looking at Gauguin's writings and ambitions of the styles he assigned to himself, one can arrive at a different interpretation of his work. Though such an interpretation would be simplistic, it may shed light on how

[91] Danielsson, Solomon Godeau, Pollock, Brooks, Eisenmen.
[92] Found throughout Pollock's *Avant-Garde Gambits.*

he could, in fact, truthfully depict aspects of Tahitian life at the turn of the twentieth century.

Gauguin was indeed affected and influenced by views of *Fin de siècle* France, advances in modernization and psychology, Rousseauan philosophy, and European art tradition; driven by a lust for something different, greater, even ideal; and inspired by a unique culture in the midst of transition and change. It is in the synthesis of these influences that Gauguin ultimately expressed himself and the essence of the culture he so admired. By embracing or possibly even creating a style and movement in art that allows for symbolism and abstraction, his work becomes complex while technically simplistified. *Manao Tupapa'u, Te Tamari no Atua,* and *O. Taiti* are three paintings that demonstrate how his Synthesist, Symbolist, and Primitivist styles were used to create a dynamic view of Tahitian culture.

Solomon-Godeau argues that Gauguin may have plagiarized many ideas from other artists and from the native crafts he had viewed. She quotes Pisarro as evidence, "Gauguin is always poaching on someone's land; nowadays, he's pillaging the savages of Oceania."[93] But this can be said of many artists. Living in artist communities like Brittany, artists mixed ideas and theories, sharing together in movements. It may be too critical to suggest that Gauguin was unoriginal because, though he had many influences and inspirations, there is much evidence to show that he worked on his own art theory. He fully subscribed to specific art styles, but in traveling to Tahiti, he took those styles and made them his own, working independently and with little contact from other artists.

[93] Solomon-Godeau, "Going Native," 328.

Armand Seguin wrote about his artistic study under Gauguin in Pont-Aven and Gauguin's "theory of complementaries" and "law of derivatives:"

> He was soon overjoyed to notice that violet, placed near emerald green, forms a more pleasing harmony than when it adjoins yellow. In a setting sun, one hears shouts of gladness: the ochre of sand, the orange of the kelp, the reds of the rocks, the violet of the shadow fired his enthusiasm. The law of derivatives was about to be created. Oh! That damned theory that gave me such violent headaches, how often he repeated it to me, analyzed it, commented upon it.[94]

Gauguin used color abstractly and for expression instead of naturalism. In studying his letters, one readily recognizes that there existed consistent objectives, techniques, and theories he practiced and believed in strongly. His move away from the Naturalism found in the Impressionism movement can be seen in his written arguments and in his shift in style from his amateur and early Brittany pieces to his later Tahitian titles.

In 1888, one can first notice Gauguin's use of a more Symbolic style in *The Vision after the Sermon* (Figure 5)**.** He uses color shifts and visual boundaries to create a feeling of division and strong emotion. Other works from this time still show the great influence of Naturalism and Impressionism. *Little Breton Shepherd*, 1888 (Figure 6), depicts a Brittany landscape with many greens and browns, realistically laying out a village and its farmland in the fall. This early work contrasts greatly to his pastoral landscape paintings while in Tahiti. An example of this is *Matamoe (Landscape with Peacocks),* 1892 (Figure 7), where the landscape is a mix of yellow, purple, and red. The objects are less realistically depicted, with little dark-to-light gradation or shadows and highlights. They are instead depicted with large areas of single colors and dark outlines.

[94] Amand Seguin, "Paul Gauguin," *Gauguin: A Retrospective*, edited by Marla Prather and Charles F. Stuckey (New York: Hugh Lauter Levin Associates, 1987), 243.

Gauguin seems to have fully embraced the Synthesis and Symbolist style while in Brittany and developed it further during his travels to Tahiti. He acknowledged his participation in the movement in a letter he wrote to Mette in 1892. Gauguin mentions the article that Albert Aurier wrote on the Symbolists for the *Mercure de France*: "I know Aurier and doubtless he has not overlooked me in his article. I created this new movement in painting and many of the young people that have profited are not devoid of talent, but once more, it is I who have shaped them."[95] Aurier did view Gauguin as a leader of the movement that had taken many ideas from the Symbolist movement that had begun in literature a few years earlier.[96]

A title that present day scholarship has used to describe Gauguin's style, as influenced by non-European traditions, is Primitivism. Though he could not specifically claim to be a primitivist, his multiple influences and unique history, discussed previously, can attest to his inclusion in this style. Varnedoe describes primitivism as equally representing "preliterate man; the idea of a beginning or original condition; and the irreducible foundation of a thing or experience. It thus may refer both to foreign peoples and to that which is most deeply innate within oneself."[97]

Manao Tupapa'u (Spirit of the Dead Watching), 1892 (figure 8), the first of multiple depictions of the female nude in bed, clearly is painted in a Synthetic, Symbolist, and Primitivist style that takes on this connection between poetry and literature. This is the case when Gauguin described *Manao Tupapa'u* in *Cahier Pour Aline*: "The musical part: horizontal, wavy lines; harmonies of orange and blue, linked

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[95] A letter to his wife, Tahiti, May, 1892, Gauguin, 169.
[96] Marla Prather and Charles Stuckey, *Gauguin: A Retrospective* (New York: Hugh Lauter Levin Associates, 1987), 150
[97] Varnedoe, "Gauguin," 181

together with yellows and violets – their derivatives – lit up with greenish sparks. The literary part: the Spirit of a living woman linked with the Spirit of the Dead. Night and Day."[98]

Notoriously confusing, Gauguin was content with his work being difficult to decipher. His symbols are colors, harmonies, patterns, and polarities, not icons. He wrote about the loss of emotion when a painting becomes easily comprehensible – "Explanatory attributes – known as symbols would congeal the canvas into a melancholy reality, and the problem indicated would no longer be a poem."[99] Gauguin, above all, was a champion of imagination. He debated with Van Gogh on the importance of imagination over realism.[100] He was more interested in expressing ideas than representing objects. This is confirmed in his statement, "Emotion first! Understanding afterwards."[101] It was in this style that he expressed elements of the Tahitian culture.

Controversial and many times interpreted, *Manao Tupapa'u* is, as Gauguin puts it, "simply a study of an Oceanian nude."[102] Yet the painting holds a story and an expression that is uniquely Tahitian. Gauguin explained the story in *Noa Noa* about his coming home in the night to his mistress, Tehamana. He finds her in bed, frightened by evil spirits called *tupapa'u.*[103] The image shows Tehamana lying on her stomach on a bed that seems lit by lamplight. In the background, there is a hooded older woman figure (the *tupapa'u*) with her hand resting on the bed. Three sparks or flowers float in the air between the two figures. This painting showcases an aspect of Tahitian belief in the

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[98] Gauguin, Paul. "Genesis of a Painting," *Cahier Pour Aline*, Marla Prather, *Gauguin,* 199
[99] A letter to Charles Morice, Tahiti, July, 1901. Gauguin, *Letters,* 169
[100] Chu, *Nineteenth*, 464
[101] A letter to Charles Morice, Tahiti, July, 1901. Gauguin, *Letters,* 169
[102] Gauguin, Paul. "Genesis of a Painting," 199.
[103] Teilhet-Fisk, *Paradise*, 71.

supernatural. Gauguin has used what he has learned from Moerenhout's book and the stories he is told by Tehamana and other natives to create an image of a female nude that can tell the audience much more about the superstitions of the native peoples.[104]

Teilhet-Fisk's interpretation of *Manao Tupapa'u* is focused around this depiction of supernatural ideas. He breaks the elements of the painting down showing how they all work together to represent the Tahitians' deep superstitions. Gauguin stated that he believed the *tupapa'u* was a genuine, everyday fear of the natives, being a traditional sign of death. The natives believed in a supernatural and natural world, as well as good and evil. They saw darkness and night as symbols of death and evil, whereas daylight signified life.[105] Tehamana is placed in a lighted area and the evil spirit of the *tupapa'u* in the darkened. Gauguin used purple as night because he believed it to convey a frightening affect.[106] This reiterates Gauguin's use of colors to convey an overall expression, without worries of naturalist accuracy.

Tehamana is painted with her eyes half open, as if she has just awakened. Nightmares and hallucinations were ascribed to the presence of the *tupapa'u*. The phosphorescent forms, as Teilhet-Fisk describes them, are imaginary shapes in the background, hallucinated by the girl in fear or in drowsiness. Also hallucinated is the figure of the *tupapa'u*. Generally, the idea was held that the *tupapa'u* would strangle its victim, so it is important that the spirit's hand is resting on the bed, next to the girl.

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[104] Some scholars believe that Gauguin only copied the ideas of Moerenhout and could not have learned anything about a religion from a group of people that had been "Chrisitanized." But Teilhet-Fisk proposes an argument on why we could possibly believe Gauguin when he says that Tehamana taught him many things on pages 70 and 71 of *Paradise Reviewed*.

[105] Teilhet-Fisk, *Paradise Reviewed,* 72.

[106] *Ibid.,* 72.

Teilhet-Fisk also notes the way the flowers stem from that same hand.[107] These sparks seem to move from the hand across the body of the girl and stop near her head, confirming the fear that is expressed in the girl's posture and the coloring of the scene.

Other scholars have provided other interpretations of the image that seem to assume much more about Gauguin's intentions. The painting contains few symbols that clearly define the reason and purpose of the work. This ambiguity allows for a wide range of opinions. Brooks, Varnedoe, and Pollock all cite the similarities between *Manao Tupapa'u* and Manet's *Olympia* (figure 9).[108] The comparison between the two works is warranted. Gauguin was impressed by Manet's work, having copied it numerous times and possessing a replica of it in his hut in Tahiti.[109] But Brooks and Pollock see the change in the female nude positioning from the dominant Olympia to a more subservient Tehamana, as provoking an invitation for sex.[110] Brooks interprets the painting as an unself-conscious Tehamana offering herself as a gift to the viewer or the audience in a natural, not erotic, way.[111]

Pollock criticizes all works that showcase women in bed, believing their existence relies solely on the male fantasy and Western racism.[112] She believes Gauguin is copying the African servant in the background of *Olympia* and turning her into a symbol of death: "The shift is possible only through a signifying chain in Eurocentric discourse which slides from Blackness to Darkness and Death."[113] Eisenman takes liberties in

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[107] *Ibid.,* 73.
[108] Varnedoe, "Gauguin," 199; Pollock, *Avant-Garde,* 20; Brooks, "Gauguin's Tahitian Body," 339.
[109] Brooks, "Gauguin's Tahitan Body," 339.
[110] Pollock, *Avant-Garde*, 39-41.
[111] Brooks, "Gauguin's Tahitian Body." 340.
[112] Pollock, *Avant-Garde Gambits,* 20.
[113] *Ibid.,* 23.

interpreting this work. He also views the work in a sexual framework, viewing Tehamana as having an ambiguous gender, portrayed in a position that extenuates her "boyishness."[114] And instead of focusing on the painting's similarities to *Olympia*, he compares it to Balzac, believing Gauguin was interested in androgyny.[115]

These interpretations of Gauguin's work focus on what the scholars believe to be key aspects of Gauguin's personality – Pollock's view of the European male's fantasy, Eisenman's idea of the androgynous artist. But when one strips away such assumptions and looks at the painting with the ambitions of the artist in mind, a less controversial, more simplistic scene can be found. A deeper vision of the Tahitian culture can be obtained when looking at the broader themes of duality shown in the painting. Duality or polarity, as Varnedoe points out, is a main theme in Primitivist works. Gauguin focuses on the difference between light and dark, good and evil, and old and new. The young Tehamana lies in the light – fearful but alive, the older evil spirit, on the other hand, sits in the darkness, symbolizing death.

The juxtaposition of polarities is a main element of *Te Tamari no Atua (Son of God)*, 1896 (figure 10), as well. Similar in structure to *Manao Tupapa'u*, the painting shows a native girl lying on a bed. This time the girl's position has changed and she is halfway covered by a wrap. The girl has just given birth, and two figures stand in the background, one holding the child. Gauguin uses color and line in a musical and poetic way, harmonizing yellow next to green, repeating lines of blues and blacks in the background.

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[114] Eisenman, *Gauguin's Skirt*, 121.
[115] *Ibid*., 122.

As the title suggests, the image may be interpreted as an allegory of the Christian Nativity, with the mother and son possessing halos and the setting in a barn-type area. Again, the contrast of light and dark is present – the mother lying in light and the child being held in darkness. The figure holding the child bears close resemblance to the *tupapa'u* of the first painting. If this is the case, the contrast then becomes very symbolic and seems to foreshadow the death of Christ.

In both paintings, there are clear opposites, but there is also an understanding of a state of limbo. Both women have their eyes half open, suggesting a dream-like or hallucinogenic state. Teilhet-Fisk points out how hallucinations would have been a way of mediation between the supernatural and natural worlds. He also notes the decorated bedpost in *Manao Tupapa'u* as being symbolic of some portal between the worlds.[116] In the first painting, the spirit leans against the pole, and in *Te Tamari*, the spirit faces it. Gauguin clearly lays out the opposites, yet shows there are transitional states. With their bodies in one world and the figures in the background in another, the girl's consciousness seems not to be focused clearly on either. This Primitivist concept may be viewed as symbolic of Gauguin's perception of the *Fin de siècle* Tahitian natives.

Gauguin saw the natives as participators in both worlds of colonial Tahiti. They were in limbo, transitioning out of one set of traditions and forming new ones. Their old way of life was falling away, yet they had not fully accepted the modern civilization into which they were being forced. Gauguin touches on this theme in many paintings, focusing upon elements of the natives' ancestry and symbols of their new European way of life. An example is found in *Merahi Metua no Tehamana (Tehamana Has Many*

[116] Teilhet-Fisk, *Paradise,* 73.

Ancestors), 1893 (fig. 1), where he synthesizes many influences to show a girl that is straddling two worlds – traditional, as showcased by the symbols on the wall, and European, as seen in the conservative dress.

Gauguin may be showing the dualistic nature of the Tahitians in his religious themes of *Te Tamari*. Danielsson makes note how the Tahitians had professed Christianity yet did not fully understand or accept all its teachings.[117] He also states that the natives still held on to their traditional supernatural beliefs.[118] Gauguin seems to depict a vision of the nativity that the Tahitians would have envisioned through their paganized Christianity. The Christian story is there – young mother giving birth in a stable – but so is the traditional *tupapa'u*, representing the evil that exists and the death it brings.

Gauguin returned to the concept of a dualistic culture in multiple paintings, using his abstract forms and musical color combinations to express a vision of the natives that seems to be one of depth, not of the superficiality that Pollock suggests when she calls Gauguin a "tourist."[119] Albert Aurier writes about Gauguin's use of symbolism as a way of focusing on the expression of ideas, not just objects:

> The normal and final goal of painting, as of all arts, cannot be the direct presentation of objects. Its ultimate goal is to express Ideas by translating them into a special language…The artist will also have the right… to exaggerate, to attenuate, to deform these directly significant characters (forms, lines, colors, etc.) not only according to his individual vision, not only according to the form of his personal subjectivity…but also to exaggerate, attenuate, and deform them according to the needs of the Idea to be expressed…Thanks to this gift the symbols, that is, the Ideas, emerge from the gloom, become animate, begin to live a life…which is the essential one, of the life of Art…[120]

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[117] Danielsson, *Gauguin*, 84.
[118] *Ibid*., 121 and 122.
[119] Pollock, *Avant-Garde Gambits*, 67.
[120] From Albert Aurier's "Symbolisme en peinture: Paul Gauguin." Teilhet-Fisk, *Paradise Reviewed*, 17.

Gauguin takes the model of a female nude and distorts it in *O. Taiti (Nevermore)* to express his ideas about the subject. The painting shows the female laying, uncovered, on a bed in a room with outside views. The elements of the figure have been simplified. Gauguin uses strong outlines, little details and flat forms. The subject is pushing out of the picture plan, confronting the audience, yet not in a sexual way. The simplistic style of the nude gives it a very natural feel, playing up the association of savage to nature. The woman is not stable, though, with the look of apprehension on her face. Her eyes look diagonally across the picture plane to a window where a bird sits, seeming to holding the weight of her anxiety.

As with *Te Tamari*, Gauguin juxtaposes two traditions: Tahitian and European. As the title implies, there is a reference to Edgar Allan Poe's *The Raven*. Like the character of Poe's poem, the woman in the painting is distressed by, yet trying to hide from, the message that the bird brings. With her back turned she is not only trying to reject the bird but the two women in the other doorway. The women in the background seem to showcase the same style and elements of the *tupapa'u* figures in the previous paintings. Both signs of evil or darkness split the center of the painting in doorways and they are contrasted with the light that is shining on the women evident on her pillow. These characters, like before, stand in a symbolic pathway, possibly from one world to another.

The opposition of the two evil characters may symbolize the two pathways open to the native – one of Europeanization with Poe's raven, or one of *savage* Tahiti with the traditional *tupapa'u*. Yet both choices cause sorrow possibly because they both cannot be fully realized. The duality found at the essence of Primitivism, and that can be

interpreted as a main objective of Gauguin, again emerges in the identity confused native. The bird's message is one of loss and melancholy as it croaked "Nevermore." Gauguin sought out his utopia and found it disturbed. The natives possessed a rich and unique culture and it was pillaged.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Paul Gauguin painted with expression and imagination at the forefront. His works are more than merely snapshots of a foreign people. He possessed some motivations and symbols, though, which may never be clear to art historians. Gauguin wrote of a fictitious situation in which he is asked to "explain Symbolism" in *Diverse Choses*. He responded by saying, "How nice it would be if you spoke to me in Hebrew, a language which neither you nor I understand. That would make the situation analogous… my paintings probably speak Hebrew, which you do not understand, so there is no point continuing this conversation."[121] But we can continue to look at his works and at the world that surrounded them. Through such inspection, interpretations can be made.

John Dewey wrote that art cannot be viewed outside the realm of human experience.[122] An artwork not only derives meaning from the audience that views it but also from the experiences of the creator. The essential fact that Gauguin was immersed in Tahitian culture for a substantial amount of time provides evidence that his works may in some way be inspired by such encounters. His emic perspective allowed for a complex depiction of a foreign peoples and a unique treatment of emerging modern styles – Symbolism and Synthetism. The experimental nature of these styles gave Gauguin a platform to explore ideas of, but not limited to, religion, ancestry, gender, love, and human rights. He combined the issues he found in Tahiti with European traditions to produce intriguing artworks.

[121] Nicholas Wadley, "The Purpose of Noa Noa: The Primitive And The Civilized," *Noa Noa: Gauguin's Tahiti*, translated by Jonathan Griffin (Oxford: Phaidon, 1985), 121.
[122] John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1934).

Not all of Gauguin's works supposed to speak deeply of the Tahitians plight or experiences. He still studied nudes and explored landscapes with rhythmic colors and simplified forms. His ambition was not to document the culture but to be inspired by it, thus developing his personal style and working towards his ideal. Gauguin demonstrates this goal in a letter to Mette in 1892: "…I have an aim and I am always pursuing it, building up material. There are transformations every year, it is true, but they always follow each other in the same direction."[123]

Yet, artworks such as *Manao Tupapa'u, Te Tamari no Atua,* and *O. Taiti* provide evidence that Gauguin did represent significant Tahitian themes and ideas with a high level of understanding. He combined the motivations of the *Fin de siècle* and the tension found in the life of the Tahitians to create works of depth, not the superficial, exotic scenes that Pollock and other feminists would suggest were only made to tantalize the white-male audience of France. Gauguin was intentional in his technique and had personal ambitions and motives that made him more than just a plagiarist of European antiquity and Polynesian tradition. His background in French society and literature combined with his first hand participation in the Tahitian world provides for a much more complex characterization than the "genius" label given by early twentieth-century writers and "sexual tourist" role proposed by later scholars. It is necessary to investigate all influences and not just focus on his personality.

This complexity becomes clear when one looks at the many ideologies and influences Gauguin found in France, including the writings of Rousseau, the modernization found in the Universal Exposition of 1889, and the exotic pictures found

[123] A letter to his wife, Tahiti, March, 1892. Gauguin, *Letters*, 165.

in imperialist literature. There is much evidence in his writings that Gauguin embraced the notions of *Fin de siècle* but was also jolted by his experiences in Tahiti. He was influenced by the context of a culture in transition. He found himself not only viewing Tahitian life but also participating in it. This interaction cannot be missed in paintings such as *Mano Tupapa'u*. To suggest that he came to Tahiti as a tourist is reasonable, but to claim that he did not outgrow that role after living in Oceania for almost ten years is unwarranted.

Gauguin was motivated to leave his industrial, modern Europe with the hope of something more simple, natural, and free. His dreams represented the exotic, romantic, and racist feelings of the *Fin de siècle*. Interpreters should be aware of these lofty ideas, but they should not be blinded by them. Gauguin was a complex artist and possessed a dynamic character. His European history should not be the only lens from which his story is told. An additional filter of colonial experiences and native insights allow the interpreter to see elements of the Tahitian narrative, of which Gauguin ultimately was a part. Gauguin found a common ground with the natives.

As the female figure in *O. Taiti* looked towards two traditions, Gauguin also debated between a civilized and savage nature. Ultimately Gauguin recognized this connection between the natives and himself. In one of his final paintings, *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* (Figure 12), he attempted to express this relationship through colors, dichotomies, and linear movement. He seems fully aware of this introspection in a letter to Andre Fontainas:

> And all this is changing mournfully in my soul and my surroundings, as I paint and dream at the same time, without apprehensible allegory in my reach…. On awakening, my dream ended, I say to myself: whence come we, what are we,

where are we going?" A reflection which is no part of the canvas, put in language spoken quite earnestly on the wall which frames not a tile, but a signature.[124]

In *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* Gauguin is the dreamer and the dream.[125] He is looking at questions that would plague the Tahitians due to the rape of their culture. Do they really have any connection to their past? Is their future ambiguous, decided on by someone other than themselves? Yet these pursuits exist in a land of beauty and of nature, with the joys of life still occurring. Gauguin witnesses this life and dilemma but also lives it. He is also trying to connect with a questionable past. He, too, feels like a savage and wants to find his true self. He then becomes the subject of the painting. He, with the natives, co-exists with the duality of life and death, nature and the supernatural, good and evil. He writes to Charles Morice a description of the work:

In this big picture:
Where are we going?
Near the death of an old woman.
A strange stupid bird concludes.
What are we?
Day –to-day existence. The man of instinct wonders what all this means.
Where do we come from?
Spring
Child.
Common life.[126]

As the Tahitians, Gauguin lived in a world that was constantly changing. He grew up in a society that was moving towards modernity. He moved to, lived in, and worked in a society that was being altered. Like the Tahitians, who were being introduced to a lifestyle substantially different than their past traditions, Gauguin was

[124] A letter to Andre Fontainas, Tahiti, March, 1899. Gauguin, *Letters*, 217.
[125] Eisenman, *Gauguin's Skirt*, 141.
[126] A letter to Charles Morice, Tahiti, July, 1901. Gauguin, *Letters*, 225.

attempting to exist in a culture he was unfamiliar with, one to which he needed to adapt. Like the natives, he straddled the worlds of Europe and Tahiti – the modern and the primitive. Without the knowledge of both the European and Tahitian cultural contexts and their interaction, the importance of the similarities between artist and subject, and subsequently major themes of many of his works, cannot be fully realized.

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Figure 3: *Two Women on the Beach*. 1891. Musee d'Orsay, Paris.

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Figure 5: *Vision after the Sermon* or *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*. 1888.
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Figure 6: *Little Breton Shepherd*. 1888.
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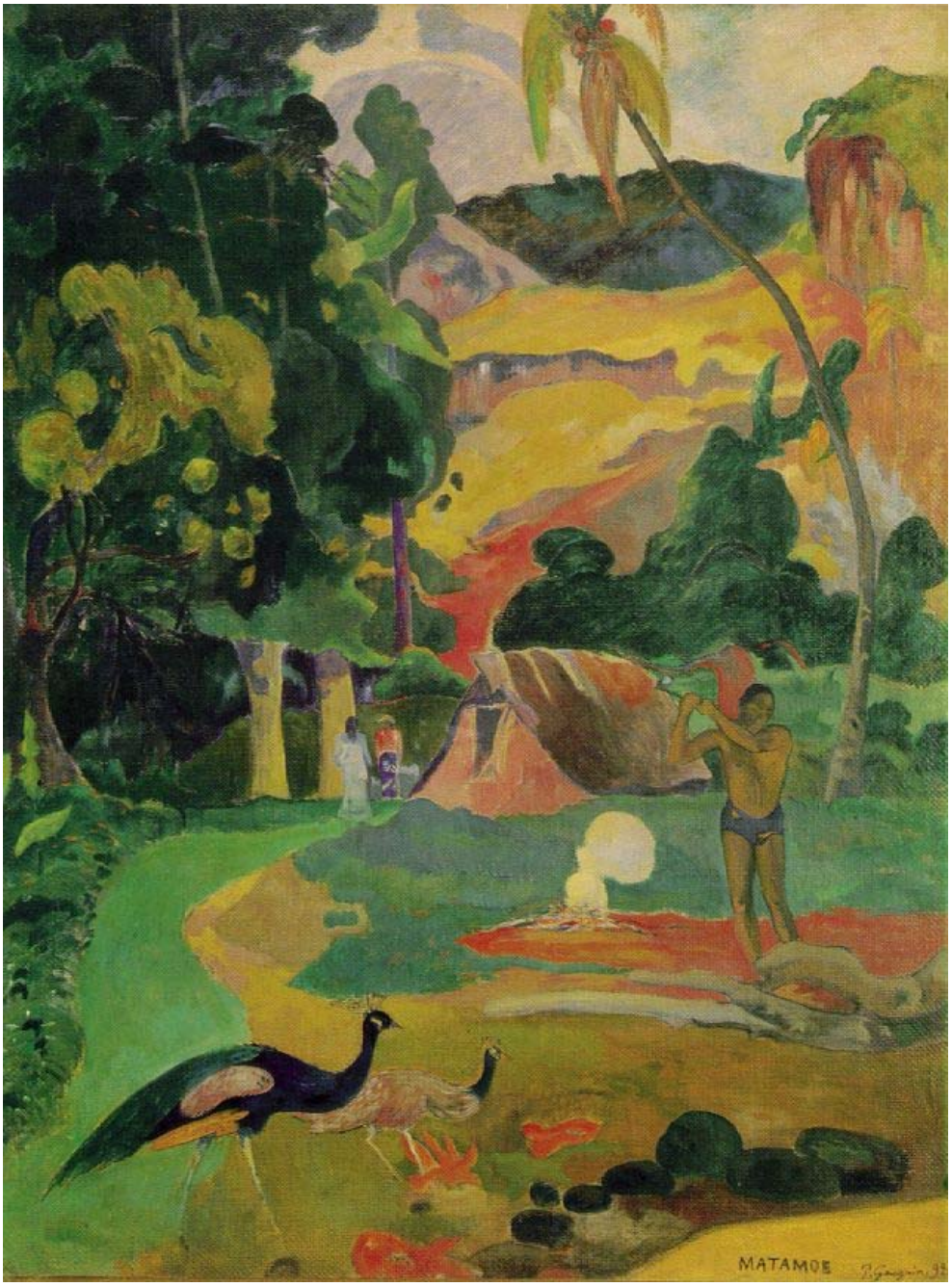

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Figure 8: Edouard Manet. *Olympia*. 1863. Musee d'Orsay, Paris

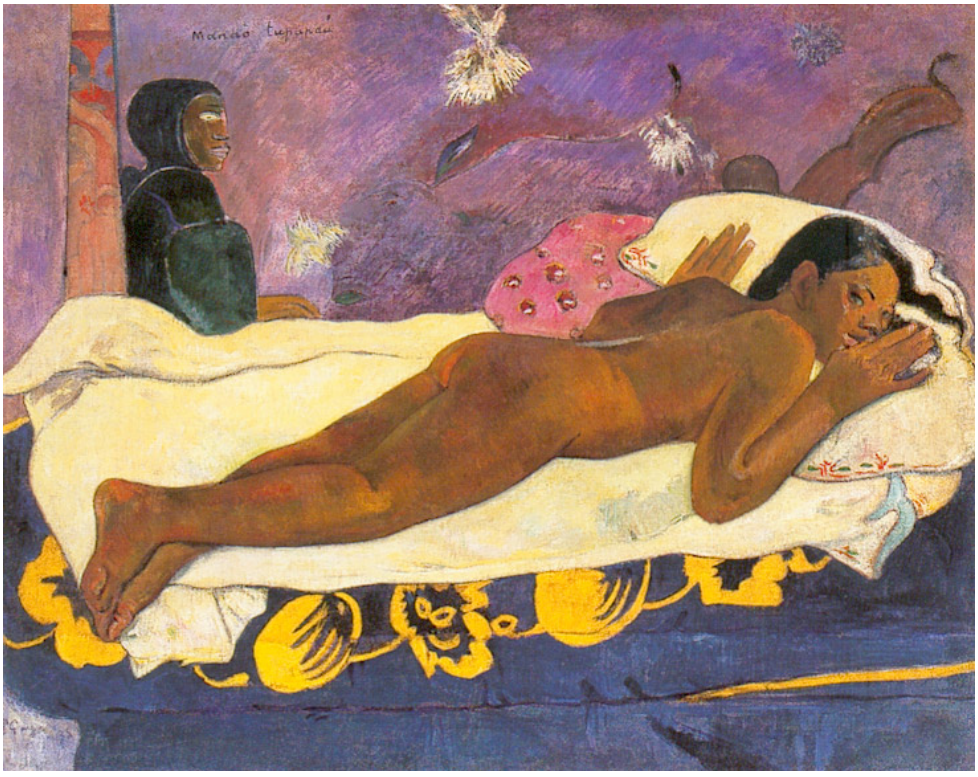

Figure 9: *Manao Tupapa'u (Spirit of the Dead Watching)*. 1892. Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY.

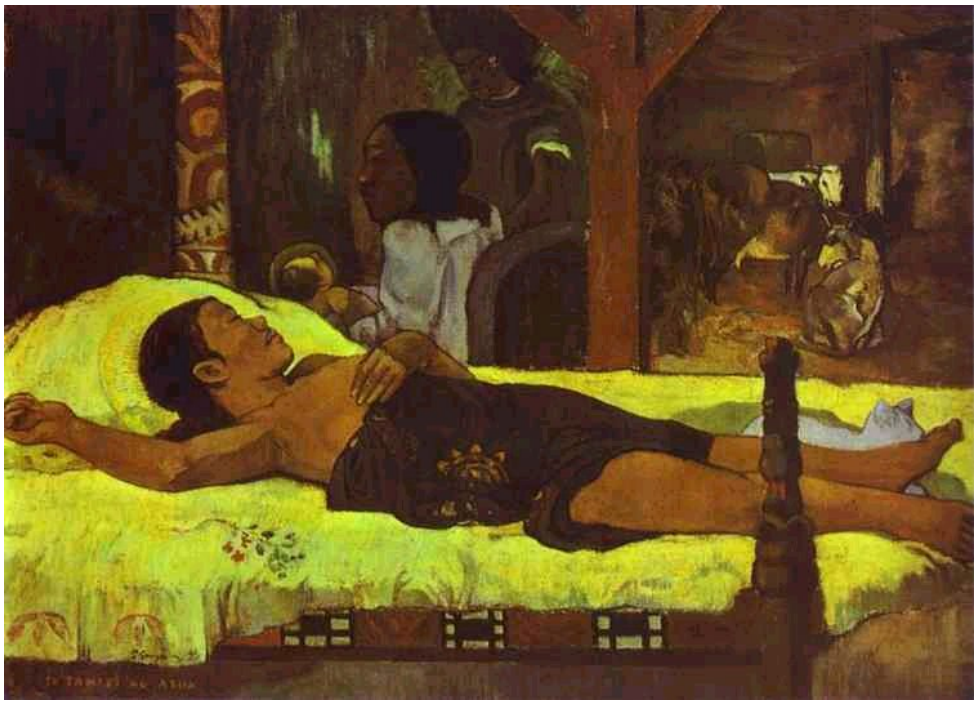

Figure 10: *Te Tamari no Atua (Son of God)*. 1896.
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Figure 11: *O. Taiti (Nevermore)*. 1897.
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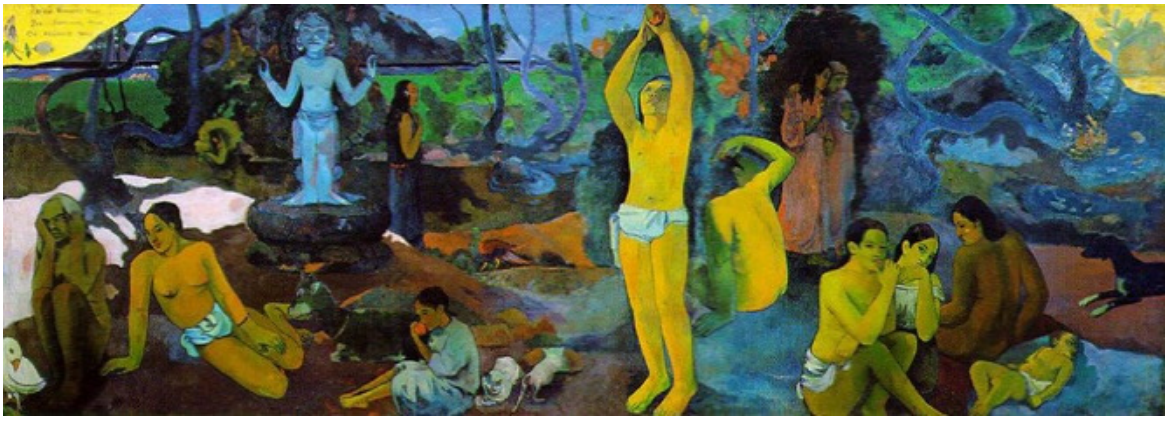

Figure 12: *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* 1897. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.