

« Paul Gauguin and Octave Mirbeau :

Two Men Brave Enough To Stun the “Society of the Spectacle” »

The "spectacle" of nineteenth-century France, though revered and accepted by so many members of the bourgeois class, was met with harsh opposition and resentment by those on the outside--the disempowered, including the artists, the poor, and those viewed as disenfranchised members of the other class looking in. Many of the artists, whether they were writers, painters, or musicians, chose to voice their opinions about this unjust, immoral society which they despised, through their personal means of escape and rebellion--their works of art. By writing or creating other works of visual art, these artisans were able to clearly express their discontent with the government and the society of the spectacle. This despondency, felt intensely by artist Paul Gauguin and writer Octave Mirbeau, led each man to his own, private escape. For Gauguin, this artistic mission in response to his frustration with the social aspects of life in France, involved traveling to Tahiti, a place of solitude and isolation, and living among the native Maori people. Mirbeau, on the other hand, chose to express his disgust with the French government by writing a horrific, radical fin-de-siècle novel, The Torture Garden. Each man chose to escape from reality in his own, unique way. Gauguin's escape was to an idealized Utopia—a place seen by Gauguin as primitive—a place where he hoped to forget the harsh realities of modern France. Mirbeau chose a much different approach to diversion. His novel, which terrorizes the reader, represented the society as a nightmare. This dystopia, which orientalizes the French society, was Mirbeau's way of lashing out at the French government which he, who was a devout Anarchist, despised. These artists, whose perspectives from the "other" point-of view both enlightened and appalled the readers of their works of art, made such a dramatic and important impact not simply because they took the road less traveled, but because they were brave enough to shock the spectacle--to escape from the mechanized French society, and to freely and openly express their opinions of the modern world.

Paul Gauguin chose to leave France in 1891 to, as he wrote in Noa Noa to "find that which I was seeking,". The island of Tahiti, as remembered by Gauguin, seemed to offer all that he was looking for. Tahiti, seen as a utopia to Gauguin, was a place where he could "breathe in the perfume of victory and rejuvenation," and literally escape from the callous veracity of France. Utopia, literally meaning "no place", was what Gauguin wanted. He wanted to go back to nature, "... gradually gain the confidence of the Maoris and come to *know* them," and rediscover who he was and the purpose of his life. He wanted to do this "far, far away from the prisons that European houses are." However, he idealized Tahiti to such a point that when he arrived, it at first did not seem to be the utopia of which he desired. Gauguin, after arriving in Tahiti, discovered that, "The dream which had brought me to Tahiti was brutally disappointed by the actuality. It was the Tahiti of former times which I loved. That of present filled me with horror." The death of King Pomare brought upon a change in the Tahitian culture. According to Gauguin, "With him disappeared the last vestiges of ancient traditions. With him Maori history closed. It was at an end. Civilization, alas! – soldiers, trade, officialdom—triumphed." Gauguin "felt myself very lonely here." The Tahitians, who looked at Gauguin as an outsider, renamed him *taata vahine* (man-woman), due to his long hair, which they had never before seen. Gauguin "struggled to understand his own contradictory position as someone both

alienated from metropolitan culture and society, and yet representative of that same colonizing power." Because of the fact that Gauguin was so distanced from the place he imagined as perfect, this contributes to the harsh reality of the situation. The image of Tahiti as an escape from reality that Gauguin had imagined as perfect had been shattered, and the belief that this sense of escape could happen only in an Utopic place--no where--became reality. This shocking discovery and harsh reality surprised Gauguin, but his intense desire for an inner peace and sense of natural rejuvenation helped Gauguin to maintain a sense of optimism that eventually triumphed. Gauguin came to acknowledge that the Tahitians are, "a prudent and good people." Gauguin stated that:

Civilization is falling from me little by little. I am beginning to think simply, to feel only very little hatred for my neighbor—rather, to love him. All the joys—animal and human—of a free life are mine. I have escaped everything that is artificial, conventional, customary. I am entering into the truth, into nature. Having the certitude of a succession of days like this present one, equally free and beautiful, peace descends on me. I develop normally and no longer occupy myself with useless vanities.

This expression of sheer joy and contentment reminds the reader that Gauguin is writing from a Utopian point-of-view. Although Gauguin seems to be free of worry and any of the responsibilities of modern society, the reader recognizes that this complete sense of utter freedom can not exist in modern society. This worry-free philosophy can exist only in a utopia—nowhere. Gauguin's experiences in Tahiti led to his painting of sixty-three splendid canvases during the first two years he spent there. It was by the "sea superb", where Gauguin remarked, "How good it is to live!" that Paul Gauguin completed some of his most spectacular works. This escape proved to be artistically stimulating and worthwhile for Gauguin.

Gauguin's work *Bathers* expresses all that Gauguin was looking for—going back to nature to find one's self, the freedom of the lack of influences from modern society, and a rejuvenation of one's spirit and soul. The style in which the work was painted, and the abundance of color which was characteristic of Gauguin, resemble the works of French Impressionist Claude Monet and Post-Impressionist Vincent Van Gogh, respectively. *Bathers*, an outdoor scene where two women are by a body of water near a hill, clearly bathing themselves, is a picture which is free of any of the outside influences of the "spectacle". The image features one woman who is standing up, and one who is sitting down by the water. The woman who is standing has her left leg in front of her right, with her back knee slightly bent. Her left hand is resting on her knee, and her back and face are leaning downwards slightly, towards her feet. She appears to be almost stretching her body after a day of work, a symbol of freedom and laxity. The woman in a sitting position has her head resting in her right hand, which is to the right of her resting body. The woman who is standing has dark hair, which appears to be tied up in a sort of bun on the top of her head. The sitting woman has long, reddish-brown hair which cascades freely around her right shoulder. The woman who is standing appears to have flawless, ivory skin. She appears to be refreshed and invigorated by her bath. The cleansing bath rejuvenates the woman as the escape to Tahiti rejuvenated the artistic spirit of Paul Gauguin. The

sitting woman's back seems to have some dirt on it. This dirt, a representation of the work that the woman has done in nature, symbolizes the distance between the women and the harshness of city life. The wide variety and the excess of colors used help to express the beauty of the setting—nature. The sky, somewhat hidden by the excessive growth of the vegetation, is a shade of light lavender which contrasts the dark greens of the trees. From the colors in the painting, it seems to be late afternoon. The lush vegetation and richness of the colors of the plants emphasizes intensely the natural setting. When looking at the painting, one can almost hear the rushing water and smell the scent of the fresh flowers. Just as the rushing water cleanses the women after a long, hard day of work, the experience in Tahiti cleansed Gauguin of his misery in France. The water washes away the physical dirt which covered the bodies of the women, while the habitation in Tahiti cleansed the soul of Gauguin, and enabled him to get back to nature to find his true self. Nature, which is a key theme in *Bathers*, symbolizes a rebirth, which is what Tahiti symbolized to Gauguin.

Although Paul Gauguin escaped from France to a place which brought about positive feelings and emotion, Octave Mirbeau chose to voice his concerns in a much more dramatic way. Mirbeau was disgusted by "the Third Republic's greatest political and moral crisis—the Dreyfus affair." Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish army officer, was charged with selling military secrets to the Germans in 1894. After being tried, convicted, and exiled, Dreyfus' family diligently tried to convince the French government to reopen the case. Eventually, it was concluded by Colonel Georges Picquart that Major Marie-Charles-Ferdinand Esterhazy was guilty, but his superior officers once again adamantly refused to reopen the case. After information was leaked to the press regarding the situation, a few politicians, including Georges Clemenceau, began to defend Dreyfus. By 1898, the case had transformed into a volatile issue. In France, "intellectuals of the left led the fight for Dreyfus, while right-wing politicians and many Roman Catholic periodicals defended the honour of the army." After a slow drift to radicalism Octave Mirbeau became increasingly more disgusted by the political situation in France. Therefore, "it was his involvement in the Dreyfus affair between 1896 and 1898 which confirmed his determination to write a scathing attack on the hypocrisies and injustices of French society." It was then that that he finished writing The Torture Garden, an Anti-utopian allegorical novel, which he wrote with a desire "to expose the hypocrisies of Church and society, to shock the reader into a realisation that much of what he or she complacently takes for granted is cruel and ugly." This dystopia shocks readers into seeing what was "a place of torture and not a house of joy and love." As the narrator in The Torture Garden was so sickened by the torturous processes and lifestyle that he saw in the prison, Octave Mirbeau was disgusted by the dishonest practices of the French government. The reality of what Mirbeau felt is harsh, as are his strikingly dramatic and detailed descriptions in the novel. After reading The Torture Garden, one sees a world which is extremely distorted, much like the world the hysterics, which were photographed in the late 1800's, saw. The hysterics, seen almost as animals to doctors and photographers, are like the prisoners in the novel, who are treated like and become like animals. Although the graphic descriptions given in The Torture Garden make the practices very real to the reader, one wants to conclude that this cannot be a sense of reality by any means at all. Reality becomes distorted to the reader, as reality was distorted to the hysterics who were studied in late nineteenth-century France. Emily Apter, in

Feminizing the Fetish, states that, "The medical establishment's obliviousness to the mistreatment of women in the course of its investigations of hysterical vision forms a seemingly not so arbitrary counterpart to the scales that descended over the political eyes of a nation at the time of the Dreyfus affair." Mirbeau wanted to shock his readers. He wanted to open their eyes to the harsh reality of dystopic life in France, and to lucidly state his opposition to the political hypocrisy that was so blatantly apparent in the French government. While Gauguin chooses to escape to his idealized Utopia, Mirbeau decided to radically face reality—to slap his readers in the face with the nightmare he lived through each and every day.

Claude Monet's paintings of waterlilies are well-known and reproduced by people all over the world. People love to see the softness of the style of Monet and his beautiful use of color. However, these people are oblivious to the dark underside of Claude Monet's work—their underwater torturous roots, and the deep racial and sexual violence that they represent. In *Nymphaéas of the Orangerie at Giverny*, one sees a picture of beautiful flowers floating on the surface of lovely water. The richness of the colors and the beauty of the nature reflected in the picture makes for a beautiful, simple work of art. Without considering the writing of Emily Apter, one sees a body of deep, blue water covered with lush, green vegetation. Within the waterlilies, or nymphaéas on the top of the water, there are several small, yellow, budding flowers. At the top of the painting, a flourishing green weeping willow hangs over the water, casting shadows on top of the deep blue water. The waterlilies form almost a diagonal pattern across the work, as the sides of the diagonal pattern are deep, blue water. The work is inviting. It represents life, new growth, and beauty. All seems to be perfect in this happy world. However, it is only after reading the work of Emily Apter and Octave Mirbeau that one can fully understand the concept of the waterlilies. When looking at the painting from the outside, one simply sees the lush vegetation and the beauty of the plants. Apter, however, leads us to believe that seeing is never innocent. There is always something else there. When one looks deeper into the symbolic meaning of the nymphéa, one discovers that the nymphéa is a flower of sexual excess, hidden torture, and hysteria—in short nymphomania. Apter states that seeing becomes a violent and even pornographic act. Our evil eye, which according to Apter is always hungry to see more, is punished by spots. Apter wrote that, "For Freud, the fate of the renegade voyeur illustrated how scolophilia (the "love of looking") is punished by the ego with blindness or, in the term popularized by his teacher Jean-Martin Charcot, with scotomization." It is quite ironic that the people of France, who did indeed love to look, turned the blind eye when it came to the Dreyfus affair. In addition, people who love the art of Claude Monet also choose to turn a blind eye to the underside of the waterlilies. People are blinded by the cultural barriers of which they are included. One sees from within their own culture, and barriers are always there. Americans look at Claude Monet's Waterlilies with "rose-colored glasses". They see the vegetation, the beauty, the new growth. They enjoy the bright colors and relish in joy when regarding the softly painted, style of Claude Monet. However, these beautiful flowers represented another thing to the artist. According to Apter, "Of all the flowers in Monet's garden, none was more enthralling than the nymphéa, the painting of which was to become like a second signature for Monet, an evident sign of the feminine and substitute for the female models denied them." She continues, expressing Monet's true reason for painting canvas after canvas of the renowned waterlilies, "It is significant that each of the two major

cycles of *nymphéas* seems to have been precipitated by the death of a beloved muse—his adopted daughter in 1899 and his wife in 1911—confirming the intimate relays between mourning and erotic sublimation in these flower women." After being exposed to the work of Emily Apter, one recognizes the significance of looking at things from another perspective. Just as Apter encourages people to see the waterlilies from a different perspective--from the bottom of the murky water, Octave Mirbeau wanted his countrymen to view the political turmoil in France from a different perspective. Mirbeau felt that the right-wing politicians were crooked, who could not see beyond their own prejudices. They refused to look at Captain Alfred Dreyfus as a talented seaman, or a family man. They simply saw his religion—they saw a Jewish man, and this one cultural barrier was what they based all of their prejudice on. Although the waterlilies are a more discreet expression of the dark side, Mirbeau's novel The Torture Garden shocks you into clearly seeing what you do not want to see. While so many of the French people had chosen to discretely look the other way, Mirbeau's shocking novel forced the public into seeing his opinions about the government and the political turmoil. Mirbeau's work made such an impact not solely because it was so gruesome, but because of the social, political, and moral standpoints that it represented as well.

In both Noa Noa and The Torture Garden, there is a significant focus on women. These women, including the Maori women in Noa Noa and Clara in The Torture Garden, help to create the feeling that the reader associates with each work. In Noa Noa, Gauguin describes the exotic, natural, utopian beauty of the Tahitian women which was most unlike anything that he had encountered in France. The Tahitian women become the appeal of his island escape—they represent the freedom, the different lifestyle, and the simplicity which Gauguin so strongly desired.

Gauguin wrote in Noa Noa that:

The amorous passion of a Maori courtesan is something quite different from the passivity of a Parisian cocotte—something very different! There is a fire in her blood, which calls forth love as its essential nourishment; which exhales it like a fatal perfume. These eyes and this mouth cannot lie. Whether calculating or not, it is always love that speaks from them...

Tahiti is covered with lush vegetation and flowers. The Maori women written about in the journal can be looked at as flowers, blooming and creating new growth. They are beautiful, yet simple. They are sexually free creatures, fulfilling the erotic needs of the Tahitian men. The setting of Noa Noa, in an exotic island paradise, is representative of the beautiful, exotic women who live there. Eisenman stated that:

When Gauguin landed in Tahiti, he entered a world in which, unlike nineteenth-century Europe, sex roles were less rigidly defined, and, if nothing else, differently coded. Sexual identity in Tahiti was very much a matter of conscious choice or ritual prescription; it was also a means of acquiring wealth and attaining knowledge of both the material and the spiritual worlds.

As the Tahitian women add to the feeling of beauty, freshness, and associated with Noa Noa, Clara adds to the horror associated with The Torture Garden. Clara is the one who enjoys the torture, Clara is the nymphomaniac, Clara is the one who shocks the reader into seeing what they do not want to see. It is very ironic that Clara, a beautiful woman, is so infatuated with terror and torture. In most European relationships, the woman is the one who takes care of and serves the man. The woman is the one who wants to make the man happy. However, these works represent this standard in a very different way. Both Noa Noa and The Torture Garden refute this European standard. In Noa Noa, the sexes were seen as equal. Gauguin wrote that, "Neither men nor women are sheltered from the rays of the sun nor the pebbles of the sea-shore. Together they indulge in the same tasks with the same activity or the same indolence. There is something virile in the women and something feminine in the men. The similarity of the sexes make their relations the easier." In The Torture Garden, the narrator "belonged to Clara, as the coal belongs to the fire which devours and consumes it." In The Torture Garden, the narrator is submissive to Clara. He longs to make her happy, he longs for her to be content with him. He "was her slave" and "desired only her". Clara, although a nymphomaniac who loved sex, freely criticized men. She says, "Men! They don't know what love is, nor what death is, which is still more beautiful than love." The narrator, as a slave to his love of Clara, does not want to see the harsh reality which is inside the garden. He wants to forget, which is a characteristic of the French public during the Dreyfus Affair. Typically, one thinks of men as more primitive, sexual creatures than women. However, Clara, and her obsessions with sex in The Torture Garden, is the primitive, instinct-driven animal. The joy and fascination that she feels when watching the torture practices makes her seem even more foreign to the reader. Clara has an abundance of sexual power, which frightens the narrator. He lives in fear of her, shocked by her and her bizarre actions.

In both Noa Noa and The Torture Garden, the women are the vegetation, which plays a large role in both of the texts. The Tahitian women represent the newness of the life that Gauguin found in Tahiti. They are primitive beings, close to the Earth and they represent one's strength found in nature. They represent freedom, which is why Gauguin traveled to Tahiti originally. These women create new life and reproduce just as Gauguin created a new life for himself by going back to nature in Tahiti. They are symbols of the beautiful flowers which grew in the Tahitian wilderness, wild and free. The lush vegetation and the natural vegetation are much like the beautiful, exotic Maori women who lived there. The beautiful descriptions of the Tahitian countryside help to create an atmosphere that is comfortable and stable for the reader.

In The Torture Garden, Clara represents the strangeness and horror that lies within the prison walls. She is a symbol of the repulsive obsessions that make a place like the torture garden possible. The disgusting, graphic descriptions of the garden and what lives there, and Clara's unique fixation with them add to her obscenity. She was obsessed with the agony and the pain that the prisoners experienced in the garden. It aroused her sexually. According to Clara, "blood is a valuable stimulant of sexuality...It's the wine of love." Nothing else that she could do would give her "such a thrill." Clara, who did not understand the narrator's discontent with being in the torture garden, repeatedly called him a "silly little fool" who did not "understand anything!" The absurdity of the torture practices and the death in the garden thrilled Clara, while repulsing

the narrator. In The Torture Garden, Clara's sexual obsessions as a nymphomaniac represent the waterlilies, or nymphéas that grow throughout the torture garden. These flowers of sexual excess and long, torturous roots are symbolic of Clara's nymphomania and deeply troubled soul.

Both Noa Noa and The Torture Garden can be seen as a reaction to the spectacle of the period. The spectacle, which was characterized by a "loss of quality", represented modernity, mechanization, and prostitution--the opposite of what Gauguin was trying to experience. Debord stated that "at the root of the spectacle lies that oldest of all social divisions of labor, the specialization of power." Gauguin wanted to escape from the spectacle, to escape from the world which he saw as a place of boredom, of gaiety gone sour, to escape from the European quest for power. Gauguin's efforts to find an Edenic "utopia" were simply his reaction to the spectacle which he so deeply resented. The Spectacle can be simply defined by one word: separation. The spectacle separated the bourgeois from the poor, the have from the have-nots, the artists, dancers, and prostitutes from the upper class. The spectacle, as Debord writes, "is capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image." The spectacle is based on image and image alone. Nothing about the spectacle is real, nothing about the spectacle feels emotion, nothing about the spectacle is achieved by hard work or dedication—it is based on one's looks, one's image, one's representation of what society expects, mandates, and approves of. Both Gauguin and Mirbeau opposed this complacent society. Each refused to conform to what was seen as "right" or "accepted" by those who "had" in society. These men represent ingenuity, strength, and a desire to take a stand against the lifestyle or the practices which they disliked. While most people who longed to be accepted by the "society of the spectacle" turned their heads to the injustices of nineteenth-century France, these men did not. Paul Gauguin reacted to the spectacle by simply leaving. Instead of staying in France and condoning the spectacle, he left with a desire to find himself, to become free of the artificiality of the spectacle. He wanted to discover what was real, and he did so by living with the Tahitian people. Their simple lifestyle became a much desired escape for Gauguin. Octave Mirbeau's reaction to the spectacle was just as, if not even more, radical than that of Gauguin. Octave Mirbeau chose to voice his opinions of the French government through the written word. His strange, terrifying allegorical novel The Torture Garden, was Mirbeau's own, private way of lashing out at the French government and the spectacle which he so despised. Though the two men chose to voice their reactions to the spectacle in different ways, both reactions were seen as radical to members of those on the "inside" of the spectacle.

Cabaret, by the French Impressionist Edgar Degas, clearly represents and defines what is meant by the word spectacle. The spectacle was about being seen. People were judged by who had the most expensive designer clothes, who was invited to the most parties, whose home was the largest and most extravagant and whose children were the most beautiful. It was all based upon vision. This desire to see and to be seen created a new nightlife for the Parisian community. Theatre, ballet, and opera all became passions for the French. They loved going anywhere where they could be seen wearing elaborate clothes and jewelry. These outings became a priority for this society. *Cabaret* reflects this spirit of the desire of being seen. The scene is perhaps a Parisian nightclub, filled with ladies and gentlemen of the bourgeois class. The painting is very busy and bright, with women wearing elaborate dresses of all different colors. Two women in the front

are leaning over, quite flirtatiously, towards two seated men. The woman on the left is wearing a dark black dress with delicate lace sleeves and a black choker around her neck. The woman on her left is wearing a bright yellow dress, and her face is slightly covered by a yellow and red fan. The light fixture in the upper right-hand corner of the painting seems to set the mood of the work. The cabaret seems to be filled with loud, diverse people. The light illuminates the café, just as the desire to be seen illuminates the well-dressed women. Behind the woman in the black dress is a woman in a bright red dress. She is wearing a choker and also carrying a fan. Behind her is a woman in a blue dress, who appears to be looking downward, perhaps checking to make sure that her dress was correctly positioned. It is obvious that all the women want to be seen looking their best. Some women remain in the background, while others longed to be the center of attention. The spectacle, remember, is based on vision. One had to make sure that at all times they looked their best. When one looks at this painting, they feel as if they were actually there in the cabaret, with the well-dressed women and handsome men. One can feel the energy in the room—the loud sounds of music, the happy chatter, and the sounds of laughter and friendship. This reflects the Parisian community's desire to entertain and to be entertained.

The cabaret scene, filled with bright colors and an abundance of energy, was what Gauguin longed to get away from. He wanted to escape from the superficialities of modern France. He did not want to be judged by the parties he attended, the number of upper-class friends that he had, or the clothes that he wore. He longed for a simpler, more natural life. He achieved this by escaping to the island of Tahiti, which he felt was a breath of fresh air. Octave Mirbeau was disgusted by the spectacle as well. He did not understand how one could concentrate on seeing and being seen when there were political scandals and situation occurring in France, such as the Dreyfus affair. In Mirbeau's allegorical novel, the narrator, who is so obsessed with Clara just as the society is obsessed with seeing, reflects the French public. The narrator, because he loves Clara so intensely, chooses to look the other way when it comes to her obscene habits. Clara's love of looking is like the public's love of looking. They both were obsessed with what they saw. Clara was obsessed with the torturing of the prisoners, as the Parisian community was obsessed with the spectacle that became their society. The public chose to ignore the political situation occurring in France, because they were so selfishly involved with their own desires of being seen. Gauguin's Noa Noa and Octave Mirbeau's The Torture Garden were both reactions to the spectacle of the period.

Paul Gauguin's use of Tahiti as the primitive culture to which he escaped and Octave Mirbeau's setting of The Torture Garden in China, which leads to a feeling of orientalism both help the reader escape from the perils of life in modern France. Primitive people, as stated in Gauguin's Skirt:

Paid a lot of attention to dreams, to dreaming, to thinking about the universe, the interrelationship of humans and animals, to the transformation of the consciousness of human to animal. Primitives were a complex lot. Within that complexity lies the potential for a whole realm of consciousness which modern society finds unacceptable, indeed dangerous.

Primitive means basic, original, primary, belonging to an early stage of

development, simple, not fully evolved. The people written about in Noa Noa are characteristic of this. The Tahitians were people that "go naked, as among animals." One woman was described as having a "strong, wild head...firmly planted on her wild shoulders." In fact, he stated that, "At first I saw in her only the jaws of a cannibal, the teeth ready to rend, the lurking look of a cruel and cunning animal." This detailed description alone brings to mind a primitive people. The Tahitians were free of modern influences, of machines and technology. They were isolated from Europe, the very place that Gauguin had escaped from. They focused not on the "spectacle", but on nature, on living, and on loving one another. They were not concerned with any of the trivial tribulations of the Parisian society. *Noa Noa* literally means fragrant, and the sense of smell is one that is linked to the animal, both exotic and primitive.

Gauguin recorded that, "Their continual state of nakedness has kept their minds free from the dangerous pre-occupation with the "mystery" and from the excessive stress which among civilized people is laid upon the "happy accident" and the clandestine and sadistic colors of love. It has given their manners a natural innocence, a perfect purity." The Maori were, "happy and undisturbed. They dream, they love, they sleep, they pray, and it seems that Christianity has not yet penetrated to this place." The Maori were pure, untarnished by the evils of Modern French society. Because of their isolation, they were still primitive. They were original, simple, basic. Paul Gauguin's work *D'où venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? Où allons-nous?* (Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?) illustrates the primitiveness of the Tahitian society, "recast Genesis in Tahitian terms. He "chooses for his basic subject a theme that seems equally drawn from Hebrew Genesis and Polynesian creation narratives." The work is complex, with Gauguin's characteristic use of bold colors making a large impact on the reader. The work features many Tahitian people, all focused on different things. There are men and women, both young and old. The colors used are deep yellows, rich browns, cool blues, and dark grays and blacks. The people are surrounded by lush vegetation and also by a blue statue of what appears to be a god. There are numerous animals, including ducks, a dog, a cat and a goat. Some of the people are naked, while others are simply wearing a loin cloth. According to Eisenman, "Where Do We Come From? is a picture that seeks to discover and explore cultural universals." The figure at the center of the painting has rich, yellow skin. The figure, wearing only a loin cloth, is looking up. His hands are wrapped around an apple, and are outstretched above his head. According to Eisenman, "The figure at the center who has not yet plucked the fruit from the Biblical tree of knowledge is an androgyne; he/she possesses spiritual purity." This idea of purity is central to the theme of primitivism.

Like the descriptions of primitivism, which make *Noa Noa* seem foreign to the reader, Mirbeau's use of orientalism in The Torture Garden has the same effect on the reader. While Gauguin writes about a far-away, primitive place, Mirbeau writes about a faraway orientalized place. Orientalism can best be described as a sense of "exotic eroticism". To look to the "oriental" side of something means to look to the "other". Orientalism was used by not only writers, but also many Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painters. According to artist Vincent Van Gogh, "We like Japanese painting, we are influenced by it – all impressionists have that in common." Claude Monet was particularly fascinated by the articulate Japanese gardens, and Vincent Van Gogh also adored the extreme precision of the Japanese work. Van Gogh, in a letter to his beloved

brother Theo, remarked that, "I envy the Japanese the extreme clarity of everything in their work. It is never dull and it never seems to be done in too much of a hurry. Their work is as simple as breathing, and they do a figure in a few sure strokes as if it were as easy as doing up your waistcoat." After meeting Clara on a boat, the narrator and Clara travel to China to start their life together. Immediately, the setting is orientalized to the reader. The reader pictures the couple traveling to an exotic, foreign and unfamiliar place. Everything about Clara, from her dramatic, provocative appearance to her bizarre actions and sensual presence, is exotic. Clara is so intensely different from the French women of the "society of the spectacle". Clara, who longed for attention much like the bourgeois French women, went to many different lengths to manipulate people, and to get that that which she wanted. She used her beauty as a type of evil weapon against people. She is described as:

Divinely calm and pretty, naked beneath a transparent yellow tunic, she was indolently lying on a tiger skin. Her head supported by cushions, her hands, which were laden with rings, toyed with a long lock of her unfurled hair. A dog from Laos with red fur slept next to her, its muzzle on her thigh and one paw on her breast.

Immediately Clara is seen as "other". European women would never wear such an outfit. They would not dress so provocatively and allows such animals to be so near. Clara speaks freely of her love for the Chinese and most importantly, their methods of torture. She says, "You see, my love, what marvelous artists the Chinese are and how well they know to make nature complicitous with their refinements of cruelty!" Clara's desire was to be a flower in the setting, a garden which "occupies a vast quadrilateral space in the heart of the prison." Clara learned that "a single flower sometimes requires twenty males to satisfy her." She, a nymphomaniac, longed to be a flower. Her unusual desires and bizarre quirks help the reader to see Clara as "orientalized" or as the "other". The Japanese art of both Claude Monet and Vincent Van Gogh reflect the "other" side.

Claude Monet's portrait of his wife, *La Japonaise*, is a breathtaking painting which shows her dressed in an elaborate red kimono, with her hair upswept, holding a fan. Her head is tilted back and the look on her face is one of pleasant contentment. In the background are numerous Japanese fans, all ornately decorated and "orientalized". Perhaps the most intriguing thing about her kimono is the fact that it is so extensively detailed. Embroidered on the red kimono are beautiful, gold leaves which are a symbol of the world-famous Japanese gardens. The bottom of the kimono is outstretched around Camille, with a Japanese ronin, or warrior, on the front. The warrior's stern look sharply contrasts the smoothness and the smile on Camille's face. The richness of the color red, a color associated with traditional Japanese culture, but also reminiscent of the blood shed by the victims of the Torture Garden, symbolizes that once again "seeing is never innocent". The bland gray color of the wall directly behind Camille sharply contrasts the square pattern of the ivory and gray carpet which lies under her feet. A single fan rests on the floor, covered with Japanese art. This orientalized image of Camille Monet, though reminiscent of Claude Monet's soft style and feminization, is quite different that other images of her, such as *Madame Monet and Child*. This image reflects Claude Monet's fascination with the Japanese culture, as reflected in both his artistic work and his gardens at Giverny. Monet's Japanese gardens, are reminiscent of those in

The Torture Garden. Monet painted several pictures of the bridge at Giverny, and several times in the novel The Torture Garden, the bridge and the "lush ground... covered in gardens and orchards and nourished giant trees and marvelous flowers." were mentioned. Emily Apter writes that The Torture Garden, though set in China, is an allegorical representation of life in France, most closely in setting related to the beautiful gardens at the home of Claude Monet, Giverny. She states that, "In their plans, Giverny and the torture garden exhibit a disturbing similarity."

Another artist who loved the work of the Japanese and who was greatly influenced by them was Vincent Van Gogh. His ideal became, "to live and work as a Japanese painter might, 'close to nature, like the ordinary man in the street'." Van Gogh's brother Theo had sent him a number of Japanese prints "he delighted in" and suggested exchanging work with each other to his friends Gauguin and Bernard, just as the Japanese artists were in the habit of exchanging their works with one another. Van Gogh greatly admired the work of the Japanese. In a letter to his brother, he wrote:

If we study Japanese art, we discover a man who is undeniably wise, philosophical and intelligent, who spends his time – doing what? Studying the distance from the earth to the moon? No! Studying the politics of Bismark? No! He studies...a single blade of grass. But this blade of grass leads him to draw all the plants – then the seasons, the grand spectacle of landscapes, finally animals, then the human figure. That is how he spends his life, and life is too short to do everything. So come, isn't what we are taught by these simple Japanese, who live in nature as if they themselves were flowers, almost a true religion? And one cannot study Japanese art, it seems to me, without becoming merrier and happier, and we should turn back to nature in spite of our education and our work in a conventional world.

Van Gogh's work *The courtesan* reflects his passion with the Japanese artists. This work features a Japanese woman in a kimono, with bamboo reeds, waterlilies, and flowers surrounding her. The colors are bright and vivid, and the image, though sharper, and painted with much thicker brush strokes, resembles *La Japonaise* by Claude Monet ever so slightly. The difference between the two is that Claude Monet's picture is of his wife, a European dressed up as an Asian, and Van Gogh's picture is clearly of an Asian woman. Her narrow eyes and ivory face are representative of the Asian culture. The kimono worn by the Japanese woman is a mixture of numerous colors—bright reds, rich greens, soft yellows, deep browns, dark blacks, and light tans. The kimono features no distinct pattern, but rather an accumulation of all of the colors. The complexity of the kimono is dramatized even more by the solid golden background that the woman stands against. The yellow frog directly under the woman represents nature and the Japanese people's love of the outdoors. Many of the Impressionists adored the work of the Japanese, which they viewed as an escape from their typical works.

One of the most special things about art is that each and every person can look at it in a unique way. While one person may read Mirbeau's Torture Garden

as the work of a deeply troubled man, another may honestly understand the political statement he was trying to make. Some people may look at the work of Gauguin as frightening or strange, but others can understand his desires to be free of European influence. The works of Gauguin and Mirbeau make such a dramatic impact on the reader not simply because they are artistically great, but because they are enlightening and eye-opening. Gauguin traveled to a primitive culture, exposing himself to a new group of people and ideas. He did not conform to the spectacle. He made his own rules. Mirbeau did not sit back and look away from the Dreyfus Affair scandal in France. He made his opinions known. He criticized organized government and religion through expressions of his work and life. Although the readers of Gauguin and Mirbeau's work may not agree with everything that the artists said and did, they respect intensely their desire to "see the other"—to break away from the spectacle of Modern Life that encompassed so many. With artists who choose to defy the spectacle, the world is a better place. Art serves to add a dimension to life that gives all life more meaning and all people an opportunity to express views on the spectacle of humanity.

Sarah Jamieson MALLORY

Université de Caroline du Nord, Greenville

<http://www.unc.edu/~smallory/portfolio.html>