

Fall 2010

“Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?”: Freud and the Unconscious of Paul Gauguin

Lauren Cavalli
Providence College

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.providence.edu/art_students

 Part of the [Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture Commons](#), [Art and Design Commons](#), [Modern Art and Architecture Commons](#), [Other History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons](#), and the [Theory and Criticism Commons](#)

Cavalli, Lauren, ""Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?": Freud and the Unconscious of Paul Gauguin" (2010). *Art & Art History Student Papers*. 6.
http://digitalcommons.providence.edu/art_students/6

It is permitted to copy, distribute, display, and perform this work under the following conditions: (1) the original author(s) must be given proper attribution; (2) this work may not be used for commercial purposes; (3) users must make these conditions clearly known for any reuse* or distribution of this work.

*Reuse of included images is not permitted.

*“Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?”
Freud and the Unconscious of Paul Gauguin*

Lauren Cavalli

Principles of Research
Senior Thesis
Dr. Johnson
22 November 2010

During his second trip to Tahiti in 1897, Paul Gauguin, a French Post-Impressionist artist, attempted to take his own life. Immediately before this attempted suicide, Gauguin painted a kind of suicide note and addressed it to the world. He appropriately titled it: *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* (fig. 1). Due to its large scale, this painting is arguably Gauguin's most ambitious work; it is approximately five feet (1.5m) high and over twelve feet (3.60m) long and took him over a month to paint. It portrays several Tahitian natives, the majority of which are painted in an orange hue that makes them stand out against the bluish-green of the Tahitian landscape. Although the painting lacks a truly dominating central figure, the largest figure, an androgynous native reaching up to grab fruit off the limb of a tree, and the child located on the figure's left, can be associated with Gauguin, himself. The figures, animals, and foliage Gauguin weaves across the canvas, as well as the Catholic symbolism present in the painting demonstrates his preoccupation with religion and the Tahitian lifestyle as he contemplated death. The title of the painting evokes questions he grappled with his whole life. Fortunately, whether intentional or not, Gauguin would fail to kill himself and live for six more years. Although Gauguin painted a diverse number of works throughout his life, due to the association of *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* with Gauguin's impending death, it became one of the greatest and most famous works he would ever create.

Over the years, numerous scholars have attempted to dissect Gauguin's life in order to obtain a greater understanding of his character and yet, to this day, the complexities of Gauguin's character still make him an enigma. There are as many accounts of his personality as there are paintings. Some believe him to be a tragic hero

who desperately sought a simpler way of life in order to preserve a closeness to nature that had long been forgotten by European society. Others believe Gauguin to be a womanizer who fled from familial responsibility and his own failures in order to have sexual freedom, and engage in a more erotic life. The only aspect of Gauguin that is indisputable is that he was first and foremost an artist. This is confirmed in a letter that was written by his wife, Mette Gad, to a biographer in 1905: “No one gave him the idea to paint. He painted because he could not do otherwise.”¹ Therefore, the best way to discern his true identity is through his art.

The majority of his work was poorly received by the European art world. Gauguin became infuriated by the little success he achieved as well as society’s inability to appreciate his art. In response, Gauguin created much controversy when he decided to abandon his life in Europe and search for a simpler way of life where he could establish a new identity. He sought to demonstrate the superiority of “primitive” life and implicitly criticize the society from which he had come. However, upon his arrival in Tahiti, he discovered that Tahitian culture had already been tainted by the influence of the West. In his work, Gauguin was determined to preserve the Tahitians’ closeness to nature and to revive as much of their culture as possible: he painted traditions and religious beliefs that the Tahitians had not practiced in some time. Since many of Gauguin’s Tahitian paintings do not accurately portray his life in Tahiti, it can only be concluded that they depict a dream world that contains bits of reality, parts of the past, and much from Gauguin’s unconscious mind.

Sigmund Freud, in Gauguin’s own time, was the expert on the realm of the unconscious mind. To gain access to Gauguin’s unconscious, one may apply the three

components that Freud determined make up the human psyche: the id, ego, and super-ego.ⁱⁱ Since Tahitian women were the predominate subjects of Gauguin's paintings, it is also necessary to apply Freud's theories on cultural psychoanalysis and childhood development in order to determine why Gauguin was obsessed with the "primitive" life and how he viewed women. Out of all the works Gauguin produced, it is imperative to focus on "*Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*" since it was intended to be his last work of art. He painted it "in an unheard-of fever," representing his "Self," or his ego, at the most vulnerable point in his life and at the culmination of all his frustrations with the world. With the lens of Freudian analysis, the painting becomes a window through which we can understand Gauguin's personality at this particular moment in time.ⁱⁱⁱ

Freud's division of the human person into the id, ego, and super-ego, allows us to break down and better understand Gauguin's psyche. The id represents human desires, which exist dormant in our subconscious and emerge from time to time to drive us to do things. The ego is our inner "Self," the person we are, and of that which we are consciously aware. The ego tries to satisfy the id in a rational way. The super-ego, however, constantly tries to thwart the id. It is the sense of morality that is embedded in us.^{iv} All three are present in *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* In order to understand what drove Gauguin into a suicidal state of mind, the state in which he painted this work, first we must apply these constructs to Gauguin, himself.

The easiest part of the mind to define in terms of Gauguin is the id, or Gauguin's desires. Throughout Gauguin's life, he seems to have been fueled by two impulses: the desire to be recognized as a great artist by the society in which he was born, and the

desire to be free from social and moral obligations so that he could commit all his energy to his art. Evidence to substantiate this is abundant in his writings, in the words of his correspondents, and in his seemingly selfish actions throughout his life. His desires are embedded deep in his unconscious, the source of which may not even have been known to him. He did not have the mechanisms—the strength or the will power—to deny them. “I absolutely must seek my existence in painting.”^v And in trying to realize his existence through his work, he painted at the expense of all those around him.

Gauguin originally left Europe in 1891, since his works were poorly received by the European art world and he was unable to satisfy his desire for recognition. Gauguin chose Tahiti as his destination over other South Pacific Islands after learning about its beauty from the published accounts of other travelers. These led him to envision an earthly paradise, and because of “the availability of subsidies for French citizens willing to go to the colonies,” the cost of his voyage was lessened.^{vi} In Tahiti, his id would manifest itself as his desire to turn “savage” and shock Europe, while he simultaneously yearned to prove his worth. For Gauguin, the “primitive” life would mean no societal obligations as well as no one to judge his work. However, what he did not realize is that he may have desired the “primitive” life long before he became jaded with European society. In reference to Gauguin, an accurate definition of primitivism is “an association of racial others with instinctual impulses.”^{vii} Therefore, Gauguin’s desire for the “primitive” originates in the experiences of his early childhood, the time he spent with his mother in Peru, and is augmented by his admiration of his Peruvian grandmother, Flora Tristán y Moscoso, whose character he learned through her meticulously kept journals.

In 1851, at the age of four, Gauguin traveled with his father, mother, and sister to Lima, Peru to stay with relatives. During the voyage, Gauguin's father, Clovis Gauguin, died of a stroke. Gauguin would live in Peru with his mother, Aline, and his sister for four years. During Gauguin's stay, he lived with his uncle, Don Pio de Tristán Moscoso and his "earliest memories were of the exotic city of Lima, where his family received all the privileges of being cousins by marriage to the president of the Republic, including living in the most luxurious setting in a wildly extravagant city."^{viii} Gauguin's childhood in Lima exposed him to all the luxuries and comforts that accompany wealth, and would ultimately result in his inability to handle financial responsibility in the years to come. It is also important to note that the death of Gauguin's father would leave him without a model to guide him as he grew up. Gauguin is forced to concentrate his parental love on his mother, who takes on the role of both father and mother. She becomes an image of strength and independence for Gauguin. Therefore, Gauguin's memories of his mother at this time are essential to our understanding of Gauguin's view of women. In one of his memoirs of Peru, Gauguin wrote about the beautiful and elaborate costumes of the Peruvian women. "The whole costume consisted of the *saya*, a long tight, pleated skirt, and the *manto*, a veil with one eyehole cut into it;" Gauguin was awed by the beauty of his mother when she wore the traditional costume, "which eerily revealed one of her soft beautiful eyes."^{ix}

According to Freud, the first four years of childhood determine the growth of a person's character.^x Any experiences a person remembers from this young age as well as "the unintelligible memories of a person's childhood and the phantasies that are built on them invariably emphasize the most important elements in his mental development."^{xi}

Even though Gauguin only spent a few years in Peru, the memories he retained served as the basis for his identity and he would always see himself as “other” in Europe.

After becoming dissatisfied with the monotony of European life, Gauguin’s earliest memory of his mother as a beautiful woman whose appearance, when she was adorned in Peurvian costume, was wildly exotic, gave Gauguin the impulse to seek the “primitive.” “In later years, the artist, who was keenly aware of his foreign ancestry and exotic appearance, and often referred to himself as a ‘pariah’ and a ‘savage from Peru,’ must have looked back to that country with considerable nostalgia.”^{xii} The voyages Gauguin would periodically take in search of a “primitive” paradise were his unconscious attempts to satisfy his id, by searching for a way home to the peace and security he had known as a child.

Gauguin’s desire to venerate the concept of the “noble savage” would spark from another fiercely independent and strong woman, his grandmother, Flora. Flora’s language in her journals bears an extraordinary similarity to that of Gauguin. As she “revolted against the cruel social order that had so victimized me, that had sanctioned the exploitation of the weaker sex,” Gauguin had believed the same, except that he was not only targeted due to his gender and the male imperative to support one’s family; he was also targeted due to his profession as an artist.^{xiii} Flora compares the native women of Peru with European women and claims, “there can be no more striking mark of the superiority of women in the primitive populations.”^{xiv} Ultimately, Gauguin believed the same of the women of Tahiti; however, when Gauguin first arrived in Tahiti, he was still strongly influenced by Europe’s condescending outlook on “primitive races.” This is made clear through his descriptive language in his journal, *Noa Noa*. At first, Gauguin

sees “the savage” in the Tahitians and describes them in animalistic terms. This can be observed upon his first encounter with Vaitua, the Tahitian princess: “At first I saw in her only the jaws of a cannibal, the teeth ready to rend, the lurking look of a cruel cunning animal, and found her in spite of her beautiful and noble forehead, very ugly.”^{xv}

However, not long after, he begins describing the Tahitians as a majestic race and on one of the first sketches he makes of a Tahitian model, he writes: “She was not at all handsome according to our aesthetic rules. She was beautiful.”^{xvi} It did not take Gauguin long to unbury his grandmother’s approval of “primitive” cultures from his unconscious.

Initially, he stayed in Papeete, which was colonized by Europeans. Gauguin soon realized it was too much of an imitation of the very society from which he fled. He found his peace and his paradise, the satisfaction of his id, as soon as he moved further into the wilderness. At first, for Gauguin, paradise meant freedom. It was an escape from European society; he was able to take refuge in a tropical haven, where the colorful landscape resonated strongly in him as he remembered the colors of Peru. However, he soon found that the natives were sophisticated in a way he did not think possible, that is, they knew how to live in communion with nature. “Here I was, a civilized man, distinctly inferior in these things to the savages. I envied them. I looked at their happy peaceful life round about me, making no further effort than was essential for their daily needs, without the least care about money. To whom were they to sell, when the gifts of Nature were within the reach of every one?”^{xvii} Tahitians lived in a communal society: if someone were sick, he or she would be cared for; if someone were hungry, he or she would be fed. The Tahitians lived simple lives without any of the anxieties Gauguin experienced in Europe. Therefore, their lifestyle became part of Gauguin’s vision of paradise, as well.

The ego, or the conscious self of Gauguin, is much harder to define due to its changing nature over the years. However, during the Tahitian period, it began as a self-righteous belief in his own virtue for being open-minded enough to live with the native Tahitians and thus, live in paradise. He arrogantly pretended that he had found a superior way of life that no other European could experience due to their attachment to the materialistic society in which they were born. In his journal *Noa Noa*, he berates European society and spins his fantasy of creating a new identity in Tahiti: “Yes, wholly destroyed, finished, dead is from now on the old civilization within me. I was reborn; or rather another man, purer and stronger, came to life within me.”^{xviii} However, Gauguin could never recreate himself into a new man and no new man was born within him. He remained, as ever, attached to the European society which he hoped to leave behind. Since he was raised primarily in Europe, no matter how happy he was in Tahiti, he defined and measured himself according to European standards. This meant that the id’s pursuit of recognition in the art world could only be achieved in Europe. If Gauguin were never to return to Europe, he would lose all sense of his “Self.” Even though he loved the Tahitians and embraced their “primitivism,” they were still “primitive” and had no ability to judge his art. His ego was in conflict with itself. Gauguin could never escape Europe and the constraints of a society that he found so suffocating.

It is not a surprise to note that Gauguin’s super-ego was rather weak. It was constantly defeated by the id. His sense of morality was greatly flawed and many of his contemporaries knew it. His super-ego’s failures can be observed in his relationship with his wife Mette Gad, whom he married at the age of twenty-five, and in his complaints to his friends and acquaintances in order to earn their sympathies, and whenever possible,

their money. In his pursuit of artistic prominence, he all but abandoned Mette and their children, who despite his reprehensible behavior remained in contact with him through most of his life. Gauguin felt pressured to be the breadwinner of the family, but due to a declining economy and the unstable reception of his art, he would have had to remain a stockbroker, his original profession, to succeed in this role. In Gauguin's last attempt to rectify his life with his family, in 1884, he would move with Mette and the children to Copenhagen, Denmark, where Mette had family. However, this move would be disastrous: Gauguin grew even more discontented with his life as he struggled to support his family in a place where he did not speak the language, he saw the art as mediocre, and Mette's relatives disdain for him was intolerable.^{xix} Instead, he gave in to his id, the desire to be a great artist, and tried to ease his super-ego by putting distance between himself and his family so that they did not serve as constant reminders of the duty as a husband and father that he was neglecting. Not only the distance, but at times the long lapses between correspondences allowed Gauguin to forget about his family when it was convenient to him.

Much of Gauguin's behavior towards his family is inexcusable, since it can mostly be attributed to his selfishness. However, within his unconscious, he had a view of women formed by his grandmother, a feminist and fierce social activist, and his mother, a single parent, both of whom exhibited extraordinary independence and were as capable as any man. Rather than battle the id, his super-ego seemed to make excuses for it. Based on the maternal archetypes in his youth, Gauguin might have assumed Mette had the same strength exemplified by his grandmother and mother, thereby making his presence in the home unnecessary, since as a woman she could take care of herself (and to a great degree,

she did). When he journeyed to Panama to work for his brother-in-law, he acquired a job working for a decent salary in an office setting. However, he wrote to Mette and claimed to be working as a day laborer on the Panama canal. Not only did he lie about his hardships in order to gain sympathy, he did not send any of the 600 francs he was making at his job back home. This is one of many examples of the failure of Gauguin's super-ego and in its attempt to cover up for the guilt he was feeling, due to the id, it caused him to fabricate tales of his own suffering.^{xx} As Gauguin grew older, his super-ego covered up for his id less and less. When his Peruvian uncle died, Gauguin received inheritance money and kept the majority of it for himself. In a letter to Mette in 1890, he tried to ease his conscience by calling his children, "her children."^{xxi} By disavowing his children, he felt as if he owed them nothing. Gauguin would use this money, along with profits from a successful exhibition at Boussod et Valadon that amounted to 7,000 francs, in order to finance his first trip to Tahiti.^{xxii}

Gauguin's first trip to Tahiti was a dream that he was able to turn into a reality. This reality is accessible to scholars through Gauguin's journal, *Noa Noa*. Even though the journal aggrandizes the Tahitians and the life Gauguin had in Tahiti, it remains one of the largest primary source documents in existence pertaining to his first journey there. Although the extent to which the account of Tahiti is exaggerated in *Noa Noa* cannot be known, much of what we know today about Tehura, Gauguin's Tahitian wife, is derived from its pages. Whether or not *Noa Noa* is accurate is of great concern, but when examining Gauguin's unconscious, if anything, it may be an even greater insight into his psyche than any other source.

According to *Noa Noa*, once Gauguin found a hut away from the European settlements, he was able to experience Tahiti as if he were one of the natives. Even though he would develop respect and appreciation for the Tahitians, Gauguin did not find happiness right away because Tahiti was still a foreign land to him; he did not speak the native language and he was lonely. It was only after Gauguin was given his Tahitian wife that he found happiness.^{xxiii} Not only did the foreignness of Tahitian culture remind Gauguin of Peruvian culture and his mother, but his wife Tehura was only a girl of thirteen years of age. Due to her youth, after spending a week with her, Gauguin “had a feeling of ‘childlikeness,’ such as I had never before experienced.”^{xxiv} This regression to a childlike state where he is free of responsibility and social constraints is Gauguin’s unconscious recall of the innocence of his childhood. Although Gauguin could not have been happier, he again became restless. Due to pecuniary concerns, he returned to France in 1893 and would not see Tahiti again until 1895.

Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going? was painted during Gauguin’s second trip to Tahiti. In order to understand how the constituents of his personality function in *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*, it is important to acknowledge that Gauguin’s return trip to Tahiti differed greatly from his first experience of the exotic land. Gauguin no longer had Tehura whom he loved and who truly made of Tahiti an Eden since he imagined them as “the first man and the first woman in paradise”^{xxv} There was no longer a sense of adventure, and the thrill of seeing the landscape for the first time was gone. The time he spent in Europe had put him in the worst spirits yet, especially due to the complete and utter failure of an exhibition at Durand-Ruel’s in Paris in November of 1893.^{xxvi} He was also older now and

his health was declining. It was in this state that he tried to resume the life he had started there so many years before, and it was in this state that he apparently resolved to kill himself.

Gauguin tells us that it was in despair at the meaninglessness of his existence that he produced with oils on canvas, *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*. Unlike the paintings from his first journey to Tahiti, which exhibit Gauguin's interest in bright color and his uses of it to paint "the sky red rather than blue," this painting is dominated by blues and greens, giving it a subdued and foreboding overtone.^{xxvii} Compositionally, it is somewhat chaotic, attesting not only to Gauguin's rejection of the western illusionistic tradition, but to his emotional distress at the time. Its horizontal orientation is a typical mural format ultimately derived from ancient reliefs.^{xxviii} This is especially so since there is no true central figure: the largest figure in the foreground is actually off-center, as Gauguin did not want to draw the viewer's eye to any particular place, preferring it to wander, as in a continuous frieze. The figures tell a story, the story of his life, which he described in a letter to his good friend, Charles Morice:

"Where Are We Going?

Near the death of an old woman

A bird strange and stupid concludes:

Who Are We?

Daily existence.

The man of instincts asks himself what all this means.

Source.

Child.

Life begins.

The bird concludes the poem [through] comparison between the inferior being and the intelligent one in this large ensemble announced by the title. Behind a tree, two sinister figures, dressed in sadly colored clothes, converse near the tree of science, their dolorous aspect caused by this science itself, in comparison to [the feelings of]

simple beings in a virgin nature that could be a human concept of paradise [if] they abandoned themselves to the happiness of living.”^{xxxix}

Gauguin loved to write about his work and since most of his works were misunderstood, he felt obliged to explain them. Besides being rejected over and over again, Gauguin detested more than anything the tendency of the European art world to attribute false meanings to his paintings. To ensure that this did not happen, Gauguin told us he wanted the painting to be read from right to left.^{xxx} This first brings us to the baby in the right-hand corner of the painting. Opposite the baby, in the left corner of the painting is an incredibly old woman. Here, Gauguin means to paint the life cycle, which the title implicates in its questions of, ‘where do we come from?’ and ‘where are we going?’

However, ‘what are we?’ is the question with which Gauguin is most concerned.^{xxxi} Essentially, he is asking himself, what am I? In the foreground, the largest figure, an androgynous figure who is positioned just to the right of the center, is stretching up across the whole canvas in order to grab a fruit, symbolic of Eve and the apple.^{xxxii} Despite this, the figure is likely a man, an unconscious projection of Gauguin’s Self as a Tahitian. Gauguin’s ego as well as his super-ego is manifested in this Adam-esque figure.

This figure as Gauguin’s ego is explicitly identifying with Eve as the ultimate sinner. Since Gauguin specifically evokes the image of Eve, this painting demands to be viewed through a Catholic lens. Although Gauguin was known for his theosophical outlook and his determination to fight the presence of the Catholic church in Tahiti, this painting demonstrates how Gauguin could not escape his Catholic upbringing and proves that he could not completely abandon his European roots. Catholic symbolism can be observed

in many of Gauguin's Tahitian works. He busied himself recasting the nativity scene in Tahiti in *Te Tamari No Atua*, painting a Tahitian Virgin and child in *Ia Orana Maria*, and often included smaller references such as the snake wrapped around the tree of knowledge in *Te Arii Vahine*. Therefore, through a Catholic lens, the central figure of *Where Did We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* as Gauguin's ego is explicitly identifying with Eve as the ultimate sinner.^{xxxiii} In his depiction of the symbolic image of Eve, whom he replaces with Adam, grabbing the forbidden fruit, there is an element of role reversal. Not only is this acknowledging that he believes himself to be a sinner, but in his symbolic reference to eating the apple, which caused the fall of humanity, he also takes the blame of original sin from the woman. This suggests Gauguin's degree of female identification.

Gauguin's affiliation with women is not only realized through this androgynous figure, it can also be seen in the rest of the painting, which besides his Tahitian Selves, includes only women. In the women of Tahiti, Gauguin saw an "identification with 'the primitive'...imaged as dark, feminine, and profligate," [and] "a disidentification with white, patriarchal, bourgeois society."^{xxxiv} Gauguin's preoccupation with women as his main subject matter might be demonstrating his ability to relate to them. When Gauguin left his family, Mette was forced to step into a more masculine role, where she took care of the family on her own. Therefore, through the perspective of the western society from which he came, in his life in Tahiti, where he relied mainly on the monetary generosity of his friends, he took on the role of the female who is dependent on men in monetary matters. One of the freedoms that Gauguin enjoyed the most in Tahiti was the freedom from fiscal responsibility. Tahitians lived off of nature; they had no use for money.

Mette's taking care of the family and Gauguin's reliance on his European contacts for money is a reversal of roles, which Gauguin may have seen as a loss of his masculinity. Gauguin's choice to paint only Tahitian women in the painting while he, himself, is evoking the Catholic image of Eve grabbing the apple may also represent the desire for a return to his childhood. If Adam and Eve are the first two humans and through them comes humanity, the painting can also be viewed as Gauguin's obsession with the creation myth and his own origins; therefore, the painting serves as a visual lamentation at the loss of his mother.

The figure as Gauguin's super-ego is manifested in the direction of the large figure's gaze, the super-ego's way of confronting God. The tree is not visible to the viewer because it is outside of the frame, suggesting it exists in a celestial paradise rather than the earthly paradise that Gauguin paints. This act of the figure looking up to acknowledge God in the commission of original sin reflects Gauguin's super-ego accounting for his sins. He is recognizing himself as a fallen man, one who failed in his familial duties, failed in the art world, and failed himself due to his decision to take his own life. The course of action he intended to carry out in reality opposes the life cycle he has painted.

The child to the left of Gauguin's portrayal of his Tahitian Self also has a fruit in his hand and is taking a bite. It is the only other figure partaking of the fruit, and thus is directly linked to the large figure. Therefore, the child in the painting is also representative of Gauguin's psychological self, his child-self, the boy so deeply bonded to his own Peruvian background and as a man, witnessed his foreignness in Europe. A Catholic reading suggests that sin takes root early in one's life. The little boy represents Gauguin's embrace of his Peruvian side and mirrors the lifecycle being depicted. The

surrounding animals and watchful posture of the idol represent alternatives to western decadence in innocence and spirituality.

The child faces toward an old woman at the far left. The woman's obvious decrepitude and misery may subconsciously reflect Gauguin's own misery as well as his fear of his deteriorating health as he grew older. The bird next to the old woman is thought by some scholars to be an agent of the devil.^{xxxv} However, the viewer should observe that in the bird's claws is a reptile, making the message clear: it is triumphing over the serpent and therefore, conquering evil. Despite, Gauguin's feelings of helplessness, as he reflects back upon his life and worries about the future, he still maintains hope that he will again know the peace he had once found in Tahiti.

As a result of his struggle, he seems to have painted a warning to the public. This is understood as the two figures conversing in the mid-ground who Gauguin has told us are "sinister" and who will never have access to the paradise that is Tahiti due to their association with the misuse of "science."^{xxxvi} Here, Gauguin sees science as synonymous with progress. Gauguin does not see the complexities, the societal norms, that Europeans have imposed on civilization as progress. The lives that Europeans lead do not result in the kind of happiness that Gauguin had originally found in Tahiti, for the Tahitians had found the formula for happiness: happiness can only be found in one's day-to-day existence.

The painting is dominated by Gauguin's super-ego whereas his life was dominated by his id. Here the id can be seen as represented in the bird with the reptile in its claws as a wish for forgiveness or some means of salvation, but is also acknowledged in the Tahitian idol in the background of the left side of the painting. Gauguin's inclusion of the

Tahitian idol stands out as the most distinctly Tahitian element because it represents the Tahitians' pagan religious practices, therefore serving as an oppositional force to the Catholic symbolism in the painting. It conveys Gauguin's sorrow over the loss of Tahitian traditions and religious practices of old, but even though the Tahitians have been tainted by the West through their conversion, Gauguin still views the freedoms they have in their lifestyle as superior to the lifestyle of the Europeans. This idol represents an essential part of the history of the Tahitian race that Gauguin sought so eagerly to capture in his paintings. He painted this God, which represents "the beyond," in spite of his Catholic upbringing, so that he may appeal to the Tahitian gods, as well. The goddess is Hina; "she is best known as the first women in creation, the ancestress of man, the spouse of Ta'aroa, and the moon goddess."^{xxxvii} While this again suggests the degree of prominence Gauguin was prepared to give to women, he would have seen Hina as a Christ-like figure since she appeals to Tefatou to "let man rise up again after he has died..."^{xxxviii}

Although one may argue that Gauguin is synthesizing the religion of the Tahitians with Catholicism, it is important to note that "virtually nothing remained of the ancient Tahitian religion and mythology...regardless of sect, they all attended church—at least once a day. Their Sundays were entirely devoted to churchgoing."^{xxxix} One thing particularly striking about this idol is the resemblance that her face has to Tehura, his beloved Tahitian wife. This can be documented by comparing the face of the idol to Tehura's face in *The Ancestors of Tehamana* (fig. 2). Therefore, his id, or in this painting, the desire for his past life in Tahiti, is made manifest by Gauguin making Tehura a god. "Now that I can understand Tehura, in whom her ancestors sleep and sometimes dream, I

strive to see and think through this child, and to find again in her traces of the far-away past which socially is dead indeed, but still persist in vague memories.”^{xl} Ultimately, Gauguin found happiness with Tehura because she became a bridge between Gauguin and the cultural past and between Gauguin and his personal past. She brought back to him the sense of innocence he had in childhood and she became his connection to the history of her ancient race, to which he was already inclined to relate.^{xli}

Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going? is a painting of an extremely personal nature. In a letter to Daniel de Monfried, Gauguin wrote: “Where does the execution of a painting begin, where does it end?”^{xlii} A painting begins long before it reaches the canvas. It began in Gauguin when he was only a boy living in Peru with his family. Across this canvas, Gauguin painted a dream world where his unconscious fears and longings are showcased. This painting is the real Gauguin as noble savage, who reflecting back upon his life finally acknowledges the mistakes he has made in the pursuit of happiness. Unfortunately, Gauguin’s long-awaited recognition by the art world would only come after his death in 1903.

-
- ⁱ Nancy Mowll Matthews, *Paul Gauguin, An Erotic Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 25.
- ⁱⁱ Vernon Hyde Minor, *Art History's History*, 2nd ed (New York: Prentice Hall, 2000), 194.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Henri Dorra, *The Symbolism of Paul Gauguin: Erotica, Exotica, and the Great Dilemmas of Humanity* (Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 2007), 253.
- ^{iv} Sigmund Freud, *The Freud Reader*, Ed. Peter Gay (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1989), 630.
- ^v Dorra, *The Symbolism of Paul Gauguin: Erotica, Exotica, and the Great Dilemmas of Humanity*, 12.
- ^{vi} Matthews, *Paul Gauguin, An Erotic Life*, 163.
- ^{vii} Hal Foster, "Primitive Scenes," *Critical Inquiry* 20, No. 1 (Autumn 1993): 72.
- ^{viii} Matthews, *Paul Gauguin, An Erotic Life*, 10.
- ^{ix} Ibid.
- ^x Freud, *The Freud Reader*, 117.
- ^{xi} Ibid.
- ^{xii} Henri Dorra, "Ia Orana Maria," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 10, No. 9 (May 1952): 256.
- ^{xiii} Dorra, *The Symbolism of Paul Gauguin: Erotica, Exotica, and the Great Dilemmas of Humanity*, 5.
- ^{xiv} Ibid.
- ^{xv} Paul Gauguin, *Noa Noa* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1985), 5.
- ^{xvi} Ibid., 13.
- ^{xvii} Ibid., 11.
- ^{xviii} Ibid., 22.
- ^{xix} Dorra, *The Symbolism of Paul Gauguin: Erotica, Exotica, and the Great Dilemmas of Humanity*, 25.
- ^{xx} Matthews, *Paul Gauguin An Erotic Life*, 82.
- ^{xxi} Ibid., 162.
- ^{xxii} Dorra, *The Symbolism of Paul Gauguin: Erotica, Exotica, and the Great Dilemmas of Humanity*, 158-159.
- ^{xxiii} Gauguin, *Noa Noa*, 29.
- ^{xxiv} Ibid., 31.
- ^{xxv} Ibid., 32.
- ^{xxvi} Dorra, *The Symbolism of Paul Gauguin: Erotica, Exotica, and the Great Dilemmas of Humanity*, 240.
- ^{xxvii} Eckhand Hollman, *Paul Gauguin: Images from the South Seas* (New York: Prestel, 1996), 63.
- ^{xxviii} George Shackelford and Claire Freches-Thory, *Gauguin Tahiti*, 168.
- ^{xxix} Dorra, *The Symbolism of Paul Gauguin: Erotica, Exotica, and the Great Dilemmas of Humanity*, 253.
- ^{xxx} George Shackelford and Claire Freches-Thory, *Gauguin Tahiti* (Boston: MFA Publications, 2004), 168.
- ^{xxxi} Dorra, *The Symbolism of Paul Gauguin: Erotica, Exotica, and the Great Dilemmas of Humanity*, 255.
- ^{xxxii} Matthews, *Paul Gauguin, An Erotic Life*, 227.
- ^{xxxiii} Dorra, *The Symbolism of Paul Gauguin: Erotica, Exotica, and the Great Dilemmas of Humanity*, 255.
- ^{xxxiv} Foster, "Primitive Scenes," 76.
- ^{xxxv} Dorra, *The Symbolism of Paul Gauguin: Erotica, Exotica, and the Great Dilemmas of Humanity*, 254.

^{xxxvi} Ibid., 253.

^{xxxvii} Jehanne Teilhet-Fisk, *Paradise Reviewed: An Interpretation of Gauguin's Polynesian Symbolism* (Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1983), 52.

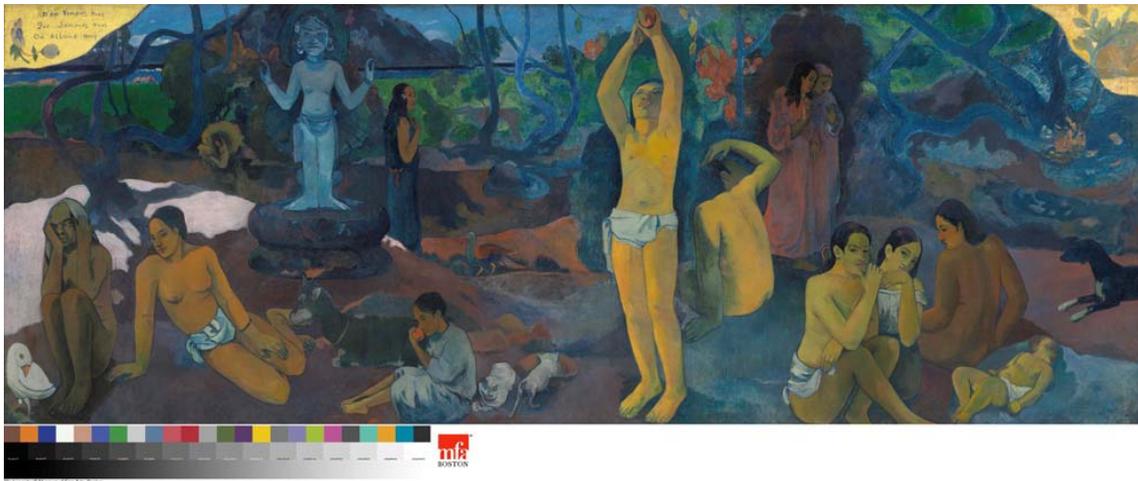
^{xxxviii} Gauguin, *Noa Noa*, 25.

^{xxxix} Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Going Native: Paul Gauguin and the Invention of Primitivist Modernism," in *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, Eds. Norma Broude and Mary Garrard (New York: Icon Editions/HarperCollins Publisher, 1992), 324.

^{xl} Gauguin, *Noa Noa*, 40.

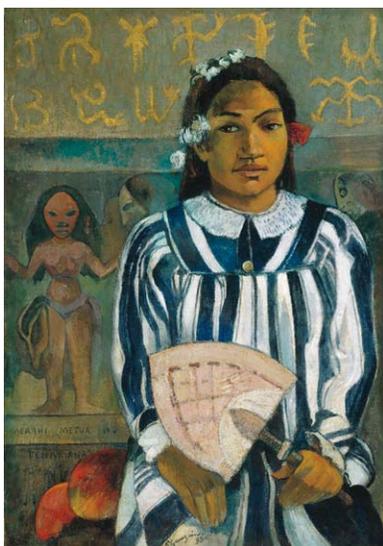
^{xli} Along with the help of "*Voyage aux iles de Grand Ocean*, a book written some sixty years earlier by the Dutchman J.A. Morenhout." Henri Dorra, "Ia Orana Maria," 257.

^{xlii} George Shackelford and Claire Freches-Thory, *Gauguin Tahiti*, 184.



Photograph © 2011 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Figure 1. Paul Gauguin, French, 1848-1903. *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*, 1897-98. Oil on canvas, 139.1 x 374.6 cm (54 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 147 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Tompkins Collection – Arthur Gordon Tompkins Fund, 36.270.



Photograph © The Art Institute of Chicago.

Figure 2. Paul Gauguin, French, 1848-1903. *The Ancestors of Tehamana OR Tehamana Has Many Parents (Merahi metua no Tehamana)*, 1893. Oil on canvas, 30 $\frac{1}{16}$ x 21 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. (76.3 x 54.3 cm). Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Deering McCormick, 1980.613, The Art Institute of Chicago.

Bibliography:

Adams, Laurie Schneider. *Art and Psychoanalysis*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers Inc., 1993.

Art Institute of Chicago. "Gauguin." *The Art Institute of Chicago Quarterly* 53, No. 1 (Feb. 1959): 2-7.

Bersani, Leo. *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.

Dorra, Henri. "Ia Orana Maria." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 10, No. 9 (May 1952): 254-260.

Dorra, Henri. *The Symbolism of Paul Gauguin: Erotica, Exotica, and the Great Dilemmas of Humanity*. Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 2007.

Duran, Jane. "Education and Feminist Aesthetics: Gauguin and the Exotic." *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 43, No. 4 (Winter 2009): 88-95.

Eisenman, Stephen F. *Paul Gauguin: Artist of Myth and Dream*. Milano, Italy: Skira Editorie, 2007.

Eisenman, Stephen F. *Gauguin's Skirt*. New York: Thames and Hudson, Inc., 1997.

Freud, Sigmund. *On Creativity and the Unconscious: Papers on the Psychology of Art, Literature, Love, and Religion*. Edited by Benjamin Nelson. New York: Harper Row Publishers, 1958.

Freud, Sigmund. *The Freud Reader*. Edited by Peter Gay. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1989.

Foster, Hal. "'Primitive Scenes.'" *Critical Inquiry* 20, No. 1 (Autumn 1993): 69-102.

Gauguin, Paul. *Gauguin's Intimate Journals*. Translated by Van Wyck Brooks. New York: Dover Publications, Inc. 1997.

Gauguin, Paul. *Noa Noa*. Translated by O.F. Theis. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1985.

Gauguin, Paul. *Noa Noa: Gauguin's Tahiti*. Translated by Jonathan Griffin and Edited by Nicholas Wadley. New Hampshire: Salem House, 1985.

Gauguin, Paul. *The Writings of a Savage*. Edited by Daniel Guerin. First Da Capo Press,

1996.

Hollman, Eckhand. *Paul Gauguin: Images from the South Seas*. New York: Prestel, 1996.

Minor, Vernon Hyde. *Art History's History*. 2nd ed. New York: Prentice Hall, 2000.

Mowll Matthews, Nancy. *Paul Gauguin, An Erotic Life*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001.

Rubin, William. "Modernist Primitivism 1984." In *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art*, Edited by Miriam Deutch and Jack Flam, 315-334. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003.

Shackelford, George and Claire Freches-Thory. *Gauguin Tahiti*. Boston: MFA Publications, 2004.

Solomon-Godeau, Abigail. "Going Native: Paul Gauguin and the Invention of Primitivist Modernism." In *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, Edited by Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, 313-330. New York: Icon Editions/HarperCollins Publisher, 1992.

Teilhet-Fisk, Jehanne. *Paradise Reviewed: An Interpretation of Gauguin's Polynesian Symbolism*. Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1983.

Thomson, Belinda. *Gauguin by himself*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1993.