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The Feminine Personification of Death in Gustave Moreau's *Evening and Sorrow*

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The end of the nineteenth century involved change and social unrest within France. A society, shifting at a rapid pace, with growing cities, and increasing developments, produced art which powerfully reflects the many social changes. For instance, in the early to mid- nineteenth century, the masculine and androgynous figure of death dominated the arts and literature. However, by the late nineteenth-century, the feminized depiction of the allegory of death prevailed. Scholar, Karl S. Guthke, argues that this shift in gender relates to the erotic fascination of death.¹ Gustave Moreau's feminine portrayal of death is no exception. This paper will argue that Moreau's depiction of the female embodies the seductive and destructive nature of death which preoccupied the arts and literature of the late nineteenth-century. Moreau's *Evening and Sorrow*, effectively conveys the increased interest in emotions, and psychology, as a counter-action to the predominance of natural sciences, during the late-nineteenth century. The composition consists of two interloped figures, *Evening and Sorrow*, which float amidst a forested landscape. Both figures, long haired and slender, appear feminine. The darkly shaded winged individual holds the other figure draped in a long blue dress. An image powerfully reflecting the social changes of the end of the century, Moreau's feminine personifications of evening, and sorrow, signifies the impact of developments in science, philosophy, and gender roles, on French society.

The Rise of Science: Challenging Religious Tradition

1. Karl S. Guthke. *The Gender of Death: A Cultural History in Art and Literature*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 193.

As the nineteenth century progressed, scientific developments continued to increase, and arising discoveries, including Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection in 1859, challenged traditional religious beliefs and values.² Darwin found that variations within a species caused individuals with the strongest characteristics to survive more so than those without, and as a result, the favorable characteristics carried over to the next generation. Darwin's discovery of the passing of traits through breeding, proposed a theory of natural evolution which challenged long standing ideas based on God as the divine creator. Beforehand, French science specifically aimed to substantiate the general belief in God's vital role in the natural world as creator. As according to scholar, John Farley, the central notion of religion remained unchanged since the beginning of the nineteenth century.³ Therefore, Darwin's theory of evolution established a new approach to science, and ultimately questioned the validity of religion.

Although gradual, scientific discoveries, including Darwin's, encouraged deeper interest in the physical appearance of the world. Certain movements- Realism, Naturalism, and Impressionism- emerged all similarly focusing on actual observation. The art of Gustave Courbet, an artist associated to Realism, highlights the honest depiction of the physically visible. Courbet's *The Stone Breakers*, 1849, (fig. 2) starkly portrays the exhaustion and brutality of labor, through the physical qualities of two workers. Certainly no stretch of the imagination, their wrinkled skin, painfully bent backs, and ragged clothing, vividly describes the poverty, and hardship of the working class. Courbet sought to represent only the visible, as demonstrated by his statement about painting, in a letter from 1861: "It is a completely physical language, the words of which consist of all visible objects; an object which is abstract, not-visible, non-existent is not within

2. Marilyn Stokstad, *Art History*, 4th ed. (Pearson, 2010), 962.

3. John Farley, "The Initial Reactions of French Biologists to Darwin's Origin of Species," *Journal of the History of Biology* 7, no. 2 (Fall, 1974): 275-300.

the realm of painting.”⁴ Courbet’s philosophy, demonstrates the growing interest in the observed world, and its opposition to the non-visible quality of religious imagery. Therefore, the increasing portrayals of the natural world challenged the long standing role of religion in art.

The general growth of science and the subsequent emergence of artistic movements dedicated to the physical world, sparked opposition to the neglect of religion. Certain individuals met the thematic shift skeptically, questioning the absent predominance of religion, especially in art. Joséphin Péladan, a prominent figure in the art world during the late-nineteenth century, strongly promoted the necessity for religious art. Intriguingly, Péladan compared the artist to a Priest: a comparison that directly relates to Moreau’s artistic concepts.⁵ A key aspect to Moreau’s work, divine intuition defines the belief in a supernatural and spiritual insight granted by God, a privilege only accessible to artists and poets.⁶ Moreau believed in the key role of religion in providing meaning to human existence, as demonstrated in his writing: “God is this incessant perfume of our soul—that which gives us the sense of the meaninglessness of life.”⁷ The artist’s opposition to the dependence on the physical world stemmed from certainty in God’s essential role in life. As a result, Moreau emphasized the qualities of the natural world, not visible to the eye, including imagination, emotions, and dreams.

Moreau’s *Evening and Sorrow*, (fig. 1), certainly portrays a scene not belonging to the everyday, as the image depicts the personifications of evening, and sorrow. Both hovering above the ground, the figures show mythological characteristics. This idea is further emphasized by the presence of wings on the darker dressed individual. Evident qualities not-related to human mortality,

4. Jennifer Shaw, “Living Art and Dead Objects: Gustave Courbet’s Realism in Nineteenth-century Visual Culture,” *Third Text* 22, no. 4 (July, 2008): 467-482: Courbet’s Statement from his letter, ‘Art Cannot Be Taught,’ 1861.

5. Pierre-Louis Mathieu, *The Symbolist Generation, 1870-1910*, (New York: Skira, 1990), 103: Péladan: “Artist, you are a priest.”

6. Julius Kaplan, *The Art of Gustave Moreau: Theory, Style, and Content*, (Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1982). Moreau, III. 55: “The divination, the intuition of things belongs only to the artist and poet.” (III, 55.)

7. Ibid. Moreau. (III, 119).

demonstrates Moreau's inclusion of imagination, and ideology. The depicted individuals serve to symbolically communicate a message, as opposed to physically portraying the visibly apparent.

Philosophic Intrigue: Deeper Than the Physical

For individuals like Moreau, the increased interest in physical observation, as encouraged by the increasing developments in science, provoked further exploration of other aspects of life. New philosophies also emerged, addressing the human psychology. For instance, Sigmund Freud claimed that dreams expresses an individual's hidden fears and desires by serving as the mediator between the subconscious and the conscious.⁸ The intrigue in philosophy manifested itself in the Symbolist movement, beginning in the late-nineteenth century. Relying on God's role in providing the soul of an individual with meaning, Symbolists sought answers to life, through the exploration of the emotional and psychological. Paul Gauguin's, 1897-98 portrayal of the different stages of life in, *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* (fig. 3), effectively establishes the central role of intrinsic qualities, to the Symbolist movement. As argued by scholar Michelle Facos, Gauguin's questioning of the meanings behind life, and death, highlight a restless and uncertain search for answers.⁹ Thus, instead of the physical depiction of life and death, in a literal sense, Symbolism explored both concepts emotionally, and psychologically.

The growing intrigue in the philosophy of psychology, demonstrates a correlation between life and death. During the time period, depictions of death indicated a sense of duality by portraying both the peacefulness in dying as well as the conflicting sorrows the living experience when a loved one dies. Death relates to the idea of eternal sleep, physically and spiritually, and the

8. Michelle Facos, *Symbolist Art in Context*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

9. Michelle Facos, *Symbolist Art in Context*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 88: "...rather he grappled with unresolvable questions of identity, meaning, and direction – questions indicative of a restless, uncertain (and therefore modern) soul."

subsequent rest from the demand of life. In *Death as a Friend*, 1851, (fig. 4), Alfred Rethel personifies death in a distinctly personal manner, suggesting signs of empathy, while the skeletal figure helps the old man depart from the world. The gentle expression of the seated man, suggests a peaceful slumber. Only the physical presence of death indicates the notion of a dying man. Evidently, Rethel relates dying to a peaceful departure from the world, similar to sleeping. Moreau's *Evening and Sorrow*, (fig. 1), also suggests a connection between death and sleep. Notably, Pierre-Louis Mathieu accredits Paul Bourget's poem, sharing the title of *Evening and Sorrow*, as being the inspiration for Moreau's *Evening and Sorrow* (fig. 1).¹⁰ In describing a conversation between evening and sorrow, the poem indicates that evening has the power to take the personification of sorrow, away from the apparent pain experienced on earth: a possible comparison between evening and the angel of death, as similar to evening, death blankets the pain of living. The referral between evening and sorrow as "My friend," establishes a sense of companionship, also evident in the physical embrace between the two individuals in Moreau's *Evening and Sorrow* (fig. 1).¹¹ Most importantly, the personification of sorrow begs evening to: "hear the dying world, and silence the voice of cruel men."¹² The plea from sorrow associates pain to living. Also in similar fashion to Bourget's poem, Moreau presents the sorrow of living as a direct consequence of death. In *Orpheus at the Tomb of Eurydice*, 1891, (fig. 6), Moreau emphasizes the central role of sorrow in the experience of loss. Scholars including, Genevieve Lacambre argue that the painting reflects Moreau's deeply effecting bereavement of a loved one.¹³ The essence of loss is encapsulated in Moreau's description of the painting in his recorded writings

10. Pierre-Louis Mathieu, *Gustave Moreau: With a Catalogue of the Finished Paintings, Watercolors and Drawings*. Translated by James Emmons, 1st ed., (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1976), 347: According to Mathieu, a copy of Paul Bourget's *Les Aveux*, poesies, 1882, was found in Moreau's library. Bourget's manuscript version of *Le Soir et la Douleur*, is pasted on the frame.

11. Ibid. Original Text: "*Mon Amee*." Trans. Lucine Colignon. To read Bourget's manuscript poem, refer to p 347.

12. Ibid. Original Text: "...entends mourir le monde Et se taire la voix des hommes cruels." Trans. Lucine Colignon.

13. Art Council of Great Britain, *French Symbolist Painters*, 83.

in 1897: “The soul is alone, stripped of all splendor, power and sweetness; it weeps for itself in this total abandonment, in this inconsolable loneliness.”¹⁴

To further distinguish between Moreau’s symbolic relationship between *Evening and Sorrow*, other works prove helpful. In particular, an identically titled, *Evening and Sorrow*, 1870, (fig. 5), also depicts two interloping figures.¹⁵ Similarly, the winged individual holds the other in a comforting stance. While both paintings presumably portray feminized personifications of evening and sorrow, they differ compositionally with the latter portraying the figures seated in the left hand corner. Unlike *Evening and Sorrow*, c. 1882, (Fig 1.) the individual without wings, holds a lyre. Moreau often depicted figures holding lyres to identify them as poets.¹⁶ As claimed by Mathieu, Moreau’s poets symbolize heroic qualities of man-kind, often sacrificing their lives for humanity.¹⁷ Thus, signifying human character, the poet embodies physical qualities of a mortal. Accordingly, it is possible that the winged creature, with mythical qualities, represents evening, while the other far more humanized individual, personifies sorrow.

The Femme Fatale and the Angel of Death

In the arts and literature of the late-nineteenth century, the duality of death corresponded to the establishment of a highly feminized personification of death. A number of contextual events occurred during the later-nineteenth century, encouraging the feminized representation of death. For instance, the increase of prostitution in the 1870s and 1880s rose the awareness of sexually

14. Ibid. 83-84.

15. Art Council of Great Britain, *French Symbolist Painters: Moreau, Puvis de Chavannes, Redon and their Followers*, (London: Lund Humphries, 1972), 87. Providence: Artist’s studio (Inv.no. 325).

16. Lacambre, Genevieve, Larry J. Feinberg, Marie-Laure de Contenson, and Douglas W. Druick. *Gustave Moreau: Between Epic and Dream*, (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1999), 215, 244, 269: As exemplified by; *The Lamentations of the Poet*, 1882-83, *Dead Poet Borne by Centaur*, 1890, and *The Poet and the Siren*, 1894-95.

17. Pierre-Louis Mathieu. *Gustave Moreau: The Watercolors*. 1st ed. (New York: Hudson Hills Press, Inc., 1985), 82.

transmitted diseases.¹⁸ Two primary depictions of women relate to the aspects of death; the femme fatale and the angel of death. Although the two feminine identities exhibit differing physical qualities, both strongly relate to the dual nature of seduction and destruction.

However, the general personification of the allegory of death did not begin in the latter part of the nineteenth century; it ran throughout the century. Only the predominance of the feminized portrayal of death uniquely emerged in the late-nineteenth century. Before the feminized personification of death, masculine and androgynous figures of death prevailed. As supported by Guthke, the masculinized personification of death, appearing in mundane forms including officers, and cooks, presents aspects of non-eroticism.¹⁹ On the other hand, the androgynous representation of the allegory of death combines feminine and masculine qualities. Through the dual inclusion of genders, the androgynous figure signifies the ominous nature of death; everyone dies, regardless of social standings.²⁰ As exemplified by Leonardo Da Vinci's androgynous *St. John the Baptist*, 1513-16, (fig. 7), the ambiguity of gender originated much before the nineteenth century. Scholar, Bram Dijkstra, argues that the nineteenth century revival of the androgynous figure, especially in the last two decades, demonstrates a counter-reaction to "economic motivations behind sexual stereotypes" which formed as a result of the bourgeois society.²¹ Yet still existing in the late-nineteenth century, androgynous figures were also highly feminized.

In *Evening and Sorrow* (fig. 5), the flowing dress on the presumed figure of sorrow encapsulates the female essence. On the other hand, the gender of evening is more ambiguous. If equated to the other winged figure clothed in a feminine gown, in the latter *Evening and Sorrow*,(fig. 5), it is possible to associate feminine qualities to the other, almost identical depiction of evening. Furthermore,

18. Michelle Facos, *Symbolist Art in Context*, 130: For example, in London's Hyde Park, 250,000 protestors gathered against prostitution.

19. Guthke, Karl S. *The Gender of Death*,177.

20. Ibid. 186.

21. Bram Dijkstra, "The Androgyne in Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature," *Comparative Literature* 26, no.1 (Winter, 1974): 62-73.

presence of wings signifies the periodic representation of the Angel of death. The Angel of death, presumably appearing in both versions of *Evening and Sorrow*, (fig. 1),(fig. 5), highlights the seductive nature. Extending on Matheiu's claim that Bourget's poem inspired *Evening and Sorrow*, (fig. 1), Robert de Montesquiou notes the high probability that *Evening and Sorrow*, (fig. 5), relates to the lines in Charles Baudelaire's poem *Recueillement*: "Be patient, o my sorrow, and keep still you craved for Evening; and look, it is falling now..."²² Baudelaire's line, greatly similar to Bourget's poem, portrays evening being desired by sorrow, as a means to achieve rest. *Death and the Grave Digger*, 1895-1900, (fig. 8), by Carlos Schwabe, presents an even more seductive feminized personification of death. Powerful, and sensual in posture, the winged angel of death assumes responsibility to take watch over the dying grave digger. The apparent popular utilization of feminized personifications of death emphasizes the erotic fascination in death which underlined the arts and literature of the late-nineteenth century.

The extreme stereotyping of women to fit the roles of the femme fatale, and angel of death, and the reasoning behind these depictions, must not be ignored. Feminized depictions of death embodied seductive and destructive qualities. For instance, Moreau's most recognized femme fatale, Salome, epitomizes the common depiction of women as sensual and evil. In response to the biblical scene in *The Apparition*, 1876, (fig. 9), where the severed head of Saint John the Baptist levitates in front of Salome, Charles Huysmans, a writer associated to the symbolist movement, describes the sensual and manipulating nature of the *femme fatale*.²³ The symbolization of the duality of death is thus evident in the femme fatale, which proves to be both seductive and subsequently destructive. As demonstrated by *Les Fleurs du Mal*, by poet Charles Baudelaire, the destructive aspect of women stemmed from the sin

22. Art Council of Great Britain, *French Symbolist Painters*, 87: "Sois sage, o ma douleur, et tiens toi plus tranquille. Tu réclamais le Soir; il descend, le voice" Trans. Genevieve Lacambre.

23. Lacambre, Genevieve, Larry J. Feinberg, Marie-Laure de Contenson, and Douglas W. Druick. *Gustave Moreau*, 167: "...a true fille...she awakened more energetically the lethargic sense of man, she bewitched and tamed his will more confidently with her charm, that of a large venereal flower..." Huysmans 1884, ch 5.

of overt sexuality, and the consequent suffering.²⁴

The intrigue in death did not originate in the late nineteenth century. However, the feminized personification of death dominated the arts and literature of the latter part of the century. A number of scholars argue that the popular depiction of death as a woman, coincided with the growing emancipation of women, and thus symbolized the masculine fear of the female. Indeed, the *femme fatale*, and the angel of death have the capacity to represent feminine sexuality and its power to corrupt men, in the late nineteenth century. On the other hand, the alternative option poses the intriguing possibility that the feminine personification of death instead represents the erotic fascination in the dual capacity of death. Moreau's depiction of evening, in *Evening and Sorrow*, 1882, (fig. 1), embodies a gentle and sympathetic angel of death; who promises to remove the pain of living through eternal sleep. As demonstrated by Moreau, the female personification symbolizes the ultimate fascination in death, in direct relation to the social unrest and change which shaped the late nineteenth century.

24. Trans. P.E. Charvet, Baudelaire: *Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 1972), 7: Baudelaire in a letter to his mother, June 1857: "But this book, whose title, *Les Fleurs du mal*, says all that needs to be said, is clothed in a sinister and cold beauty..."

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Figures



Figure 1. Gustave Moreau, *Evening and Sorrow*, c. 1882. Oil on canvas.



Figure 2. Gustave Courbet, *The Stonebreakers*, 1849. Oil on canvas.



Figure 3. Paul Gauguin, *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*, 1897-98. Oil on canvas.



Figure 4. Alfred Rethel, *Death as a Friend*, 1851.



Figure 5. Gustave Moreau, *Evening and Sorrow*, 1870. Oil on canvas.



Figure 6. Gustave Moreau, *Orpheus at the Tomb of Eurydice*, 1891. Oil on canvas.



Figure 7. Leonardo Da Vinci, *St. John the Baptist*, 1513-16. Oil on canvas.



Figure 8. Gustave Moreau, *L'Apparition*, 1876. Oil on canvas.



Figure 9. Carlos Schwabe, *The Death of the Gravedigger*, 1895-1900. Oil on canvas.