

A CAMEO OF DIONYSUS: EDNA PONTELLIER'S APOTHEOSIS AS A SEMI-CELESTIAL

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A thesis submitted to the

Graduate School-Camden

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Arts

Graduate Program in English

Written under the direction of

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Shanyn Fiske

Camden, New Jersey. May, 2012

## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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For the Greeks who worshipped him, Dionysus was as strongly associated with undermining social norms as he was connected to the idea of rebirth and renewal. That subversive nature of the god continued into the Victorian Era. For many Victorians--particularly Nietzsche and Pater--Dionysus became both a figure who embodied subversion and a symbol for the denunciation of Christianity and other firmly established social constructs. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, association with Dionysus became a way to laud both the arcane and libidinous aspects of human nature.

By examining several of Chopin's journal entries, it is apparent she was familiar with the god and the strain of radical thought with which he was always associated. Other entries show that Chopin was less interested in literature that dealt with political statements and more interested in the impulsive nature of people and characters. It is no coincidence, therefore, that symbols and images that are always associated with the god--wine and lush vegetation, for instance--are associated with Edna Pontellier throughout *The Awakening*.

By examining the novel with a Dionysian lens, the focus on Edna and her interaction with other characters--particularly with the young Victor Lebrun who literally transforms into Dionysus at her farewell dinner party--becomes less a political statement about a woman denouncing the patriarchal society in which she lives and more about immortalizing Edna due to her embrace of the arcane, Dionysian aspects of human nature.

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## I. *The Awakening* and the Mythic Structure

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* has garnered as much negative criticism as it has praise since it was published in 1899. The novel was criticized as "a morbid book" that "leaves one sick of human nature" as much as it was lauded as a "very subtle and a brilliant kind of art" (Chopin, *Private Papers*, 295). The last century has seen no lack of divided opinion about the book, either. From feminist readings that, not surprisingly, focus on a woman who cannot break the bonds of a patriarchal society, to readings that look specifically at the Creole culture to which both Chopin and Edna belonged, *The Awakening* has proved fertile ground for critical thought and debate. Yet, in all of that debate, very little attention has been given to the role that Greek myth and mythopoeic structure clearly play in the novel. Lawrence Thornton examines the use of Icarus as a symbol for Edna in "A Mythic Issue", while Rosemary F. Franklin examines Edna's symbolic connection to Psyche. Lastly, Sandra M. Gilbert looks at Chopin's use of fantasy and mythic structure to argue that Edna is the second coming of Aphrodite. Few other critics, if any at all, tackle the issue.

In an age of unwavering roles and spheres for both men and women, it is no surprise that many female authors had little choice but to turn to the Greek classics in order to find an aid to what was perceived as a weak voice, an idea that has been well documented by critics such as Fiske and Olverson. However, whereas works by writers such as Browning, Augusta Webster, Amy Levy, Pfeiffer, Bradley and Cooper, and Charlotte Bronte have been examined with the Hellenic lens, Chopin's *The Awakening*

has not entered the discussion. That is not to say that the critical work others have done on the novel is in some way flawed because they may have missed the point; rather, it is a simple matter of acknowledging that myth certainly plays a role in the novel and can augment the extant, multifaceted readings of an amazing work.

Considering the “awareness of the dark side of Hellas” that was gripping many Victorian imaginations such as Pater’s and Nietzsche’s, it should come as no surprise that Chopin might choose Dionysus as a central metaphor for her novel (Evangelista, 107). To be sure she was aware of the god, we need look no further than her *Commonplace Book*, which dates from 1850-1870. Chopin was well aware of Dionysus and, particularly, the tragic aspect of the god. In her entry on the German sculptor Danneker’s “Ariadne” sculpture, Chopin writes Ariadne “stood alone on the wild shore of Naxos, ‘her hair blown by winds all about her expressing desolation’...immortal and triumphant, as the bride of Bacchus” (Chopin, *Private Papers*, 52). Chopin also mentions several images that are typically associated with the god: Ariadne is “reclined on the back of a Panther...already circled by the viny crown...the flushed queen of the Bacchante” (Chopin, *Private Papers*, 52-53). Chopin clearly alludes to Greek culture by freely and easily paraphrasing the line about Ariadne’s wind-blown hair and expression of desolation in her journal. She must have been familiar enough with the myth in order to freely incorporate it into her commonplace book. Furthermore, the fact that she spells panther by capitalizing the ‘P’ and placing a space between “Pan” and “ther” (a conscious effort on her part because in the same passage she says the beast “is not a natural, but a mythological panther”) shows she had to be familiar enough with Dionysus to connect him (by way of a pun) to Pan, who was closely associated with the god.

Chopin's analysis of the piece is important because it is the key to understanding the ways in which Chopin uses Dionysus throughout *The Awakening*. Although accounts of the myth of Dionysus and Ariadne differ greatly, the general consensus among all versions is that Dionysus rescues Ariadne from the shores on the island of Naxos and makes her his bride. More importantly for this discussion, once he saw her on the shore, Dionysus selects the "fair hair Ariadne" as his wife and "saved her from death and age" as a result (Hesiod, 54). The description sounds uncannily similar to the story Robert relates to Edna one night while both are walking along the gulf in which a spirit rises from the Gulf and "seeks some one mortal to keep him company, worthy of being exalted for a few hours into realms of semi-celestials (49). Edna, in this way, becomes one who is specifically selected by Dionysus; why else would he appear and speak to her directly at her farewell banquet? She has been hand selected in the same way Ariadne had been in the sculpture Chopin wrote about so eloquently.

Additionally, Robert tells Edna that the same spirit who can number her among the semi-celestials thinks she is special: "But to-night he has found Mrs. Pontellier. Perhaps he will never wholly release her from the spell. Perhaps she will never again suffer a poor, unworthy earthling to walk in the shadow of her divine presence" (49-50). The spirit must take her because she does not deserve to be counted among mortals. It is no mistake, therefore, that Edna's last moments are steeped deeply in Spring, that time of the year when his festivals celebrate his rebirth: "There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air" (190). The nature imagery always associated with Dionysus surrounds Edna in her final moments and are the last words ringing in the reader's ear. The musky scent of flowers and the buzzing of bees are certainly nowhere

near the water or, at least, not as far as she would need to be to not make it back to shore. Dionysus--whose strong association with the advent of spring could certainly be associated with flowers and the buzzing of bees--visits her again, but only to number her among the immortals.

Chopin's familiarity with and use of the god manifest in several ways throughout *The Awakening*. First, Edna is a liminal figure in the text. The special attention she receives throughout the novel would seem to support what so many critics have said: that she is a woman whose suicide is a "judgment on society and the institutions that have forced [her] to commit [suicide]" (Fox-Genovese, 35). But, according to Chopin, she would not have written a novel about social problems. She writes, "Human impulses do not change and can not so long as men and women continue to stand in the relation to one another...which is why...Shakespeare is true to-day,[and] why Ibsen will not be true in some remote tomorrow...because he takes for his themes social problems which by their very nature are mutable" (Chopin, Private Papers, 86-87). Instead, and what is closer to Chopin's own vision, Edna represents the impulsive nature of any natural, Dionysian desires. After all, Robert envisions her as hand-selected by a "spirit" who sounds uncannily like the Dionysus of the Ariadne myth, and she is later spoken to directly by Dionysus at her own farewell party. Therefore, we should not view Edna as a lens through which we should view the ills of society, but instead as a figure who, as the immortal bride of Dionysus, represents the strength that comes from following impulse and ignoring the social constructs that preach the denial of those impulses.

Secondly, because Dionysus is the god of fertility, and the festivals that were held to honor him most often coincided with the advent of spring, careful attention must be



given to the imagery of scenes in which there are descriptions of lush vegetation and an abundance of food and wine. Wine, in particular, is associated with Edna's defiance throughout the novel. Moreover, several of these scenes coincide with music and dancing. The theatrical, festive atmosphere of these scenes are reminiscent of those festivals held in honor of Dionysus for his ability to destroy boundaries, to give commoners the ability to be something greater than themselves, and to celebrate the advent of a new season.

Thirdly, and most importantly, a close look at the behavior of several of the characters and their relationship to Edna shows the dark, Dionysian, chaotic aspect of human nature ultimately overpowers the arbitrary social constructs that are in place. As a result, Dionysian imagery appears throughout the text to remind us of the precarious line that exists between base instinct and social propriety. Social institutions, it seems, are a farce. No one truly adheres to them. After all, Mariequita mentions "Francisco ran away with Sylvano's wife who had four children" (57), the young lovers constantly seek a place to be alone, and Edna has an affair with Arobin. Desire continuously overpowers social propriety despite what society deems as appropriate behavior. People will inevitably break down those barriers of their own accord. Therefore, by focusing on Edna and the Dionysian imagery that surrounds her and her interaction with others, the novel serves as a reminder to all that it is the impulsiveness of human nature, and not arbitrary social structures, that guide all human relationships.

## II. Edna's Farewell Dinner and a "Cameo" by Dionysus

Edna's farewell dinner is perhaps the most important scene in the book for two reasons. First, Dionysus appears directly to Edna while Gouvernail recites lines from the Swinburne poem "Cameo." Secondly, the duality of the scene is represented not only by the poem, but by the behavior of the characters. It is in the dinner scene where the duality of human nature most clearly manifests itself. The event is one in which the revelers' "good fellowship passed around the circle like a mystic chord", and, due to this mysticism, an interesting transformation takes place. The young, seldom mentioned Victor Lebrun suddenly has a "garland of roses, yellow and red...laid...lightly upon [his] black curls" by Mrs. Highcamp (149). The account of the barely-known youth sounds remarkably similar to accounts of a young Dionysus who often appears, when he appears as himself, with a wreath around his flowing "rich, dark hair" (Hamilton, 66). Victor, "as if a magician's wand had touched him" becomes a vision of "Oriental beauty" whose "cheeks were the color of crushed grapes" while his eyes "glowed with a languishing fire" (149).

Victor's "Oriental beauty" is important because of Dionysus' connection to the foreign. Furthermore, the connection between crushed grapes, wine, and Dionysus almost goes without saying; the boy's color has taken on the hue of the most important symbol in Dionysian myth, the grape. The "languishing fire," additionally, is always associated with Dionysus due to the circumstances surrounding his birth. Semele, Dionysus' mother, perishes after seeing Zeus in his true form: "Before that awful glory of burning light she died" (Hamilton, 65). But before she died, Zeus snatched the unborn child from her. Dionysus, therefore, "was born of fire" (Hamilton, 65).

Lastly, the attention Victor receives from Mrs. Highcam both completes his transformation and immediately accentuates the duality of human nature. Her attention “was never for a moment withdrawn from” Victor, not even when he turned toward the “prettier and more vivacious” Mrs. Merriman (147). Dyer indicates that Edna’s “annoyance” with her dinner guests is a result of watching Mrs. Highcamp dote upon Victor. The annoyance, according to Dyer, may come from Edna’s “own awareness of the ugly and destructive side of passion” and makes Dyer question whether Edna’s own passion will “someday make of her a Mrs. Highcamp” (130). As a result of her own passionate desires, Mrs. Highcamp takes a “white silken scarf” and “draped it across the boy in graceful folds” (149). The transformation is complete, and Dionysus appears to the group as a result of their own desires boiling to the surface. What else could be happening when a crowned, dark haired ephebe dressed in a diaphanous robe who visits a party of drunken revelers where “the good, rich wines” were in abundance appears and smiles at them all?

Of course, if the imagery is not evocative or convincing enough, Gouvernail cryptically murmurs two lines of a poem while looking at the boy: “There was a graven image of Desire/ Painted with red blood on a ground of gold” (149). The lines are from Swinburne’s *A Cameo*, in which several aspects of the human condition--Desire, Pain, Pleasure, Satiety, and Hate--are personified and depicted as despondent and tortured in some way by their existence as mortals. The balm for all, it seems, is Death, who stands “aloof behind a gaping grate.” But the price that would need to be paid is too much, apparently: an inscription upon the lock to the grate reads “Peradventure.” Like Hamlet, who realizes that the “dread of something after death” is what allows people to endure

their hardships and that, as a result, the “conscience does make cowards of us all” because the “native hue of resolution/ is sicklied over by the pale cast of thought,” Hate, Pleasure, Desire, Pain, and Satiety must all endure the pain they suffer because the doubt and uncertainty inscribed upon the lock to the gate is too great a price to pay for solace. As a result, we must ask ourselves what the connection is between the poem and the appearance of Dionysus. The lines, after all, are uttered immediately after Victor’s transformation with the robe is complete.

First, and most striking after reading *A Cameo*, is the way the setting between poem and novel differs. Whereas the setting of the dinner party is sensuous and regal, the setting for the poem is dismal and bleak. The dinner party is replete with “wax candles in massive brass candelabra, burning softly under yellow silk shades” and the room is abound with “full, fragrant roses, yellow and red” which are all surrounded by “silver and gold...and crystal which glittered like the gems the women wore” (145). The revelers are surrounded by the comforts of life and society. All that exists is beauty and pleasure.

On the other hand, the stark imagery of the poem sounds as though those characters are living in a wasteland. Of course, a cameo is a physical thing, an image that is defined as “a precious stone having two layers of different colours, in the upper of which a figure is carved in relief, while the lower serves as a ground” by the Oxford English Dictionary Online, the complete second edition. The cameo in the poem to which the title refers is “the graven image of Desire” wherein the “red blood” is the upper layer carved in relief, and the “ground of gold” is the lower against which the relief stands in contrast. The red blood, as a result, is the setting for the main image, the depiction of the suffering states of the human condition.

Furthermore, we read that “insatiable Satiety kept hold,/ Walking with feet unshod that pashed the mire” while “The senses and the sorrows and the sins,/...Followed like beasts with flap of wings and fins.” All senses, sorrow, and sins are paradoxically held captive by “insatiable Satiety.” Moreover, they all trudge through the mire while they “pash” (or “smash,” according to the Oxford English Dictionary Online) which they must do if there is any hope of feeling any type of satiety at all. The characters are tortured by their own hunger, their own desires, and the wasteland in which they find themselves.

The dinner scene, as a result, becomes a cameo of sorts to the underlying despondency, the “ground”, in other words, which Edna certainly feels. First, since the imagery associated with Edna’s party is predominantly shimmering and gold, it is safe to assume that it most certainly represents the lower golden ground against which such a dark poem, the red blood, stands in relief. The macabre imagery of the poem, therefore, contrasts the ethereal light of the lower. All is not as it seems at the party. The first indication is the desire, “the graven image” Mrs. Highcamp shows for Victor, and the second is Swinburne’s poem. Yet, all of the desires must be kept in check by the sense of social propriety and Death standing near.

The other definition of “cameo”, which was certainly extant in the late Victorian period, is “a small character part that stands out from the other minor parts” (Oxford English Dictionary Online). Dionysus literally makes a cameo in a scene where Edna’s implicit duality is coming to the surface; it is the dinner occasion, after all, that Edna is using as a “farewell...before leaving” the home where her domestic duties as a woman lie (136). Perhaps Chopin is being tongue-in-cheek, but it is not beyond the realm of

possibility that she would have selected the two lines from *A Cameo* and placed them within a scene of a textbook image of Dionysus to emphasize duality as well as a visitation from the god of the vine.

As a result, we are left with two scenes that stand in stark contrast to each other, both introduced while the image of Dionysus sits at the table and has wine “held...to his lips” as though it is an offering; one scene of gaiety, light, and profundity, and the other of blood, insatiable desires, and trudging through the mire beneath the watchful, albeit “aloof,” eyes of Death (150). There is lightness and darkness, life and death, pleasure and suffering, all while Edna looks on the scene as a quiet observer. And then, unexpectedly, she is singled out by the visiting god, the possessed boy. After a period of “silence” in which he “seemed to have abandoned himself to a reverie,” he looks directly at Edna and sings “Ah! Si tu savais!” (Ah! If you knew!), to which Edna earnestly replies, “Stop...don’t sing that. I don’t want you to sing it” (150). Edna “shatter[s]” her glass “against a carafe” and “the wine spilled” (150). Victor taunts her; he “laughed and went on: Ah! Si tu savais/ ce que tes yeux me dissent” (Ah! If you knew what your eyes say to me). The statement is as cryptic as the two lines Gouvernail mumbles to himself, so we must ask the question: why do the ideas appear so closely together in Edna’s last supper? In order to answer the question, we must first examine who Dionysus was for the Greeks and then the Victorians in order to have any understanding of how the god relates to Edna and the novel as a whole.

### III. The Greek and Victorian Dionysus

Dionysus is a paradoxical god; he is both god and human, being born of Zeus and the mortal Semele. He brings joy and bravery as much as he brings maniacal behavior and destruction, and he is both life and death because he is the vine that bears the grape as well as the suffering god who is torn limb to limb every year. This duality manifests itself in all accounts we see of Dionysus, and he harnesses it in his behavior towards humans. As a result, he “unites human beings and divides them, is the god of joy and peace, and of sudden irrational violence...but in his association with ecstasy, madness, and violence, his are also the forces that tear down distinctions of civilization” (Nelson, 155).

His importance for this discussion balances precisely on his ability to “tear down distinctions” of society. Although many Greek accounts of Dionysus differ greatly depending on which poet, playwright, or historian is depicting the god, there are similar themes repeated throughout the stories; particularly, that the god is most often, if only initially, depicted as effeminate, is always associated with the foreign, and always blurs the lines between the social conventions that keep society intact and the dark, animalistic forces that threaten to destroy those boundaries. By examining the ways in which these themes are used, we are better able to use the multiple, and sometimes conflicting, accounts of the god to more accurately understand his importance to Chopin and *The Awakening*.

His suffering is an important characteristic to consider, particularly as it pertains to Edna, because his suffering enables him to exist at the boundary between two worlds.

According to Hamilton, he “was afflicted...because of his own pain. He was the vine, which is always pruned as nothing else that bears fruit...through the winter a dead thing to look at” (74). Like the grapevines that need to be pruned at the end of each harvest, the annual death of Dionysus “was terrible [because] he was torn to pieces...by Hera’s orders” (Hamilton, 75). His suffering is unique because, whereas the other Olympians are immortal and, as a result, largely incomprehensible to humans, Dionysus suffers a horrible, painful death annually. His death is what binds him to humanity. Even the Titan Prometheus, despite his suffering while chained to the side of a mountain, does not die. And, while Persephone must spend half the year in Hades, it is not by way of a painful death. No god truly suffers like Dionysus.

His death, however, is tempered by the promise of renewal. It was a promise to those who took part in his mysteries that, while the physical may change form or be destroyed altogether, the ethereal, spiritual aspect of any being may live on after death. He was “the assurance that death does not end all...[and] that his death and resurrection showed that the soul lives on forever after the body dies” (Hamilton, 75). The very nature of Dionysus, therefore, is of duality. He can inflict pain as easily as he can pleasure because he experiences both, but it is not without reason, and is never without cause or understanding. If there is a constant for Dionysus, it is that he is the boundary between pleasure and pain, between chaos and order, between life and death because only he understands what it is to exist with both extremes.

In many accounts of Dionysian wrath, for example, dark, maniacal forces tear down the established social constructs. More often than not, those in the place of power are the characters who repeatedly deny the god his rites and, as a result, must suffer his



wrath. Whereas other Olympians whimsically inflict pain and suffering, Dionysus calculates who he destroys and tortures perhaps, in part, because only he can empathize with the pain. The pain he inflicts, therefore, is not for nothing. There is always a purpose. For instance, In *The Bacchae*, Pentheus, king of Thebes, is so far removed from any threat to his power that his own hubris eclipses his judgment. He cajoles, questions, and makes demands of a stranger-- a disguised Dionysus--who suddenly appears in Thebes: “Who are you and from where?” and “Who is this god whose worship you have imported?” (Euripides, 562-563). Dionysus continually avoids direct answer or comment, a response the king is certainly not used to. After all, when a herdsman comes to tell the king of the women who “in madness went streaming bare-limbed out of the city gates,” the herdsman must first ask permission to “speak freely” because he is “afraid of [Pentheus’] hastiness... [and his] hot temper” because Pentheus is “too much like a king” (Vellacott, 202). Power, it seems, has made a megalomaniac of Pentheus, and he has abused this power to make others fear him because they know he is “too much like a king”.

As a result of his own audacity, Pentheus travels an arc from powerful despot to idle plaything of the Bacchae, and his kingdom is left in ruin. Due to Dionysus, the salacious, ravenous Bacchae are able to destroy the extant power structure of Thebes, which calls into question the might of that hierarchy in the first place. Additionally, Pentheus goes to his death wearing a woman’s dress, although he says that he could never “bring [himself] to dress in women’s clothes” because he would “die of shame” if he were forced to do so. Yet, ironically, die he does at the hands of women. “The whole horde/ of Bacchae swarmed upon him...one tore off an arm, / another a foot still warm in

its shoe. His ribs / were clawed clean of flesh and every hand / was smeared with blood as they played ball with scraps of Pentheus' body" (Euripides, 592). How strong could any king have been, how stable his kingdom, if, in a matter of moments, scraps of his body become idle playthings for those who murder him? The façade of power is both mocked and destroyed by the Bacchae. Moreover, Pentheus must feel what it is to be a beggar, the lowest possible position in any society. He pleads for his life before his own mother "plant[ed] her foot upon his chest...[and] wrench[ed] away the arm at the shoulder" to which he cried, "No, no mother!...Pity me, spare me...but do not kill your own son" (Euripides, 592). In one rapid movement, Pentheus' entire kingdom collapses.

How structurally and ideologically sound can any hierarchy be if a pack of frenzied women, fueled by the forces of nature, can destroy its king so brutally and, more to the point, so easily? The social norms are entirely inverted; Dionysus has empowered women to destroy a king, not an army of rugged, male soldiers, not a formidable opponent trained in the art of combat. The god serves as a reminder, in this case, that power is arbitrary; it is a simple construct that exists only to keep order in a nonsensical, violent world. The darker aspects of human nature are where the real power truly lies because it is those forces that eventually destroy a kingdom and all its heirs.

Thebes, for instance, is left without an heir and ruin is brought to the entire royal family. Once Agave realizes what she has done, Cadmus, Pentheus' grandfather and the former king of Thebes, cries, "All our house/ the god as utterly destroyed and, with it, / me. For I have no sons left, no male heir" (Euripides, 602). Furthermore, Dionysus declares that the offenders "shall be driven from the city/ to other lands; there, submitting to the yoke/ of slavery, they shall wear out wretched lives, captives of war, enduring

much indignity” (Euripides, 604). The family that once ruled Thebes becomes the family who suffers and who are exiled from the land they once ruled. The result is the entire social construct--not one man, but the entire society--is destroyed by the chaotic, frenzied forces that those constructs are meant to keep at bay.

The act of recognition is also an important theme throughout all accounts of Dionysus. As is the case with *The Bacchae*, Dionysus appears in disguise to test others. In Pentheus’ case, if he had merely recognized the god and acknowledged that those forces existed, that they, that Dionysus, truly have the power, Thebes would have been spared. Instead, Pentheus refused to acknowledge Dionysus and the power of those forces he represents. If he had recognized the base, demoniac forces Dionysus represents, he may have been spared.

On the other hand, when Dionysus is captured by a pirate ship and abused by all but one of his captors, the result of recognizing the god becomes clear. In the anonymous Homeric Hymn to Dionysus, written sometime around 500 B.C.E., we read, “Pirates...raced across the wine-dark sea” and “when they saw” Dionysus, whose “rich, dark hair flowed round him” they “nodded to each other and instantly leapt out and caught him” because he must have been “the son of those kings the gods love” (Cashford, 100-101). However, when a helmsman realizes “the ropes would not hold” Dionysus, he declares, “Madmen! Who is this god you have seized and bound?” and immediately requests that the men put the god ashore. As a result, the helmsman alone was spared from Dionysus’ wrath and the god, “had mercy on him and made him truly happy” and tells the helmsman “you have charmed my heart” (Cashford, 104). Whereas the others are punished for believing that they could actually control the god, the helmsman is

rewarded for his own understanding and humility. He accepts that he cannot control the stranger or the situation in which he finds himself, and concedes. Furthermore, it is important to note that the helmsman is not empowered but is made “truly happy” because, perhaps, he is able to live with the understanding that those in a position of power--his captain in this case--are easily stripped of that power because it is ultimately a facade. As a disciple of Dionysus, the helmsman can take solace in that simple revelation

Dionysus’ effeminacy also reinforces the idea that there are forces at work below the surface of what we see. As an “effeminate stranger”, which Pentheus calls him, Dionysus has the ability to initially appear weak and powerless to the forces against which he is cast. He never appears as a powerful, awe-inspiring god, but rather as an ambiguously clad stranger who, as a result of that ambiguity, is mistaken as weak and gullible. Dionysus donning the garb of a woman plays a special role in all of the stories where he is depicted as feminine; it lures others, particularly those in a place of power, into a false sense of security before they are reminded of the arbitrary nature of that power.

It is Pentheus who threatens to “cut off [his] girlish curls” before he thinks he can make the god submit (Euripides, 563-564). Furthermore, when Dionysus meets the daughters of the king of Thrace, they “[refuse] to take part in his “mysteries” to which “Dionysus, in the shape of a girl, had invited them himself.” The result, not surprisingly, is “the sisters fell into madness: the oldest tore her son to pieces, then all three of them ate him” (Kott, 194). Also, at the start of Aristophanes’ *The Frogs*, written in 405 B.C.E., Dionysus is dressed in a robe that “resembles a woman’s garment, and in buskins or high laced-up boots of a tragic actor [which] also have a somewhat feminine look”

(Aristophanes, 156). His physical appearance is no different than the use of a light near a spider's web; it lures unsuspecting victims, but only those who recognize the web for what it is are able to steer clear before it is too late. The others must suffer the consequences of being tempted by a stranger or, more to the point, their own socially constructed views of that stranger. Pentheus believes he can abuse the man because of his girlish looks, and the sisters believe they are simply entering a conversation with another young woman. Their own views, which have been informed by a life of privilege, ultimately fail them.

The common denominator is that in all of the Dionysian myths, whether a tragedy, a comedy, an epic poem or a hymn, there is a particular emphasis on the act of recognition (or the lack thereof) of the stranger. Those who believe the god, who are willing to worship or, at the very least, listen to his commands when first noticed, are ultimately saved. Those who do not recognize him are typically in a position of privilege and power but are stripped of all they once had and, ultimately, become part of the fallen house of Pentheus.

Although classical accounts of his composure and actions may differ, all accounts seem to point to that one idea: he is the line between two extremes, the dividing point. No king can be too powerful, no captain of a ship too sure of himself. Those characters who worship Dionysus, who believe in the chthonic deity who suffers and encourages madness, are characters with seemingly little power who are ultimately empowered. But they are not empowered with social status or wealth. Rather, the lowly helmsman whose warnings fall on deaf ears in the *Homeric Hymn to Dionysus*, the blind old prophet Teiresias in *The Bacchae*, the underdog Aeschylus who wins a literary competition in

Hades in *The Frogs*, and the women who follow Dionysus, become aware that the social constructs which have once bound them are simply arbitrary structures imposed by other men.

Empowering the weak and challenging social norms are easily the most important aspects of Dionysus, so it is not surprising that these were the traits celebrated several times a year throughout Greece. There was, however, no temple specifically for Dionysus. His rites were celebrated in the theater, a place where a person could become something other than himself and be celebrated for the act. Hamilton mentions, “the place where people gathered to do honor to the god was not a wild wilderness,” nor was it a “temple precinct with ordered sacrifices and priestly ceremonies. It was a theater” (74). Nowhere else, not in the wild nor in a temple, were strangers recognized and lauded or were common citizens able to become important figures for the day. But such was the power of Dionysus; the relation between his abilities as a god to break down barriers, and the way in which these ideas manifest themselves in the consciousness of so many Greeks, gave even the lowliest citizen the right to criticize politicians and others in a position of power and to claim power for himself, if only temporarily. This is, perhaps, the reason so many worshipped the god; the “possibilities of theatrical disguise and ritual role reversal...allowed those with less status to mock those with more” (Scodel, 34).

The mutability of those with status is made apparent in such a festival. The Athenian citizens would be well aware, under the influence of Dionysus, that they have just as much ability to tear at the social fabric as their worshipped deity if so desired. The common citizen would naturally desire power; why else would such a festival and the idea of role reversal be so important? If those desires were to be kept at bay for too long,

however, they could easily boil over and destroy the institutions that are put in place to ensure society continues uninterrupted. As a result, the entire community would gather to worship. Such cathartic festivities would have curative powers for any of society's ills; the ability to reverse roles would give a person the chance to experience life from a different, empowered perspective. The events were all-inclusive as well: "Men and women participated, both citizen and metic" (Scodel, 28). In no other festival--other than one that is dedicated to a god whose chief traits are that of being a foreigner and of breaking boundaries--could foreigners be praised and all people take place in worship as guests of honor. Furthermore, citizens and foreigners alike could not only participate, but could have a special purpose: "Some had special ritual functions, and to be appointed to these posts was evidence of great honor" (Scodel 28). Furthermore, these positions were announced to the public in the theater because "no other festival concentrated so effectively the entire citizen body in one place at the same time" (Scodel 29).

Perhaps this Greek vision of the god is the reason why so many Victorians lauded Dionysus and his mysteries, and why they denigrated the other Olympians. In the Olympians they saw a likeness to the Judeo-Christian God who could allow others to suffer while he sat and watched the pain of others ambivalently from heaven. Margot Louis says, "The gods of Greek mythology were...limited in sympathy with mortal suffering, and separate from humanity in their inhuman beauty and their immortal joy" (329). Dionysus and his mysteries, on the other hand, "were assumed to have satisfied the religious sensibility because they connected celebrants with one another, with nature, and with the infinite." She continues and says that "in the polarized atmosphere of the late Victorian era, denigrating the Greek gods became a way to attack the Christian cult

of transcendence and immortality, the focus on life after death” whereas the mysteries were a way to “celebrate the sacredness of this life, of sexuality, and of the life force” (329).

Revolution and Dionysus seem to be inextricably linked, particularly with the Victorians and the popular interest in the secular and scientific. He is perpetually the foreigner who represents the downtrodden in classical texts. His status as a liminal figure--and the powers that can be associated with it-- persisted in Victorian times. Whereas the emphasis on Dionysus for the Greeks is balance and the concept of an eternal soul, to many Victorians he became the symbol for rebellion, a “little Olympus” apart from the Homeric Hellenism that was equated with Christianity.

Walter Pater was a proponent of this view of Dionysus. He states, “the thought of Dionysus and his circle, a little Olympus outside the greater, covered the whole of life, and was a complete religion, a sacred representation or interpretation of the whole human experience” (10). In order to help readers understand the importance of Dionysian worship to the ancient Greeks, Pater draws an analogy to Victorian symbols and ideas in “A Study of Dionysus”:

Now, if the reader wishes to understand what the scope of the religion of Dionysus was to the Greeks who lived in it, all it represented to them by way of one clearly conceived yet complex symbol, let him reflect what the loss would be if all the effect and expression drawn from the imagery of the vine and the cup fell out of the whole body of existing poetry; how many fascinating trains of reflexion, what colour and substance would therewith have been deducted from it, filled as it is, apart from the more awful associations of the Christian ritual, apart from Galahad's cup, with all the various symbolism of the fruit of the vine.



By acknowledging what a tremendous loss the “whole body of existing poetry” would suffer and, in turn, the readers of that poetry if the symbols of the “vine and the cup” were nonexistent, Pater simultaneously acknowledges the idea that Dionysus was important to the Greeks who lived by his religion, and that the symbolism of the god was an important part of Victorian society. The prevalence and importance of the god and the forces he represents, therefore, would make him a formidable figure against the waning view of the shimmering ideals of the other Olympians and of Christianity.

Also, Pater’s diction in the passage might offer a statement about the moral relativism of the Victorian Age and the veiled attempts so many were using in order to rail against established social and religious institutions. Pater mentions that, without Dionysian imagery in existing poetry, “fascinating trains of reflexion...colour and substance would [be]... deducted from it” (10). He goes on to state that the reader must not consider “the more awful associations of the Christian ritual” when considering the loss that poetry would suffer, but he does little to explain why the poetic imagery should not be associated with Christian ritual. It seems as though there is a critical difference between the two, according to Pater. His use of the word “awful” is the best clue as to this distinction; a glance at the Oxford English Dictionary shows that Pater’s particular spelling appears under the entry for the adjective “awful,” and could mean both “awe-inspiring” but also “terrible, dreadful, [and] appalling.” In an age where “British mythographers were hampered...by the need to conciliate a strong evangelical lobby deeply suspicious of paganism in any form,” it is no wonder that Pater would use a pun that certainly makes his belief known while simultaneously pointing to the absurdity by attacking the ‘awfulness’ of Christianity (Margot 330).

Dionysus plays a crucial role in Pater's ongoing attempt to reconcile Christianity and humanism-- "repeated attempts at synthesis," according to DeLaura--in a rapidly changing world. It is not difficult to see why the god would play such a role, either; as an intermediary between the divine and the secular, the mortal mother and the heavenly father, Dionysus symbolized that synthesis by embodying all of the qualities Pater sought to reconcile. "The other Olympians," says Pater, "are above sorrow. Dionysus, like a strenuous mortal hero...has his alterations of joy and sorrow" (40). DeLaura mentions that Pater's "desertion of Christianity was nurtured in the same climate of condition" that rejected Christianity due to "ethical revulsion," which led him to "appeal far more frankly to aesthetic criteria in rejecting Christian standards" (168). By mentioning the Dionysian images associated with poetry and the significance of those images, he is not only appealing to that aesthetic criteria, but using it in such a way as to undermine the "Christian ritual" that depend so heavily on those images of the vine and the cup. DeLaura also mentions that Pater's Hellenism "adopts the fervor, the sensuousness, some of the implicit sexuality, and a good deal of the anti-Christian tone of German Hellenism...by adding Dionysian tradition" (177). By focusing on the Dionysian tradition and translating that to Victorian times, Pater was able to "advance his 'enriched' view of Greek religion as a conscious alternative to a played-out Christianity" (177).

Christianity, in this sense, is synonymous with Pentheus; the established order is not evil simply because it is the status quo, but because it is too myopic, too focused on one aspect of life. Everything else, the "fascinating trains of reflexion," for instance, is ignored or pushed to the wayside. The ignorance and suppression of those desires are exactly what Christianity, Pentheus, the Athenian metics, and others in a place of power

promote. For some Victorians, like the Greeks long before them, Dionysus is the all-embracing figure that can, and therefore must, restore balance to a one-sided, unbalanced view of life. He is the reminder that there is more to life than meets the eye, and if that simple truth is ignored, there is a great deal to lose.

Perhaps no one embraced this idea more than Nietzsche in his 1872 work, *The Birth of Tragedy*; Nietzsche views Christianity as a plague and prescribes all things Dionysian as its cure. The reasons, according to Nietzsche, are that Christianity exhibits “a curse on the passions” and a “fear of beauty and sensuality” (9). To subscribe to the Christian doctrine, therefore, is to deny oneself so much of what, for many, makes life beautiful. Nietzsche is more brazen, to the point of audacity, than Pater when it comes to his view of Christianity: “In truth, there is no greater antithesis of the purely aesthetic exegesis and justification of the world...than the Christian doctrine which is, and wants to be, *only* moral” (9). To emphasize the point, he adds, “From the very outset Christianity was essentially and pervasively the feeling of disgust and weariness which life felt for life, a feeling which merely disguised, hid, and decked itself out in its belief in ‘another’ or ‘better’ life” (9).

The panacea for such a myopic religious view, therefore, lies in an understanding of two contrary creative forces in Greek art; namely, the Apollonian and the “Dionysiac”. Nietzsche believes that “there are two states in which human beings attain to the feeling of delight in existence, namely in *dream* and in *intoxication*” (119). The Apollonian is associated with the dream aspect of delight and artistry, the “luminous one” who has “beauty as his element [and] eternal youth [as] his companion” (120). His antithesis, however, is the “Dionysiac” view. In it, according to Nietzsche, “subjectivity disappears

entirely” because “not only do the festivals of Dionysus forge a bond between human beings, they also reconcile human beings with nature.” The Dionysiac places humans closer to the ethereal, the arcane, the libidinous aspects of human nature and, in doing so, allows humans to embrace all aspects of life and rejoice in beauty as much as in suffering. As opposed to a myopic view of life in which all focus becomes an afterlife that may not exist at all, the Dionysiac view is capable of accepting all aspects of life. Humans are not only reconciled with other humans regardless of subjective views, but with nature as well.

The reconciliation, furthermore, goes beyond men and nature and reverberates, not surprisingly, throughout social classes as well: “All the caste-like divisions which necessity and arbitrary power have established between men disappear; the slave is a free-man, the aristocrat and the man of lowly birth unite in the same Bacchic choruses.” Most importantly, “they feel themselves to have transformed by magic, and they really have become something different” (120). The view Nietzsche espouses is the same reason Dionysus was worshipped in Greece in the first place. Opposed to the glittering ideals, the “sunny” side of high Greek culture, which is certainly synonymous with those same ideals in Victorian culture, Dionysus is needed to remind everyone of the darker side of reality and to serve, as he did for the Greeks, as an equalizing force for humanity.

Humanity must learn to embrace the “terrible or absurd nature of existence” because, even though it is far more difficult to do so than, say, believing that all will be well in the afterlife, to accept such a terrible truth is far better than living within the confines of “the most excessive, elaborately figured development of the moral theme that humanity has ever had to listen to” (40, 9). Nietzsche says, “Art alone can re-direct those

repulsive thoughts about...existence into representations with which man can live.” By accepting the “Dionysiac” worldview, people are better equipped psychologically to deal with the darkest aspects of human nature because those aspects are taken into consideration, whereas--with Christianity--a large portion of life is simply ignored and suppressed. Here we see a similar strain in the act of recognition. Those who recognize the god and accept all he represents are more psychologically equipped to deal with that reality than those who attempt to deny those forces.

Another area to examine Dionysian influence in Victorian times is, appropriately enough, the theater. By examining what trends were popular, Michael Walton states “*The Bacchae*...makes uncomfortable reading or viewing beyond the sheer cruelty of its plot” and, as a result, “more than any other classical tragedy [serves as] a barometer of the times in which it has been revived” (189). By examining the way in which the play was received by Victorians, in other words, we can have a fairly reliable sense of what the popular view of Dionysus was at the time.

The Dionysus in Aristophanes’ *Frogs* is “the god incarnate of masquerade, impersonation, paradox, pretence, in-jokes, theatre and metatheatre: all with a happy outcome” (Walton, 191). This happy outcome was obviously quite popular with Victorian audiences because the material was “in tune with the Victorian fondness for popular entertainment and especially for illusion and magic.” As a result, “No fewer than seven new translations of *Frogs* were published between 1882 and 1900, at least two of which were specifically aimed at amateur performance. The frivolous Dionysus of Aristophanes was clearly a god which the nineteenth century could accommodate” (191).

It should come as no surprise that, for the most part, many Victorians chose the Apollonian worldview over Nietzsche's Dionysiac prescription. If we compare the reaction to two different depictions of Dionysus--the comedic god of *Frogs* and the tragic god of *The Bacchae*--it is easy to see which side of Dionysus the audiences would rather see. The jovial Dionysus upholds Victorian core beliefs, values, ideals and societal mores. In a ribald comedy where the god of the vine is treated irreverently, where he is "belaboured by loutish underlings" and "there are delicate mental situations in which no man, let alone a god, should be expected to involve himself," Dionysus is not threatening in any way, and any sense of tragedy associated with him or his name is entirely forgotten (Walton, 192). In other words, the Dionysus of *The Frogs* represents a being that uses reason and humour to uphold societal norms. From this perspective, all that is really lost is the reputation of Euripides after losing the literary competition, and the loss can be viewed from a comical distance. No norms, no established order, is truly upset.

The Dionysus of *The Bacchae*, however, was not so well received. A god who forces a king's mother to eat her own son, who banishes a royal family, and who sends women screaming and dancing through the fields to eat the flesh of men and wild beasts, is certainly no god for those Hellenophiles who desired beauty and reason. The Dionysus of *The Bacchae* represents the "unaccountable and the illogical" and, as a result, "was anathema in the first part of the nineteenth century because it fitted so awkwardly with the whole sane and sanitised view of an ancient Greece based on simplicity and controlled reason" (Walton, 192). Indeed, as opposed to *The Frogs*, Euripides' play "proved either too strong meat, or too strange fruit, to surface very often. Between 1837 and 1901 there were ten new translations of Bacchae published in England" (Walton,

193). Conversely, “No fewer than seven new translations of Frogs were published between 1882 and 1900, at least two of which were specifically aimed at amateur performance” (Walton, 191).

For many Victorians, it was enough that their worldview was being challenged by science, changing views of morality, child labour laws, and increasing pressure for women’s rights, so it is not surprising that many would eschew a play that celebrates delirium, brutality, and feverishness as the forces that overthrow the established order. Walton states, “It was this dimension of Dionysus which fitted so uncomfortably with late eighteenth and nineteenth century notions of an idealised Greece” because the play “parades and celebrates unreason” and focuses upon “a religion which proved wholly resistant to colonisation by Christian virtues” (195). Reason and established norms were faltering in the face of feverish expansion, so the Dionysus of *The Bacchae*, as the incarnation of unreason and a brutal overthrow of power, must have been necessarily avoided. In the patriarchal, Victorian time period, therefore, the Apollonian view--the reasonable, ordered, and beautiful view of the world--was the preferred view. *The Bacchae*, as the barometer it is, shows us many Victorians desired strong boundaries between rich and poor, male and female, religion and science. Anything that threatened that precarious balance could not be tolerated.

But what is most important is that there was the perception of a threat at all. With the response to *The Bacchae*, and the writings of Pater and Nietzsche, Dionysus was still strongly identified by many Victorians as a chaotic force that had the ability to destroy social mores and long-held religious beliefs. For the Greeks, Dionysus served as a force that could reach between worlds and could both show the living a glimpse of the

immortal soul as well as show that boundaries can be destroyed. For both, Dionysus stood specifically for embracing those aspects of life that were taboo and destroying the forces, such as Christianity, that preached people must deny impulses and natural, instinctive drives.



#### IV. Dionysus and *The Awakening*

In *The Awakening*, the lady in black is the best place to begin understanding the importance of impulse versus natural, Dionysian desires because, for such a minor character, a great deal can be understood by examining her presence. The lady in black represents those social conventions that attempt to subdue carnal desires. She is often seen nearby the two young lovers while they walk around the island, and her proximity to them takes on an increasingly foreboding air each time she is seen with them. The first time we see the lady she is “telling her beads” as she was going “over to the *Cheniere Caminada* in Beaudet's lugger to hear mass” (6). Her presence, initially, does not seem threatening at all. Her rosary affiliate her with Christianity from the start, but there appears to be nothing threatening about the association. The next time we see her, however, she is “reading her morning devotions” all the while, close by, the “two young lovers were exchanging their hearts' yearnings” (29). Her presence here is slightly more ominous, particularly if we keep Nietzsche in mind. We read that the old woman in dressed in black while reading her devotions, and, in the next sentence, the yearning of the young lovers is mentioned. Chopin creates a strange dichotomy between the two images; one, foreboding, void of color and passion, the other full of hope, vibrancy, and yearning hearts. Like the cameo that appears at the novel's end, there are two layers presented that allow us to focus more intently on the glittering ideals of one image and the macabre image to which it is set in relief.

The young lovers, despite their heart's yearnings, are encouraged to not act on those impulses because of a sense of moral and social propriety. The eyes of the old woman are always on them, reminding them of what not to do. Take, for instance, the

increasing intensity with which the lady in black gathers a foreboding air. The third time we see her, she is “creeping behind” the young lovers, looking “a trifle paler and more jaded than usual” (37). Her appearance is increasingly sinister the more the young lovers embrace each other and come closer to acting outside of the bounds of propriety. There is no reason the old woman should look “paler and more jaded” than she typically does unless we look at the two young lovers. They are closer, now, than they had been previously. They “were leaning toward each other as the water oaks bent from the sea” and so enthralled in each other’s presence that it seems as though “not a particle of earth” was “beneath their feet” (37). Like those who refuse to recognize Dionysus for who he is, the old woman grows more weak, paler, and jaded as she witnesses the Dionysian influence over the young couple. Social propriety, in this case, has no influence over the young couple and their strong desire for each other.

Yet, when young lovers decide to go to church with several others from the island, a plan they had “laid...the night before” the old woman is “following at no great distance” (55). The closer the young lovers come to embracing Christianity, the more invigorating it seems to be for the watchful eyes of the old woman. When the two are being intimate and affectionate, the old woman looks paler than usual. The closer they get to church, however, the lovers, who are “shoulder to shoulder, creeping” are followed by the lady in black, who is “gaining steadily upon them” (56). Interestingly, there is a role reversal; the two lovers are now described as “creeping” and the lady in black is able to gain on them. Physically, she is able to keep up her speed, but all that she represents is rapidly taking control of the young couple. Here, Christianity is that which keeps the young lovers from embracing their impulses, and instead pushes them closer to the

established norms of society. That the two quite suddenly begin “creeping” toward church shoulder to shoulder, not bent toward each other and yearning shows the Christian ideals represented by the old lady are “gaining steadily upon them.”

Interestingly, with Chopin’s quotation in mind about the significance of impulses and their relation to memory, we never find out any specific details about the two young lovers. They are, as a result, a symbol for those who yield to societal and religious conventions. To recognize and embrace Dionysus and Dionysian impulses is to honor the god and live a “happy” life (Cashford, 104). The two young lovers, however, never truly act on their impulses and, as a result, are never any more significant than passing youngsters who will, more than likely, fade into obscurity like so many others who do not recognize those libidinal forces.

Compare the obscurity of the young lovers and the old lady, then, to the notoriety of Edna on Grand Isle. Edna’s realization that a “certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her” occurs shortly after she follows “in obedience...one of two contradictory impulses” in herself and decides to go with Robert to the beach to bathe (25). This realization, furthermore, sounds as though it was taken directly from *The Birth of Tragedy*. “It moved her to dreams, to thoughtfulness, to the shadowy anguish which had overcome her,” and this beginning, is “necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing” (25). Edna’s strong desire to follow her impulses allows her to glimpse beyond the Apollonian, social confines that constrain her and look into the chaotic, shadowy regions of human nature that certainly adhere to Nietzsche’s vision of the Dionysian.

Once she looks at the “exceedingly disturbing” view, she cannot return to the Apollonian view of the world that laws, social mores, and church certainly attempt to uphold. She has seen through the glittering ideals to which everyone is supposed to live and viewed instead the blood-colored relief of life’s cameo. As a result, Edna cannot sit through the same service that the young couple and the rest of the odd assortment of characters manage to bear. “A feeling of oppression and drowsiness overcame Edna during the service. Her head began to ache, and the lights on the altar swayed before her eyes...her one thought was to quit the stifling atmosphere of the church and reach the open air” (60). She is stifled by the view of reality offered by the church to the extent that she feels so stifled she must excuse herself from the service. Even in the open air, however, Edna is “in the shadow of the church” and must leave in order to rest.

It seems as though the spirit from the gulf that Robert mentions is progressively influencing Edna. Like Dionysus choosing Ariadne as his wife, the vague and “disturbing” view of reality have an increasing hold of Edna, and the reader’s attention is focused solely on her in the midst of several Dionysian settings in order to highlight the difference. As opposed to the young lovers and the lady in black who belong to the world of glittering ideals and the church-- the world that will not be remembered by others, according to Chopin--Edna’s desire to act on physical impulse and not what is deemed socially acceptable creates a sharp contrast between her and many of the other characters who, like the young lovers and the lady in black, embrace the Apollonian view of life.

Before she can openly accept the Dionysian view, however, Edna, as well as the reader, must realize that she is different from the other characters due specifically to an increasingly Dionysian influence. By focusing on several of the settings in which she

finds herself, for example, we see that there is typically a festive atmosphere--not unlike those festivities dedicated to Dionysus--in which Edna both stands apart from the crowd and receives special recognition. Furthermore, Edna, like Dionysus, is associated with both the alien and the androgynous. As a result, both characterization and setting create the backdrop against which Edna must grasp the macabre forces of Dionysus.

From the start of *The Awakening*, therefore, Edna realizes, “though she had married a Creole, [she] was not thoroughly at home in the society of Creoles” (18). Everything about Edna is alien; from the idea that she is not “thoroughly at home” in the society of Creoles, to the way in which she carries herself with the “graceful severity of poise and movement, which made [her] different from the crowd” (27). These few simple lines about Edna’s character appear early in the work and draw attention to her otherness, a trait indicative of Dionysus. In Detienne’s account of Dionysus, for example, we read that “Nowhere is he at home” and that his “personality is deeply colored by his status as stranger” (i, 10). Similarly, Otto states, “research has conclusively proven that Dionysus made his way into Greece as a foreigner” (52). The connection between Dionysus and Edna as strangers is an important one because it heightens the reader’s awareness that the two represent marginalized figures who need not adhere to any social, political, or religious sense of propriety.

Interestingly, the character who mentions the Gulf Spirit is also the character who serves two purposes when it comes to highlighting the extent of Edna’s Dionysian embrace; after all, of all the potential faux-suitors to whom Robert could have become a “devoted attendant,” he selects Edna. His devotion, of course, is noticed by many, including Madame Ratignolles who warns Robert that his selection is not wise because

“[Edna] is not one of us; she is not like us” (35). While she may be chastising the youth for doting on a married woman, Madame Ratignolles also highlights Edna's otherness; she is a foreigner and, like Dionysus, must be dealt with accordingly.

Despite the warning he receives, Robert does spend a great deal of time with Edna. Interestingly, when the two are alone, an odd symmetry is created between them; Edna's face is more “handsome than beautiful” lent in part to a “certain frankness of expression” and a “contradictory set of features,” while Robert's face is “clean shaved” and serves to make “the resemblance” between the two “more pronounced than it otherwise would have been” (9). The narrator does not elaborate on what is meant by contradictory features, and the lack of clarity is intriguing. The mirror descriptions of both Edna and Robert highlight Edna's androgyny, a characteristic that strongly aligns her with Dionysus. The two strongly resemble one another and, while both are obviously attractive, what qualities would make one or the other attractive to the opposite sex are strangely opaque. In this sense, Edna, while beautiful in the same way that Dionysus is described in so many accounts, is a perfect choice for god of the vine.

Besides her androgyny and the otherness it reinforces, Edna receives special attention by way of offerings and devotions in theatrical settings much in the same way Dionysus would at the Greek festivals held in his honor. The connection to the Dionysian festivals, particularly the way in which a theatrical setting serves as a prelude for the final dinner scene, is what binds the mortal to the god. This is evidenced when Edna receives recognition from Mademoiselle Reisz in front of the others at Madame Lebrun's the evening that “an unusual number of husbands, fathers, and friends had come down to stay over Sunday” (40). The scene opens with “Every light in the hall ablaze,

every lamp turned as high as it could be...[while] the white muslin curtains...puffed, floated, and flapped at the capricious will of a stiff breeze that swept up from the Gulf” (40). The imagery is ethereal; a well-lit hall with diaphanous curtains blowing in the capricious Gulf breeze seems fit for the entrance of some celestial being, and the lush description of vegetation brings the idea to fruition.

The lush description of vegetation is most certainly Dionysian; we read, “Some one had gathered orange and lemon branches, and with these fashioned festoons between.” Furthermore, “the dark green of the branches stood out and glistened against the white muslin curtains. . . which puffed, floated, and flapped at the capricious will of a stiff breeze” (40). The use of the word “festooned” emphasizes the connection to Dionysus because, according the Oxford English Dictionary Online, festooned means “a chain of garland, flowers, or leaves.” The account of the vegetation sounds remarkably similar to the entrance of Dionysus in *The Bacchae* where, according to Kott, the women who surround the god “brandish the sacred thyrsi, long sticks twined with ivy branches and tipped with pine cones” (187). Whenever the god’s presence is felt, whenever his entrance is imminent, he is first known through bountiful verdure.

Secondly, we read that “music, dancing, and a recitation or two were the entertainments furnished, or rather, offered” (41). Not only do we see the conscious decision on the part of the narrator to change the word “furnished” to the more meaningful “offered,” as though the performances were an offering, but the activities themselves are strongly Dionysian: Kott mentions that the women who were harbingers of the god of the vine always enter “beating drums, dancing and singing” (187); Detienne states, “Erwin Rhode imagined the spread of dionysism in terms of an epidemic of

convulsive dancing” (4); Hamilton remarks that as god of wine, Dionysus played a role in “lightening men’s hearts, bringing careless ease and fun and gaiety” (72).

The festive setting, therefore, is replete with dancing, performances, and, finally, a performance that is for Edna alone. We read that the Farival twins “were prevailed upon to play the piano...[and] played a duet from ‘Zampa,’” as well as “an overture to ‘The Poet and the Peasant’” (42). Then, “a young brother and sister gave recitations,” and “a little girl performed a skirt dance in the center of the floor” and, after, “Madame Ratignolle...consented to play [piano] for the others” (42). While she played, “almost everyone danced.” The role of fun and gaiety is closely linked to the setting of the hall; it is informal, yet elegant and regal. The scene may not seem fit for a god, but we must keep in mind that there was no temple specifically for Dionysus. As Hamilton tells us, his rites were celebrated in the theater. This is similar to Harrison’s historically based, but fictional account of an Athenian citizen attending the theater on the day of the Spring Festival of Dionysus:

Passing through the entrance gate to the theatre. . .our Athenian citizen will find himself at once on holy ground. He is within a temenos, or precinct, a place ‘cut off’ from the common land and dedicated to a god. . . his attendance is an act of worship, and from the social point of view obligatory

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It is no mistake that the actions of the characters throughout the scene bring to mind a theatrical atmosphere. They are cut off from the common land on Grand Isle, and the dancing, the recitations, and the music are all forms of worship for the one who will



receive the most auspicious honor of the evening; an “offering” from the cantankerous Mlle. Reisz.

Edna is mentioned only after all of the main forms of entertainment are finished, further accenting the idea that the events of the evening all lead to a performance in her honor. She “went out on the gallery and seated herself on the low window sill, where she commanded a view of all that went on in the hall and could look out toward the Gulf” (43). The view she “commanded” sounds remarkably similar to the seat of honor that Dionysus held at festivals in his honor; Edna, too, could preside over the events of the entire evening. She also looks toward the Gulf, the same region from where the Gulf Spirit will come, and the same region from where the “capricious” winds come. It is as though the performances of the evening serve as not only offerings to the one who sits in a seat that commands a view of them all, but also as a way to presage the entrance of the spirit from the Gulf who will eventually claim Edna.

After Mademoiselle Reisz finishes playing piano at a party, she tells Edna, “You are the only one worth playing for. Those others? Bah!” (45). Among all the others in the party, Edna is selected by the woman who “had quarreled with almost everyone,” and who performs a piece at Edna’s request--an offering-- that becomes the highlight of the evening. Because Edna “was thus signaled out for the imperious little woman’s favor” among all the others, the reader’s attention, by extension, is also focused solely on her (44).

The offering has a strong effect on Edna. After the performance, Robert suggests “a bath at that mystic hour and under that mystic moon” (45). The double emphasis on “mystic” cannot be downplayed in this scene. Thoughts of otherworldly, esoteric powers

come to mind, as well as the mysteries of what lie beyond. It is in this setting, once she receives her offering in a seat that she alone commands, where Edna finally realizes that she is able to swim. It was that night when “she was like the little tottering, stumbling, clutching child who of a sudden realizes its powers” (46). In the Gulf that blew its capricious breeze, the Gulf from where the Gulf Spirit might claim Mrs. Pontellier and her “divine presence,” Edna realizes her true powers and wishes to become “daring and reckless” (47). She wishes to shatter the conventions set in place and swim to “where no woman had swum before” (47). She is finally able to view the Dionysian, the darker, powerful forces that drive life. Indeed, while she is in the water, “a vision of death smote her soul” (47). It is that vision, which is closely aligned with her new-found power, that inextricably links Edna with Dionysus and all that he is. As a result, Edna--unlike the young lovers and the lady in black who are simply minor characters not deserving of dialogue or names--is a character who will remain in the reader’s memory because she is not afraid to both acknowledge and embrace powers that may require her to view death itself as something that is strongly associated with vigor and new-found strength.

The use of wine as a symbol throughout the book also helps establish a connection between Edna’s increasing desire to cast off all things Apollonian. Wine, always associated with Dionysus because it was he who first showed men how to harvest the grape, is equated with freedom and truth for Edna. The first time wine is mentioned in the novel is when Edna faces the truth about her feelings toward her children--that she loved them in “an uneven, *impulsive* way”--with Madame Ratignolle (33, my italics added). The “unaccustomed taste of candor...muddled her like wine, or like the first

breath of freedom” (33). Wine, therefore, is equated with both candor and freedom in the novel.

The first time wine is mentioned in the novel, it is equated with truth. Whenever it appears again, we must pay careful attention to who is drinking it and under what circumstances. An interesting pattern occurs as a result; only when Edna is showing signs of freedom, of honesty, of her desire to cast off those glittering ideals that keep society in tact, will she drink wine. There are other circumstances, however, when she will not take drink. When Mr. Pontellier will not “permit” Edna “to stay [outside] all night” and demands that she “must come in the house instantly”, she flatly refuses (53). When he pours himself a glass of wine he “offered a glass to his wife [but]...she did not wish any.” He attempts to offer her a drink again, but “Mrs. Pontellier again declined to accept a glass when it was offered to her” (53). Two striking ideas are addressed in the passage. First, the word “offered” appears again, as it did in the festive theatrical scene, as though the wine is a feeble offering to Edna. Like the gulf spirit who selects her to be his own in order to be a semi-celestial, other characters must notice, on some level, that Edna is special. Why else would she receive offerings of gifts and settings that are strongly Dionysian? It could be because she is increasingly associated with Nietzsche’s vision of the god and, while the characters may not be aware, the reader has more than enough evidence.

Secondly, the Appolonian realities are made to stand in stark contrast to the Dionysian dream world for which Edna longs. After her refusal to drink with her husband, to submit to his entreaties, Edna “began to feel like one who awakens gradually out of a dream, a delicious, grotesque, impossible dream, to feel again the realities

pressing into her soul” (53). Again, the dream world of Dionysus is set against the stark realities that press upon her soul. The promising ideals of the Apollonian are contrasted with the “grotesque” and the “impossible” but “delicious” dream world. Edna cannot come under the influence of the Dionysian with the other world oppressing her, so she will not accept the wine.

Her refusal to drink the wine becomes more significant when we examine the scenes in which she accepts and drinks wine. In all of the scenes when she does drink, she is associated with independence and a growing sense of self. After she leaves the “oppression” and the shadow of the church, for instance, she rests in order to rejuvenate herself. When she wakes, she is “very hungry” and notices that “no one was there”; however, a “crusty brown loaf and a bottle of wine” was left “beside [a] plate.” She then “bit a piece from the brown loaf, tearing it with her strong, white teeth. She poured some of the wine into the glass and drank it down (63). She wakes from her dream and, away from the social realities of both marriage and church, she is independent, alone, and able to drink down a bottle of wine in peace. The attention to detail with her “strong, white teeth”, furthermore, focuses our attention on the almost animalistic description of her “tearing” at the bread.

Furthermore, when Edna joins her father in a “pretty dispute” against Mr. Pontellier, the “fumes of the wine” melted the “unpleasantness” of the situation. Once the unpleasantness is gone, however, the doctor can focus more clearly on an important change in Edna. She has met Arobin already, the man with whom her truly impulsive nature will come to fruition. The doctor’s focus shifts to Edna’s

subtle change which had transformed her from the listless woman he had known into a being who, for the moment, seemed palpitant with the forces of life. Her speech was warm and energetic. There was no repression in her glance or gesture. She reminded him of some beautiful, sleek animal waking up in the sun 116

Although the act of defiance is small, it is not insignificant; her debate with her husband, “pretty” as it may be, is still important because of the light in which the doctor views Edna. She has the forces of life surging through her and, once again, she is connected with the strong animalistic nature of the Dionysian in the scene. More importantly, there is “no repression” of the strong social and moral constructs as a result.

In addition to wine allowing the doctor to focus more intently on Edna, the diction in the passage is strange, too, and focuses the reader’s attention on Robert’s spirit-from-the-Gulf story. The doctor sees that Edna was not “transformed” into a woman or a person, but a “being”; he notices she is under some influence, but does not recognize what, exactly. Robert’s gulf spirit, who wishes to choose some woman, some Dionysian Ariadne, to make a semi-celestial would make perfect sense. She is not a woman and she is not a god. She is somewhere in between, some “being” that encompasses traits of the Dionysian aspect of life.

The wine is in abundance, therefore, at Edna’s farewell dinner. Mlle. Reisz had “tasted the good, rich wine” when she turns to Edna and says, “Goodnight, my queen, be good” (148). As mentioned already, the “effect of the wine” on Victor was to change him to Dionysus incarnate who, once transformed in a white gown and a garland of roses, “sipped the wine slowly.” Finally, before Edna and Arobin leave her house for the evening before their “short walk” to the pigeon house, she realizes that she “hated to shut in the smoke and the fumes of the wine” (152). It is as though she knows that her

impulsive nature is about to take hold entirely and she wishes that the veiling smoke and the power of the wine could be sent into the night air with both her and Arobin. She will, of course, act on the impulse, but the fact remains that she hates to keep the smell of the wine locked in the house she shares with husband and instead, one would guess, would rather have the smell associated with her liberating pigeon house.

We must also pay close attention to what Mlle. Reisz tells Edna in the scene--the cryptic “Goodnight, my queen”--because it is not the first time the woman whispers something to Edna that is not clear. We already know that the “imperious” Mlle. Reisz focuses her attention on Edna, and we can assume at this point it is because she, too, stands on the outskirts of society and Grand Isle. That she calls Edna “queen”, therefore, may not seem that surprising as a result, but that she obviously places Edna in a position of respect by referring to her as queen may indicate that Mlle. Reisz is aware, like those in Greek accounts of Dionysus, that Edna is capable of more than what shows because of her ability to grapple with the Dionysian aspects of life.

The strange woman offers another cryptic line, however, which pertains to soaring above tradition and the Appolonian view of life. Mlle. Reisz tells Edna, “The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth” (138). She also checked Edna’s “shoulder blades” to “see if they were strong” (138). The social constructs, the glittering ideals, the “tradition and prejudice” are all associated with the Appolonian, so to soar above them is to break free from tradition. Thornton says as much when he states, “The self can only thrive by discarding its role

and flying to freedom, to some place where one's sex is not the determinant of one's destiny" (142).

Soaring above those constructs, however, goes against the central metaphor of the cameo. The social construct is the thing above; there is nothing higher. To transcend society in the Romantic sense is not possible because it takes us away from those impulsive, driving, shadowy, Dionysian forces that drive all life. It is a wonderful thought, but even the naked man who Edna imagines standing on the seashore with an "attitude ... of hopeless resignation as he looked toward a distant bird winging its flight away from him" understands that the idea of flying away, flying further from the forces that drive all life, is folly (44).

The most problematic image of the novel--that of Edna swimming into the sea for the final time--is established by focusing on the image of another bird. Edna appears in a scene that is almost the mirror-opposite of the naked man; she is naked and standing on the beach right before she walks into the water. This time, the bird in the distance has a "broken wing" and is "reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water" (189). The bird, the symbol for transcendence above tradition and prejudice, is at last broken and, like Edna, will disappear into the water. As a result, our focus must be not above the social constructs, nor must it be on those traditions that establish order and prejudice. It must instead be below the surface, where the dark, shadowy Dionysian impulses that drive all life can be found.

The continual references to the sea as a dark, seductive force, begin to make sense. Edna does not resign; she accepts Dionysus, the entreaties from the spirit of the

gulf, completely. She accepts the “everlasting voice of the sea” (13) and the “seductive odor of the sea (23) and realizes that “the voice of the sea is seductive...the voice of the sea speaks to the soul...the touch of the sea is sensuous” (25). Each description places her more closely to that impulsive, sensuous world that belongs to Dionysus. The idea of transcendence away from those forces that drive all life must also crash into the sea because it is from the sea, those impulses, from which they first come. We are granted the idea of transcendence from the abstract, farcical notion of power only because life exists in the first place. It is the carnal, Dionysian powers that truly establish those ideas. Edna, accepting these ideas as the semi-celestial that Robert describes, seems “to be reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself” (48).

And lose herself to those forces she does; she must as the one to whom Dionysus speaks directly in the dinner scene, as the chosen mortal who must become a semi-celestial. He knows what her eyes say to him before she is completely aware because he is well aware of the hold he has over her. Once she accepts the power of that influence, she does indeed become immortal. Edna is the feminine aspect of Dionysus incarnate; she must submit to those desires, shun social conventions, and prove to all that, ultimately, our impulsive decisions are the ones that are remembered for eternity because those impulses are so strongly associated with the forces that drive all life. True, Edna dies, but in the same sense that the subject of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18 will:

But thy eternal summer shall not fade,  
nor lose possession of that fair thou ow’st,  
nor shall death brag thou wander’st in his shade,  
when in eternal lines to time thou grow’st,  
so long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,  
so long lives this, and this gives life to thee.



In this sense, she will become a semi-celestial, she will never wander in death's shade, because, as Chopin predicted, it is not the "social problems" we will remember and discuss for eternity; it is the impulsive, rash decisions people make that we will remember. Like Shakespeare's characters to whom she alludes when writing about the permanence of impulsive decisions, Edna Pontellier can be numbered among the semi-celestials as long as "men can breathe" and "eyes can see".

The Awakening, therefore, is not a novel about the injustices of society and one woman's struggle against those injustices. Like those who refuse to accept or acknowledge Dionysus in Greek myth, many people choose to remain ignorant to the fact that what drives all life is not the abstract notion of power or the moral construction of churches and institutions such as marriage. We remember Edna Pontellier because of her rash decisions, because of her desire to act on impulse, and for her strength to submit to those shadowy forces that allow her to become a semi-celestial.

By examining the way in which several characters and settings interact, the denseness of lush vegetation that correlates with Dionysian images such as wine and sleek animals, and the way in which all of these ideas coalesce and blossom in Edna, a mosaic is completed. That mosaic, furthermore, is not possible to see unless each aspect is taken together. It is this image that Edna must see when Dionysus speaks to her. If we look to Pater's "The Bacchanal's of Euripides", we can appreciate the full meaning of such a mosaic as it pertains to Dionysus and his influence over Edna:

The random catching on fire of one here and another there, when people are collected together, generates as if by mere contact, some new and rapturous spirit, not traceable in the individual units of a multitude. Such swarming was the essence of that strange dance of the Bacchic women:

literally like winged things, they follow, with motives, we may suppose, never quite made clear even to themselves, their new, strange, romantic god. Himself a woman-like god,--it was on women and feminine souls that his power mainly fell. At Elis, it was the women who had their own little song with which at spring-time they professed to call him from the sea: at Brasiae they had their own temple where none but women might enter; and so the Thiasus, also, is almost exclusively formed of women--of those who experience most directly the influence of things which touch thought through the senses--the presence of night, the expectation of morning, the nearness of wild, unsophisticated, natural things--the echoes, the coolness, the noise of frightened creatures as they climbed through the darkness, the sunrise seen from the hill-tops, the disillusion, the bitterness of satiety, the deep slumber which comes with the morning

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The presence of Dionysus is always looming, always hinted at, “never quite made clear”, but is always felt by Edna and her association with the sea. She, like the women Pater describes, “experience[s] most directly the influence of things which touch thought through the senses”. She is never entirely aware of his presence, but is aware on some emotional level that it is there. Edna believes, for instance, that she grasps the “significance of life” only after she has sex with Arobin (140). She sees at last that the foundation of any social institution, her marriage in particular, is based solely on the “nearness of wild, unsophisticated, natural things” and the “echoes, the coolness, the noise of frightened creatures.” She runs like a wild creature and attempts to make sense of those ideas, but not until she submits to desire and impulse after the visitation from Dionysus can she accept the shadowy embrace of the water, the “musky odor of pinks”, the “hum of bees” and the spirit from that gulf, Dionysus.

## VI. Conclusion

Thornton states, “there is no question that *The Awakening* is a strong political novel” (138). The novel can certainly be read that way, but I think the point is missed entirely if that is the only expectation a person has when approaching the book. What statement is made by focusing on the suicide of one woman who cannot cope with a patriarchal society? The answer, perhaps, is found in the author’s own words concerning the suicides of privileged women. An editorial mentioning the suicides of “four young women of high social position”--and Chopin’s response--were written in the beginning of 1898, one year before *The Awakening* was published. Despite the fact that “these young women were petted daughters of society,” they still contained that “condition of mind and body” that leads to self-destruction, according to the editorial’s author. Furthermore, according to the piece, the young women did not feel “the pinch of poverty, the strain of work or the worries of women who must toil” that must certainly be felt by those who wish to commit suicide because, clearly, women in high society can feel no such pain. Finally, the author asks a question that one can only surmise must have seemed as shocking and horrific to the upper class as the suicides themselves: “Does the conjunction of suicidal attempts indicate a tendency in that direction among women of society?” (Chopin, *Private Papers*, 220).

Chopin’s reply to the editorial is indignant and may have seemed callous to those who read it. She argues that to focus on the “half a dozen unfortunates, widely separated,” who took their own lives is to miss the point that “men do the same thing everyday.” She continues by saying, “The tendency to self-destruction is no more pronounced among society women than it ever was” (Chopin, *Private Papers*, 222). In

other words, special attention should not be given to the cases mentioned in the article. To focus on the suicides of several young women is to miss the idea that there may be problems that are rife throughout society, no matter the social position of the young women. In fact, the desire to commit suicide, according to Chopin's response, "seems to come in waves, without warning, and soon passes away" (Chopin, *Private Papers*, 222). To focus on the suicide is to miss the larger picture; there is a darker side to life--even the Apollonian, higher social-class of shimmering ideals--that exists within us all.

Suicide, therefore, is not worthy of specific attention. So, is it too much of a stretch to believe that Edna's suicide should fall under the same category? Every indication in both *The Awakening* and Chopin's own words on the topic indicate that Edna's suicide should not be the focus of the novel. To focus on the result alone, and not the novel's entire mosaic through which Pater's and Nietzsche's description of Dionysus manifests itself, is to take a myopic view and lose the idea that Edna's true strength comes as a result of her embracing the Dionysian and his divine, albeit dark, beauty. Once we realize that Edna sees the natural, Dionysian imagery of her final moments--her embrace of the Gulf Spirit and all aspects of his existence throughout the novel--all of society becomes the cameo: a quixotic, beautiful layer that stands in stark contrast to the libidinous, shadowy, layer that lies beneath. Those layers are brought into focus by the appearance of Dionysus, the only god who can not only understand the contrary states, but who exists in them and reminds us all that one is based on abstract notions of propriety and control, while the other is based on the forces that keep all life in motion.

Chopin was well aware of the distinction because she equates divine love with animal instinct when asked, "Is love divine?" by the St. Lois Post-Dispatch. Chopin

answered, “It is as difficult to distinguish between the divine love and the natural, animal life, as it is to explain why we love at all” (Chopin, *Private Papers*, 219). There is, in her mind, little distinction between divinity and the “natural, animal life.” She states that she is “inclined to think that love springs from animal instinct, and therefore is, in a measure, divine” (Chopin, *Private Papers*, 219). The social notion of love, then, has its underpinnings in an “indefinable current of magnetism” that has nothing to do with religion, social constructs, or any sense of propriety. There is quite simply the animalistic, the Dionysian, and the inexplicable forces that drive us all. As Nietzsche indicates, and as Chopin certainly believes, any social constructs are purely arbitrary. It is Dionysus and the libidinal, chaotic, shadowy aspects of life that he represents who Edna finally accepts. The political aspects of the novel that Edna’s suicide seems to support are therefore overshadowed by her desire to embrace the divine love of one who can make her an immortal. And it is in the embrace of Dionysus where Edna Pontellier truly becomes a semi-celestial.

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