

UC Riverside

UCR Honors Capstones 2016-2017

Title

From Wormwood Tinctures to Absinthe Mixtures: The Instability of Absinthe in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2z99x83k>

Author

Simon, Ashlee Lauren

Publication Date

2017-12-11

FROM WORMWOOD TINCTURES TO ABSINTHE MIXTURES:
THE INSTABILITY OF ABSINTHE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY LITERATURE
AND CULTURE

By

Ashlee Lauren Simon

A capstone project submitted for
Graduation with University Honors

May 11, 2017

University Honors
University of California, Riverside

APPROVED

Dr. Susan Zieger
Department of English

Dr. Richard Cardullo, Howard H Hays Jr. Chair and Faculty Director, University Honors
Interim Vice Provost, Undergraduate Education

From Wormwood Tinctures to Absinthe Mixtures: The Instability of Absinthe in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture

“[The] idea of absinthe developed a mythology all its own” (Baker 7).

Absinthe, commonly referred to as "la fée verte" or "the green fairy", was a popular alcohol directly tied to much of French and English art and literature during the Decadent movement, prominent in the 1890s. Originally prescribed medicinally to French soldiers, it quickly became a recreational "experience" for aesthetes – poets, authors, and artists fascinated with intoxication and its impact on their work. Unlike other spirits, this alcoholic experience was unique, as absinthe provided a ritualistic performance for its users in which the state of the drink was physically altered, consequently mirrored in the states of the its consumers. Eventually, this developed from a past time to a craving, which often later resulted in mental degeneration and early death. Addiction and subsequent health issues caused by alcoholism and absinthism were especially a problem in the French working class, a facet of society where cheap, lower quality, higher alcohol proofed absinthe quickly gained traction. Ultimately, the history of absinthe as a drug is inherently connected to society and culture of the late nineteenth century. Both pharmaceutical and poisonous, absinthe is an unstable object that attracted cultural attention because the demarcating line between these points is uncertain. For this reason, work about the drink is largely impacted and alternately represented by the mystery attached to the artists that drank it and the cultural developments of addiction demonstrated within the working class. In my paper, I will discuss the history and importance of absinthe during the nineteenth century, with an emphasis between medicinal and recreational use of absinthe, and the instability of existence somewhere in

between. I will be discussing *Wormwood*, a popular 19th century novel by Marie Corelli, that superficially seems to chronicle the journey of the main character, Gaston Beauvias, down a path of debauchery and despair, due to his relationship with absinthe. However, what is particularly important in the novel is the representation – or more accurately, the misrepresentation of absinthe and absintheurs, and the choice to diabolize the drink in place of identifying addictive tendencies that already exist within the flat character of Gaston.

Artemisia Absinthium: The Medicinal History of Absinthe

“Wormwood [...] developed its diabolical glamour directly from its medical use as a vermicide and anti-malarial” (Adams 19).

Like many other recreational drugs and alcoholic beverages, absinthe was originally designed with medicinal purposes prior to being the drink popular in cafés all over France. The use of wormwood in absinthe was predated by the presence of wormwood in the medicinal setting for hundreds of years, where “ancient absinthe was different from the liquor [...] imbibed, generally being wormwood leaves soaked in wine or spirits” (Conrad 85). In fact, “the English word for [wormwood] is [...] from the Anglo-Saxon ‘ver mod’ meaning man-inspiring, for its tonic properties” (Adams 17), where “the term absinthe derives from the Greek work ‘apsinthion’, meaning unusable” (Adams 15). This alternate etymological history is important in tracking the change from medicinal tonics infused with wormwood with multiple uses to a recreational alcoholic drink. Absinthe, described as “bitter” and “unpalatable” upon its initial production, was later made “usable” by the addition of other ingredients, such as water and sugar.

Prior to the rise of the absinthe of the nineteenth century, “wormwood had largely been found reliable for getting rid of intestinal worms in humans and animals” (Baker 102) among many other uses, such as treatment for “child birth, jaundice, rheumatism, anemia, and menstrual pains” (Conrad 85). While “until a point in the nineteenth century wormwood drinks were among a number of alcoholic beverages” (Adams 19), the alcoholic drink that became Absinthe “as we know it today is thought to have appeared only at the end of the eighteenth century” (Baker 104). While stories of absinthe’s creation seem to alter slightly from resource to resource, they all seem to agree that it was most likely invented (at least partially) in the 1790s by Pierre Ordinaire, a French doctor living in Switzerland, who, “being acquainted with absinthe’s use in ancient times, [...] began experimenting with it” (Conrad 87). It was later sold to, and further developed, by Major Daniel Henri Dubied, who “marketed the drink as having the ability to ‘cure indigestion, improve appetite, and [it] was even good for fevers and chills” (Baker 105). Initially more of a tincture, the drink rose to fame in this period of “French colonial wars in North Africa”, during which “French troops were given a ration of absinthe to protect them from malaria and other fevers, and to kill bacteria in their drinking water, fending off dysentery” (Baker 106). When prescribed, however, “the soldiers took to spiking their wine with absinthe [...], thus creating a more strongly alcoholic drink” (Adams 20). Ultimately, this drink rapidly became popular and the colonization efforts it represented were such a success, regardless of the questionable bouts of insanity that soldiers experienced during their tours, that “they took their acquired taste for the bitter-flavoured alcohol back to the cafés of France” (Adams 20). It is here that the recreational absinthe hobby was born, and where “the respectable bourgeois custom of absinthe drinking

became almost universal” (Baker 107). However, it is with this relatively quick switch from medicinal to recreational that the drink’s instability as a substance also began, as “absinthe’s origins as a medicine meant it began its commercial life with a revivifying image, the exact opposite of its situation just over a century later, when it was excoriated and banned” (Adams 23).

L’heure Verte: The Green Hour and Absinthe Rituals

“Many dreamy hours were spent in observing this magical process taking place in a glass” (Adams 3)

With the presence of absinthe in the household, and its change of use from treatment to enjoyment, many societal changes occurred. As Phil Baker describes in *The Cultural History of Absinthe*, “the time between five and seven o’clock was *l’heure verte*, the green hour, when the smell of absinthe would be carried on the early evening air of the Paris boulevards” (107). Initially meant to be used to “sharpen the appetite for dinner” (Baker 107), absinthe could also sometimes be used as a nightcap, or a drink taken prior to bed. It was at these times that drinking absinthe was thought to be societally acceptable, more like a recreational sport than partaking in a medicinal substance. Initially “the idea, originally, was to have just one” (Baker 107), and it was the hours of *L’heure Verte* that “protected [people] from absinthe abuse at this period” (Baker 107).

During the Green Hour, absintheurs would often meet in cafés and engage in the ritualistic performance aspects of the drink. In this experience, “a measure of absinthe was poured into an absinthe glass” and “a special pierced spoon was then balanced across

the glass, with a lump of sugar on it; and cool water was poured over the sugar into the glass” (Baker 172). Some resources also say that sometimes the sugar cube was lit on fire before being mixed with the water and absinthe, which may have “slightly ton[ed] down the excessive alcohol strength” but it was mostly done simply for “novelty” (Baker 171). This action of mixing water with absinthe was referred to as *le louche*, meaning “to become unclear” (Baker 171) or known as “the clouding” (Danovich), which “freed the oils [in the alcohol] and made it a cloudy pale green” (Adams 3). This effect, which was essentially “an indulgence for the senses” (Danovich), was mirrored in the affect of the people drinking the slightly hallucinogenic, highly alcoholic beverage. In addition, the louching and addition of sugar both assisted in making the drink more palatable to its consumers, and the water that was required was needed to dissolve the sugar and to slightly dilute the incredibly high alcohol content of most absinthes (Adams 66). This preparation process “would have been an insult for the waiter to prepare” (Baker 172), as the visual clouding of the drink and the resulting shade of green would have been almost as important to the consumer as the drink itself.

This ritual process was “essentially a decorative act” and another way to “differentiate between the classes” (Adams 66). Many different pieces of drinking paraphernalia were created during the absinthe craze specifically for the preparation of the drink. While none of it “was deemed necessary” (Adams 26), tools like spoons and fountains did arguably create a more favorable drinking experience. Absinthe spoons were better able to hold the sugar needed for louching, and drip fountains allowed for an elongation of this process while increasing efficiency as well, by economically cooling a large amount of water that could be over a period of time (Danovitch). Overall, while

“differential [...] was limited” when it came to the prices of absinthe itself, this was not the case with drinking paraphernalia, “which could be delicately crafted and decorated with expensive materials” (Adams 66). Even though “absinthe impedimenta was not [...] integral to the activity” (Adams 66), it offered wealthier consumers opportunities to flaunt their class status in fancier equipment than the simpler versions used in cafés. The creation and use of an all new category of drinking paraphernalia truly goes to show just how important the ritualistic aspect was. It also gave another opportunity to separate absinthe drinkers by class, class status being incredibly influential in the drink’s history and which will be explained in depth shortly.

Degeneration and Delirium: Addiction and Absinthe

“Absinthe became the standard drink, a product with many times the alcoholic strength of wine” (Adams 3)

Much of the notoriety of absinthe is connected to the extensive history it has with madness and mental degeneration. However, there were many misconceptions about addiction and alcoholism during this time. In fact, “the term alcoholism had been used since the 1850s, when it was thought to be a form of poisoning caused by distilled spirits” (Adams 6). While this explains some of the madness in excessive drinkers, the idea that sufferers of alcoholism were unable to quit drinking of their own accord was not common knowledge. Most alcoholics were just thought to be too weak to stop choosing to drink, and that they were impacted “not [by] the quantity consumed, but the quality [of alcohol they were drinking]” (Adams 178). In fact, it was believed that people weren’t able to become addicted to wine, and that alcoholism was a direct result of “wine shortages

[which] had lead the French to turn from good, natural wine to vile unnatural industrial alcohol” (Adams 178). It is clear today that neither of these are truly the issue, but that alcoholics are suffering instead from a mental illness where they are prone to addiction. The character of Gaston, from Marie Corelli’s *Wormwood*, is subject to these backwards thoughts of addiction. Although in the beginning of the novel he is depicted at a dinner party drinking wine (Corelli 100), it is when Gaston drinks absinthe that his life begins to fall apart. As the novel progresses and his money dwindles, Gaston drinks cheaper qualities of absinthe and his madness increases. Corelli conforms to this undeveloped understanding of addiction in the depiction of Gaston’s alcoholism, which will be elaborated on further in the literary analysis section of this paper.

Absinthe was a particular threat to the already existing problem of alcoholism in French society, because “some absinthe contained up to 90 per cent pure alcohol, three times as much as brandy” (Baker 108). As tolerance began to build in alcoholics addicted to drinks with a lower percent of alcohol by volume, like wine, absinthe would’ve allowed them to experience the feelings they had become immune to and accelerated the disease further with the incredibly high alcohol content. It was recognized that “however culpable alcohol might be, absinthe was worse” (Adams 6), and it’s clear in how high the alcohol amount was that “alcoholism was clearly a risk right from the start, and one that would increase as people developed a taste for the drink” (Baker 108). This increase would result in what was known as absinthism, or the “acute or (usually) chronic intoxication with absinthe” (“absinthism, n.”). A hot topic during this time, absinthism was believed to be suffered specifically by those who overindulged in absinthe, however “drunks were referred to as *absintheurs* as a general term, even if they did not drink

absinthe” (Adams 9) and absinthism “may have been simply a severe form of alcoholism” (“absinthism, n.”). The symptoms of absinthism can easily be attributed to the incredibly high alcohol level of the drink, with madness and hallucinations also being attributed to acute alcoholism. In fact, the actual hallucinatory effects of the drink are still highly debated today. These attitudes toward alcoholism and addiction play a major role in the class division of absinthe users, and also the representation of the drink itself. While “alcoholics were always going to find absinthe congenial” (Baker 108), it was ultimately the misuse of the drink that made it notorious, and the eventual ban allowed it to be a “[scapegoat] for the national alcohol problem” (Baker 8).

Cheap Knock-Offs: Class Division and Absinthe

“It is unsurprising that the middle class and the artists became associated with absinthe, [...] which came to represent the culture of both” (Adams 26)

One of the major impacts on the instability of absinthe was the inconsistencies between the people that used it. Initially, absinthe was marketed as a drink specifically for the bourgeoisie, and “its complex production meant absinthe was relatively costly, and at a time of urbanization when many could scarcely afford to feed themselves the price of a drink taken as a stimulant to appetite restricted it to the middle class” (Adams 23). Over time, as a “vine-killing aphid called phylloxera [...] left wine in short supply” (Danovich), absinthe became more readily available for lower classes, eventually costing “one third the price of a loaf of bread” (Baker 125). However, this is because “in the 1850s and 1960 the poor were not drinking the same absinthe as the rich: small operators were producing cheap copies of absinthe, often made with adulterated ingredients but

always highly alcoholic” (Adams 5). These unadulterated versions, usually made with “cheap beet and grain alcohol” (MacLeod 45), could be dangerous and were not as visibly appealing during the louching process for consumers, and “to meet the demand for [*le louché*] makers of bad absinthe would add poisonous additives such as antimony to enhance the effect” (Baker 172). This also sharply impacted the use and view of absinthe by the bourgeoisie, as “decorum dictated that they could not be associated with the activities of the lower class” (Adams 65). People of the upper class still continued to drink absinthe, they would just partake in higher quality absinthe within the hours of *l’heure verte*. Much of the connection between addiction and absinthe was experienced by people of lower classes, who could only afford bad quality, highly alcoholic and inherently dangerous absinthe. Ultimately, as absinthe became more readily available for all people, it is reported that “there was a 15-fold increase in the absinthe consumption in France between 1875 and 1913. Between 1885 and 1892 alone consumption of absinthe in Paris increased by more than 100 percent” (Adams 7).

Alternatively, the hallucinogenic properties of absinthe held a captivating charm to aesthetes, who also belonged to the middle class, becoming “unquestionably the career drink of intellectuals and artistic wannabes” (Baker 110). Believed to be the “most powerful and seemingly cerebral of drinks” (Baker 190), it’s no wonder that for this group, the ability to use the spirit as a muse often outweighed the risk of addiction. Many of these aesthetes were followers of the Decadent movement which encouraged experiencing all aspects of life with great intensity, and the desire “to burn always with [a] hard, gem-like flame, to maintain [...] ecstasy, is success in life” (Pater 152). This meant that absinthe was a perfect fit to the movement due to “its distinctive appearance

and daring for its exotic origins, its fascinating colour changes, its extreme, almost unbearable bitterness” and most importantly, “the suggestion that it acted on the consciousness to produce ideas not otherwise accessible” (Adams 26-7). Decadence, meaning “the process of falling away or declining” (“decadence, n.”), was predicated in favor of artificiality, questioning bourgeoisie contentment, and the idea that art did not reflect the time it was produced and existed only “for art’s sake”. Decadents believed that the only respite for their intense living was their death, another definition for decadence being an “impaired or deteriorated condition” (“decadence, n.”), giving absinthe an additional fit to the movement as a means for further degeneration and death. Ultimately, while these aesthetes used absinthe for slightly different reasons, they also often identified with and mimicked the lower class crowd that abused the substance, desiring the experience of new sensations.

“Vital Poison”: *Wormwood* and the Representation of Absinthe

“Gaston’s degeneration is not attributed to heredity [...], but rather to his absinthism”
(MacLeod 41)

As “the first treatment of the subject of absinthism in British literature” (MacLeod 12), Marie Corelli’s *Wormwood* was “written with the moralistic intention of exposing the dangers of absinthe” but “is far more than a temperance tract or a treatise of literary criticism” (MacLeod 27). The novel depicts the life of Gaston Beauvais, a young Parisian banker who falls in love with a woman only to find out that she is in love with his best friend. As Corelli explains, this “betrayal” causes Gaston to fall “prey” to absinthe, and unfortunate incidents follow. In the novel, Corelli represents Gaston as an addicted

absintheur whose actions are all the direct result of the “hold” that absinthe has on him. However, this representation is incredibly flawed. Corelli’s novel is overly sensational and completely inaccurate. It fails to adequately identify Gaston’s pre-existing addictive tendencies shown in his response to love and work. He also shows a lack of character growth throughout the novel, and is unable to cope with his emotions. The novel also demonstrates the cultural instability of absinthe and its malleable place in nineteenth century culture, accepted by readers as worthy of the blame that is cast upon it unjustly by Corelli. While problematic, this novel is needed to understand the cultural misrepresentation of absinthe overall, and one that still permeates society to this day.

Prior to his relationship with absinthe, Gaston meets and immediately falls in love with Pauline; the feelings he describes when talking about love hold a striking similarity to a response one may have to an alcohol addiction. For example, Gaston describes the feeling of love much like an intoxicant, and to being, “transformed; we are for the first time alive, and conscious of our beating pulses, or warm and hurrying blood” (Corelli 78). This feeling of falling in love is incredibly addictive to Gaston, who explains shortly after that “an overwhelming passion seized [him]; [he] was no longer master of [his] own destiny” (Corelli 83). It is no coincidence that the language Gaston uses to talk about love, particularly heat, also echoes in the language he uses to describe absinthe, a “force more potent than fire” (Corelli 210) which he also describes as beloved. In fact, he even goes to compare his relationship with absinthe to a marriage, where a “wondrous wedlock was consummated, - an indissoluble union with the fair wild absinthe-witch of my dreams!” (Corelli 217). Ultimately, Gaston immediately falls for Pauline overpoweringly and without any rational thought, and it is as though she has taken over his entire life and

reason for being. While Gaston's artist companion André Gessonex explains that "love is only a hot impulse of the blood, and like any other fever can be cooled and kept down easily if one tries" (Corelli 168), Gaston never has any desire to control his feelings, describing it as being "a passion that consumed [him] like a fever and would scarcely let [him] sleep" (Corelli 86), and instead wishes to "stoke the flames" and to enjoy the feeling of being in love as much as possible. This feeling is not as exclusive to Pauline as it is the intoxicated feelings he receives from love. Gaston hardly ever really knows Pauline as an individual and falls in love with her solely for her beauty, often remarking about her naivety and even her stupidity at times; however, when he first meets Pauline, Gaston throws himself fully into the role of fiancé immediately, describing his infatuation with her as "self-torment which [he] half enjoyed, it being a more delicious than painful experience" (Corelli 87). Gaston's attitude towards his love for Pauline clearly demonstrates that he already has addictive personality traits, resulting in the ability to track his struggle with addiction prior even to his first sip of absinthe.

Gaston's addictive personality is also shown in his attitude towards work, especially obvious in the period where he is running his father's bank. Prior to this financial career path, it is established that Gaston was once an author, trying to woo Pauline with "[his] own literary productions" which he judged to be his "best efforts" including a novel which had "just been published" (Corelli 82). This publishing effort would mean that Gaston was a competitive writer and it also demonstrates that he had given up his academic pursuits in place of his romantic pursuit of Pauline. During his engagement, Gaston later explains to the reader that "while [his father] was away, all the work of superintending our Paris banking-house, fell entirely on my hands. [...] I had

indeed so little leisure of my own, that I could seldom spare more than a Sunday afternoon and evening of uninterrupted enjoyment of Pauline's society" (Corelli 122). Immediately switching into workaholic mode after being consumed with love for Pauline shows a clear tendency for addiction with Gaston; a history that he had initially demonstrated in the abandonment of his authorial projects for his new romantic engagement as well. While his father is away, Gaston completely immerses himself into the role of Bank Superintendent, casting Pauline's love (very briefly and only partially) aside in favor of the business. Being a banker is another role that dominates his life fully, and he is "busy from morning into night" (Corelli 122). Even following his absinthe addiction, Gaston holds a particular sense of pride in the fact that "[his] career was stainless, save for the green trail of the absinthe-slime which no one saw" (Corelli 229). Ultimately, the ability for Gaston to go from being so overwhelmingly in love with Pauline that he couldn't survive without her to seeing her barely once a week in favor of work truly demonstrates the established addictive tendencies that Gaston already had prior to his relationship with absinthe.

This history truly goes to show Corelli's misrepresents of absinthe to the audience. Once Gaston begins to partake in absinthe, he then overwhelmingly immerses himself in it, but this isn't the fault of absinthe; Gaston already has proven this history in his attitude towards his love and work. Just as he commits fully to the life of a fiancé and banker, he wholly attempts to become an absintheur, who "dark deeply and long of [his] favorite nectar" (Corelli 206). Although uninterested in absinthe for the reasons of traditional absintheurs such as the aesthetics, Gaston still succeeds in his addiction, and explains that, "no one loves absinthe lukewarmly, but always entirely and absorbingly"

(Corelli 258). With Gaston, this is shown in his pattern of history - he does everything with intense heat, and nothing halfheartedly. Gaston himself states, “resist temptation! cry the preachers. Very good! but suppose you cannot resist?” (Corelli 76), clearly demonstrating the struggle of a man with a history of dependency.

In addition, Gaston does not grow as a character at all throughout the entire novel, and is reliant upon virtues and vices to characterize him. Initially, following his relationship with Pauline, he is a fiancé and “mad for [Pauline]! mad with a of longing I could hardly restrain” (Corelli 86). While following in the footsteps of his father, he is “his partner” in the “very serious business” (Corelli 81) of banking. Eventually, he loses responsibility of the bank and is rejected by Pauline for Silvion; it is at this point that Gaston needs another role to fill, as he’s too flat of a character to exist without one. It’s only natural that he would fall into the next open role, that of the path of least resistance – an absintheur, with the desire to desist the “dull aching at [his] heart, - the throbbing in [his] temples, [and] the sick weariness and contempt of living” (Corelli 166). He talks later in the novel of kicking his absinthe habit, but can only do so if he is able to with the help and love of Héloïse, Pauline’s cousin, of whom he states that “[his] wrecked life should be hers to dominate as she chose!” (Corelli 356). Once that possibility is lost, he “was left to his own devices” and delivers the “final blow” (Corelli 363) by returning to the role of absintheur once again. Gaston is completely unable to exist without a crutch – love, a career, an addiction – because they are the entirety of his character development. In fact, he’s even too weak to kill himself, “afraid – horribly afraid” (Corelli 364) to drink the poison he obtains from a chemist, unable to bear the permanent thought of death amongst his temporary life roles. Gaston describes himself as a “victim of pleasure”

(Corelli 351), but he is not truly a victim at all, instead a willing participant in a life where he allows other forces to act upon him.

Finally, Gaston demonstrates that his reliance upon absinthe is not from a desire for the substance itself, but largely due to his inability to cope with his feelings and his constant search for happiness. One of the major reasons he becomes addicted to absinthe is because Pauline no longer makes him happy, and André Gessonex tells him that absinthe will make him happy. Gaston knows the risk, but desires to obtain “a brief respite from the inner fret of [his] tormenting thought”. He only makes a “faint sign of rejection” (Corelli 166) before proceeding, “without taking any more thought as to what [he] was doing”, to “finish[...] the entire draught” (167). He is not as interested in the taste or the ritualistic aspects of the drink, but instead in “the indescribably delightful sense of restorative warmth and comfort” (Corelli 167) that he experiences after ingesting it. As he tells the audience later in his absinthe addiction, “If I had wanted money that night, I would have murdered even an aged and feeble man to obtain it! If I had wanted love [...], I would have won it, either by flattery or by force” (Corelli 271). With the desire to use absinthe to mask the unpleasant feelings that he doesn’t want to deal with, Gaston has no regard for the feelings or livelihood of anyone but himself. In fact, he is almost sadistic in this foray, taking “a fierce delight in [provoking Pauline] to such adorable frenzy” (Corelli 325) and enjoying the feeling of causing others pain, hoping that administering it to others would alleviate it within him. Unable to confront the feelings he is struggling with and desiring to feel the happiness he once obtained, Gaston frantically grabs on to absinthe like a life preserver. This is another reason why he is unable to break his reliance upon it – he has no desire to. Even having a doctor explain

the threat to his life was not enough, as “no medicine can do good, where the patient refuses to employ his own power of resistance” (Corelli 354). Gaston does not comply with the cultural representation of absinthe drinkers, unconcerned with *l’heure verte* and *le louche*, focused instead on searching for happiness and concealing the feelings that he cannot face confronting within himself.

Ultimately, Corelli’s novel misrepresents absinthe and demonizes it in the eyes of readers when Gaston is already a terrible person prior to even touching it. His addictive tendencies, flat character development, and self-servant desires prove that his addiction is not solely the fault of absinthe, but choices made of his own accord. Absinthe has the ability to play such a vital role in Corelli’s novel because of its instability of French culture, especially with its differing representation between the social classes. A major change in the nineteenth century, literacy rate increased in the middle class and novels like *Wormwood* were more prevalent and easier to obtain throughout society. As a working class recreational habit during this time period, absinthe would have been demonic to middle class readers, whose recreational habits were reading serial installments of “Shilling Shockers” and “Penny Dreadfuls” – cheap and accessible pieces of literature. Not only would Corelli’s sensational events keep readers engaged, described as being “sublimely over the top” (Baker 9), the portrayal of Gaston’s addiction would have emphasized to them the demonic qualities of absinthe, his fall from grace depicting a harsh and abrupt lowering of class status. Beginning the novel as a member of the comfortably wealthy upper-middle class with a knowledgeable family name and a respectable profession and education, Gaston would have initially been a character that the average middle class reader would have been envious of. He even tells the reader that

if it weren't for absinthe, "I might have been rich, I might have been respectable, I might have even been famous" (Corelli 76). It is after his introduction to absinthe that he begins to chronicle his "rapid downward career" (Corelli 229). He eventually leaves his father's household for a less desirable location, although it is explained to the reader to be more desirable by Gaston due its ability to cater to his "wild new mode of life" which he was able to achieve by taking "a small apartment in an obscure hotel under an assumed name" (Corelli 230). Gaston ends up denying his familial name and all wages from the work he did for his father, quickly moving from riches to rags. By the end of the novel, he's willing to do anything, "for twenty francs, you can purchase me body and soul, - for twenty francs I will murder or steal" (Corelli 363) and is unable to even purchase a book that cost "two francs" as he was "unable to spare the money" (Corelli 75). Gaston's loss of class standing allows for the acceptance of the representation of absinthe by the reader, trusting Corelli's molding of an incredible malleable object.

Although problematic and incorrect, the reading of this novel is pivotal to supplement this thesis and to fully understand the representation of absinthe in nineteenth century literature and culture. Essentially, *Wormwood* is one of the few representations of absinthe in literature during the nineteenth century. While there are various poems and paintings executed by members of the drink's aesthetic crowd of consumers, novelistic representations with storylines that revolve completely around absinthe are severely limited. However, this novel is detrimental to much of the contemporary research done about absinthe because it is treated by researchers as though it is a personal account of historical events, and "it is not uncommon for writers on absinthe to quote Marie Corelli's [...] as if the first person narrator [in her novel] were a real person and the

experience a real one” (Adams 12). Corelli’s novel, often presented alongside “repeated quotation of anecdotal or even openly fictional events as historical fact” (Adams 12), is an incredibly damaging one to absinthe research. It’s important to note as well that Corelli was an English novelist, of whom “her [readers] looked to [...] for guidance on religious and spiritual matters, [and] on issues of social reform” (MacLeod 9). This sensationalized misrepresentation of absinthe as presented by someone that was such a “literary phenomenon” (MacLeod 9) would have certainly made an impact on the societal attitude towards absinthe. This is especially important to the English representation and aversion toward absinthe and French culture during this time. Regardless of this knowledge being available today, absinthe academics continue to take Corelli’s novel for much more than face value, using an account of a fictional absintheur to describe the atmosphere of France during this period.

Absinthe and its modern cultural representation is still unstable, irreparably damaged for years after being banned in France in 1914. However, the knowledge of its medicinal and recreational history is vital to fully understand the culture that it once represented, and the people that gathered at cafés to enjoy some time with the “green fairy”.

Works Cited

- "absinthism, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2017. Web. 11 May 2017.
- Adams, Jad. *Hideous Absinthe: A History of the Devil in a Bottle*. Madison, WI, The University of Wisconsin Press, 2004.
- Baker, Phil. *The Book of Absinthe: A Cultural History*. New York, Grove Press, 2001.
- Conrad III, Barnaby. *Absinthe: History in a Bottle*. San Francisco, Chronicle Books, 1988.
- Corelli, Marie. *Wormwood: A Drama of Paris*. Ontario, Broadview Press, 2004.
- Corelli, Marie, and Kirsten MacLeod. "Introduction." *Wormwood: A Drama of Paris*, Broadview Press, Ontario, 2004, pp. 9–55.
- Danovich, Tove. "The Art Of Drinking Absinthe, The Liquor Of Aesthetes." *The Salt*, NPR, 10 Aug. 2015. Accessed 11 May 2017.
- "decadence, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2017. Web. 11 May 2017.
- Pater, Walter. *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*. London, Oxford University Press, 2010.