

Deference or Defiance: How a Thematic Duality in Characterization Is Negotiated in Kay Pollak's *Så som i himmelen* [As it is in heaven]

Usa Padgate

Naresuan University, Thailand

Corresponding author's email: usapadgate@gmail.com

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Abstract

Så som i himmelen [As it is in heaven] is a 2004 Swedish film directed by Kay Pollak, who also co-wrote the screenplay. The film has received a number of international film awards and enjoyed popularity worldwide. This article aims to illustrate that part of the film's appeal lies in its presentation of the thematic duality of Christianity and paganism through the characterization of the male and female protagonists, Daniel and Lena. While the plot's predilection seems to groom Daniel to follow the path of selfless heroism as exemplified in the Christian gospels, on closer inspection he is characterized almost analogously to the myth of the pagan god of wine and ecstasy, Dionysus. Similarly, Lena is shown to echo the controversial role of Mary Magdalene in the alternate account of the biblical gospels as well as to reflect visual symbolism of Aphrodite, the pagan goddess of love and sexuality. By incorporating hedonistic aspects of antiquity's cults of Dionysus and Aphrodite into the characterization framed by the Christian gospels, the film acknowledges human fallibility as indoctrinated by the gospels yet intimates that it is possible to make peace with pain and celebrate life with physical pleasures.

Keywords: film criticism, Swedish film, Christianity, paganism, Mary Magdalene

Swedish director Kay Pollak's 2004 film *Så som i himmelen* [As it is in heaven] was a phenomenon for reasons both expected and unexpected. It garnered as many nominations as one great film could ever have done at the 2005 Guldbagge Awards and won none (IMDb, n.d.). The film was also nominated for Best Foreign Language Film at the 77th Academy Awards. It did not win that award either (The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, n.d.). *Så som i himmelen* was, however, a box office hit domestically (The Local Sweden's News in English, 2005) and internationally, especially in Germany, the Netherlands, Australia and New Zealand (Box Office Mojo, n.d., Sams, 2007)¹. It also received relatively high ratings on online film platforms: 7.5/10 from IMDb (IMDb, n.d.), 4.5/5.0 from Amazon.com (Amazon, n.d.), and 83% (critics) and 91% (audience) from Rotten Tomatoes (Rotten Tomatoes, n.d.).

This apparent dichotomy between authoritative judgements and popular acclaim concerning *Så som i himmelen* is a reflection of the film's spirit which could be read as dual in its thematic presentation. On the one hand, the film is a rather straight forward portrayal of selfless service according to the Christian faith. On the other hand, it is a celebration of life's sensual pleasures and the hedonistic present that echoes the cult of pagan divinity, rather than the glorification of death and the afterlife that often preoccupy the Christian lore. This article, therefore, aims to illustrate, by taking a close look at the characterization of the male and female protagonists, these dual aspects that give the film its quality of being at once deferential and defiant, congruent and contrary, as well as ethereal and earthly.

¹ The film was the top-grossing film in Sweden in the year it was released (The Local Sweden's News in English, 2005). As of April 2022, the film was ranked number 13, 175, 99 and 65 in Germany, the Netherlands, Australia and New Zealand respectively in their national all-time box-office rankings (Box Office Mojo, n.d.).

Featuring an original screenplay credited to Anders Nyberg, Ola Olsson, Carin Pollak, Kay Pollak and Margaretha Pollak (The Michael Nyqvist Archives, 2017), *Så som i himmelen* tells the story of Daniel Daréus (Michael Nyqvist), a famous, overworked and discontent conductor who retires to the village of his childhood in Northern Sweden after a heart attack. He meets Lena (Frida Hallgren), a free-spirited store clerk and member of the parish choir, applies for the position of cantor and guides the choir members—an assortment of idiosyncrasies—to find their inner tones, listen to other choir members' tones and sing in harmony. In the process, they cultivate the courage to acknowledge pleasure and the strength to walk away from pain. Daniel himself eventually overcomes his reluctance to give love and fulfills his dream to open people's hearts with his music. At a music festival in Innsbruck, Austria, the choir harmonizes their different tones and inspires other performers to join in while Daniel, ridden with exhaustion from gearing up to the event, collapses and dies alone listening contentedly to the choral music as it is in heaven.

Deference or Defiance

The duality of the thematic presentations as reflected in the characterization of the protagonists of *Så som i himmelen* is discussed in two sections concerning, firstly, the observation of and deviation from the canonical gospels of Christianity, and, secondly, the celebration of the pagan hedonism of antiquity. In the first section, the film's plot involving the male protagonist's life and work in a remote Norrland village of Sweden is shown to accord the Christian missions of propagating good work and faith. In addition, the visual and textual presentation of the female protagonist is put under the spotlight to suggest a more controversial aspect of that faith. In the second section, the film's acknowledgement to and appropriation of key aspects from the worships of Dionysus and Aphrodite are discussed to illustrate two points. First, the male protagonist's working style and philosophy are shown to reflect the transcendental liberation characterized of the God of Wine. Second, the female protagonist's pleasure and passion are shown to resonate with the celebration of sensuality and sexuality

characterized of the Goddess of Love. The result is a negotiation, not a submission nor a compromise, to celebrate life “here and now, and not tomorrow” (SBSExclusives, 2007, 0:06-0:08).

In the Footsteps of the Canon and Beyond

Although it does not scream religion from the outset, the film’s storyline is constructed around the characters’ connection to the Church in roles such as minister, cantor, choir member and caretaker. Also, peripherally, it is far too easy to interpret the film’s plot as a process to unmask the pretense of piety that could happen to any religious community. Two of the film’s villains profess strong ties with Christianity. One is a widely respected minister who preaches what he himself cannot observe; charity is acutely lacking in his character. The other is an uptight churchgoer who hides behind the words of the Holy Scripture in her constant criticisms of others. Yet, the film can also be read as metaphorical, or even allegorical, of the Christian gospels, which would then confirm rather than contest the scriptural merit. Daniel’s tireless effort to remedy the spiritual maladies of the choir members through music, the toll of which eventually expedites the final cardiac arrest that takes his life, could not be that far out of step of the example of the gospels that generally prescribe self-sacrifice: “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15: 13, The New International Version).

Worldly and solitary, yet with a wondrous measure of innocence, charisma and compassion, Daniel is an enigma to the snow-bound community that initially does not quite know how to take him. He puts his musical talent to good use by working for the parish church as a cantor. His ‘unorthodox’ approach during the choral practice such as having the members interlace their arms and legs while lying down on the floor to build trust, balance and harmony is, however, rather too tactile to suit the taste of the conservative. Refusing to submit to the dictum of the established authority of the parish minister, Daniel incites some powerful enemies as well as unjust accusations, towards which his reaction is more or less silence. His progress with the choir is then beset by an abrupt termination of his employment by the church council, resulting eventually in the

establishment of a new choral congregation outside of and separate from the former confirmed grounds. He performed ‘miracles’ by empowering individual voices to be heard in synchrony with the need for group harmony, the results of which help heal the various ills of the villagers – a lovesick heart, a tormented soul, a challenged mentality, and a wounded body. Subsequently, lifelong love is declared and accepted, and lifelong resentment is recognized and forgiven. Daniel’s devotion makes better the lives of others. He redeems their lives with his own. The plot is taken straight from the best-selling book of all time: the Bible. The film’s theme of redemption through selfless service, hence, could be read in parallel with, for example, the gospel in the book of John:

I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. (John 10: 9-10)

Yet, like Daniel’s nonconformist methods of work, *Så som i himmelen* also embraces elements that are at times not exactly by the ‘Book’ and at others downright paganistic. This is most noticeable in Lena, the female protagonist, is shown to be the guardian angel of her small community. She is first seen on screen superimposing a cardboard picture of an angel and wearing a festive garland as her halo. She guards the vulnerable members of the community with the vigor with which she guards the till of the supermarket where she works, humoring the old, standing up on behalf of the bullied and fending for the abused. She guards the village school as an angel painted by her grandfather on one of the walls inside the school building, thus keeping an eye on the school children and subsequently on Daniel when he buys the old school building and turns it into his living quarters and, later on, music hall for choir practice. However, Lena is not characterized as a controlled, contained and contented idolatry. In spite of her natural angelic gallantry and occasional cherubic outfit, she cries over heartaches, loses her temper and shouts in rage and in joy—an image more comfortably befitting a martyr who has rebelled and experienced

pain—a saint with a tragic back story, not a flat cardboard cutout of a mythical angel.

The choice of her name, in addition, could not be accidental. Lena is shortened from Magdalena, which echoes the name of a prominent figure in the New Testament, Mary Magdalene, who is sometimes portrayed as a prostitute² and generally acknowledged to be among the closest circle of Jesus Christ's followers: "Many women were there, watching from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of Zebedee's sons" (Matthew 27: 55-56). In the canonical gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John, she is mentioned by name more times than most of the apostles (Haverford College, n.d.) and has a key role as the first witness to Christ's resurrection:

Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (Which means "Teacher"). Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her. (John 20: 16-18)

If this were to be translated into today's culture of cinematography, Mary Magdalene would most certainly share more 'screen time' with the male protagonist than would most other main characters. Incidentally, Mary Magdalene is worshipped by a so-called heretical Christian sect as the Sacred Feminine, who, according to an alternate and much controversial historical account, companioned Christ and bore His

² In the book of Luke, an unnamed woman described as a sinner anointed Christ with her tears and dried His feet with her hair. Her sins were then forgiven by Christ (Luke 7: 36-55). Later interpretations identified her with Mary Magdalene; some say out of spite and jealousy (Baigent et al., 2006, pp. 349-351) and, subsequently, out of tradition, fascination and convenience (Arnold, 2014; Bolton, 2020; Pickard, 2011). This claim, however, has been dismissed by many modern scholars (Caldwell, 2018; Dickman, 2018; Filipczak; 2019; Marjanen, 1996).

child (Baigent et al., 2006; Beavis, 2013; Starbird, 1993). In *Så som i himmelen*, fun-loving Lena, likewise, is described by a self-proclaimed devout Christian as displaying promiscuity, hopping “in and out of all these different cars” (Pollak, 2004, 52:19). The allusion to Mary Magdalene and her alleged infamous occupation cannot be missed. The eventual coupling between Lena and Daniel boldly stretches the biblical allusion by underlining the reference to a heresy which somehow humanizes Christ and deifies His woman.

In short, Lena, like her biblical namesake, is a controversial character of contesting ideologies—someone who loves to party hard on Saturday nights but never misses mass on Sunday mornings. To delegate Lena to one or the other stereotype would be as false and incomplete as cutting her in half, figuratively speaking, serving half a portion of her and saying that that is all there is. In the same vein, to negate Lena’s roles in the community and in Daniel’s life would be blatantly unfaithful to the story of the film and would raise a question about the veracity of the plot concerning Daniel’s work with the choir, which originated out of his attraction to Lena. In other words, the film offers a combination of faiths so intertwined that in order to be truthful to the spirit of the story they have to be taken in together. By acquiescing both the mainstream and alternate accounts of a major religious faith, therefore, the film endorses the practice of inclusion and negotiation in the face of widespread indoctrination of exclusion and negation.

In the Spirit of Antiquity’s Cults of Hedonism

There is a key scene towards the middle of *Så som i himmelen* where the message seems to be most daring. The choir members hold a party inside the church’s congregation hall where they usually have choir practice. Despite an awkward preamble, the party soon takes off and quickly shifts gears. It becomes louder and merrier as the choir has its fill of wine and champagne and is joined by other musicians and community members including a leather-clad young man and a young lesbian couple. Everyone looks very happy, except one choir member—an advocate of the parish minister and his spy—who

describes the party as “cultSodom and Gomorrah”³ (Pollak, 2004, 54:38). Apparently, celestial blessings are exclusive, and wholesale happiness, it seems, is a sin by itself.

The film, however, faces this notion head-on by not evading the Church, spherically or thematically. In point of fact, the film champions happiness, not religion. And who is to say that the two cannot go hand-in-hand. The party scene seems intent to indicate that a religious space can bring people together and, instead of submitting them to nervous inhibitions of taboos and punishments, can genuinely serve as a sanctuary where woes are forgotten, wrongs are forgiven, and bigotries are forgone—a place on earth as it is in heaven.

This party scene, in addition, can be viewed as a nod to the hedonistic cult of Dionysus, the God of Wine of Ancient Greece. Amongst the great Olympians, Dionysus (or Bacchus in the Roman pantheon) is the one encompassing the highest degree of ambivalence. He is the only Olympian whose parentage is not concurrently divine, being the result of Zeus’s illicit relationship with a princess of Thebes, and who returns to the city of his mother to claim his birthright. He has his place on Olympus but his work—the cultivation of vine—is exclusively on earth. His followers, especially the infamous female maenads, are enlivened by his drink and often become destructive in drunken ecstasy and madness. The cult of Dionysus, nevertheless, offers unbridled hedonism and (quasi) divine transcendence (Turney, 2018). Since none other has captured the Dionysian possession quite as beautifully, it is worthwhile to quote Edith Hamilton at length here:

³ Two cities mentioned in the Bible, notably for their destruction as God’s punishment for acts of homosexuality conducted by their population (Genesis 18:16-33; 19:1-29)

Under his influence courage was quickened and fear banished, at any rate for the moment. He uplifted his worshipers; he made them feel that they could do what they had thought they could not. All this happy freedom and confidence passed away, of course, as they either grew sober or got drunk, but while it lasted it was like being possessed by a power greater than themselves. So people felt about Dionysus as about no other god. He was not only outside of them, he was within them, too. They could be transformed by him into being like him. The momentary sense of exultant power winedrinking [*sic*] can give was only a sign to show men that they had within them more than they knew; “they could themselves become divine.” (Hamilton, 1999, p. 62)

Giving life to annual crops, Dionysus also symbolizes life and death, and is connected to the mysteries of both the afterlife and resurrection (Howatson, 2011, pp. 208-209). Dionysus, in other words, is the very embodiment of duality, in both properties and attributes.

Daniel, in certain ways, is similar to the God of Wine. He returns to the village of his youth where he was literally driven away by bullying classmates and takes possession of his old school, of all places. Having travelled the world as a fully-booked orchestral conductor, he is highly cultivated but deeply unfulfilled. Although he has every right to enjoy the echelon of world-class musicians, he finds contentment and fulfillment working as a cantor for a small and unknown village choir. He teaches them to discover their tones by expressing themselves kinetically as well as vocally and to find choral balance by trusting one another, getting a natural high from transcending fears and inhibitions. The choir members are extremely loyal to him. They walk out of the church after learning that Daniel has been dismissed from his cantor position, march to the old school building which Daniel has made his residence, and set up an independent congregation there: “We go on rehearsing?” “Yes!” (Pollak, 2004, 1:27:24). The women – single, married, young, old – fall headlong in love with their conductor:

You’re strange. Everyone here’s in love with you. You must have noticed. Inger, she’s crazy about you, and Lena loves you, and I, you know, I ... I record everything you say. Then I sit at home in the garage and listen to you. (Pollak, 2004, 1:02:49-1:03:15)

The euphoria culminates in the party scene, which is again a carbon copy of Dionysia, the festival of Dionysus characterized by ritual revelry and dramatic performances (Howatson, 2011, p. 206). The euphoric revelry is captured in photographs showing Daniel drinking with the minister's wife; they are both red-faced and bleary-eyed, obviously drunk, clearly happy, which consequently heightens the wrath of the minister.

Tragic though Daniel's death is, his departure is not really unexpected, given the medical condition of his heart. A more important consideration is that he dies knowing that his legacy will live on. Indeed, the film celebrates that life is stronger than death. By characterizing Daniel with these Dionysian suggestions within the allegorical frame of the Christian self-sacrifice, the film sends an urgent message that a life devoted to others does not need to be deprived of fun – that one can be good and happy and have fun at the same time. And that time had better be now.

(Re)education, thus, is an important motif of *Så som i himmelen*. The director himself opines that culture has educated people to be victims and to find excuses not to be as happy as they want to be, and that in his film Daniel's work with the choir helps them "start to stop to be victims" (SBSExclusives, 2007, 1:04-1:05). In the film, the process of unlearning (stigmas and scars) in order to relearn to take full advantage of what life has to offer ends up most aptly in the school building owned and conducted by the master himself. Yet, Daniel is probably the one who is in the direst need to be reeducated, and it is possibly why he comes back to the school of his troubled childhood and finally learns to enjoy what he was deprived of as a child—the company of friends, the freedom of cycling, and the exultation of giving and receiving love.

Daniel's constant companion in his journey of reeducation is, of course, Lena. She instructs and inspires him in a number of ways. Early on in Daniel's role as cantor, Lena gives him practical advice such as when she tells him that a coffee break is as needed to rouse the spirit of the choir members as vigorous vocal training: "Coffee's important, too" (Pollak, 2004, 34:37). Later on when Daniel struggles to learn to ride a bicycle, Lena gives him the balance on his bike.

Figuratively, she also gives him the mental balance to ride the storm of prejudices in their small, country community. She is his constant moral support and plays a major role in his sensual awakening. In one way or another, their contact more often than not winds up physical, such as touching or kissing. Curvaceous and full-figured, Lena is a picture of female sexuality. Men are attracted to her, and some women are apparently jealous of her. When she stands naked by a river ready for “the first dip of the year” (Pollak, 2004, 1:21:38), she invokes Botticelli’s “Birth of Venus,” one of the most famous paintings of the Goddess of Love, depicting Venus (a Roman name for Aphrodite) arriving at the shore fully-grown after emerging from the sea (Botticelli, 1485). Daniel, standing mere meters away, is overawed, then terrified, as are countless other males in the myths who find themselves all of a sudden face to face with the full splendor of a goddess. Handling physical sensuality is part of his reeducation.

Although most widely known as the Goddess of Love, Aphrodite also represents beauty, fertility, physical pleasure and sexual desire (Howatson, 2011, p. 54; Roman & Roman, 2010, p. 73). In her relationship with Daniel, Lena displays these capitals in multitudes. Up for every physical challenge—singing, playing music, dancing, riding, Lena is an irrepressible force of fun. Her youthful energy and physical charms revitalize his expiring heart and exhausted soul, giving him a new burst of life. He learns to appreciate each and every day he has lived knowing her, as he remarks: “Now we’ve known each other for one hundred and eighty-four days” (Pollak, 2004, 1:57:34) and acknowledges finally that love brings him happiness: “When you love someone, you feel happy being with her” (Pollak, 2004, 1:54:42).

Through her seductiveness, Aphrodite is also the patron goddess of prostitutes. In Ancient Greece, prostitutes gathered to celebrate the festival of Aphrodisia with various carnal symbols as a form of worshipping the goddess (Church of the Celestial Order and Temple of Olympus, n.d.; Howatson, 2011, p. 55). Female sensuality that typically incurs a reference to wantonness and scornful gossips, as mentioned earlier in such reference to Mary Magdalene and Lena,

is a cause for celebration in the cult of Aphrodite.⁴ Reading Lena as a representation of the force of Aphrodite, therefore, brings into the picture the jubilation, not condemnation, of physical intimacy that is as pleasurable on earth as it is in heaven.

Through a motif of reeducation, the film pays homage to the hedonistic cults of the Greek divinity that offer a path towards the enjoyment of life by means of inclusion, deferring to the Christian indoctrination of human shortcomings, and simultaneously defying it by celebrating those very shortcomings heathen-style. By incorporating attributes of pagan deities into the characterization of the protagonists framed by Christian paradigms, the film suggests that in spite of the shadow of pain and the surety of death, the life that we have now is ours and it is possible to be happy in it.

Afterword

Daniel writes a song for the choir's annual concert. He gives the solo to Gabriella, the oft beaten wife of his childhood nemesis; consequently the ultimate victim of domestic abuse. The song succinctly encapsulates the spirit of the film. It is referred to as "Gabriella's Song," but essentially it is a song for everyone:

... All my living days
I will live as I desire.
I want to feel I'm alive,
Knowing I was good enough.
...
I am here
And my life is only mine;
And the heaven I thought was there,
I'll discover it there somewhere ...

(Pollak, 2004, 1:09:43-1:12:45)

⁴ Budin (as cited in Gibson, 2019, p. 928) explains practices in antiquity that are now variously called "sacred, ritual, cultic or temple prostitution" in which prostitution and/or sales of virginity were part of rituals in honor of Aphrodite.

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