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Temperance Beyond Discipline: Considerations on the Functions of US Temperance Drama

Abstract

The essay investigates the functions of representing the near destruction of nuclear family structures and values in nineteenth-century US temperance drama. The thesis underlying this investigation postulates that the embodiment of the quasi-wilful destruction of the nuclear family on stage gives expression to socially unacceptable desires of escaping that structure in the face of its oppressive potentials in antebellum middle-class society. Taking the text of the most prominent temperance play, *The Drunkard, or The Fallen Saved* (1844), as a point of departure, and amplifying it with readings of *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* (1858) and *Fifteen Years of a Drunkard's Life* (1828), the thesis assumes further that various instances of ambiguity and irony warrant an understanding of temperance plays as more than one-dimensional, didactic cautionary tales upholding given status-quo power structures. Basing itself on theoretical approaches from Cultural Studies, this thesis departs from the established interpretations of the genre as part of an ideological apparatus in tune with hegemonic imperatives of self-discipline mandated by an economy industrializing in the context of a mainstream culture determined by an Evangelical ethos. The essay first provides a historical, socio-political contextualisation of the development of the genre. What follows is an introduction of relevant precepts of Cultural Studies as formulated by John Fiske. The special focus of this theoretical lens lies on the interface of play text and the processes of encoding and decoding, excorporation and incorporation that result in ambiguous and conflicting interpretations of encoded messages. An analysis of character constructions as well as of sensationalized scenes depicting the main character's personal downfall and decay with the concomitant damage to his family form the main part of the investigation.

KEYWORDS: temperance drama; antebellum literature; cultural studies; John Fiske; incorporation and excorporation; encoding and decoding

Introduction: The Socio-Cultural Context of Temperance Drama

There is hardly a dramatic genre that is as straightforward and transparent in its meaning and purpose as temperance drama. On the surface, tem-

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perance plays seem little more than variations on the same cautionary tale whose main goal is to deter the audiences from overindulging in alcohol on account of the detrimental effects to health, family, and social status. Emerging in the first half of the nineteenth century in the US-American context, the temperance ideology, from which temperance drama evidently drew, was impacted chiefly by the invigoration of Evangelical spirituality during “the ferment of the Second Great Awakening” (Carlson 1998: 660-1), by the concomitant general proliferation of reform movements to amend social ills (*ibid.*), by the status anxiety of former elites who “sought in temperance a means of social control” (660-1), and by the emerging middle class “which found in temperance a vehicle to respectability” (660-1). While the somewhat dissimilar factors that shaped the temperance movement seem to belie the straightforward and transparent appeal of temperance drama, its invariable deep structure has often been read to corroborate its ideological simplicity. In their temperance-themed encyclopaedia, Blocker, Fahey, and Tyrrell identify the unchanging “dramatic devices” of contemporaneous temperance drama on both sides of the Atlantic to be “battered wives, abused and/or neglected children, the decline of an entire family from prosperity to poverty and degradation, and the drunkard’s social and physical deterioration to a point of crisis” (2003: 201). The authors note that American examples of the genre tended to end in the protagonist’s restoration and therefore “espoused a more assimilative brand of reform” whose upbeat message was “reflective of a young country in which social mobility and a bright cultural and economic future were guaranteed to the sober and the ‘good at heart’” (*ibid.*).

If it is said that temperance plays function as ideological tools that stabilize the socio-political *status quo* and its upbeat narratives, it is only on their surface that they do so by their overt didactic message. They fulfil this function much more profoundly by virtue of their capacity to provide a space, albeit an imagined one, in which impulses potentially destructive to the *status quo* can be contained, into which they could be safely channelled and remain materially ineffectual. They could thus provide some relief, allowing spectators to vent the counter-societal and counter-hegemonic, even antisocial impulses and stirrings, posing as didactically valuable and morally edifying entertainment. The present essay argues that temperance drama was not only popular because it provided moral fortification against the temptations of alcohol, then so ubiquitous in American society, but also, and even centrally, because it visually depicts the quasi-wilful destruction of family structures on stage and so subversively gives expression to clandestine, even repressed, desires to escape the family structure. This argument unfolds on the basis of a Cultural Studies-informed reading of the most successful American temperance play of the antebellum period, *The*

Drunkard (Smith 1844), as well as on complimentary readings of *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* (Pratt 1858) and *Fifteen Years of a Drunkard's Life* (Jerrold 1828), which are among the most widely cited representatives of the genre. After a brief historical contextualisation, the essay elucidates how John Fiske's concepts of incorporation and excorporation (1989) can be employed to highlight the ambivalent instances in temperance-play texts as well as to focus on the inconsistencies that thus grow apparent in the encoding of the purportedly transparent message. In this manner, a rather more differentiated evaluation of the socio-political uses of temperance drama as a literary dispositive can take place. Rather than understand it as an efficient ideological discursive instrument politically aligned with the various points on the agenda of the antebellum temperance movement in a monolithic way, the essay proposes to re-evaluate the genre's specific function and operational mode.

A sketch of the history of *The Drunkard* habitually begins with some note on the play's overwhelming success. D'Alessandro refers to "unprecedented audiences" (2014: 252) attracted to the theatre in 1844, the year of the play's opening in Boston, and subsequently in 1850, when "it became America's first play to reach 100 uninterrupted performances" (253). Similarly, Judith N. McArthur reports that "[n]ineteenth-century audiences loved *The Drunkard*" (1989: 520) and that this circumstance helped in building up the Boston Museum, the relatively new theatre that staged the production, to a notable presence. The theatre, as McArthur further explains, profited from professional and political gatherings proceeding in the city, on the occasion of which it arranged special reproductions, enthusiastically received by these target audiences.

The favour with professional and political audiences is not coincidental according to scholars investigating the ideological messages of the temperance movement in general. Such scholars notice that in all parts of the country, temperance movement messages overlapped with the ideological underpinnings of the emerging market economy and the concomitant socioeconomic changes gradually becoming visible during the decades in question. As Ian Tyrrell points out, "[s]outhern temperance reformers . . . were as quick as their northern counterparts to explain economic dislocation in terms of individual moral inadequacies", stating further that "[e]qually prominent in the southern temperance movement's economic arguments was the assertion, common also in the North, that intemperance hindered all kinds of businesses by rendering the labor [*sic*] force less efficient" (1982: 498). And this connection between temperance and the emerging city-based market economy was no purely American phenomenon. Writing about nineteenth-century England, Peter Mathias states that the "temperance movement . . . was one of the more important influences up-

on the social attitudes current in Victorian England. It sprang to life in an age dominated by the problems of housing, feeding and disciplining the unprecedentedly growing numbers of a society increasingly committed to life and labour in industrial towns" (1958: 107).

Clearly, temperance plays intimated that sobriety and productivity depended on each other and were, generally, favourable qualities to be individually cultivated. Nonetheless, the relation in which temperance drama stands to the political aims and expedient ideological alliances of the temperance movement as a larger dispositive is not one of straightforward propagandistic affiliation. In other words, the supposition that temperance plays were little more than advertisements for the movement would be an erroneous one. After elucidating the development of the temperance movement's various organisations, Jeffrey D. Mason reports that "[b]y the mid-1840s, many believed that the temperance battle was won; from 1830 to 1845, consumption of absolute alcohol declined from 7.1 gallons per capita to level off at 1.8, and teetotalism had evolved from a radical notion to a standard practice in middle-class respectable families" (1990: 97). Mason's most interesting observation regarding the histories of the temperance movement and temperance drama concerns the sequential relation between them, for

by the time the first popular American temperance play appeared in 1844, the movement had already effected a significant change in America's drinking habits, and indeed would not achieve further measurable success until the beginning of Prohibition in 1920. In other words, the temperance dramas, no matter what the intent of their creators and supporters, rather than helping to change attitudes to a significant degree, were instead affirming a vision that had already come true; they were conservative rather than revolutionary. (ibid.)

In short, temperance plays were at their most popular and successful well after the temperance movement had become a mainstream part of American antebellum society. This means that the task of convincing and educating the viewers on the matters close to the temperance movement's heart had been successfully completed before the emergence of the most successful temperance plays.

To recapitulate: the temperance plays' popularity was contingent upon several factors, among which their instrumental usefulness to the proliferation of temperance ideas figured only peripherally, as these ideas had already been accepted and were more likely to have served as a factor that conditioned the popularity of the plays. Much more decisive was the fact that temperance plays had the image of being didactic and wholesome, and therefore rendered a night out at the theatre to view one such play as ac-

ceptable entertainment, in contradistinction to other forms of drama which still had the image of frivolity and undue gaiety in a society that ostentatiously valued the puritan origins of many of its cultural mores (cf. Augst 2007: 312). Before this temperance-aided transformation of the theatre in America took place, theatres and other entertainment venues were regarded as disreputable and dangerous, as the gaiety “could and on occasion did rise to the level of a riot” (Block 2008: 196) and “audiences were noisy, more anarchic than democratic, and often violent” (ibid.). The redefinition of American antebellum theatre in which temperance drama played points to the fact that the entertainment rather than solely the didactic aspect drew the impressive numbers of viewers reported to have attended, as this genre represented the transmogrification of a temperance message into a merger of “sensational forms of civic enlightenment and popular entertainment” (Augst 2007: 313).

Cultural Studies and Temperance

It is important to acknowledge the fact that temperance drama developed and functioned in a cultural context that was predisposed to accept its didactic message at face value and to consider it proper and decent entertainment. However, one must also keep in mind that this cultural context was not monolithic, but determined by extremely contentious, vigorous, and forceful efforts in American nation-building. Thomas Augst’s research expresses the crucial function of the discursive space provided by the temperance movement in such an environment:

At a moment when the ideological status and social uses of written texts were themselves the objects of critical debate, technological innovation, and institution-building, the drunkard’s story generated larger contests for moral authority that were waged between professional elites and ordinary people within relatively new forms of mass communication such as the newspaper and the popular lecture, as well as across the evolving literary genres of sermon, novel, autobiography, and stage melodrama. (Augst 2007: 298)

Augst presages the potentially promising pairing of Cultural Studies as an analytical approach and temperance drama as an object of study. Augst focuses on the mass cultural aspect of the antebellum temperance movement, and on the extent to which the proliferation of media and venue formats dedicated to temperance topics impacted social and political institutions during that time of American nation-building. While not himself proposing the use of Cultural Studies in looking at temperance-related phenomena, Augst nonetheless identifies all of the elements as central to the issue

that would be identified as universally important by Cultural Studies proponents: mass circulation, popular formats, the impacts of readerships recruited from different classes, and the contentious negotiation of norms.

Centrally, the purview of Cultural Studies encompasses not only processes of collective political negotiations of meaning and value, but also looks at such processes on a more refracted and individual level. This field postulates the dynamic and destabilized nature of meanings, which rarely remain unaltered in the processes of their en- and decoding. John Fiske makes an interesting point concerning consumers' uses of cultural products on the basis of his observation of the various implications of wearing jeans and tearing them in order to make individual statements of style and, ultimately, of culture (15). He writes that such a "disfigurement of a commodity in order to assert one's right and ability to remake it into one's own culture" (*ibid.*) can be transferred to any area of consuming and making sense of culture. Fiske refers to this phenomenon as "excorporation" (*ibid.*) and defines it as "the process by which the subordinate make their own culture out of the resources and commodities provided by the dominant system, and this is central to popular culture, for in an industrial society the only resources from which the subordinate can make their own subcultures are those provided by the system that subordinates them" (*ibid.*).

Yet when the "subordinates", as Fiske calls consumers and readers, engage in such acts of excorporation to create their own meanings out of the hegemonic products presented to them, the "dominant system", as he further explains, tends to reinsert that very excorporated element back into its hegemonic structure of meaning. This process is termed, consistently, "incorporation", and, among other things, it "can also be understood as a form of containment – a permitted and controlled gesture of dissent that acts as a safety valve and thus strengthens the dominant social order by demonstrating its ability to cope with dissenters or protesters by allowing them enough freedom to keep them relatively content, but not enough to threaten the stability of the system against which they are protesting" (18). Analysing a specific instance of incorporation in advertising for the aforementioned torn jeans, Fiske concludes that "[i]n such ways, the theory of incorporation tells us, signs of opposition are turned to the advantage of that which they oppose" (19).

To reiterate Fiske's ideas, the finding and defending of pleasure in the process of decoding play a major part in these strategies of reading polyvalent signs. According to that viewpoint, reading processes, in fact all processes of interpretation, entail contentions and negotiations in which readers try to wrestle something meaningful and helpful, some form of pleasure, from the cultural products that they consume, even if these products seem to possess an overwhelming hegemonic and disciplining quality.

This view often casts the recipient or reader as fundamentally oppositional, refusing whenever possible the overtly encoded hegemonic message and engaging instead in decoding practices that allow for a more personally useful and enjoyable experience of whatever cultural product is at hand. Ambiguities, inconsistencies, ironies, and ambivalences in the encoded hegemonic message thus become opportunities to engage in alternating reading practices.

Assuming this view on the reception of cultural products often predisposes the scholar to adopt a reader-oriented methodology, as Fiske's case clearly shows. That approach, however, did not manage to sway mainstream literary scholarship into its direction. Nor does the approach employed here feature reader-orientation. That said, it is hardly conceivable that the temperance play is devoid of any vestige of its audience. As Augst points out, temperance venues have always been spaces of exchange, negotiation, and participation. The approach of the proposed analysis is therefore text-oriented, employing close reading to identify the internal inconsistencies between the overt message and its particular encoding that highlights the opportunities for the recognition of inconsistencies, ambiguities, and ambivalences. This essay sees the temperance play itself as an instance of simultaneous ex- and incorporation, in which the hegemonic ideology of temperance is transformed in potentially transgressive ways through polyvalent and tellingly ambiguous encoding, but ultimately serves to contain those transgressions in the confines of the art form.

Family Conflict in Temperance Literature

One such matter of ex- and incorporation concerns the normative structure of the nuclear family. The fact that the representation of uneasy family relations is highly symbolic in temperance literature is a well recognized one. In his analysis of the complex negotiation of the American Revolutionary period and the hero worship it engendered in temperance texts, William Breitenbach notes that "[t]he most striking thing about the treatment of children in temperance literature . . . is the frequency with which writers described hostile and antagonistic relations between parents and their offspring" (1983: 69). This observation stands at the beginning of Breitenbach's explanation of the parallelism between the "clashes between fathers and sons" (*ibid.*) and the charged negotiation of social and cultural influence and prestige between the "Revolutionary Fathers" (74) and the men who came of age during the first decades of the nineteenth century. Breitenbach contextualizes this peculiar representation of father-son hostility not only in the legacy of the Revolution, but also in the various transmuta-

tions of the socio-economic landscape of the Antebellum. With fathers increasingly absent and incapable of the same level of providing the prosperity and security necessary for the social reproduction of Early-Republic structures, “[t]he public, patriarchal family of the colonial period gave way to the private, maternal family” (Breitenbach 1983: 74). These developments that so drastically shifted the sphere of economic agency from the countryside to the city for many men and disengaged the rest of the family from a responsible part in the socio-economic production, and the safeguarding of the family’s survival, were not only stoking antipathy toward the fathers; they also transformed the family into a burden for the male agent, which is finally channelled into the representations of violent family relations in temperance literature and especially in temperance plays.

The destruction of families and its ambiguous rendition was not the purview of temperance drama alone. The gradient of destruction emanating from fathers and targeting families was also represented in the short poems often included in temperance materials distributed by the different clubs and societies dedicated to the cause. The piece quoted by Michael R. Booth in his seminal 1964 essay on temperance culture is a case in point:

‘Tis but a drop, the father said,
 And gave it to his son;
 But little did he think a work
 Of death was then begun.
 (qtd in Booth 1964: 206)

Clearly, these lines aim to warn parents against instilling dangerous patterns of consumption into their children. Yet the plot structure of the minimally developed and poignantly used epic mode simply suggests that fathers use alcohol in a manner that brings about the disintegration of the family. Such verse, which, as Booth puts it, “built up horror and pathos stanza by stanza” (1964: 205), also established responsibilities and unmasked, wittingly or not, the negligent and irresponsible, but at the same time knowing way in which fathers put their children at risk.

Certainly, this type of verse resonates with the sentiment of generational conflict, as it highlights the elders’ failure to care appropriately for their offspring and to provide them with the required protection. At the same time, the particularity of the image and character constellation invoked by the verse should not be completely eclipsed by the aforementioned abstraction and generalisation that casts fathers as fore- and Founding fathers. The particular image refers the readers of temperance pamphlets and the viewers of temperance drama to the nuclear family, which is negligently jeopardized by its very head. And while such verse unfolded “horror and pathos,” as Booth put it, to boost the appellative function of the message and

scare viewers into a more careful relationship with alcohol, it certainly also lured and excited them. Horror and pathos certainly bind the audience's emotions and thrill the viewers, relying on a desire to be shocked and disgusted while presented with a relatable premise for a story.

The gradient of destruction depicted in verse did not direct itself to children exclusively, but described the fate of wives, as well. The temperance tune anthologized by Edwin Paxton Hood as "The Bridal Feast" presents itself in the epic mode, as well, and recounts the macabre story of a wedding whose turning point from dream to disaster comes upon the serving of wine. Its consumption first leads to an increase in gaiety, yet finally induces the demise of the couple:

The bridegroom, tho' he can scarcely stand,
Seizes the glass with a trembling hand,
And drinking long life to his lovely bride,
He falls down a corpse by her father's side.
(Hood 1850: 8)

The bride finally dies of grief. While the verse clearly blames the "destructive wine" (*ibid.*), the husband's overindulgence is highlighted as the element that finally causes two deaths and precludes a family from forming. Surely, all of the elements referenced by Booth are expertly invoked in this ballad and speak to the potential of temperance literature to serve as lurid entertainment.

And while the bringing about of the children's descent into alcoholism was not presented in any unusual terms as far as its moral valuation and verbal phrasing is concerned, the wives' fates are subject to an almost upbeat twist, as this stanza of "The Inebriate's Lament" shows:

Sally, my wife, bow'd her beautiful head,
Long, long ago; long, long ago;
Oh, how I wept when I knew she was dead,
Long, long ago; long, long ago;
She was an angel, my love, and my guide, –
Vainly to save me from ruin she tried;
Poor broken heart, it was well that she died,
Long, long ago, long, long ago.
(Hood 1850: 3)

What presents itself as an instance of solace, suggesting that the wife's death precluded her from witnessing her husband's further descent, is likewise a rather matter-of-fact, if not cheerful, description of an event that can well be expected to be more traumatic for the speaker in this instance. This seems particularly the case since he is speaking from a position of final so-

briety. A much more believable lament in the circumstances invoked may be the sadness regarding the wife's inability to witness her husband's final betterment and healing. And this reaction of relief upon the death of a member of the nuclear family is equally present in instances of temperance drama. In so far, the potentially regressive pleasures of destruction and aggression inform the encoding of any of the genres used to convey the message of temperance.

Escaping Nuclear Family Pressure

A subtle indication of the identification of the family structure with unease and restraint offers itself in the climax of the delirium scene of *The Drunkard*. Commonly, the tremor-scene in which Edward hallucinates that snakes entangle him is regarded as the culmination of the performance and the climatic moment of the play. Writhing on the floor in what seems a delirious fever induced by alcohol, Edward shouts to William Dowton, Edward's foster brother and friend, who came to his rescue, but whom he hardly recognises:

EDWARD (*on ground in delirium*) Here, here, friend, take it off, will you? – these snakes, how they coil round me. Oh, how strong they are! there, don't kill it, no, no, don't kill it! give it brandy, poison justice, ha, ha! justice! ha, ha!

WILLIAM He does not know me.

EDWARD Hush! gently – gently, while she's asleep. I'll kiss her. She would reject me, did she know it, hush! there, heaven bless my Mary, bless her and her child – hush! if the globe turns round once more, we shall slide from it's [*sic!*] surface into eternity. Ha, ha! great idea! A boiling sea of wine, fired by the torch of fiends! ha! ha!

(4.1)

In Edward's delirious fantasies, the paranoid frame of the snakes that restrain his body is immediately followed by images of his wife asleep, and subsequently resolve into what seems to constitute an apocalyptic vision of burning floods of alcohol set ablaze by demons. The communications of these terrifying images are accentuated by occasional interjections that indicate laughter. Certainly, they can be read to convey Edward's delirious confusion and exuberance, leading him to introduce the incongruous images of infernal catastrophe with expressions of approval and amusement. Allowing for more ambiguity and therefore for the possibility that a literal understanding of these interjections is not off the mark, one can also suggest that this approval is generated not solely by Edward's delirious con-

fusion. The sequence of images invoked by Edward in the quoted section is of special interest in applying this second reading. As said, the images of Mary and the daughter are followed by the image of slipping from the earth “into eternity”, upon which the first approving interjection of “Ha! ha! great idea!” is uttered, before finally the image of a “boiling sea of wine, fired by the torch of friend” is once again intensified by the poignant interjection of “ha! ha!”.

The image of Edward’s family is introduced in his mind by the intimidating frame of serpents entangling his body and it is followed by metaphorical invocations of death and hell. By arranging his speech and thoughts in that manner, Edward aligns his family with the semantic fields of restraint and hell. One cannot but surmise upon reading this passage that snakes, family, and the alcoholic hellfire are meant to be mutually evocative. They clearly are for Edward. The text works to establish this association between the family and physical restraint not only through the specific arrangement and sequence of concepts in the quoted scene, but also through the construction of structural similarities between different scenes. More specifically, a scene in the second act in which Edward intends to leave his family’s home on account of the shame he feels for his shortcomings and alcoholic transgressions seems to mirror the climatic experience of the delirium:

- MARY (*springing forward and clasping his neck*) Edward, dear Edward, do not leave me! I will work, I will slave, anything; we can live; but do not abandon me in my misery: do not desert me, Edward, love! husband!
- EDWARD Call me not husband – curse me as your destroyer; loose your arms – leave me.
- MARY No, no! do not let him go. William, hold him!
- WILLIAM (*holding him*) Edward, dear brother!
- JULIA (*clinging to him*) Father! father!
- MARY You will be abused. No one near to aid you. Imprisoned, or something worse, Edward.
- EDWARD Loose me; leave me; why fasten me down on fire? Madness is my strength; my brain is liquid flame! (*breaks from her – William is obliged to catch her*) Ha! I am free. Farewell, forever! (*rushes off, C. D.*)
- MARY Husband! Oh, Heaven! (*faints*)
- WILLIAM (*bursting into tears*) Edward! brother!
- JULIA Father, father! (*runs to the door, and falls on the threshold*)
- (2.5)

The melodramatic, tear-provoking quality of this scene is heightened to maximum effect as Edward’s wife, Mary, his daughter, Julia, and William

together and simultaneously hold on to him and implore him not to relinquish the family. They call on Edward using both his given name and, hoping to appeal to his sense of love and duty, the familial terms that denote their respective relations to him. Yet those appeals manage not to sway or hinder Edward's guilt-induced resolve to abscond. Mary's calling him "husband" even provokes a direct and harsh imperative not to do so, replacing the familial term with the threatening appellation of "destroyer". While the situation implies that Edward's shame and desperation motivate this imperative, the seemingly spiteful and aggressive tone indicates that the distance between Edward and his family has grown to a degree as to render him unresponsive to their pleas. This distance between them is once again underlined in the exclamation declaring his freedom after he manages to escape his wife's restraining embrace. The alliteration employed to mark this exclamation when Edward declares "Ha! I am free. Farewell, forever!" adds an almost harmonizing ring to the finalisation of this discordant scene and fortifies the impression of Edward's apparent satisfaction with his exit. His freedom is clearly associated with his "Farewell", while Mary's invocation of imprisonment only serves to bring her into conceptual and metonymic association with a lack of freedom. At the same time, this scene's representation of Edward's thought processes already anticipates the climax by letting the protagonist reference "fire" and "liquid flame", thereby once again associating an intense encounter with his family with images of hell.

This implies that the protagonist perceives the family as a threat to his physical and emotional wellbeing, for they are metonymically aligned with danger and torture and increase both in Edward's delirium. It seems like the scene of the wife, the brother, and the daughter holding and restraining him, reminding him of his familial obligations to them, while being the reason for his experience of guilt, is mirrored in the image of Edward's delirious vision of serpents that wind around him. In both scenes, Edward cannot but invoke hell and death. Only after the cathartic moment of this association has been experienced, only after the delirious, phantasmagorical realisation of the equation of the family and the entanglement by snakes could be invoked, could the restitution of the hero into the structures he wanted to escape begin. The admission, however figurative and veiled, of his repressed emotions could reconcile Edward enough to render Rencelaw's influence and the subsequent restoration possible. And Rencelaw makes his first appearance immediately after Edward's described climatic delirious breakdown.

What is enacted in the instance of the climatic scene is thus a convoluted, self-referential conjunction of two catharses. The first to be mentioned is the expected one experienced by the viewers: their identification with

Edward as he enacts the emotionally and physically painful convulsions of his delirium. The second catharsis is the rather more subtle and indirectly mediated one brought about by the hallucination, which can be read as an implicit realisation of the source of Edward's real unease. Edward's delirium is therefore comparable to a virtual stage of self-perception, in which his hallucination, rendered in his words, provides him with the needed cathartic moment to leave behind the self-destructive habit and understand, albeit not entirely consciously, his own motivations. And, of course, that more subtle catharsis with its relieving lesson galvanizes onto the viewers.

Evidently, this phantasmagorical space of the delirium exceeds the space that serves as an escapist refuge and is often cited when it comes to the kind of cultural product that aims at reconciling the consumers with the *status quo* or restoring them back to it after a phase of increasing unease and discontent with the same. In this manner, *The Drunkard* does not only provide a commentary on the antebellum connotations and the socio-economic significations of the family structure, it also provides a comment on its own genre's socio-cultural functions in the specific context of its productions. That socio-cultural function is one of containing destabilisation by allowing its monitored and ab-reactive enactment in a setting marked as phantasmagorical and fictional. It fosters understanding and relief and thereby eases resistance toward the structures that compelled the flight into the theatre, or the theatre of the delirium, in the first place.

The perception of unease in family relations is equally, and less metaphorically, depicted in the case of *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room*. Both the novel of 1854 and its dramatisation of 1858 seem to portray the stress which alcoholism puts on families. The story follows the rise and downfall of Simon Slade, who has sold his mill to become an innkeeper. The play also introduces the downfall and vindication of Joe Morgan, whose story of improvement from drunkard to respectable man includes the inadvertent murder of his daughter Mary at the hands of Slade.

Slade's professional history, of which he informs the audience in a casual chat with Romaine, the temperance advocate and benefactor, is particularly indicative of the propagandistic tying of a discourse of work with that of sobriety, but conveys a link between enjoyment, drink, and upward mobility at the same time. As Slade tells Romaine,

SLADE I am a miller by trade; and a better miller, though I say it myself, is not to be found in Bolton county. I got tired of hard work, and determined to lead an easier life; so I sold my mill, bought this house with the money, and I find it an easy life, and, if rightly seen after, one in which a man is sure to make money.

(1.2)

What points to the character of the tavern to be a place of specifically male happiness is the fact that Mrs. Slade, the innkeeper's wife, appears to be longing for the old days of the mill and distrust her husband's cheer, which she suspects to be affected. The sequence of ideas and emotions in their exchange is thus particularly revealing:

MRS. SLADE Ah, Simon! we shall never be so happy again as when we were at the old mill. The tempter has entered our paradise of peace and joy.

SLADE Devil take the women! they are never satisfied. What's the matter with me to-day? I've got a touch of the blues coming on; I'll mix me a nice drop to drive them away.

(1.2)

Mrs. Slade's expectations and evaluations of the change cause Simon Slade to consider alcohol as a coping mechanism that helps him endure the underlying conflict with his wife. The frustration expressed in Simon's first two sentences manifests itself in a generalisation that blames womankind for a lack of comfort and recognition perceived by men. While the consumption of alcohol presents itself as the aforementioned coping mechanism, it also has an aspect of active, though defensive, aggression. While the phrasing of "I'll mix me a nice drop to drive them away" directs its defensive aggression at the "blues" that would be fought with the help of alcohol, one cannot help but surmise that the actual target is the actual cause of the "blues," namely the women in the lives of the men referred to in the said generalisation. Here, a particularly relevant parallel can be seen with the treatment of Morgan's family. How to drive away Mary is a very real concern for both Morgan and Slade and receives a great deal of attention from all of the men present in the inn when Mary tries to persuade Morgan to leave.

In many ways, Morgan portrays the fulfilment of these destructive fantasies, while Slade only articulates them in an impending stage. Slade's is a polyvalent role: on the one hand, he represents the upwardly mobile entrepreneur keen on and successful at improving his social standing, while facing diffuse and insufficiently articulated pressures and demands from the family. But he also serves as the personification of alcohol and its destructive force. What perspires in this nearly metaphorical transfer of meaning is that middle-class upward mobility and the prioritizing of the trade of consumption goods are detrimental to the ideal of a production-oriented economy and the mechanic class that stands for it. Quite clearly marked as morally superior, the production of goods is shown to be derided and destroyed by those representing trade and alcohol.

And it is precisely those latter classes that are shown to cling to the ide-

al of the nuclear family. Particularly the idealized descriptions of Slade's family life in the very beginning of his acquaintance with Romaine draw attention to this link. *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* makes this association particularly clear by portraying Slade's family as having specific functions in the inn. The business is dependent on the labour of family members – a structure which might not differ from the organisation of labour on farms or indeed mills, but which still evokes a sense of danger in the face of the character of goods traded. The narrative of this association between trading upwardly mobile middle-class males and the nuclear family as it is constructed in *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* contains a revealing ending in Slade's case. The fact that his proximity to alcohol finally casts his son, Frank, into addiction, promising though he is as a youth, shows that the presented structure of the middle-class nuclear family is detrimental to children. But the much more fatal end seen by the senior Slade, finally killed by his son, reveals that the nuclear family structure is fundamentally opposed to male interests.

The exposition of *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* also introduces some significant messages by the mere sequence of characters and topics they introduce. One such message seems to be that the presence of the nuclear family, either in character or in discourse, is followed by some form of strife. After the conversation with the nostalgic and cautious Mrs. Slade, Simon feels depressed and seeks to remedy this condition with a drink. And after Mary Morgan makes her appearance and mentions in both speech and song her mother, who is worried to tears and alone at home, thus managing to take her father away with her, a fight between the remaining party of men breaks out, caused by a disagreement over how to best respond to Morgan's disruptive presence in the tavern in the future.

Mary's death, however, starts Joe Morgan off on a path of righteousness and enables a final state of marital bliss. Years after the fatal incident, the audience receives a glimpse of Morgan's life:

MORGAN Dear wife – have I not faithfully kept the promise given to our angel child?

MRS. MORGAN Yes, you have, and the years that have passed since she was taken from us have rolled by like some sweet dream, adding every day some new joy to our happy home.

(5.4)

Clearly, these words are meant to signal Morgan's success at following the narrative of improvement and using the traumatic moment of his child's death as a pivotal experience to escape the addiction. The particular phrasing, however, with the markers of time and the choice of positively marked nouns such as "sweet dream," "new joy," and "happy home" seem to con-

nect the child's departure and the ensuing happiness in an almost causal, not merely temporal way, on account of the repetition and strength of the upbeat depiction of the time after the child's death. One would expect at least a minor degree of sadness when faced with characters thinking of that traumatic an event; yet no trace of sadness can be found in either Morgan's or his wife's presentation in this instance. Once again, the destructive urge is contained and not even reprimanded, as the destruction itself was not administered by the protagonist directly. The disruption of the nuclear family through the death of the child, it seems, can thus function as the hallmark of marital happiness in *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room*.

Unmasking Deceptive Temperance Virtues

However, not only the scenes depicting direct interaction between husbands and wives, fathers and children suggest the fundamental unease with and ambivalence toward the family structure and its concomitant obligations in general to be encoded in the message of the plays. In *The Dunkard*, the same unease and ambivalence are encoded into one specific though peripheral character called Patience. Its synopsis, published together with the play text, describes this character by stating that “[f]litting in and out, like a bird of ill-omen, is a conceited spinster, PATIENCE, who is sharp-set for a breach of marriage suit against any specimen of the male gender. She occasions much fun – relieving the sombre shades of the very affecting drama” (Smith 1844: 3).

Patience is clearly intended as a laughing stock. Yet the fact that the ridicule is here connected to what appears to be the hyperbolic urge to contract matrimony appears as ambivalent messaging in the context of the play. The play boasts a character whose main objective is the illegitimate and cunning tricking and pressuring of men into marriages that they clearly do not want. If marriage and the starting of a family are clear indicators of middle-class respectability, the presence of a character who constantly reminds the audience of a scenario in which that estate is the result of fraud and deception seems ironic, if not outright inconsistent with the purported agenda of the play of fortifying and glorifying those very features of middle-class life. The scenario invoked by the presence and particular construction of Patience as a character implies that marriage is desirable for women, but potentially harmful for men. In some ways, this putative scenario resonates with Edward's proclamation of freedom in the second act upon disentangling himself from his family and commanding his wife not to refer to him as “husband”. While this scenario is clearly marked as preposterous and this character's inept endeavours at carrying it out foster

the comic relief referred to in the play's synopsis, a certain resonance with Edward's energetic escape and his declaration of freedom in the second act cannot but at least insinuate itself.

In that manner, Patience's status as a laughing-stock character derives its intensity from the awareness of a subtle inconsistency in encoding a message that professes to affirm family and middle-class values. In a sense, Patience represents the incorporation of an oppositional impulse of making meaning of marriage. The process of incorporation has rendered the initially oppositional message as the object of ridicule in a hegemonically structured context, but it has not bereft it completely of its destabilising potential, thereby allowing a highly ambivalent construction of a peripheral character. As Fiske has been shown to argue, the potential for destabilisation has been contained through ridicule and marginalisation, but at the same time the issue at hand, namely the dissatisfaction with the hegemonic nuclear family structure and the nature of marriage, is not entirely obliterated from view. Negative though the character may be represented, Patience still contains some of the original oppositional vestige of dissent, and therefore acknowledges, rather than thwarts, potential dissenting impulses in the audience.

The often-noted circumstance that *The Drunkard* employs telling and highly emblematic and evocative names bears some repeating when it comes to regarding the character of the spinster. Much has been made of the symbolic import of Edward's surname, Middleton, and its apparent function to categorize the protagonist as a representative of the middle class and its corresponding values. In a similar manner, William's surname, Downton, classifies him as aligned with the sturdier working class and marks him as Edward's adjutant, who necessarily occupies a lower social position than the protagonist. Mary's Biblical first name implicitly references her purity and glorified maternity, the benefactor Rencelaw's name's last syllable invokes justice and order, and the villain Cribb is but one letter "b" away from being called a cheat directly.

The name of the spinster who continuously endeavours to entangle males in a breach-of-engagement suit is no less telling in that respect, but possesses, in contrast to the others, a highly ironic quality. As said, her name is Patience, which alludes to socially accepted, valorised expectations and values. These, however, are ridiculed in the play along with the character that allegorically stands for them, bearing the telling name. That name invites the audience to find different interpretations for its relation to her attempted course of action. Her presence seems to constitute a negative comment on the quality of patience itself: pursuing the goal of getting married is certainly discursively connected to that quality for the middle-class woman of the Antebellum. Barbara Welter's eminently famous canon of

the four core features of purity, piety, domesticity, and submissiveness constituting “The Cult of True Womanhood” (1966) of the time certainly would not chafe against its expansion by the quality of patience. This quality and the uncomplaining passivity that it connotes is likewise consistent with the “physical leisure and spiritual nurturing in the home” (Newbury 1995: 691) that normative femininity increasingly entailed as it differentiated itself from the normative ambit of the antebellum middle-class male, whose “professional work was not only the crucial sign of his social status but also a sign of the stature and well-being of his family” (684). Yet that quality is here represented not as consistent with a normative femininity to be extolled, but with a cunning and scheming, while fundamentally inept, disposition. In that manner, the apparent invocation of normative femininity through the character of the inept impostor can prompt a destabilising reading of the unequal distribution of socio-economic outside stressors and pressures on husbands and wives in middle-class married couples.

On a phonetic level, some assonance between ‘patience’ and ‘temperance’ infuses the character with even more potential for self-reflexive irony and ambivalence. The homophonous suffixes, the etymological similarity as well as the correspondence in meaning of these two conceptually adjacent nouns that both refer to commonly positively connoted strengths of character render inferring some form of ironic, self-referential comment fairly uncomplicated. What further adds to the association of this character with temperance is the sole fact of her gender. As is commonly noted in the research on the many reform movements of the antebellum period, temperance activism grew to become a sphere of increasing female agency and influence, as its professed goals did not contradict the norms of domestic femininity centred around the wellbeing of the family (e. g. Dannenbaum 1981: 236; Alexander 1988: 764). With the assonance and the membership of temperance in mind, such an ironic and self-referential comment could postulate that to incorporate Patience is to implicitly concede that the play’s apparent project at hand, namely to imbue the audience with a fervour for resisting destructive temptations for the sake of family values and a rigorous work ethic, is indeed as deceptive, inelegant, and graceless as the character that bears the name of a quality that stands in connection with the movement of which the play is a part.

Such plays on names that invoke the values of the temperance movement are not rare. In *Fifteen Years of a Drunkard’s Life*, the protagonist’s wife Alicia and his sister appear dressed up as such virtues on the occasion of a fancy-dress ball, the former choosing ‘Temperance’ and the latter ‘Prudence’ (see below). The protagonist’s reaction to such masquerade clearly conveys the underlying tension under which he feels placed by the females of his family, and foreshadows the impending though impermanent rift:

VERNON Oh, sisters! Prudence and Temperance – well, my fair ladies, these are virtues I have been between all my life, but could never yet come over to either of them. Adieu!
(1.5)

The aspect of masquerade seems to add a component of reproach, suggesting that women adopt such personae to exercise a certain power and pressure over men, which in the context of the play is mostly of an economic nature. The scene in which Alicia confronts Vernon about his inability to provide for her and reports that she had to pawn her wedding ring in order to supply the family with food is a case in point. Upon receiving this information, Vernon is shocked and swears to forego alcohol. In their embrace of reconciliation, Alicia inadvertently drops a full purse, which reveals to Vernon that he has not been told the truth but manipulated instead. Just as Alicia tries to explain, Vernon interrupts her:

VERNON Not a word – ‘tis all explained. The wife would reclaim the truant husband; and with a subtle story lure him back again to home and obedience. You had no money?
(2.1)

The association of “home” and “obedience” shows that the family structure proves coercive for Vernon and that he understands the appeals to his role as a provider to be first and foremost ploys to ensure his subjection to his wife’s interests and culturally enshrined moral and disciplining superiority. This association therefore amounts to an excorporating unmasking of ‘Prudence’ and ‘Temperance’ as ideological tools to fortify a certain structure of socio-cultural organisation that may outwardly boast patriarchal power, but nonetheless puts men under pressures they are unwilling and unable to bear.

In stark contradistinction to these family relations are the relations between men that form around alcohol and the spaces dedicated to its consumption in *Fifteen Years of a Drunkard’s Life*. In addition to the aforementioned quality of the inn as a space of male happiness, it further becomes the space of male solidarity in this play, as it is the Landlord who furnishes the returned drunkard Copsewood with shelter, in spite of knowing of his failures. The words with which he offers Copsewood a place are particularly expressive of that attitude of mutual understanding and support and the awareness of outward pressures:

LANDLORD Yes. I like prudence, and have practiced it – but not that cold and calculating foresight which you, and rightly, too, condemn. You may have done wrong once. Well, show me the man that has not,

and let him tell you to starve on the highway – I have committed many an error, and have no right to say so, nor will I.

(3.2)

Copsewood's gratitude-induced sobriety lasts barely into the next scene and does not break with the general portrayal of alcohol-related professions as detrimental to health and respectability. Nonetheless, the Landlord's benevolence does betray a deeper understanding and sympathy than is portrayed to operate between family members. Especially his reference to "prudence" seems to take up the aforementioned play on names and implicitly reference Alicia's persona during the masquerade. By implication, the characters that personify the virtue of "prudence" are classed as representative of a "cold and calculating foresight" – a description which does not stand in conflict with the ruse employed by Alicia to persuade Vernon to quit drinking. While she is still convincingly portrayed to be motivated by a concern for Vernon's well being, there is still an aspect of a manipulative intent, which is very strongly felt by her husband. In this manner, and mirroring the use of names in *The Drunkard*, the virtues associated with temperance and the characters that personify them are cast as agents of coercion.

Conclusion: Tempering the Destructive Impulse

To conclude it can be said that temperance drama sets out to advocate certain kinds of impulse control and disciplines. However, the practices in question do not solely pertain to the consumption of alcohol, and the shaping of social practices does not only aim at curtailing this consumption. The social practices at stake here pertain to the markers of antebellum middle-class status, most prominently family life. And the analyzed narrative structures and character constructions are not used to present an image worth of emulation, nor to construct images capable of deterring from the vilified practice of alcohol abuse. Much rather, they are used to construct an opportunity to vicariously experience that which is overtly represented as reprehensible. This opportunity provides the viewers with a space that establishes itself in the process of viewing to fulfil the same stages of the destruction of family life completed by the protagonist. In this manner, temperance operationalises drama for the purposes of social control through ex- and incorporating processes for the containment of antisocial, destructive urges.

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