

## **Alcoholism and Alcoholics Anonymous in U.S. Films, 1945-1962: The Party Ends for the "Wet Generations"**

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**ABSTRACT.** *At least 34 Hollywood films were made between The Lost Weekend and Days of Wine and Roses with an alcoholic as a major character; six depicted an Alcoholics Anonymous-like self-help organization. Presentations of alcoholism's origin as mysterious competed with psychodynamic interpretations and situational explanations, often in the same film and sometimes concerning the same character. As paths to recovery, willpower and mutual help were each frequently shown, while neither professional treatment nor AA's spiritual side were often shown. For the women alcoholics (17 of 39 depicted), drinking went with sexuality, while for men it replaced it. "Creative" occupations were hugely overrepresented among screen alcoholics, in part reflecting the personal struggles with drinking of the movies' creators. These writers, actors and directors were drawn from the "wet generations" of middle-class youth, who had adopted heavy drinking in their college years as a generational revolt against "Victorian morality". It is shown that Alcoholics Anonymous was founded and peopled by members of the same cohorts as a generational solution to their eventual life-problems. The flurry of alcoholism films represented a parallel and overlapping generational response.*

### INTRODUCTION

Between 1945 and 1962, at least 34 Hollywood movies were made in which one or more major characters were marked by inebriety, that is, with their drunkenness presented as a continuing and defining character trait (Table 1). While normalized drinking and drunkenness episodes were quite common throughout the corpus of Hollywood films in this period, what distinguishes the films listed in Table 1 is that the character's drinking was presented as a chronic problem, as a major character defect, and usually as a problem with which the character self-consciously struggled. In short, broadly speaking the characters in question are presented as alcoholics, to use the terminology which was coming into widespread use in American society during this same period. (Concerning the growing acceptance of the alcoholism terminology in this period, see Room, 1983, pp. 69-70.)

The presentation of inebriety on the screen was certainly not a new phenomenon in the postwar period. Temperance melodramas had been an important genre of American films in the early years of the cinema (Silverman, 1979), and they continued to be made until the early 1930s (Herd and Room, 1982). Many of the conventions of the temperance melodramas -- for instance,

the stock scene of delirium tremens, and the ever-faithful wife -- were in fact carried over into the alcoholism films of the postwar period. Inebriety was also portrayed in the films of the 1930s, notably including the prewar versions of A Star Is Born. The Lost Weekend, however, can be taken as initiating a new era of films influenced by the alcoholism movement. Days of Wine and Roses marks a convenient end-point; after this, alcoholism stories became until recently more the province of television than of films. This transition was already underway by 1960: Days of Wine and Roses itself was adapted from a television drama.

As we will argue, the films we are considering were not made only for commercial reasons. Often, indeed, they pushed against the tide of the film world's expectations. The Lost Weekend was held on the shelf for a while after it was made, and attained a greater critical than commercial success. Many of the other films fared much worse both commercially and critically. With some exceptions -- such as The Lost Weekend and Notorious -- most of the films under consideration received lukewarm reviews in The New York Times (New York Times Film Reviews, 1970). Many were seen as being depressing, and often the reviewer gave them the mixed blessing of finding them edifying. The Lost Weekend was a film "which every adult movie-goer should see", but which could not be recommended "for a gay evening on the town"; The Voice in the Mirror stood "firm as a good, small sermon on a large problem". Reviews occasionally reacted strongly against what was seen as sermonizing, invoking the memory of the melodramas of the temperance era: Smash-Up had "more resemblance to 'The Drunkard' of ancient memory than to the best film of 1945" (i.e., The Lost Weekend); Come Fill the Cup was a "tongue-parching temperance tale"; "we shudderingly watch" the protagonists in Days of Wine and Roses "suffer, we do not really suffer with them. They are impressive performers in a temperance play, and in the background one senses the tinkle of 'Father, Dear Father, Come Home To Me Now'."

In common with American culture generally, the alcoholism films of this era were influenced by two related but separate efforts to secure humane treatment for the alcoholic. One effort was that of the publicly-oriented alcoholism movement, which traces its history back to an unusual alliance of scholar-entrepreneurs and ex-alcoholics with public relations expertise at the Yale Center for Alcohol Studies in the mid-1940s. Through what eventually became the National Council on Alcoholism (NCA), this movement had a large influence on public perceptions of alcohol problems, particularly in securing at least lip-service to its first principle, that "alcoholism is a disease" (Room, 1982). The other effort was Alcoholics Anonymous, a self-help group which grew by leaps and bounds in the 1940s. We know that the leaders of what became the NCA, galvanized by the success of Lost Weekend, took on substantial advisory roles in the making of Smash-Up (Johnson, 1973, pp. 282-283.) By the nature of the organization, AA's direct influence was less visible. Yet, as discussed below, it is clear that many people involved in making films listed in Table 1 had had experience as Alcoholics Anonymous members, and drew on that experience in writing or making the pictures.

This paper starts from a consideration of the varying representations of alcoholism and the alcoholic in these films of the first 15 years or so after the end of World War II. As we will show, there was considerable divergence in the presentation of alcoholism; in particular, the message on alcoholism that they presented to American society often strayed quite far from the images which Alcoholics Anonymous or the National Council on Alcoholism would have preferred. We then consider some common themes in the portrayal of alcoholism which recur across the range of representations. Lastly, the efflorescence of alcoholism films in this period is considered as a

generational phenomenon, reflecting the life experiences of middle class youth generations of the 1920s and 1930s. It is argued that, in a development that is both parallel and overlapping, Alcoholics Anonymous itself can be seen as having emerged as a generational solution of these "wet generations" to the problems eventually posed by their drinking histories.

## METHODS

The corpus of 34 films listed in Table 1 was arrived at by accretion. No standard source has yet appeared for film plots of the 1940s and 1950s, and the film literature has paid relatively little attention to alcohol dimensions in films. Starting from listings in Cook and Lewington (1979) and Johnson (1973), the file was built up over several years from such sources as friends' recommendations and logs of movie reruns on television. The list is thus unlikely to be complete, particularly for films in which a character's alcoholism is an important plot premise, but is not the central focus of the story (as in Key Largo or Razor's Edge). There are a number of issues of boundary definition in drawing up such a list. Under Capricorn might be excluded as more British than American, or conversely Edward, My Son (1949) might be included. Perhaps the role of the drunken school caretaker is crucial enough that Peyton Place (1957) should have been included. In principle, a criterion for inclusion was that the character's drinking be a problem; but this begs the question, "for whom?" -- the drinking may be a problem for another character but not in the film's overall perspective. Perhaps arbitrarily, Harvey and The Sun Also Rises were included on the list, while The African Queen (1951) and A Tree Grows in Brooklyn (1945) were not. Similarly, Sarah's drinking in The Hustler goes on the list, while Eddie's does not, even though another character calls him a "loser" in part because he doesn't "know how to drink".

This analysis draws on viewings of 25 of the listed films, and on such secondary materials as contemporary reviews in The New York Times and elsewhere, and more general film reviews and criticism. Detailed notes were taken during the viewing of each film, focusing on dialogue about drinking, drunkenness and alcoholism and their motivations, and the role of such aspects of drinking in the action, plot and characterization. The quotations from dialogue given here based on these notes. Soon after the viewing, analytical notes were written on each film. The methodology is thus neither that of literary analysis nor of quantitative content analysis, but might be described as applying to prepared cultural products the observational methods of qualitative sociology and anthropology. The analysis grows out of an informal collaborative project on alcohol in U.S. films (Herd and Room, 1982; Herd, 1986; Room, 1983.)<sup>1</sup>

## ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS IN THE FILMS: THE VOICE IN THE MIRROR

In six of the movies listed in Table 1, Alcoholics Anonymous is a visible presence -- Come Fill the Cup, Come Back Little Sheba, Something to Live for, I'll Cry Tomorrow, The Voice in the Mirror and Days of Wine and Roses. The hallmark of an AA-influenced movie, indeed, seems to be the presence of a recovering alcoholic doing his (it is always a male) "twelfth-step" work. We might surmise that the AA tradition of "drunks helping drunks" is so intrinsic to an AA-oriented presentation of recovery from alcoholism, and yet so far from usual Hollywood plot conventions,

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<sup>1</sup>See also: Robin Room, "Shifting Perspectives on Drinking: Alcohol Portrayals in American Films", presented at a colloquium on "Représentations de l'alcool et de l'alcoolisme dans le cinéma français", June 6-7, 1983, Paris, France; pp. 14-15. On website: <http://www.bks.no/alcofilm.htm>

that it can be used as a marker of direct AA influence. (One solution to the problem of how to fit 12th-step work into the plot was to have it be the vehicle of boy-meets-girl, as in I'll Cry Tomorrow. In the real world of AA, it is clear that such cross-gender twelfth-stepping was discouraged as potentially disruptive.)

Perhaps the film with the closest and most detailed ties to the AA worldview is The Voice in the Mirror, an unpretentious movie which slipped into distribution in 1958 as a second feature on double bills. The intertitle at the opening telegraphs the story line: "this is the true account of an overwhelming terror and one man's struggle to survive it". The story of the downward slide and of the painful recovery of a commercial artist, Jim (Richard Egan), is organized around his role as a link in a chain of "drunks helping drunks". Near the beginning of the film, as Jim is released from the drunk tank, a trumpet player who managed "20 months on the wagon" talks to him of a "way for staying sober": that a "fellow in New York's got a hunch", a method that includes "admitting you're licked -- and trying to get some spiritual help". But Jim's drinking continues: he is warned by his doctor about neurological damage, quits a new job, steals from his faithful and longsuffering wife Ellen (Julie London) and from a coworker, escapes from Ellen and his doctor (Walter Matthau) as they try to commit him to a neuropsychiatric clinic after he suffers hallucinations. In a mission dormitory, he remembers the trumpet player, and asks the custodian "how do you go about arranging" for spiritual help. "Haven't you ever prayed, brother?", asks the custodian, as he leads him through the Lord's Prayer. In his search for the trumpet player, Jim encounters Bill (Arthur O'Connell) in a bar, an alcoholic who left his hometown, his family, and his job as a schoolteacher behind 14 years before. They talk over the trumpet player's message, and Jim takes Bill home to sleep off his drunkenness on the couch. Ellen is not thrilled at Bill's arrival -- "I can just shoot you" -- but Jim tries to explain to her his spiritual experience "without sounding crazy":

we were both in the same boat -- we talked the same language; it wasn't some doctor or minister talking about drinking, it was a couple of drunks. And while we were talking, I got the feeling that if this poor coot could stay sober for a while, maybe I could. And if I could, well, maybe he could. . . . It didn't work too well for him, and tomorrow it might not work for me, but tonight I feel like someone lifted a hundred pound rock off of my neck. I feel like old times.

Jim and Ellen end the conversation with some sexually-oriented badinage. Ellen comments that "your mind's been on other things", but in the end she withdraws from him. The theme comes up again when Ellen bristles at banter from the family doctor about "how do you suppose it's going to feel to have a husband around the house?". In a later scene, she apologizes to Jim and they kiss with passion.

Meanwhile, Jim gets a job doing store-window painting and devotes himself with Bill to seeking out and trying to recruit other drunks to his incipient AA-like group, speaking at a soup kitchen and to the inmates of a drunk tank, talking to small groups on the street, calling on a woman in the hospital, picking up old men off skid row and from the police. To a young "kid" in his 20s who has mocked him, but now seeks his help after his first time in the drunk tank, Jim starts to expound, "well, you have a lot of first times coming -- first blackout, first convulsion, first DTs, first time your stomach starts to . . ." before he is interrupted. Eventually his wife returns unexpectedly to find Jim holding a group meeting in their apartment; they are too much for her, and she dashes out to weep in the bedroom. A little self-righteously, Jim reproves her: "you know I've broken my back night after night, week after week, talking to hundreds to gather together. . . . They're so unsure of

themselves -- so afraid: one little spark and . . ." as he flicks his finger. Then, as the group files out, a distraught mother is at the door; her son "tried to kill himself tonight -- all because he couldn't live up to your rules." "I was only trying to help", Jim protests. "That's a mother's job -- who gave you the right to play God?"

Bill goes on a bender and wrecks Jim's and Ellen's apartment. "How much more, Jim?", Ellen asks. "No more, it's all over -- everyone can relax", he replies. "You were happier when I was a drunk, weren't you? You really were: you had a function, a reason for living. . . . You didn't have to be a wife, you could be a mother". Ellen cuts him off with a slap on the face, and Jim goes off to a bar and orders a drink -- "make it a double". He pours most of the drink down quickly, and the tension in his face collapses. "Do it again", and pours another double down. "Think I almost forgot how it felt to have that little pilot light." He doesn't have the money for the drinks, and has to leave as security the sexy slip he had bought earlier for Ellen, on an impulse. He walks home, passing by a bottle shop with difficulty.

At home, the trumpet player has shown up, and has had a long talk with Ellen. Now it's Jim's turn to be cynical, but Ellen says "I was blind before. The wife of an alcoholic gets mixed up, too. . . . Honey, can you just be patient with me?" As Jim softens, they agree that "maybe that's all you ever have to do, is to get by tonight". The film closes with an AA-like meeting, complete with the Serenity Prayer framed on the wall. It's 10 years later, and Ellen is in furs as Jim and she walk in to a standing ovation; we see Bill and many of the other characters of the film in the audience. Jim gives a speech for his anniversary of sobriety:

A few of us were lucky enough to stumble onto an idea -- but nobody owns that idea, and nobody has the right to stand up and take a bow. And in a way that's part of our strength: that all of us, all the hundreds of thousands of us all over the world, are just nameless alcoholics getting by because we realize we're all in the same boat -- none of us more than one drink away from the gutter, for the rest of our lives.

The film faithfully reflects the contemporaneous view of the world of Alcoholics Anonymous. Alcoholism is mysterious; no psychodynamic or other explanation of Jim's condition is offered, except the death of his three-year-old daughter, and, as his doctor notes, "Ellen lost a child too, but she didn't become a drunk". The medical profession is essentially powerless to deal with alcoholism. On the other hand, there's a strong emphasis on the physiological side of alcohol's effects, which can be ministered to by physicians: neurological damage, hard livers and soft heads, hallucinations and convulsions. The film is much gentler with doctors and jailers than many other alcoholism movies (Ritson, 1979): all social-handling agents are presented as good-humored, and there is no hint of sadism. Jim's doctor plays an ambiguous role: he snorts about Jim's "self-hypnosis" and "all this miraculous hocus-pocus", but when Ellen pleads that he not discourage him, he responds, "I never discourage him -- I only make him mad" -- and, indeed, Jim is presented as undertaking his mission to prove something to the doctor.

The film's handling of Jim's relations with his wife also fits the AA worldview of the time. She remains ever faithful, although their sexual relations have disappeared in Jim's drinking phase. But she has difficulties when he starts to "wear the pants" in the family again, and is jealous of the energy Jim puts into his AA-like group. The film does not pick up the tendency of the psychodynamic literature of the time to blame the wife for the husband's drinking (Jackson, 1954): Ellen is indeed pushed out of shape by Jim's recovery, but she is not blamed for his drinking.

Most of the key symptoms of the AA/Jellinek phaseology get picked up somewhere or

other in the movie, and, without a point being made of it, Jim moves through most of the 12 Steps of AA. Alcoholics Anonymous would also have approved of the presentation of Jim's overreaching pride in his successes with other alcoholics; his "slip" teaches him the humility of living "one day at a time".

Almost all the drinking in the movie is in bars. The world of the bar is presented quite positively; it's a world of wistful dreams, of laughter in the background, and of friendly (if businesslike) bartenders, with no hint of violence. The everpresentness of bars and liquor stores as temptations in the big city is repeatedly used in signalling Jim's cravings, but there is no moral loading against their presence. As in most of the AA-oriented movies, in fact (reflecting the practice of many AA members), Jim keeps a bottle of liquor at home: temptation is to be faced up to rather than avoided. The drinkers -- particularly Bill -- are soft-spoken, defeated but with some native dignity, perhaps a little effeminate when drinking. As Falk and Sulkunen (1983) noted of the portrayals in Finnish films, the world of drinking is a man's world, antithetic to sexual relations and with women kept apart from it. The most poignant expression of this in The Voice in the Mirror comes after a squabble between Ellen and Jim early in the movie, where she sits across the street at a bus stop watching him drinking in a bar. Drunkenness is mostly conveyed by staggering, by collapsing or passing out, by a narrowing of the mental focus, and of course by convulsions and other neurological signals. Except for a short hallucination sequence, the presentation is naturalistic, and without the scenery-chewing of such films as Days of Wine and Roses. Craving is presented both with music and with a visual presentation of the idea that alcoholics don't drink like other people: a reverent cradling of the drink in both hands, followed by a quick gulp. It is of course also implied by the lengths of self-humiliation involved in getting a drink.

#### MODELS AND EXPLANATIONS OF ALCOHOLISM

As we have seen, the motivation for the alcoholic's drinking in The Voice in the Mirror remains obscure. This is true for a number of the films in Table 1, reflecting the alcoholism movement's view that alcoholism was caused by a mysterious "predisposing X factor" which was presumptively physical (Jellinek, 1952). The failure to offer a motivation went against the grain both of the heavy psychodynamic and indeed Freudian emphasis in drama of the 1940s and 1950s, and of longstanding dramatic conventions which required that a motivation be supplied for a tragic flaw. Reviewers thus often complained of the lack of motivation for the drinking shown in the films. For instance, the Times reviewer felt that the "one weakness" of I'll Cry Tomorrow, "as a psychological study, at least -- is its failure to make it seem compulsory that the heroine should take to belting booze." Similarly, the reviewer of The Lost Weekend complained that "the reason for the 'dipso's' gnawing mania is not fully and convincingly explained."

Strong psychodynamic interpretations of alcoholism are common in the movies that were outside a direct AA influence. In some movies, indeed -- as in much psychiatric thinking at the time (Roizen, 1977) -- the heavy drinking serves as a mere symptom of an underlying character flaw dating back to inheritance or childhood. The weak son of a Southwest oil dynasty in Written on the Wind, for instance, "always drank too much". In Too Much, Too Soon, other characters complain about Diana Barrymore "chasing your father" long before she emulates his drinking in remorse at his death, and she is later described as a "bottle baby". Another alcoholic actor explains that Diana and he are no good for each other "because of what we are -- for people like us, drinking is just a symptom of something much deeper; for you, a need for love so fierce that you make people

prisoners trying to get it."

For Alicia Huberman (Ingrid Bergman) in Notorious, the motivation given for her heavy drinking and associated sexual looseness is implicitly psychodynamic: at the very beginning of the movie, that she drinks heavily and throws herself at Devlin are presented as linked aspects of a self-hate that derives from the fact that she is unable to distance herself from a father whose actions she despises. But the solution is situational: with her father's suicide and a new purpose in life, she is liberated from her problems.

Situational explanations of a character's alcoholism, in terms of a life event or a life situation, offer strong competition with psychodynamic interpretations of alcoholism in the movies under consideration. "Alcoholics are mostly disappointed men", says the chiropractor AA member in Come Back Little Sheba; he had had to give up his medical studies to marry a pregnant girlfriend who then miscarried. The heavy drinking of the central character in Ten North Frederick, Joe Chapin (Gary Cooper), is presented as precipitated by the ending of a promising political career following disclosure of his daughter's pregnancy, unsuitable marriage, and miscarriage. One of his political managers, asked where Joe has gone, answers that he's "Where I'd be -- off somewhere treating my wounds with alcohol". Subsequently, Joe's two law partners excuse to each other his "two double martinis before lunch" by talking of the number of blows he had had to absorb in the previous year -- including the "sneaky rabbit punch" of having turned 50. His grown children, describing Joe's ailment as "galloping despair", place much of the blame on their bitter and mean-tempered mother: "If only you'd shown him a little kindness . . .". In Joe's world, lives are tightly constrained by the network of family, business and small town ties, and heavy drinking becomes perhaps the most socially acceptable way of breaking out of these constraints. (For a discussion of alcoholism as "rattling the cage", see Ablon, 1980.)

Drawing on another recurrent theme, the heavy drinking of Helen Wright (Joan Crawford) in Humoresque is presented as resulting from the loneliness and purposelessness of the idle rich woman. "I was married twice before -- once at 16 and once at 21", she explains, adding: "it really takes the glint out of your eyes -- to see how you can club a man's wings down". "Why do you drink so much?", her violinist lover (John Garfield) asks, but she parries: "Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies". To his follow-up probe, "They say people who drink a lot are unhappy", she responds "Or are thirsty"; "Or are lonely" is his rejoinder. In thus explicitly rejecting a psychodynamic "out" for herself, Helen lays claim to being without illusions, even about herself: "I've got one virtue -- I've never lied to myself". In a theme which emerges also in other alcoholism films, her drinking is presented as related to this painful clarity of vision: "I never wanted to look as myself as I really was -- so I drank -- that was it, pure and simple".

The theme of situational anomie is sounded also concerning the singer in Smash-Up. When her husband's success and their affluent lifestyle leaves her without a function, a psychiatrist tells her husband, "With all the best intentions in the world, men like you make your wives idle, useless. You have taken all responsibility away from her. She lost you to your career. In despair she turned to this."

Often there is a psychodynamic tinge to the situational explanation. The actor's drinking in The Country Girl is attributed to his guilt about his son's death, as a result of which he "shuns any responsibility like the plague". Frequently, indeed, the rhetorics of motivation are mixed together for the same character. Having offered the husband in Smash-Up an explanation in terms of purposelessness, the psychiatrist continues, without a pause, "Your wife is the victim of a disease".

On the other hand, earlier the singer herself had explained to a maid, "when I used to drink in nightclubs" -- long before she was married and idle -- "I was so blamed scared I had to have two drinks just to go on". "What are you so scared of?" "I don't know -- just people, I suppose". As a counterpoint to the theme of disappointment noted above, the wife in Come Back Little Sheba explains to their roomer that her husband "was an only child and his mother thought the sun rose and set in him".

In films with two alcoholic characters, quite different rhetorics of motivation for drinking are often assigned to different characters. This is notably the case in two of the films directly influenced by AA, Come Fill the Cup and Days of Wine and Roses. The drinking of the main character of Come Fill the Cup, the hardbitten newsman Lew Marsh (James Cagney), is left without motivation. As his boss puts it in firing him at the opening of the movie, "why do you do it, Lew, why do you swill all that talent right down the drain?" Lew himself remarks that "a lush can always find a reason if he's thirsty". A cynical doctor at the city hospital softens and tells him, "you've an incurable disease -- alcoholism. Liquor is as poisonous to you as sugar is to a diabetic. The only sure-cure treatment is to quit."

The counterpoint is provided by the publisher's nephew, a "gifted . . . composer" with an unfinished concerto, who started drinking heavily two or three years after marrying the woman who had been Lew Marsh's old girlfriend. His mother watches over him devotedly, despite remonstrances by others that "you're smothering him". Reminding Marsh that he took him back when he sobered up, the publisher pressures him to take the nephew in hand, which Marsh reluctantly ends up doing ("you never stop paying for the bottle -- you pay and pay"). The nephew is portrayed as somewhat effeminate -- his term for being drunk is "I'm in a condition" -- and Marsh, with ample provocation, is insulting and rough with him. While Lew's world is entirely masculine, the nephew's drinking is tied up with his affair with a gangster's woman. His alcoholism is clearly attributed to his relation with his mother -- as his wife puts it, "I've seen Boyd sober before -- until his mother comes back from Europe."

In Days of Wine and Roses, the drinking of Joe (Jack Lemmon) is given little motivation, other than a touch of self-hate associated with his role in public relations -- "I want to be a PR man, not a pimp." Joe's AA sponsor, Jim (Jack Klugman), explains that alcoholism is "a lottery". He then likens it to getting hives from strawberries: "How many strawberries does it take to give you an allergy -- and which one gave you the hives?" The alcoholism of Joe's wife, Kirstie (Lee Remick), on the other hand, is discussed in terms of an addictive personality. In Jim's view, "you could have known from the fact that Kirstie was so addicted to chocolates" that she would become an alcoholic. "A psychologist could have told you that she had an addictive personality." There are also broad hints of incestuous longings on Kirstie's part; she comes in drunk to her father's bedroom while he is in bed, acting kittenish. The father, scandalized, manhandles her into a shower.

It is notable in Come Fill the Cup and Days of Wine and Roses -- and for that matter in Too Much, Too Soon -- that little motivation is offered for the sympathetic alcoholic's drinking, while psychodynamic motivations for drinking are associated with an unsympathetic alcoholic figure. The sense of mystery about motivations about which film reviewers often complained thus might be seen as lending itself to a sympathetic portrayal of the alcoholic character (see Alasuutari, 1986 for a related argument). Situational explanations also tend to be associated with a sympathetic presentation, although (as Joe's doctor notes in The Voice in the Mirror) they beg the question of why others don't respond in the same way. On the other hand, psychodynamic interpretations tend



to diminish the authority and authenticity of the character's actions. They also seem to be more associated with women or with men who are presented as somewhat feminized.

### THE PATH TO RECOVERY

The Voice in the Mirror is perhaps unique among films of the period in its fidelity to the Alcoholics Anonymous model of recovery. Other films influenced by AA tended to depart from the model in one or more ways. For instance, The Voice in the Mirror's unflinching presentation of the explicitly spiritual dimension of AA was rare. In Come Fill the Cup, the redemptive role is played by "angel feathers"; as Lew Marsh (James Cagney), the lead role in Come Fill the Cup, explains, "there's only one thing pulls a drunk up short -- that's the sound of angel feathers -- a peek into the void. We run away from life, but we run away from death, too." In Days of Wine and Roses, as in many movies, there is no mention of a religious aspect at all.

Though this aspect of the movie was little noted, Come Fill the Cup was apparently the first appearance on the screen of the AA theme of "drunks helping drunks". For the AA-oriented movies, of course, this was the prime path to recovery. Lew's path to sobriety follows a classic AA model. Befriended by a sober alcoholic, Lew moves in with him; five years later, Lew has worked his way up from lumper to city editor at his old paper. His 12th Step work is implied in his hiring of several alcoholics as reporters; when the editor complains that "this place is beginning to look like a branch of Alcoholics Anonymous -- we're crawling with ex-drunks", Lew responds, "when it comes to newspapermen, give me the reformed lush every time. . . . Work takes the place of liquor."

In Days of Wine and Roses, the route is explicitly contrasted with the main alternative offered in the films: that the alcoholic should conquer alcoholism by willpower, on his or her own. Kirstie's failure to attain sobriety is linked to her inability to ask for help from others: "I refuse to ask for help for something that's a matter of self-respect and willpower. I will not get up in front of a bunch of people and degrade myself. I'll use my willpower and not drink and that's the end of it."

A third alternative, of course, was professional treatment by a psychiatrist or other doctor or therapist, in a hospital or outpatient clinic. One of the main emphases of the Yale Center and the National Council on Alcoholism in the late 1940s and 1950s, in fact, was on getting states to set up networks of publicly-supported alcoholism clinics with professional treatment staffs, on the model of the outpatient Yale Plan Clinics opened in Connecticut in the mid-1940s. By the 1950s, such clinics could be found in many states (Henderson and Straus, 1952). But this effort failed to catch the imagination of Hollywood and found no reflection in the films. We have already noted Ritson's comment on the generally negative attitude towards medical treatment displayed in the alcoholism films. The main exception is the only film on which we know that leaders in the alcoholism movement -- Marty Mann and E.M. Jellinek -- played important advisory roles, Smash-Up. Dr. Lorenz (Carl Esmond), with a classic middle-European psychoanalytic demeanor, serves as the pedagogic voice of the film, explaining patiently to Angie and her husband that she has a disease and that he is partly responsible for it, and presiding benignly over the hopeful ending.

Otherwise, the alternative to AA was willpower. In a culture "which attributes morality, success, and respectability to the power of a disciplined will" (Lemert, 1951, p. 356), the idea that moral problems like alcoholism have to be solved by oneself using one's willpower is an old and deep theme -- one with which Alcoholics Anonymous waged a constant struggle in its daily work. AA's position at the time, reflected in some of the AA-oriented movies, made a careful distinction:

the drinker had to decide by himself or herself that he sincerely wanted to stop, but the process of stopping had to involve surrender, accepting help, and helping others; it was not something to be done by willpower and alone. But many film treatments simply fell back on willpower as the process of recovery, reflecting the deep themes in the culture, and also perhaps because of the moral worth imputed by such a single-handed triumph. The singleminded emphasis on willpower and self-therapy that started with The Lost Weekend continued into the 1950s. In The Country Girl, a character pontificates towards the end that "there are only two reasons why a drinker stops: he dies, or he decides to quit, all by himself", and the alcoholic tells his wife, "this is something I've got to work out for myself". At the end of Too Much, Too Soon, the actor portraying a professional writer (Gerold Frank, who also coauthored I'll Cry Tomorrow) comes to the hospital room to propose to Diana Barrymore that they write her autobiography together: "Maybe in reliving it you'll find the real reason why it all happened. . . . If you finish, . . . you'll have gone a long way towards straightening yourself out."

#### AMBIGUOUS RESOLUTIONS: HEROIC DECLINE OR GENTEEL DOMESTICATION

"We surely only have to be told that we are going to see a film about an alcoholic to know that it will be a tale either of sordid decline or of inspiring redemption", remarks Richard Dyer (1979). Dyer's comment, of course, epitomizes the conventions of the temperance melodrama which flourished on the stage and screen and in fiction for the 70 years before 1930 (Silverman, 1979). The common element in these melodramas was the depiction of the drunkard's progress downhill to the valley of despair. There were then two alternate endings: the path ended either in suicide, madness, or another "bad end", or in a redemption and restoration to the path of sobriety and the bosom of the family. Herd (1986) has shown that the second path was more common for leading characters marked by inebriety in the films of the 1920s.

The concept of the alcoholic promoted by the alcoholism movement of the 1940s and 1950s, as Levine (1978) has shown, owes much to temperance-era conceptions of inebriety. Similarly, the alcoholism movie of the postwar period drew heavily on temperance-melodrama conventions. But happy endings, as Herd has also shown, were no longer the rule. Concerning the alcoholic heroes in the films under consideration, it is not always clear that "the lowest common denominator of their heroism is that they should transcend their alcoholism" (Grant, 1979), and relatively uncommon for us to be sure that they will live happily ever after. In the films less influenced by the alcoholism movement, even sympathetically presented figures often come to a tragic end: thus Norman Maine's heroism in A Star Is Born is expressed by walking into the sea. Where the film ends positively, the resolution is often last-minute, like a last major chord in the music of the baroque, and usually tentative. We do not know what lies ahead beyond the good intentions of the hero of The Lost Weekend, or of Too Much, Too Soon, or of The Bottom of the Bottle: the future has to be taken, as AA counseled, "one day at a time".

For many of the alcoholic characters, the sober future often promises, in fact, a transition from colorful to colorless, from heroic excess to mundane constraint. This theme comes out most explicitly in Come Back Little Sheba, where the monotonous living out of a disappointed life with a well-meaning but twittering wife is broken for Doc Delaney only by the drama of a drinking episode. But the theme is also there in potential in other movies: if it is his drinking that elevates the hero of The Lost Weekend above his colorless brother, will the hero also become conventional in

his new life of sobriety? Over the positive resolutions of many of the films hangs an aura of genteel domestication that could hardly have seemed appealing to youthful audiences of the 1950s.

## GENDER, SEX AND ALCOHOLISM IN THE MOVIES

In their perceptive essay on "Women, Alcohol and the Screen", Judith Harwin and Shirley Otto (1979) start from the premise that "few films have been made about women alcoholics, many fewer than have been made about male alcoholics". But of the 39 major characters presented as active alcoholics in the films listed in Table 1, 17 are women. This is in fact an overrepresentation in comparison with the gender distribution of 5.5 males to every female alcoholic which was generally accepted for the U.S. at the time (Roizen and Milkes, 1980). Several factors might contribute to this relatively strong emphasis on women alcoholics. There may still have been some titillation value in showing a woman drinking, an apparent factor in the fascination with women's drinking in films of the late 1920s and 1930s (Room, 1988). Thus the Times review of Smash-Up talks of "the spectacle of much drinking by a lady" as a distinguishing mark of the film. As discussed below, the films portray quite a narrow class and lifestyle range, and the gender ratio of alcoholism they imply may have been quite realistic within that range.<sup>2</sup> The dramatic genres in which many of the alcoholism films were made may have tended to put them in the category of "women's pictures", pictures with strong female characters intended primarily for a female audience. And as Herd has discussed, the traits associated with alcoholism may also have been seen as more womanly than manly (Herd 1986).

The critical reaction in the New York Times to women alcoholics was somewhat more negative for women than for men, though they did not hew so explicitly as the British reviewers cited by Harwin and Otto (1979) to double standards about men's and women's drinking. The heroine of in Smash-Up is described as a "fallen sister" and as "sousing", the woman in Humoresque as "soused to the ears", the woman in Under Capricorn as "sozzled", the woman in Something to Live For as a "drunkard", the woman in I'll Cry Tomorrow as a "lush" who takes to "boozing", and the woman in Too Much, Too Soon as wading through "a river of alcohol". Apart from uses enclosed in distancing quotation marks in the review of The Lost Weekend, "lush", "drunkard" or "drunk" are applied to a man only in the reviews of Harvey and Beloved Infidel. Male heavy drinkers are otherwise variously described as a "boozer" (Harvey, Come Fill the Cup), as "taken to self-pity and drink" (The Country Girl), as "boozing and blubbering" (Written on the Wind), as a "flabby, tipling night owl" (The Joker Is Wild), and as a "sodden", "wild-drinking ruin" (Too Much, Too Soon).

Through the whole gamut of films in Table 1, there is a clear gender differentiation on the relation between drinking and sexual behavior. For women, drinking goes along with sex; for men, it replaces it. As a character in Humoresque puts it, explaining his remark that Helen Wright is "as

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<sup>2</sup>The results of the 1953 Portal House survey of known alcoholics in the city of Chicago, among other sources, suggest that the ratio of males to females was lower in more middle-class populations; the survey found sex ratios of 3:1 in private physicians' practices, 4:1 in social and family agencies, 6:1 in hospitals, and 11:1 for those with repeated arrests for drunkenness. See "Survey of Alcoholism", Chicago: Portal House of the Chicago Committee on Alcoholism, January 31 1955, pp. 20-34. Reflecting the overwhelmingly male composition of Alcoholics Anonymous in its early years, the 1939 edition of Alcoholics Anonymous included only one life-story of a woman. The 1955 edition moved to a gender balance close to that in Table 1: 26 men and 11 women.

complex as a Bach fugue", "she was born with a silver flask in her mouth. She's got a large alumni association". When Sophie reappears as an alcoholic in The Razor's Edge, she has acquired a heavy-lidded sensuality and describes her French "boyfriend" as "a sulky brute, but quite a man".

The connection of drinking with "easy virtue" for women draws on a much older theme in American culture. In films before the late 1920s, "any drinking by a woman is a sign of immorality, and a first drink is often an early signal of perdition. In this, the movies were substantially reflecting the society; certainly, in pre-Prohibition days, respectable women did not drink in public places" (Room, 1988; and see note 1 above). In their role as a major wetting agent in late-1920s America, the movies sometimes inverted this relationship: the virtuous daughter in Our Dancing Daughters (1928) turns out to be the one who drinks champagne with her parents, and not the ostentatious abstainer (Herd and Room, 1982). But the cultural convention remained strong: the assumption of immorality was simply transferred from drinking at all to the heavy drinker. Days of Wine and Roses exemplifies the double standard concerning the effects of alcohol. Kirstie's drinking bout sends her off to make advances to her father, while Joe is simply impelled out into the potting shed in search of more booze. No other women are involved in Joe's drinking bouts, while for Kirstie "there were lots of detours, but I never looked at them". Already drunk, Kirstie seduces Joe into a drinking bout with an explicit challenge to his manhood: "what did they do to you at that AA place, anyway? Aren't you a man any more? Can't you hear a woman calling to you? I don't want any of your mealy-mouthed, holier-than-thou boy scouts with cold feet, who don't have the guts to take a drink."

In Hitchcock's Notorious, cultural assumptions about the association of a woman's drinking with promiscuity are explicitly stated, although they are presented unsympathetically and are eventually undercut by the development of the plot. Devlin (Cary Grant), as the government agent assigned to recruit Alicia Huberman (Ingrid Bergman) as a U.S. agent, believes and repeatedly throws in Huberman's face that once a drunk is always a drunk, and that drunkenness in women is associated with promiscuity. In the affair they begin in the course of their assignment in Rio, her former drinking and presumed promiscuity become explicit issues: refusing "another drink", she comments, "Well, listen to me talk. I'm practically on the wagon." When Devlin comments, "you've been sober for eight days and as far as I know you have made no new conquests", she complains about his cop's mind with its assumption that "a woman like you can't ever change her spots". Then when it seems that their affair is only a "nice daydream", she says, "I think I will have another, then", and he comments, "I thought you'd get around to it". Defiantly, she responds, "Make it a double. Why won't you believe in me?"

Huberman's assignment involves marrying a fugitive Nazi. When her husband catches them at a champagne reception in the act of discovering his secrets, Devlin and Huberman cover themselves by feigning a boozy embrace. The Nazis eventually realize Huberman is an American agent and gradually feed her poison. Devlin, meeting her when she's already sick from the poison, mistakes her condition for a drinking relapse. Asking her if she's sick, Devlin responds to himself in a bitter tone, "no, a hangover", and adds: "Back to the bottle again, eh? You ought to take it easy on that liquor. You look all mushed up, you should take it easy."

While women alcoholics' drinking commonly carries sexual connotations, male alcoholics' drinking usually takes place alone or in male company -- although there is some change, reflecting trends in the society, between the male-only bar drinking usual in The Lost Weekend and the additional companionate home drinking in Days of Wine and Roses. The scenario of seduction in a

bar, with mixed-gender heavy drinking, played out in recent movies -- The Verdict, for instance -- is largely absent in the movies of the immediate postwar period. For the men, drinking replaces rather than causes sexual behavior. In movies showing the process of recovery, the attachments and process it entails also often compete with cross-gender relations: the hero of Come Fill the Cup shares a bachelor apartment with his AA-like sponsor, and, as we have seen, the hero's 12th Step efforts in The Voice in the Mirror come between him and his wife even more than his drinking had. It is only the domesticated and perhaps slightly effeminate ex-drunks -- the composer in Come Fill the Cup, the beaten-down hero of Come Back Little Sheba -- who end up keeping or getting the woman. Part of the redemption of the broken-down, dependent actor in The Country Girl is his declaration of independence from his wife: "This is something I've got to work out for myself -- with you or without you".

By and large, in their treatment of male alcoholics, the films of the postwar period kept the temperance-melodrama stereotype of the faithful woman who hangs on through the roller-coaster of her man's drinking. The movies of Table 1 are replete with women who "are just born suckers for men in trouble", as a character in The Voice in the Mirror puts it -- from the concerned career-woman fiancée of The Lost Weekend, through the composer's wife in Come Fill the Cup, who loves him and stands by him though she believes he will go back to drinking when his mother returns, and the faithful and loving wife of the jail escapee in The Bottom of the Bottle, to the longsuffering wife of The Voice in the Mirror. The counterpoint to this theme, of the woman driving a man to drink, also occasionally appears, most notably in Ten North Frederick and Come Back Little Sheba; again, in these movies it is notable that the wife endures whatever may come in the marriage. As in the larger society, the men married to alcoholics are more likely to leave -- for instance, the husbands in Smash-Up, in Ill Cry Tomorrow, and in Days of Wine and Roses.

The most evocative treatment of the theme of the faithful wife is in The Country Girl, which explicitly plays the dominating-wife motif against the theme of the patient helpmeet. For much of the film we are led along, with a sympathetic director -- who, it emerges, has had his own problems with women -- into attributing the wife responsibility for her husband's drinking. "The good strong helpmate", the director says sarcastically. "Did it ever occur to you that your strength might be the very reason he is weak? I don't like strong women, Mrs. Elgin. . . . You want him wholly and utterly dependent. . . . You do it in the name of love." Eventually, it comes out that the husband has systematically deceived the director, and the wife has been maligned. While she admits "an element of truth" in the accusation of "controlling his life", it has only been a response to his dependency. The husband, "getting older" and "beginning to slip", had found a "respectable excuse for failure" in heavy drinking after the death of his son.

## THE SOCIAL POSITION OF THE MOVIE ALCOHOLIC

Herd's analysis (1986) of the class and occupational status of characters with alcohol problems in U.S. movies of the 1920s and 1960s showed a strong disproportion of characters in "creative" occupations, such as writer, artist, actor or musician -- 19% in the 1920s and 24% in the 1960s. The disproportion is even more noticeable among the alcoholic major characters of the films listed in Table 1. Excluding the two films set in the 19th Century, 12 of the 21 males fall in the "creative" category of writer, journalist, artist, actor, singer or musician, as do 8 of the 16 females; none of these 37 characters, except perhaps the brother/escaped convict in The Bottom of the Bottle, is shown as having a working-class occupation. Again, we may suspect that several factors

lay behind this disproportionate emphasis. As Grant (1981) and others have remarked, there is a longstanding cultural association of heavy drinking with creativity and artistic occupations. Besides, a pronounced tilt towards portraying purported upper-class lifestyles, and glamorous occupations such as actor or singer, had long been a general feature of Hollywood movies.

But there was also a more proximate reason for the extreme emphasis on writing, acting and allied occupations in the alcoholism films of this period: the subject was highly topical among the creative community which was making the films. Their personal struggles with drinking or drug use must have lent a special poignancy to the participation in these films of such actors as Judy Garland (A Star Is Born) and Bing Crosby (The Country Girl). For many writers and for that matter actors, working on the book or screenplay was a form of self-therapy: we know that the authors of the original books or plays of The Lost Weekend, Come Fill the Cup, Come Back Little Sheba, I'll Cry Tomorrow and Too Much, Too Soon were drawing on their own experience as alcoholics, and it seems highly likely that this was true also for some other authors and screenwriters involved. Dorothy Parker, for instance, worked on the script of Smash-Up "with the hope that such a task might help her to overcome her drinking problems" (Johnson, 1973, p. 387). Others involved in making the films could draw on the heavy impact other people's drinking had had on their lives. After working with the heavy-drinking Raymond Chandler on Double Indemnity, a "wrecking experience" which forced him "to be in close contact with a man of talent and watch him disintegrating", Billy Wilder turned to The Lost Weekend -- in an effort, Maurice Zolotow (1977) believes, "to explain Raymond Chandler to himself". The family life of Charles Brackett, who co-wrote the screenplay with Wilder, had been deeply marked by alcoholism. His wife, according to Zolotow, "had lost control of her drinking during the 1930s". A daughter "perished after falling down a flight of stairs drunk. Her husband died in a fire in the Midwest. He also was passed out." Furthermore, Brackett had "been a friend of many alcoholic writers. He was the friend who was there to nurse them through hangovers or rescue them at the end of a spree. He had nursed Scott Fitzgerald and Robert Benchley through many drunken episodes. He had seen Dorothy Parker become a lost soul because she couldn't stop drinking", and had "nursed Dashiell Hammett through many of his drunks in Hollywood."

#### THE ALCOHOLISM FILM CYCLE AS A REFLECTION OF A GENERATIONAL EXPERIENCE

The conventional interpretation of the concentration of people with alcohol problems in the film community -- underscored, indeed, by films like A Star Is Born and Too Much, Too Soon -- focused on the special cultural position of Hollywood, already well established in the 1920s, as "a synonym of Sin", or, less judgementsally, as a place of "beautiful dazzling dreams", of "wild parties" and "excitement" (Anger, 1981). But there was also a more general cultural factor involved, I believe, in the efflorescence of alcoholism movies in the period of Table 1. Adopting Sulkunen's term (1979), I have written elsewhere of "wet generations" of middle-class youth in America, coming of age during and after the First World War (Room, 1984a, 1984b). In the vanguard were the bohemians, writers and other creative artists of the "lost generation", coming of age between about 1910 and 1920. Reacting against the pieties and conventions of Victorian middle-class family life, with many of their lives pulled out of accustomed orbits by the First World War, and with national Prohibition offering an archetypal symbol of the values and lifestyles they were rejecting, the avant-garde of this generation took to heavy drinking as "the symbol of a sacred cause" (Liebling,

1981, p. 667); for "intellectuals during prohibition, alcohol turned from being a mild aid to dining and conversation into almost a primary and constant necessity" (Sinclair, 1964, p. 331).

Through such media as Fitzgerald's early works, the lifestyles of this vanguard set an enormously attractive example for college students of the following college generations. Drawing on her analysis of college newspapers of the 1920s, Paula Fass (1977, pp. 316-317) has concluded that by the middle of the decade a new "subterranean ethic began to jell" by which "one drank to become drunk, or, failing that, to appear drunk. . . . In addition, one drank in the company of and together with women". An experienced collegiate temperance worker described patterns in the late 1920s and the 1930s in terms of a "college drinking epidemic" unprecedented in the previous century (Warner, 1970).

Writing in the early 1960s, Andrew Sinclair remarked concerning the cultural divide over alcohol in the 1920s that "posterity has sanctioned the rebels and repeal, not the defenders and prohibition". In terms of the world of creative arts, in terms of the mass media, and in terms more generally of American intellectual life, the repeal of prohibition signaled a near end for several decades to the national discussion of alcohol problems as an issue in the public arena. While alcohol questions maintained until fairly recently their status as a public issue in the South and prairie states, on a national level alcohol questions moved out of the public arena and became matters of purely private concern -- to use Gusfield's (1981) distinction. To bring attention to any public dimensions of alcohol issues, indeed, threatened one's credentials as progressive, forward-looking, urbane and cosmopolitan. The impulse towards "problem deflation" thus deeply affected the conceptualization of and attention to alcohol issues even in the scientific and public health literatures (Herd, 1992; Room, 1984c).

It is worth noting that the big shift in drinking mores was particularly a middle-class phenomenon, and was most notable in the Northeast, Midwest, and Pacific regions of the country. By raising the effective price, prohibition had greatly diminished working-class consumption (Warburton, 1932), and the Depression kept consumption among the poor low through the 1930s. John Dollard's description in 1945 of the "drinking mores of the social classes" in terms of a U-shaped curve, with a "strong taboo on drinking" in the lower-middle class, may have still applied in the small Southern towns where he had done his major fieldwork, but it was immediately challenged by a listener as inapplicable in Connecticut.<sup>3</sup> As a Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) staff member saw it in 1953, "there has been a breakdown in the middle classes. The upper classes have always used liquor. The lower classes have always used liquor. Now the middle class has taken over. The thing is slopping over from both sides" (Gusfield, 1962, p. 114). Along with the decline in middle-class commitment to temperance went a shift in the class location of temperance organizations; Gusfield (1955) has demonstrated that, as early as 1925, the proportion of local WCTU leaders whose husbands had working-class jobs had risen to 45%.

For the vanguard rebels coming of age in 1910-1920, and for the mass of middle-class youth coming of age at the end of the 1920s and the 1930s, the image and rhetoric of drinking and drunkenness was initially entirely tilted towards the positive. Mostly, the negative effects were ignored entirely; to take the negative effects seriously was to play into the hands of the cultural

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<sup>3</sup>See comment on p. 102 following Dollard, 1945. On class differences in drinking, see also Knupfer and Room, 1964; on regional differences in class patterns, see Room, 1972.

enemy. Furthermore, the only available rhetoric with which to talk of the negative effects of drinking was the discredited invective of the temperance movement. If negative effects were acknowledged, then, it was in the language of the temperance movement, but with an ironic and depreciating tone. Among drinkers, words like "drunk" and "lush" became ironic self-identifications, rather than stinging insults.

The gap between generations was in part a reaction against the "feminization" (Douglas, 1978) of middle-class mores which had taken place in the late 19th century. The reaction was pointed in two somewhat contradictory directions: towards a reassertion of male prerogatives against the claims of Victorian domestication, and towards a redefinition of gender roles away from highly segregated male and female spheres and toward the "companionate" couple. In terms of drinking, these themes found representation on the one hand in the image of the "two-fisted drinker", as might be played by Humphrey Bogart or James Cagney, and on the other in the woman joining the man in the cocktail lounge, as exemplified by the couple in The Thin Man.

As the members of the initial "wet generations" tried to play out these themes in their own lives, we may suspect many contradictions came to the surface. There was an obvious conflict between the machismo and male bonding of "two-fisted drinking" and the mixed-sex drinking of the companionate couple. But there were also contradictions resulting from the fact that people's emancipation from their upbringing was limited and imperfect. In particular, people were torn between the rigid gender roles of the Victorian middle-class family and the new ideals of the "career woman" and the companionate marriage, between the old expectation that a bad marriage would be endured and the new conviction that it should not. Breaking with the old expectations often proved to carry heavy loads of guilt. Lillian Rubin (1984) has described the same phenomenon in terms of the changes in gender roles of the 1970s; change, she writes,

comes slowly, meeting enormous resistance both inside us and in the system of social institutions that supports our society's mandates about femininity and masculinity -- about how a good woman lives, how a good man behaves. . . . Change generally outruns consciousness, and, for most of us, change in consciousness lags well behind the changing social norms, sometimes even behind changing personal behaviors. Indeed, always, no matter how revolutionary a period of change may seem on the surface, the old myths continue to whisper to us. Consciously derogated, unconsciously avoided and denied, they continue to speak with a power and persistence that will not be dismissed. Consequently, two contradictory systems of ideals lie within us -- the emerging one vying for dominance with the old one, new behaviors creating internal conflicts as they rub against obsolete but still living rules.

The trajectories of individual lives of these generations were also often buffeted by the great tides of history. Men born before 1900 experienced mobilization for the First World War. The middle-class affluence of the Twenties was succeeded suddenly by the privations of the Depression, which was in turn brought to a definite end only by another World War. In an environment whose changes could not be controlled, existing cultural values on self-reliance and self-control took on consummate importance, both as a practical strategy and as a symbolic surrogate for control of the external world.

#### ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS AS A GENERATIONAL SOLUTION

In the meantime, as they moved into middle age the members of the "wet generations" found



that their sustained heavy drinking becoming problematic for them. As a habit that carried built-in reinforcement, heavy drinking in the long run often wrought havoc on work and home life. The founding of Alcoholics Anonymous in 1935, and its emergence as a national movement around 1940, must be seen as the reaction of the initial wet generations to the predicament in which they found themselves. Table 2 shows the approximate birthdates (where these can be determined) of those contributing their life stories to the first and second editions of Alcoholics Anonymous, the main text of the movement. It will be seen that, for the first edition in 1939, the mean age of the contributors was about 45. When the stories of the "pioneers of AA" were self-consciously set off from others in the second edition of the book in 1955, they represented the same age cohort, by then at an average age of 60. It is interesting to note that the average age of those contributing the other stories to the second edition was only eight years younger. Alcoholics Anonymous was a creation, then, of the vanguard "wet generation", of those coming of age by the early 1920s, and its normative center at least through the mid-1950s seems to have remained in this generation. By 1955, the youngest members of this generation had turned 50.<sup>4</sup>

The approach and rhetoric of AA, as it was worked out in the late 1930s, was carefully attuned to the mind-set of members of the initial wet generation -- and, in particular, to the men of the generation. Part of the process of convincing a "pigeon" to join was a heavy emphasis on what two-fisted drinkers the recovering alcoholics in AA had been. As one pigeon put it in recounting his story, "I met men whose stories convinced me that in the ranks of men who had been heavy drinkers I was an amateur and a sissy" (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1946, p. 372). To appeal to the members of the generation, AA had to develop a language clearly differentiated from temperance rhetoric in which to talk of drinking and drinking problems. In dealing with the outside world and with potential "pigeons", the term "alcoholic" was a clear choice; its medical provenance underlined the major strategy of argument that the potential recruit had "a sickness, a fatal malady" which set him or her apart from the normal drinker. But in the internal dialogue, much of the language fell back again on temperance terminology, but used now with a double layer of irony, speaking of themselves to each other as "rummies" or "drunks", and talking of "going on" or "falling off the (water) wagon" (see, for example, pp. 118, 181 of Dr. Bob ..., 1980).

Since the Victorian middle-class moral system had been heavily entwined with institutional religion, part of the revolt of the wet generations had been against organized religion. While the heart of the Alcoholics Anonymous experience was religious, this aspect was kept non-institutionalized

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<sup>4</sup>The mean age of the 98 alcoholics who answered the Grapevine questionnaire analyzed by Jellinek in 1946 was 46 (assuming that the mean and median are reversed in Jellinek's table). Many in the sample must have been relatively new in AA -- only half were more than a year beyond their "lowest point". It is well recognized in the standard histories that AA went through an organizational crisis in the 1950s, usually discussed in terms of a battle over the form of governance of the movement. There are some hints that the crisis may also have been generational. Some AA pioneers were in favor of a "council of older members" controlling AA. Long before, in 1938, one of the founders is quoted as having initially rejected a potential recruit aged only 34: "'Impossible', he replied. 'He hasn't suffered enough. There's never been anyone that young come into the Fellowship and recover'" (Dr. Bob ..., 1980, pp. 321, 143). Per-capita AA membership in the U.S. actually dropped for a while in the 1950s, before resuming a steady growth (Leach and Norris, 1977, p. 448).

and was soft-pedaled and attenuated as far as possible. In this way an AA recruit could tiptoe through the minefield of the anti-clerical commitments of his or her youth while recapturing a sense of purpose beyond the individual ego. An early AA member, acknowledging that "there are many who feel a strong resentment against such a spiritual approach", found that "in my case I was ripe for such an opportunity, perhaps because of early religious training" (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1946, p. 361).

We may suspect that the interpretation offered by Alcoholics Anonymous also became an important way for its members to reconcile or deal with the conflict in norms on gender roles and family and work life between Victorian expectations and 1920s ideals. In their family and work lives, AA's members had gone through severe and often excruciating problems -- job loss, divorce, separation from their children, etc. Caught at the juncture of the Victorian and "modern" worldviews, the founding generation carried a heavy load of guilt, in a culture that emphasized personal responsibility and failure and discounted the effect on individual lives of structural factors such as the Depression. While its members had undoubtedly experienced severe and demoralizing problems with drinking, AA's ideology and practice offered a way of interpreting checkered pasts so as to deal with the burden of guilt. As AA's First Step put it, not only were its members "powerless over alcohol", but also "their lives had become unmanageable". Thus the alcoholism conception offered an account not only of their loss of control over drinking, but also of their failure to live up to expectations at work and at home.

## LOOKING BACK IN ANGUISH

By and large, those who made the movies listed in Table 1 came from the same vanguard wet generation as the founding cohort of Alcoholics Anonymous, or from the immediately succeeding generation. The efflorescence of alcoholism films in the U.S. in the immediate postwar years thus can be seen as in large part a generational phenomenon, reflecting the life experiences of the middle class youth generations of the 1920s and 1930s. In their youth, these generations had reacted decisively against the shibboleths of Victorian morality, taking drinking, and indeed heavy drinking, as a symbol of that revolt. For the youth generation of the 1920s, then, alcohol was an important commodity with tremendous symbolic power, but one which their cultural politics demanded be discussed in terms of private choices and styles rather than public issues and problems.

By the time they reached middle age, many members of these generations found themselves in trouble with their drinking, and struggled to control it through various means, including such social innovations as Alcoholics Anonymous. For writers and performers, the medium of struggle was often their art, in semi-autobiographic fiction and portrayals. Given the symbolic power their generations had attributed to alcohol, drinking also often served more general emblematic purposes; alongside the positive symbolization of cosmopolitan affluence and the insouciant good life, negative symbolizations reemerged, drawing on old cultural themes: of inebriety as a symbol of a life out of control, cut off from security and comfort, adrift on the tides of history.

The alcoholism movies of the postwar period, and especially those explicitly "about" alcoholism, represent, then, acts of homage to the struggles of these generations to understand and transcend the personal anguish many had experienced by middle age as they lived out the cultural commitments of their youth. The commitment on the part of those who made the movies seems to have been dual: working on the films, or the books and plays that underlay them, was often in itself a

medium to come to terms with personal histories; it was also a form of "12th Step" work, documenting the path to recovery and spreading the word to others. The words which were actually spread, however, had been processed through the wringer of commercial film production, and carried many conflicting messages.

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**Table 1. U.S. feature films, 1945-1962, with a major character marked by inebriety**

1945	<u>The Lost Weekend</u> * male writer
1946	<u>Notorious</u> * female playgirl/homemaker <u>The Razor's Edge</u> * female homemaker
1947	<u>Smash-Up</u> * female singer <u>Humoresque</u> * female society woman/homemaker
1948	<u>Key Largo</u> * female singer/"moll"
1949	<u>Under Capricorn</u> * female homemaker
1950	<u>Young Man with a Horn</u> male musician <u>Harvey</u> * male "at leisure" (comedy)
1951	<u>Come Fill the Cup</u> * male journalist, male playboy/composer (male AA-like) <u>Night into Morning</u> male college professor
1952	<u>Come Back Little Sheba</u> * male chiropractor (male AA) <u>Something to Live For</u> female actress (male AA)
1954	<u>The Country Girl</u> * male actor
1955	<u>Written on the Wind</u> * male dynasty heir <u>I'll Cry Tomorrow</u> female singer/actress (male AA) <u>Pete Kelly's Blues</u> * female singer/"moll"
1956	<u>The Bottom of the Bottle</u> * male escaped convict
1957	<u>A Star Is Born</u> * male actor <u>The Joker Is Wild</u> male comedian/singer <u>The Sun Also Rises</u> * female & male without occupation <u>The Buster Keaton Story</u> * male actor <u>The Helen Morgan Story</u> female singer
1958	<u>The Voice in the Mirror</u> * male commercial artist, male schoolteacher (male AA-like) <u>Too Much, Too Soon</u> * male actor, female actress/singer <u>Ten North Frederick</u> * male lawyer <u>Cat on a Hot Tin Roof</u> * male sports announcer
1959	<u>Beloved Infidel</u> male writer <u>Rio Bravo</u> male deputy sheriff
1960	<u>From the Terrace</u> * female homemaker
1961	<u>Back Street</u> * female homemaker <u>The Hustler</u> * Female on remittance/student
1962	<u>Sweet Bird of Youth</u> * female actress <u>Days of Wine and Roses</u> * male advertising executive, female secretary/homemaker (male AA)

\*viewed for this study

Note: The gender and occupation of the inebriate character(s) are noted. Characters in parentheses are recovering alcoholics who play an AA sponsor-like role.

**Table 2. Approximate Birthdates of Those Contributing Life Stories to the First and Second Editions of "Alcoholics Anonymous"**

<u>"Pioneers of AA"</u>	<u>First Edition (1939)</u>		<u>Second Edition (1955)</u>	
		<u>Other Stories</u>		
1879 x		x		
<b>1880</b>	x			
1882				x
1888 xx		x		
1889		x		
<b>1890</b>	x			
1891 x				
1893		x		
1895 x		x		
1896 xxxx		x		xx
1897 xxx				
1898				xx
1899		x		
<b>1900</b>	xxxx		xxx	x
1901 x				xx
1902				xx
1903				x
1904 x				xx
1906		x		
<b>1910</b>				
1914				x
1917				x
...				
1928				x
with determinable dates:				
20		12		16
mean birth year:				
1895		1895		1903
indeterminate birthdates:				
8		1		8

