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**A "REVERENCE FOR STRONG DRINK": THE LOST GENERATION  
AND THE ELEVATION OF ALCOHOL IN AMERICAN CULTURE**

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Alfred Kazin (1976/77), Marcus Grant (1981), Gore Vidal (1980), Donald Newlove (1981) and others have noted how many American literary greats were heavy drinkers -- and, indeed, often suffered for their drinking. Often this literary curiosity is interpreted as a general characteristic of cultural production, in terms of alcoholism as the "writer's disease" or more generally as an affliction of the especially creative. As Grant (1981) notes, "the presumption of a positive correlation between heavy drinking and high creative achievement has long been a feature both of the mythology of alcoholism and the mythology of creativity." Some explanations proffered for the link focus on the intrinsic loneliness of writing and some other artistic activities -- the loneliness is seen both as lending itself to solitary drinking and as leading to compensatory gemütlich drinking. Alternative explanations would emphasize alcohol's properties as a psychoactive drug, under the influence of which the writer or artist can envision an alternative reality or be opened to creative urges.

But such explanations would predict a high rate of literary or artistic drunkenness in any culture and time in which alcohol was generally available. And while lists of major writers with a "reputation for heavy drinking" or "alcoholism" include a sprinkling of names from a number of cultures and times, the lists are strongly clustered by place and time, "the largest single category probably being twentieth century American novelists" (Grant, 1981). In fact the clustering is even tighter than Grant implies. Chart 1 shows the American authors mentioned as having a reputation for drunkenness by Grant, Kazin or Newlove, arranged by their birthdate. Over one-half of the authors mentioned were born in the 13-year period 1888-1900. While there is undoubtedly considerable arbitrariness in such lists, and in particular writers born after the mid-1920s are likely to be underrepresented, there seems to be a clear association of problematic drunkenness not only with American writers but with a particular generational cohort which came of age in the years 1909-1921. Part of the explanation of the phenomenon of literary drunks, it would seem, must be sought in factors which would drive a particular literary generation to drink.

To the extent the generational clustering has been noticed, explanations of it tend to focus on the influence of the "roaring 20s". As Kazin (1976/77) puts it, "there are periods and occasions when drinking is in the air, even seems to be a moral necessity. The 20's marked the great changeover from the old rural and small-town America. It also marked the triumph in the marketplace of 'advanced', wholly 'modern' writers and books, ideas, and attitudes. They all entered into the big money and the big time at once." But the 1920s are a better explanation of the continuation of heavy drinking in this generation than of its inception. The quadrant of the population with the most frequent drunkenness nowadays is males aged 18-24 (Cahalan, Cisin and Crossley, 1969; Clark and Midanik, 1982) -- the college years and immediately afterward, for middle-class youth -- and it seems likely that the same was true early in the century. Certainly, biographies of the generation of writers under consideration support the proposition that most were embarked on a pattern of heavy drinking well before the advent of the 1920s. An explanation of their heavy drinking must attend as well to influences in the preceding decades.

There is some evidence that male students in college in the decade 1900-1910 were in general an especially heavy-drinking cohort, in an era when attitudes to drinking were increasingly politicized and polarized. Harry Warner, long involved in college temperance organizing efforts, wrote in 1938 that "by 1900 two deeply divergent trends were to be seen side by side in American college communities: one, a strong and increasing questioning of the place and value of alcoholic liquors in the community and in personal use, . . . and the other, a growing consciousness and attitude of defense of the traditional drinking privileges combined with efforts to retain support for the criticized customs" (1970, p. 47). While saloons were legislatively pushed farther and farther away from college campuses in the years after 1900, the majority of male students in the elite universities were drinkers -- one campus survey in 1903 reported that over 90% of students were drinkers, "that 35% drank heavily, and that 15% became drunkards" (Warner, 1970, p. 48).

But most of the literary generation with which we are concerned would have attended college in the decade 1910-1920. And in Warner's view, the college climate of that decade, and even of the Prohibition years up till 1928, was significantly dryer than the climate of the first decade of the century. At the University of Michigan, where the football captain ten years earlier had boasted "that I can drink my whole team under the table", a popular football player led a 1916 student abstinence movement (Warner, 1970, pp. 53-54). In 1912 University of California students voted over 4 to 1 to ban "use of intoxicants at any . . . social event given by any student organization". In 1915, Yale undergraduates, including "leading football, crew, newspaper, and senior class men", appealed to Yale alumni -- presumably notably including those from the previous college generation -- to eliminate "alcoholic indulgence at their own class celebrations at the University" (Warner, 1970, pp. 54-55). This theme was to be repeated in the following decade. In 1923 University of Illinois students voted to "petition alumni . . . to leave hip-pocket flasks home". An observer at a 1925 intercollegiate conference reported that the students there discussed "the problem of the bad effects of the Alumni when they came back for reunions, social events, and the big games. The average undergraduate is a more law-abiding citizen than the average father or older brother" (Warner, 1970, pp. 62, 65).

In her study of college student peer culture in the 1920s, the historian Paula Fass broadly concurs, on the basis of student newspaper reports, that there was a "dry" period among American college students in the early 1920s, although she sees there having been an initial period of defiance of Prohibition, between 1919 and about 1921, among male students. Fass also points to the

traditional nature of the norms surrounding college drinking in the first half of the decade: "there was a clear code of limitations on drinking that reflected traditional attitudes toward propriety in drinking. Thus, drinking at athletic events and with other men was permissible, but drinking at dances and in the presence of women was not" (1977, p. 316).

Those who were to become the literary greats of their generation thus appear to have been bucking the trend among their college classmates in embarking on heavy-drinking careers. We may suggest several possible reasons for this. By the time they came to maturity, temperance had become a majority sentiment in the country at large, and a sentiment associated by and large with conservative or reactionary political forces. Earlier in the nineteenth century, temperance had been associated with the major reform movements of the era -- for instance, the movement for abolition of slavery, and the movement for women's rights. Its original main population base had been the Congregationalist and other New England denominations. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the main population base for the temperance movement had shifted to fundamentalist and conservative Protestant denominations in the South and midwest. In the South, the movement had become identified with racism and with the maintenance of the Bourbon hegemony -- the dominant Southern politics of the time, quite against the factual evidence, invoked and played upon an association of blacks with drunkenness (Herd, 1983). In such a political climate, college students with vague liberal or radical political leanings were likely to come to regard visible drinking and drunkenness as an act of political dissent.

Students with literary or artistic pretensions would have been particularly likely to react against moral codes seen as reflecting conventional middle-class morality. It was a period when the idea of self-conscious identification as an artistic avant-garde was at its height (see Schücking, 1962) -- as epitomized by the New York Armory art show of 1913. Bohemian lifestyles and Dionysian actions helped to dramatize one's membership in a chosen artistic elite (see Erenburg, 1981, particularly p. 253).

Lastly, a number of the eminent members of the literary generation went to college at elite Eastern campuses. Warner notes that even during the "high-water mark in the college anti-liquor movement, there remained in the Eastern universities and colleges, those attended by young people from the so-called 'privileged' families and groups, drinking traditions which continued with little or no change" (1970, p. 56; see also Fass, 1977, p. 312). In 1915, a student at Harvard complained that abstainers were "excluded" from many social occasions "through an unwillingness to make themselves conspicuous by their abstinence" (Warner, 1970, p. 49). Fitzgerald and some other writers of the generation may well have seen heavy drinking as a means of identifying with their richer confreres.

After living through World War I as a cohort at prime military age, many of the writers in the generation returned or went to Paris as founding members of "the lost generation" -- those who, "like the characters in The Sun Also Rises, had been unable or unwilling to settle back into the routines of peacetime life" (Allan, 1977, p. 85). The term, popularized by Hemingway in the epigraph of The Sun Also Rises, came to be used to refer more generally to "young Americans abroad, particularly those with literary or artistic inclinations" (Allan, 1977, p.85). At least half of the authors shown on the chart who were born between 1885 and 1900 spent time in Paris in the 1920s. Allan's book refers to stays or visits by Sinclair Lewis, Robert Benchley, Dorothy Parker, e.e.cummings, F.Scott Fitzgerald, Hart Crane, Ernest Hemingway, and Thomas Wolfe. As Allan (p. 85) notes, "the city had a double attraction for writers. Its artistic reputation had never been

higher. It was the home of all that was most daringly modern. As Gertrude Stein used to say, Paris was where the twentieth century was. Secondly, it was also a city where Americans could live well on very little money", because of the high value of the dollar compared to the franc.

It is a workable hypothesis that the continuation of heavy drinking into adulthood among the literary members of the "lost generation" partially reflects the particular association of the generation with France. At the time, as indeed to this day, France had the highest recorded per-capita consumption of alcohol in the world. If the members of the generation had simply adopted French drinking styles, their overall alcohol consumption would have far exceeded American norms. But it seems rather that, like others encountering new cosmopolitan drinking styles (Bruun et al., 1975, pp. 56-59), they added the new styles and beverages onto their existing styles and preferences. Fitzgerald wrote that "they drank cocktails before meals like Americans, wines and brandies like Frenchmen, beer like Germans, whiskey-and-soda like the English" (Allan, 1977, p. 89).

But beyond these general influences of French culture and expatriation, there were other more particular French influences for an American writer in the 1920s that provided a supportive normative climate for heavy drinking. Baudelaire and the French Symbolist writers served as a precedent for a particular association of avant garde creativity with alcohol, among other drugs (see Peschel, 1974). The character who is O'Neill's own self-portrait in A Long Day's Journey into Night quotes Baudelaire's praise of drunkenness:

Be always drunken. Nothing else matters: that is the only question. If you would not feel the horrible burden of Time weighing on your shoulders and crushing you to the earth, be drunken continually. Drunken with what? With wine, with poetry, or with virtue, as you will. But be drunken. (Grecco, 1974)

More generally in French culture, 19th century political history had invested drinking with symbolic meanings which the "lost generation" would have found congenial. Susanna Barrows (1980) has shown that the cafés, as "the parliaments of the people", were viewed with great suspicion by conservative regimes throughout the 19th century, culminating in the MacMahon regime's vigorous suppression in the 1870s of the licenses of cafés suspected of political leanings. In reaction against this policy, the number of cafés -- and alcohol consumption levels -- rose steeply in the following years, but the MacMahon regime had inadvertently succeeded in turning drinking into a political act, a gesture of defiance of the forces of law and morality (Barrows, 1980). To some extent, drinking had become a ritualized expression of the autonomy of oneself and one's social group against the claims of the state and of official morality.

The residue of such attitudes in the French drinking culture would have had a particular significance for Americans in the 1920s. While, as noted above, it was not until the late 1920s that behavioral defiance of Prohibition became a general pattern for American middle-class youth, for writers of the "lost generation" drinking and drunkenness provided from early in the decade a clear demarcation between themselves and the "booboisie". Writing of his own youthful stint in Paris, A.J. Liebling (born 1904) commented that "people whose youth did not coincide with the twenties never had our reverence for strong drink. Older men knew liquor before it became the symbol of a sacred cause. Kids who began drinking after 1933 took it a matter of course. For us it was a self-righteous pleasure. . . . Drinking, we proved to ourselves our freedom as individuals and flouted Congress. . . . It was the only period during which a fellow could be smug and slopped concurrently" (Liebling, 1981, p. 667).

Recent work by Denise Herd points to another shift in the cultural position of alcohol in the

U.S. which had a general impact on middle-class American culture in the 1920s, but which may have struck American writers in Paris with particular force. We have already mentioned the alliance between temperance and racism in the postbellum South. In reaction, black leaders, who had been strongly identified with temperance in an earlier era, stopped talking about temperance in the late nineteenth century. As the great migration of Southern rural blacks to the Northern cities got under way in the early twentieth century, drinking changed its position in black culture to become a symbol of liberation and sophistication, closely associated with the rise of ragtime and jazz, of New York nightclubs and the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s (see Herd, 1985; Erenberg, 1981, pp. 250-259 *et passim*). In Paris, even more than among whites in the U.S., there was a great vogue for and fascination with black music, art, and nightclub revues (Allan, 1977, pp. 43-61).

In addition to these converging external supports for a career of heavy drinking, the American writers in Paris themselves provided a supportive environment by sustaining a subculture centering around alcohol and cafes.

The literary colony was based in Montparnasse, known familiarly as the Quarter. In the center of Montparnasse, then as now, lay the four large cafés that dominate the crossroads. . . . The Coupole and the Rotonde, the Dôme and the Sélect soon had international reputations. By 1925 critics of the older generation were using phrases like "the school of the Rotonde" to describe, usually disparagingly, a new undercurrent in American literature. The twenties' expatriates were . . . closely identified with these cafés. . . . The cafes were the stages on which the daily comedy of Montparnasse's literary life was played out. . . .

Drinking was an important part of the life style of the Quarter. (Allan, 1977, pp. 87, 89) William Carlos Williams (born 1883) later wrote that "whisky was to the imagination of the Paris of that time like milk to a baby" (Sinclair, 1964, p. 330). On the other hand, many members of the subculture were uneasily aware of the potential conflict between their work as writers and the camaraderie of the cafes. Cafe habitués like Harold Stearns and Robert McAlmon were seen as failures in their craft and pointed out to newcomers as warnings; one observer noted concerning McAlmon, "the drinks were always on him, and alas! often in him" (Allan, 1977, pp. 88, 91). Ezra Pound, who had moved to Paris in 1920 hoping to find there "a poetic serum to save English letters from postmature and American letters from premature suicide and decomposition", finally left for Italy in 1924 in part in disapproval of the heavy drinking (Allan, 1977, pp. 85, 89).

The Paris café life of the early 1920s was by no means the only milieu in which the "lost generation" writers sustained each other's drinking. Hemingway chronicled the hegira of "the moveable feast" through various locales; he himself remarked wryly concerning the 1957 movie version of The Sun Also Rises that it was a "splashy Cook's tour of Europe's lost generation bistros, bullfights, and more bistros" (Laurence, 1981, pp. 115-116). Ring Lardner's son reflects the cohesiveness of the subculture in writing recently, "I have lived, boy and man, among writers and drinkers for more than sixty years. The first two drunks in my life were Sinclair Lewis and F. Scott Fitzgerald" (Lardner, 1979, p. xi).

The present analysis, then, suggests that there were a number of factors that concurrently helped to push the American literary generation born in the late 1880s and the 1890s into heavy drinking, and sustained many of them in heavy drinking patterns for much or all of their lives. While some of these factors were purely American, many of them reflected the unusual confluence of American literature, art, and music with French culture -- and with an expatriate community in Paris -- in the years immediately after World War I.

In its turn, the "lost generation" became a transmitter of cultural values concerning drinking to the larger American culture. Their influence was felt in a number of ways. One of the most immediate was in their inadvertent promotion of mass middle-class American tourism to Paris in the late 1920s -- a development which eventually swamped the subculture of the Quarter.

From 1924 onwards, a growing number of articles had been appearing in American newspapers and magazines about the dissolute, wasteful and immensely attractive lives of the writers and artists who lived in it. The triumph of The Sun Also Rises put the finishing touches to this unintentional publicity campaign. By the late twenties it seemed as though no college student's education was complete without a spell of hard drinking in the Montparnasse cafes. Other tourists took up the scent, and soon the writers no longer felt at home in the district whose image they had done so much to propagate. (Allan, 1977, p. 95).

The generation also had a lasting influence on younger writers, by strengthening the cultural association between writing and drinking. The link is given backhanded recognition by the leading character in the 1981 film Arthur, when he remarks that "everyone who drinks is not a poet; some of us drink because we are not poets". A recent interview with the novelist Donald Newlove, born in 1928, notes that "as an impressionable ninth-grade dropout, he began reading Thomas Wolfe, who had been drinking to become James Joyce, who had died [as] the result of drink. 'I began reading Wolfe for his art, his next goat-cry, or extravagant set-piece, just as I read Joyce to experience what language can do out there at its limits. And I ended by searching through biographies of both these geniuses to find some sanction that would allow me to drink as they did. I took all their manias and ulcers as badges of glory, as I did with all my gods. . . . All these boozers on their mountaintops wrestling with their genius -- what better life can there be?'" (Payer, 1981; see also Writer's Digest, 1978).

Undoubtedly the generation's widest and most lasting influence was on general American cultural patterns through the success of their literary productions in the U.S. We have already quoted Kazin concerning their triumph in the mass marketplace. Although much of this success came in the later 1920s and afterwards, the pattern was initiated early the decade, as Fitzgerald's This Side of Paradise (1920) "exploded on the public scene" to shock and fascinate the American public with the doings of their young -- notably including drinking and drunkenness. "Fitzgerald gave the twenties its symbols: flappers, jazz, gin. . . . This Side of Paradise struck a responsive chord in the twenties precisely because it strives to be naughty, sophisticated, and shocking. By portraying the young as he did and by posing as their spokesman, Fitzgerald was brilliantly telling his audience what it was eager to know but unable to condone. . . . Almost immediately he was damned and maligned, accused of being a consciously naughty young man, and paid the highest compliment of all, that of being widely read and imitated" (Fass, 1977, pp. 25-27).

Whatever the factors responsible, there is no doubt that there was a decisive shift in American middle-class mores concerning drinking, particularly among youth, in the late 1920s. This shift was but a part of larger cultural shifts (Fass, 1977), but the change in attitudes towards drinking had its own specific timing and character. Writing in 1938, the temperance organizer Harry Warner could assemble impressive evidence of a "college drinking epidemic" after 1928, and conclude that "the present trend is a reversal of the trend of 100 years. It is toward a wider diffusion of drink practices and greater regularity of use among larger numbers. For a comparable situation one must turn back, not twenty, nor thirty years, but to the conditions that prevailed more than a century ago" (Warner, 1970, pp. 70, 79). The obverse of the rise in middle-class drinking after the 1920s can

be seen in Gusfield's data on the falling class status and rising age of the leadership and membership of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (Gusfield, 1955; 1957). Fass concludes that the shift away from abstinence among college students coincided with a change in the character of their drinking norms: while the older code "drew a fundamental distinction between drinking and drunkenness", a new "subterranean ethic . . . began to jell" by the middle of the decade which "worked counter to these self-limiting rules. In this ethic, one drank to become drunk, or, failing that, to appear drunk. . . . In addition, one drank in the company of and together with women" (1977, pp. 316, 317). In part, Fass notes, "youth's behavior and attitudes reflected what was a common unofficial standard among adults in the twenties, especially among certain smart or glamorous sets frequently portrayed and described in the movies and the literature of the period." The adult models imitated by youth "were the models not of conventional conduct or propriety but of glamor and liberated behavior, . . . the modern or deviant pacesetters" (1977, p. 322).

It would be rash to claim that the writers of the "lost generation" created these shifts in drinking norms and behaviors. On the contrary, their success may well have depended on the occurrence of the more general shift in mores, resulting in the development of a mass market for their writings. But, at a minimum, when the shift occurred, the writers' work -- and for that matter their lives, which the work often reflected -- were available as exemplars, and eventually as cultural icons. Collectively, and often individually, the heavy-drinking writers of the generation eventually reached an extraordinary range of audiences. In the depths of the Depression, the urbane heavy drinking world of Dashiell Hammett's The Thin Man (1934) tantalized and set a ideal for the mass movie audiences of the Depression era. At a more rarefied cultural level, works by Hemingway, Faulkner and others typically occupied a central place in postwar college courses in "modern American literature" -- with the course often taught by an aging devotee from the college generations of the 1930s and 1940s. That the writers thus certifiably produced Literature, and yet appealed to a mass audience, made their work irresistible to Hollywood, particularly in the 20 years after World War II. A total of 15 Hollywood movies have been based on Hemingway novels or stories -- with nine of them made between 1946 and 1958 (Laurence, 1981).

It is a task for the future to characterize in detail the vision of drinking and its place in the culture which the works of the literary generation between O'Neill and Hemingway collectively portray -- and to attempt to estimate the effects of their works on American cultural patterns. Clearly the vision they offered contrasted dramatically with that presented by writers of the previous generation. In his novel The Wet Parade (1931), Upton Sinclair (born 1878) delineated this gap, with ambiguous sympathy, from the perspective of the older generation of writers. The difference is not only in the implicit politics of alcohol, but includes also the phenomenology of drinking. Jack London's John Barleycorn is not only a temperance tract -- however equivocally so -- it also identifies drinking with the world of working men. In The Sun Also Rises, drinking has become part of a lifestyle of affluent leisure. The gulf is exemplified by the contrast between two early 1930s novels -- on the one hand, The Wet Parade, full of drunkard's progresses and an explicitly political presentation of alcohol, and on the other The Thin Man, filled not only with breezy boozing by an upper-middle class couple, but also with a staccato of badinage that makes light of drunkenness. Both novels were made into movies, but The Wet Parade has been forgotten, while The Thin Man, immensely popular at the time, remains a cultural staple (see Herd and Room, 1982). As Sinclair puts it (1964, p. 329), "posterity has sanctioned the rebels and repeal, not the defenders and prohibition".

For the "lost generation" of writers and for the collegians of the late 1920s who followed in their steps, drinking and indeed drunkenness served as a rhetoric of emancipation, a "symbol of liberation" (Fass, 1977) from the claims of an older America for moral hegemony (see Gusfield, 1963). As Chart 1 suggests, many writers from the generation eventually paid a substantial personal price for their commitment to hard drinking. In the 1930s and afterwards, a new autobiographical genre of "alcoholism" novels -- and films based on many of them -- chronicled the struggles of lesser literary lights with their own drinking habits. (See, for example, William Seabrook, Asylum (1935); Charles Jackson, The Lost Weekend (1944); Harlan Ware, Come, Fill the Cup (1952).)

As the quotation from Liebling suggests, for later generations, alcohol lost some of its symbolic power. "What the college youth of the thirties inherited were the innovations of their predecessors without much of their self-consciousness" (Fass, 1977, p. 270). But the changes in drinking patterns, and in the cultural position of alcohol, once established, persisted. Drinking remained associated, though more weakly, with urbanity, cosmopolitanism, and a vaguely liberal position on status and lifestyle politics. As availability and affluence increased, during World War II and in the 1960s, those who were already drinking drank more, so that on a per-drinker basis the U.S. now ranks high in the world alcohol consumption tables (Room, 1983, p. 579). (It should be noted that, against this trend, abstainers have broadly speaking held their own in the U.S. in the postwar period. The alternative, "dryer" American tradition has never lost its hold on the rural South and prairie areas (Room, 1983).) The writers of the "lost generation" were perhaps only the harbingers and carriers of the cultural elevation of alcohol that these changes reflect. But, at the very least, we might suspect that the writings of the generation of writers born in the late 1880s and the 1890s helped to crystallize the position which, in broad terms, alcohol has continued to occupy in American culture for the half-century since Repeal.

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## CHART 1. Birthdates of American authors with reputations as heavy drinkers or alcoholics

1809	Edgar Allen Poe	
.....		
1869	Edward A. Robinson	
.....		
1876	Jack London	
1879	Wallace Stevens	
<b>1880</b>		
1885	Ring Lardner	Sinclair Lewis
1888	Raymond Chandler	Eugene O'Neill
1889	Robert Benchley	
<b>1890</b>		
1892	Edna St. Vincent Millay	
1893	J.J. Marquand	Dorothy Parker
1894	e.e. cummings	Dashiell Hammett
1895	Edmund Wilson	
1896	F. Scott Fitzgerald	
1897	William Faulkner	
1899	Hart Crane	Ernest Hemingway
<b>1900</b>	Thomas Wolfe	
1902	John Steinbeck	
1905	John O'Hara	
1908	Theodore Roethke	
<b>1910</b>		
1914	John Berryman	Tennessee Williams
1917	Robert Lowell	
<b>1920</b>		
1922	Jack Kerouac	
1928	Donald Newlove	