

# **The American Pipe Dream: Drug Addiction on Stage, 1890-1940**

A dissertation submitted by

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the representation of drug addiction and drug use in U.S. theatre from the 1890s to the start of the Second World War. In this, it engages with the decades in which the nation first formulated its conceptions of addiction. It is in the 1890s that addicts first appear on stage and assume a significant place in the national imaginary. Over the next fifty years, the theatre becomes an integral part of a cultural process that shapes the characterization, treatment, and legislative paradigms regarding addiction. In many cases, these paradigms that appear during the Progressive Era, Jazz Age, and Depression persist today.

This study examines this history by looking at a variety of performance formats, including melodrama, vaudeville, and Jazz club acts. Ranging from the “elite” theatres of Broadway to the “lowbrow” variety stages, this research establishes connections between representational practice and an array of sources. These include the medical, legal, and literary histories related to drug use in the period. Up till now, these are the histories that scholars have recorded, but they have yet to take into account the importance of performance as it both formed and reflected other elements of culture related to drug use. It was the stage that helped push through reforms on part of the Prohibition Era activists; it was also the stage that disseminated the rapidly changing medical etiologies of addiction to the general populace. Extending beyond these regulatory and diagnostic concerns, this dissertation moves to examine addiction as a defining condition of modernity, a concept that stems from a literary legacy connected to Thomas De Quincey, Charles Baudelaire, and the Decadent writers of the *fin de siècle*. Throughout this history, the stage-addict served to test the limits of U.S. imagination while formulating the parameters of normal and abnormal, natural and artificial.

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## INTRODUCTION

### *The Gateway*

“... a theatre seemed suddenly opened and lighted within my brain, which presented, nightly, spectacle of more than earthly splendor.”

- Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, 1822.

Tully Marshall had a knack for playing drug addicts. He did so to acclaim twice in his long career as a stage and screen actor. Bony, long-limbed, and hatchet-faced, he seemed to fit the part. Marshall first portrayed an addict in Clyde Fitch's 1909 melodrama *The City*, about the pitfalls of urban life. His character was a blackmailing villain with incestuous tendencies. In 1916, Marshall again played a dope fiend in the silent film *The Devil's Needle*, directed by Chester Withey. The film follows the downward spiral of a mild-mannered artist who transforms into a raving degenerate once he acquires the morphine habit.

Both of Marshall's performances received positive responses. Reviews of *The City* praise Marshall for stealing the show through his “embodiment of the physical wreck of a man.”<sup>1</sup> His acting in *The Devil's Needle* (which survives) is all gnashing teeth, roving eyes, twitches, and shakes. We can imagine he enacted similar paroxysms in Fitch's drama. Audiences believed Marshall's portrayal of the addict was so true-to-life that reporters questioned his process, wondering how he was able to so capture the frenzied mien of the drug user so effectively. They hinted that it seemed too good to be an impersonation. Marshall was quick to assert that he had no experience with narcotics himself, loath to be connected to the creeps he personified so convincingly.<sup>2</sup> What is striking is that Marshall's

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<sup>1</sup> “*The City* Visits Harford Again,” *The Hartford Courant* (Feb. 14, 1911).

interpretations of the addict not only bear close resemblance to modern representations, but the responses he received mirror those generated by actors who play addicts today.

Present-day films and plays feature drug use as typical dramatic fare. The performance of addiction follows a set of conventions so ingrained as to almost too easily result in caricature. Sunken eyes, pallid skin, and incessant scratching (all of which Marshall exhibited) are part of a repertoire that actors readily adopt when playing addicts. Actors eagerly seek these roles as diving into the depth of human degradation is an attractive challenge. Playing an addict presents the opportunity to infuse a portrayal with desperate tics and legitimizes extreme behaviors in performance. Engendering sympathy in an audience for such a character comes with it a certain prestige and proof of skill. For clean-cut movie stars these roles provide the opportunity for transformation. Leonardo DiCaprio played a delinquent junkie in *Basketball Diaries* (1995) and an extravagant profligate in *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013); Christian Bale won an Oscar for his impersonation of former crack addict and prize fighter Dicky Eklund in *The Fighter* (2010); and Jennifer Hudson recently appeared as a heroin-addicted prostitute in *The Inevitable Defeat of Mister and Pete* (2013).<sup>3</sup> Just as the performances by Tully Marshall in 1909 and 1916, modern day portrayals receive special attention and each of the performers listed faced questions regarding their process and their personal experiences with narcotics.

There are a number of reasons that writers pursue these questions. On the one hand, audiences simply want to demystify the acting process. On the other, by admitting to

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<sup>2</sup> "Actor Tells Story: Praises Fitch Play. Tully Marshall of 'The City,' Talks of Career," *New York Tribune* (Dec. 25, 1909).

<sup>3</sup> Peter Galvin, "Diary of a Thoughtful Junkie," *San Francisco Chronicle* (Apr. 16, 1995); Nicole Eggenberger, "Leonardo DiCaprio: I've 'Never Done' Drugs," *US Weekly* (Feb. 7, 2014); Soraya Roberts, "Christian Bale: 'Fighter' weight loss required me to do a 'lot of coke,'" *New York Daily News* (Dec. 7, 2010); Katie Van Syckle, "Jennifer Hudson on Drugs, Drake and Twerking with Miley," *Rolling Stone Magazine* (Oct. 29, 2013).

personal drug use, the actor somehow cheapens his or her performance; their convincing act of representation becomes merely a re-enactment. And, finally, there is a latent desire to discredit these celebrated individuals and drug use is excellent grist for the mill.

Regardless of the motivation, the interest in the ingenuity of modern actors ignores the fact that the markers of addiction in today's media are little altered from those that Tully Marshall exploited in his performances; markers that, even in 1909, were not new. In this study, my aim is to historicize these performances, drawing attention to the fact that the signifiers of addiction are founded in a history that dates back more than a hundred years.

This dissertation tracks the history of the representation of the drug addict and drug use in U.S. entertainment from the addict's first appearance on stage in the late 1880s to the Second World War. This study explores the significance of the addict to U.S. culture, the composition of addict identity, and the changing narratives concerning drug addiction throughout the period. I propose a historical study of a broad range of scripts, mounted productions, iconography, and popular performance forms. As portrayals of addiction occurred in numerous formats, this study encompasses performance genres of melodrama, variety, jazz-club acts, and (as a secondary subject) film. I also examine certain theatres that might be more typically categorized as elite or avant-garde. For instance, I include plays produced on Broadway and certain works performed by the Provincetown Players. I cast this broad net as all of these plays, stages, and forms collectively shaped the national imaginary in the period. However, I do not consider formats such as the radio, the circus, puppet shows, and sporting events, which were also an important part of the spectator culture throughout the period but rarely, if ever, featured depictions of addiction.

By 1920, Andrew Woollcott of the *New York Times* complained of the drug addict's

ubiquity on stage. He remarks cynically that the dope fiend had become “an essential figure in all modern melodramas.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, beginning with E.E. Price’s comedy *One of the Bravest* in 1888, this research takes into account more than fifty plays, twenty films, and a host of performers. In effect, the stage-addict was a pivotal figure in popular entertainment through the Progressive Era, the Jazz Age, and the Depression and I hope to fully instate his importance. Facing this substantial source material, I have attempted to avoid a survey by highlight particular works within each chapter, breaking the history into digestible pieces focused on particular patterns and important anomalies.

Beginning with the stage-addict’s first appearance, the endpoint of this study marks two events that are of consequence, one regarding the history of drug use in the country and the other regarding the history of theatre. With U.S. involvement in World War II, illicit drug use in the country nearly ceased.<sup>5</sup> The war disrupted international smuggling routes, leading the majority of the addict population to dry out or seek cures. Numerous historians have noted that maintaining an addiction either at home or while in the service at this time would have been almost impossible for anyone not in a medical position. The idea that the Second World War created a large swath of new addicts is somewhat of an urban myth. This notion is more applicable to either the Civil War or the war in Vietnam. After 1945, a new addict population appeared in the country consisting of, as Nancy Campbell notes, “mainly heroin users, younger, poorer, increasingly African American, and more commonly

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<sup>4</sup> Alexander Woollcott, “The Ouija Board,” *The New York Times* (Mar. 30, 1920).

<sup>5</sup> David Courtwright, in his seminal study of U.S. narcotic use *Dark Paradise: Opiate Addiction in America Before 1940*, uses the same historical moment as the limit for his study. So too does Chad Heap in his examination of slumming practices in the country. This points to the fact that the war interrupted leisure activities on a broad scale and that practices that did not return in the same form once the war ended.

involved in minor, nonviolent criminal offenses.”<sup>6</sup> The theatrical and filmic representations shifted with this new addict.

The year that the U.S. joined the war is also the year that Eugene O’Neill finished his play *Long Day’s Journey into Night*. O’Neill’s characterization of Mary Tyrone marks an extraordinary moment in the history of the representation of addiction. Mary’s characterization is a high-water mark in which, I will argue, the portrayal of addiction communicates the defining philosophical struggles of the modern condition. Thus, this research moves from the earliest appearance of comic dope fiends in the 1880s that came with the recognition that there was, in fact, a drug problem in the country to the semi-autobiographical masterpiece by one of America’s great playwrights and the rise of a new addict population. By doing so, this study encompasses the first phase of the country’s relationship with drug addiction.

To a great extent, this history has escaped not only theatre scholars, but also those writing general histories of drug use and addiction in the U.S. Historians like David Courtwright and Caroline Jean Acker have offered exceptional histories of addiction, primarily through examinations of legislative and scientific developments. They do not consider the importance that performance plays in shaping the perception of the addict over time. When scholars do consider addiction’s relationship to the arts, their attention is directed to the study of literature. Thomas De Quincey, Samuel Coleridge, and (later) Charles Baudelaire have attracted volumes of contemplation. Two works of literary scholarship have influenced my analysis profoundly. Susan Zieger’s *Inventing the Addict*, which examines the portrayals of addiction in nineteenth-century American and British

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<sup>6</sup> Nancy Campbell, *Discovering Addiction: The Science and Politics of Substance Abuse Research* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 63.

literature, and Alina Clej's *A Genealogy of the Modern Self*, which examines De Quincey's influence on literary Modernism. Thus, I see my work as corresponding closely with these literary examinations. One of the primary surprises that came with undertaking this research was realizing the extent of De Quincey's influence on popular performance. I borrow from Zieger and Clej's works a number of hermeneutic paradigms including a method for exploring the connections between addiction and sexual deviance. Media scholars such as Kevin Brownlow and Michael Starks have examined addiction in film. Similar to this project, Brownlow and Starks recognize the racial prejudices and problematic moral absolutes that surround the representation of addiction. Like the theatre, drug films both shaped and were shaped by the culture that produced them. However, few have tracked the history to its theatrical roots, as the conventions that appear in early film all have theatrical antecedents.

The absence of scholarly work on addiction from theatre historians is surprising. There has been, as far as I can find, nearly no mention of an addict character on the U.S. stage before 1930 and even then there has been no single study dedicated to tracking the history of this characterization. It may be that the addict has been hidden in plain sight. With the present focus on identity studies in academia, the addict may be too ambiguous (unraced, unspecified regarding gender and ethnicity) to draw attention. I might argue that it is the addict's ambiguous status that makes the figure so fascinating especially in light of modern identity theory.

There are, however, a number of studies in theatre history that relate to this project. These are works that examine the representations of degenerates and deviants figures, as well as the theatrical treatment of antisocial behaviors and controversial outsiders. These

studies are especially focused on the Progressive Era (1890 to 1920 for the purposes of this study). Theatre historians have produced scholarship on the portrayal of homosexuals, racial minorities, immigrants, ethnic others, prostitutes, and the disabled. Essentially, there has been a wellspring of interest in how the theatre shaped the nation's image of the newly arrived, the underworld, and "how the other half lives" to borrow Jacob Riis's phrase. I am indebted to a long list of scholars including Amy Hughes, Katy Johnson, Rosemarie K. Bank, Harley Erdman, Robin Bernstein, Laurence Senelick, George Chauncey, J. Chris Westgate, Eric Lott, Edward Ziter, Dave Williams, Tamsen Wolff, Shane Vogel, and a host of others. It is with these authors that I aim to converse, while exploring an uncharted track in the historical landscape that they have all helped map.

### **FOUNDATIONS: CONSTRUCTING THE ADDICT**

This research presumes that, from the beginning, the performance of addiction was not simply the result of direct observation, but rather a complex cultural construct. As Jacques Derrida notes, "with drug addiction, the concept of drugs supposes an instituted and institutional definition: a history is required, and a culture, conventions, evaluations, norms, and entire network of intertwined discourses, a rhetoric, whether explicit or elliptical."<sup>7</sup> Essentially, the popular perception of drug use and addiction is a conflation of historical, social, and cultural factors. Performance is both an element in this conflation (a source for Derrida's "conventions" and "rhetoric") and the result of it. Recognition that this perception diverges from reality is not a new insight. Since the 1930s researchers have clarified that sunken eyes, prostration, and muscle twitches, so typical in modern

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<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida, "The Rhetoric of Drugs," *Points...: Interviews, 1974-1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber, trans. Peggy Kamuf et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 229.

portrayals of the addict, are more a sign of withdrawal than dependency.<sup>8</sup> It was at this time that early drug researcher Maurice Seevers notes,

[t]o the average medical layman lacking firsthand experience with addiction, the term 'drug addict' may conjure a mental image of a sallow-skinned, hollow-eyed Oriental, who in his utter depravity is clutching with bony, long-nailed fingers at the throat of a young girl or suckling babe. Such a picture of addiction is commonly portrayed in the Sunday supplements or in the literature of the professional reformers.<sup>9</sup>

Save for the Chinese component in the drug user's identity, this description is hardly less accurate of modern impressions than it was in 1939. Along with the Sunday supplements and reform propaganda, the theatre was a key factor in molding the perception of the addict both before and after the work of Seevers. It is my contention that nowhere were the ambivalences and ambiguities concerning addiction and the addict more manifest than in representations brought to the stage. Thus, by examining the performance of addiction, this research provides a new proxy for understanding the larger history of America's relationship with the addict at the launch of the modern age.

Over the period covered in this study, the stage-addict is associated with a range of evolving signifiers including non-white racial identities, non-normative sexual identities, corrupted gender norms, underworld and criminal inclinations, godlessness, and brutish frontierism. This panoply of characteristics was constantly in flux and we see the addict in a range of genres and shifting narratives. On the stage and screen, as well as in newspapers and dime novels, writers reshaped the addict in reflection of the particular moment. However, in any iteration, the drug addict presented a figure that seemed to test the imagination regarding the depth to which a person could fall. Addicts were degraded,

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<sup>8</sup> Campbell, 37.

<sup>9</sup> Maurice H. Seevers. "Drug Addiction Problems," *Sigma Xi Quarterly* 27 (June 1939), 91.

atavistic, will-less, and soul-less. They failed to conform to the most basic tenet of modern thinking: that your life was your own. From this position, portrayals of the addict investigate the limits of forgiveness, sympathy, tolerance, and redemption. Narratives of addiction helped to mediate between artificial and natural states as well as normal and abnormal desires. This is part of the underlying value of studying how the stage exploited the addict. We can view society, via the theatre, in the act of establishing some of its fundamental values during a time of national upheaval that begins with the large-scale mechanization of industry and the expansion of the modern city.

The national development of urban centers sets a scene in which the addict has particular resonance. The rise of the middle class and of the industrial capitalist economy established a particular set of principles in the U.S. mainstream to which addiction was decidedly antithetical. The working and middle classes newly idealized the paradigm of the “self-made man.” Progressive Era thinking placed a premium on self-discipline, moral restraint, productivity, and self-determination.<sup>10</sup> The addict, in his very nature, represented the sapping of self-control and the surrender to desire. Timothy Hickman notes, “[n]arcotic addiction thus embodied the otherwise abstract threat that stalked the autonomous individual in a new interdependent, modern society.”<sup>11</sup> Taken in context with America’s “Third Great Awakening” and a vivified temperance movement, drug addiction in the late-nineteenth century assumed a unique place in the American mind. In a *Chicago Daily*

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<sup>10</sup> Numerous scholars studying both addiction and U.S. culture in general at the turn of the century make this assertion. See Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Thin Air: The Experience of Modernity* (Penguin, 1988); Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007); Timothy Hickman, “Double Meaning of Addiction: Habitual Narcotic Use and the Logic of Professionalizing Medical Authority in the United States, 1900-1920,” *Altering American Consciousness: The history of Alcohol and Drug Use in the United States, 1800-2000*, eds. Caroline Jean Acker & Sarah W. Tracy (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Hickman, 184.

*Tribune* article from 1906 about the growing problem of cocaine addiction in the city, the author declares,

A man may drink whisky and retain some of his moral if not his physical stamina; he may even smoke cigarets [*sic*] to excess and retain something of the qualities that once made him a man; but he cannot use 'dope' without soon losing every vestige of moral and physical fitness.<sup>12</sup>

Of the forbidden pleasures afforded modern man, "dope" was the most deleterious. The fact that addiction was such an egalitarian disease, afflicting both male and female, regardless of class, race, or upbringing, demonstrated the flimsy nature of the protective standards and social hierarchies that defined most value systems. Any and all could fall under addiction's sway. The addict represented modernity's worst-case scenario and, to the Progressive Era's rhetoric of reform and redemption, it was the greatest challenge.

## **HISTORY OF DRUG USE in the United States**

Prior to the 1890s, the average drug user in the country was white, upper class, and female. These women were primarily iatrogenic addicts, meaning that they came to their dependence by way of medical officials. Doctors prescribed opiates and other intoxicating nostrums to women for reasons varying from hysteria to pregnancy, a practice that often resulted in addiction. This community of addicts was, for the most part, silently tucked away in the sphere of domesticity and family secrecy. These women could maintain healthy and long lives, fulfilling their domestic and social duties as long as their local physicians kept them regularly supplied with opium tincture, opium pills, or morphine. It was in the 1930s that researchers confirmed that morphine caused no identifiable damage to internal

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<sup>12</sup> "Cocaine, the Curse of Chicago, Claiming Victims by Tens of Thousands," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (Feb. 25, 1906).

tissue.<sup>13</sup> Thus, these women attracted little attention.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, opiate use spiraled out of control in the country. During the Civil War, the Union side alone consumed nearly 10,000,000 opium pills and over 2,814,000 ounces of opium powders and tinctures.<sup>14</sup> Opiates on the battlefield and elsewhere served not only as treatment for pain, but symptoms ranging from diarrhea to asthma. Soon after the war, new medical technologies made the hypodermic kit widely available to the country. Syringes were attainable without regulation in local stores or through the mail for personal use. Many who suffered injuries on the battlefield sought relief in morphine and fell into addiction. The anonymous Yankee author of *Opium Eating: An Autobiographical Sketch by an Habituate* from 1876 was a soldier with a chronic injury that was treated with hypodermic injections of morphine leading to a severe dependence. It is also in the 1870s that medical and popular presses begin to discuss a national “drug problem.” It is at this point that people abandon the colorful terms morphinist, morphinomaniac, opium slave, and opium eater for the medically sanctioned and comprehensive label of “addict.”

This new attention to a national drug problem did not, however, mean changes in policy. As is often the case, the imagination moved far faster than the country’s lawmakers. National drug legislation was not enacted until the Harrison Act of 1914, a law that this study examines closely in its relationship to theatrical representation. Leading up to this

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<sup>13</sup> There remains today a belief that narcotic cause physical deterioration. Images showing addicts before and after they begin using drugs such as methamphetamine are supposed to demonstrate how the drug eats away the skin and leaves users emaciated. Such before and after images are not new. But the fact is that unhygienic lifestyles and disease are the cause of these physical deterioration, likely brought on by the poverty of addiction, but not the drug itself.

<sup>14</sup> David Courtwright, *Dark Paradise: Opiate Addiction in American before 1940* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1982), 55.

law, narcotics had an air of the quotidian. Over-the-counter nostrums for anything from colic babies to toothaches contained narcotics that today are considered dangerous and are carefully regulated. Vin Mariana was a widely consumed cocaine-infused wine. And Dr. Buckland's Scotch Oats Essence was a "nerve and brain food tonic" laced with morphine that supposedly cured everything from paralysis, ovarian neuralgia, and sciatica, to the opium habit. Like so much snake oil it was found not only ineffective, but dangerous.

At the same time as the public was dosing itself in the home, drug use started to become a standard part of the expanding leisure activities in the country. At the turn, the dominant addict in the country shifts from middle and upper-class housewives to middle and lower-class men and boys who took opium, morphine, cocaine, and heroin as part of social interactions. The "Age of the Bachelor" saw expansive new entertainments in urban centers catering to a generation of young, unmarried men with middle and working-class occupations who had money to spare and no families to impede their pleasure seeking. These young men found their amusement in pool halls, brothels, dance halls, sporting arenas, opium dens, and theatres.<sup>15</sup> These social activities typically involved disregard of traditional social restrictions. These men drank, visited prostitutes, and mixed with racial "others" in bars known as "black and tans" and opium dens. Joining these men were liberated working-class women, who were more and more eschewing the traditions of Victorian family for the independence provided by a personal income.

These men and women found the time and money for such endeavors as a result of important changes in the nation's labor practices. While industrialization provided new

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<sup>15</sup> Caroline Acker identifies all of these locales save for sporting arenas as new amusement venues for working class youth where drug use was normal. However, boxing especially played a part in this new culture of carousing and would just as likely be host to those sniffing heroin for the first time as the swells at the racetrack. Caroline Jean Acker, *Creating the American Junkie* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 3.

factory and clerical jobs, there was a reduction of the workday hours beginning in the 1880s and an increase of over-time. By 1914, factory workdays reduced from as many as fourteen hours a day to nine hours.<sup>16</sup> Kathy Peiss cites a working woman of the period, who notes, “The shorter work day brought me my first idea of there being such a thing as pleasure. . . . Before this time it was just sleep and eat and hurry off to work.”<sup>17</sup> One of the new “pleasures” available to these workers were those supplied by recreational drug use, which became a fundamental aspect of the new urban social behaviors. It was in brothels, poolrooms, and theatres that many young men and women were offered their first sniff of cocaine or heroin, or extended their first invitation to an opium den. Out of this grew a new population of addicts and newly established sub-cultures around those addictions.<sup>18</sup> It is in response to this population of addicts that the stage began to feature depictions of drug use and the ravages of addiction.

Concerns over the new urban entertainments led to intensive investigation of the corrupting influence of city environments. These investigations often made it apparent that at the heart of the most troubling activities and enterprises was drug addiction. New York’s famous Committee of Fifteen and John D. Rockefeller’s Bureau of Social Hygiene were both originally founded in the first decades of the twentieth century to curb prostitution.

However, they soon realized that drug abuse was a significant part of the culture that was tied to the sex trade. Similarly, when researcher George Kneeland was hired to carry out

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<sup>16</sup> Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusement: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press: 1986), 42.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>18</sup> The relationship between these new addicts and the burgeoning entertainment venues of the period has been detailed by numerous historians including David Courtwright, Susan Zieger, Caroline Acker, Susan Speaker.

studies of red light districts in Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York City, his findings maintained that substance abuse was an intrinsic part of criminal behavior.<sup>19</sup> Sidney Brewster, Warden of City Prisons in New York, postulated in a *Narcotic Education* article from 1924: "The man who uses heroin is a potential murderer, the same as the cocaine user. He loses all consciousness and moral responsibility."<sup>20</sup> Framed this way, drugs were not part of criminal activity, but the actual cause of crime.

Grossly inaccurate information about the number of addicts in the nation intensified the derision aimed at drug users. Reformist Hamilton Wright claimed in 1910 that the addict population had increased by 351% over fifty years. In 1918, the U.S. Treasury Department officially estimated that there were 1,500,000 addicts in the U.S. Courtwright tempers these claims to 133% and no more than 313,000 addicts in the country.<sup>21</sup> However, the hysteria instigated by Wright helped push through the Harrison Act of 1914, which was the single most drastic restriction on narcotics in U.S. history. The overblown figures also reduced officials' willingness to finance treatment options and drove courts to decide in favor of the strictest possible enforcements of the drug laws. Growing recreational narcotic use, spirited reform efforts, and revelatory investigation into vice districts all contributed to the popularity of the addict on stage.

## **PATHOLOGIES OF ADDICTION**

The utility of the drug user as a stage-character was due in part to general confusion over

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<sup>19</sup> Acker, *Creating the American Junkie*, 44.

<sup>20</sup> Susan Speaker, "Demons for the Twentieth Century: The Rhetoric of Drug Reform, 1920-1940," *Altering American Consciousness*, 215.

<sup>21</sup> Courtwright, 9 and 29.

the causes of addiction. Over the fifty years covered in this study, explanations for addiction waver constantly between disease and vice models. These confusions persist today as addiction cannot shake the pejorative status of a personality trait, while at the same time the diagnosis and treatment of drug dependency is typically the province of medical professionals. Throughout the period covered in this study, however, a rapid succession of new etiologies develop, each of which provide the playwright with fodder for dramatization.

Disease concepts of addiction in the U.S. stem from the eighteenth century and Dr. Benjamin Rush's discussion of chronic drunkenness in his 1784 treatise *An Inquiry into the Effect of Ardent Spirits upon the Human Body and Mind, with an Account of the Means of Preventing and of the Remedies for Curing Them*. However, this early disease-model defined addiction as habituation; one was habituated to drunkenness, not to liquor.<sup>22</sup> Beginning in the 1870s, researchers reoriented the overuse of opiates along parameters defined in part by Eduard Levinstein's study *Die Morphiumsucht* (1875). This seminal work was translated into English in 1878 as *The Morbid Craving for Morphia* and helped officially establish a disease model of addiction within the medical community, an etiology that reached maturity around 1910.<sup>23</sup> North American and British studies inspired by Levinstein sought to explain addiction along the lines of an illness that could be treated through a number of prescribed courses. The emergence of germ theory, particularly via the work of scientists such as Louis Pasteur and Robert Koch, prompted the consideration of addiction as

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<sup>22</sup> Harry G. Levine, "The Discovery of Addiction: Changing Conceptions of Habitual Drunkenness in America." *Journal of Studies of Alcohol* 15 (1978), 4.

<sup>23</sup> Terry M. Parssinen & Karen Kerner, "Development of the Disease Model of Drug Addiction in Britain, 1870-1926," *Medical History* 24 (1980): 275.

something that could be contagious, such as typhoid or pneumonia. This “autoimmune theory” of addiction led people like George Pettey and Ernest Bishop to create antitoxic treatments like Narcosan that supposedly helped with withdrawal, but may have caused more than a few deaths in its administration.<sup>24</sup> Darwin-inspired models additionally conceived of addiction as an inherited malady, an idea that prospers readily today along with updated disease models. Reflecting on a number of urban youth she meets in Ohio in 1873, a leader of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union notes, “Ah, many of [them] knew what it meant to be a drunkard’s child. Many had the inherited taint coursing through their veins, and if they did not surrender to the inborn craving they would only escape through a lifelong battle.”<sup>25</sup>

Because it was so hard to lock down an explanation for addiction, dramatists could employ the malady in any number of ways, attributing it to whatever defect they wanted to explore. Addiction could be the result of improper environment, the absence of either mother or father, a mixed racial background, a psychologically determined drive for self-destruction, or it could be the result of non-normative sexual desires. At the same time, a vulnerability to narcotic stimulation was listed as a symptom of a host of pseudoscientific conditions including Max Nordau’s “Degeneracy” and the ailments of hysteria and neurasthenia. It was similarly a supposed sign of the nation’s “cultural drift” towards racial devolution. The theatre employs all of these explanations at different times. The application of these theories depends on a number of factors, primarily the addict’s social standing, race, ethnicity, and gender. As Courtwright is often quoted as saying, “what we think about

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<sup>24</sup> Campbell, 18.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Levine, 13.

addiction very much depends on who is addicted.”<sup>26</sup> The determination of which addicts are pitied and which demonized is the outcome of diverse considerations that this study attempts to clarify.

Throughout this research, I attempt to link performances with contemporary theories regarding addiction’s causes. In part, my aim is to track the ways in which concepts born of the scientific community filter down to popular culture. At times, there is a direct correspondence. Elsewhere, the theatre seems to entirely ignore medical science in its explanations for addiction; or, the theatre outpaces science, benefiting from the freedom to imagine new possibilities while the scientific community is hampered by their need to gather empiric evidence. My interests lie in how medical science, reform movements, and popular culture all intersect. In what ways do the moral imperatives and evangelism of the Progressive Era coexist with the burgeoning sciences of the modern age? How do performances of the 1930’s manifest the division between the severe anti-drug rhetoric of the time and some of the first federally funded studies regarding opiate addiction that seemed to negate some reformers’ claims?

## **THE THEATRE’S PART**

As noted, the theatre was an important part of the new urban entertainments and a place where drug use became an established practice. Recreational narcotics infiltrated further than the quiet nooks of the balcony and lobby. There was a belief that much of the drug use was taking place on the other side of the footlights. Actors were long accused of all types of profligacy, and it seems only natural to add drug use to the list. Today, actors with drug

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<sup>26</sup> Courtwright, 3.

problems are a standard part of Hollywood tittle-tattle. In the late-nineteenth century, there was already a connection between actors and substance abuse. Barbara Wallace Grossman's biography of Clara Morris details the way in which the actress's morphine addiction became part of the spectacle of her performance. Grossman outlines both the actress's struggles to deny rumors of her addiction and the outrage that followed discovery of her dependence. Grossman considers not only the effect of this discovery on her public persona, but how Morris's addiction may have altered her actual performances. Grossman argues, "It is inconceivable that Morris's reliance on injected morphine would not have profoundly affected her acting. An unacknowledged subtext in her life and work, drug addiction undoubtedly was the most significant factor in her artistic decline."<sup>27</sup> Morris's struggle represents one of the earliest encounters between an actor-addict and her knowing public. Rumors of actor's abusing mind-altering substances would only increase as time went on. However, as Morris never played an addict, nor is there evidence that her own performances influenced the conventional performance of addiction, she is not included in this research.

The real-life addiction of an actor could cross over into performance in ways that do fit within the parameters of this study. Wallace Reid's very public death from a morphine overdose fueled the production of the anti-narcotic film *Human Wreckage* from 1923. Reid's widow, the actress Dorothy Davenport, produced the film with special dispensation from William Hayes to show the degradation of drug use in its direst forms. However, this is a rare example.

I have found no examples of actors known to be addicts or drug users playing the

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<sup>27</sup> Barbara Wallace Grossman, *A Spectacle of Suffering: Clara Morris on the American Stage* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009), 188.

part of an addict on stage or screen. This is a significant difference between plays about dope fiends and plays aimed at demonizing alcohol consumption. Amy Hughes details that it was well known that William H. Smith, the author and star of the famous temperance drama *Drunkard; Or, the Fallen Saved* (1844), was an alcoholic who suffered frequent relapses. Hughes argues that Smith's "sordid past and an unstable present" was part of the draw for audiences.<sup>28</sup> Smith crafted his performance from experience, thus representing a compelling slippage between reality and representation. The absence of a similar scenario with a drug user might signal the deeper disgrace that drug addiction represented. This is partly due to the fact that there was a belief that drunkards could reform, but there was less assurance that addicts could find a cure. Thus, the drug addict was a darker figure, whose transgressions were not as easily overlooked by an audience.

There were ways in which real life actor-addicts linked the world of the theatre to the underworld of drug use. As a recognizable figure, the actor's presence in the theatre, on the street, and in the opium dens (or other user-friendly locations) entwined these locations in the public mind; again, they were all part of the new sphere of leisure activities. We find evidence of these associations in some of the earliest literature on U.S. drug users. In 1883, a young journalist named Allen S. Williams published a study of the nation's opium smokers. The book, *The Demon of the Orient and his Satellite Fiends of the Joints: Our Opium Smokers as they are in Tartar Hells and American Paradises*, was a flashy piece of reportage that brought the young journalist some acclaim for revealing the intrigues and inner-lives of dope fiends. Two years after Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* gained national attention with its images of urban degradation that included opium dens, Williams's book

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<sup>28</sup> Amy Hughes, *Spectacles of Reform* (Detroit: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 68.

was a part of a rash of slumming literature. Williams disguises his work as a social reform piece, but it is more intrigue than condemnation. The “Paradise” in the book’s title invokes Baudelaire’s *Les Paradis Artificiels* and the transcendental side of drug use. William’s preface accentuates this aspect as he asserts that the “[o]ccult and mysterious influences possess a powerful interest for the imagination of thinking people.” These influences include “[a]strology, clairvoyancy, mesmerism and the effect of subtle poisons, such as hashish, and opium in its various forms.”<sup>29</sup> Williams’s writing clarifies the ambiguity with which people approached the opium smoker at the time. On the one hand, Williams paints a picture of dirty Chinatown dens, full of members of the Tongs (Chinese mafia), fallen women, and syphilitic coolies that share the pipe with white men whose families starve in nearby tenements. On the other hand, Williams himself is an opium smoker and he insists that the dens are home to the most “delightful *converzazioni*” with a fascinating mix of social classes including “representatives of the real upper tendom” [*sic*] of both sexes.<sup>30</sup>

Teetering between glamorization and a warning against moral ruin, Williams significantly dedicates an entire chapter to “Victims in the Dramatic Arts.” He was writing in 1883, approximately five years before the first portrayals of drug users appear on stage. Thus, before actors were playing dope fiends, they were accused of being dope fiends. As an actor in Williams’s study notes, his type had a certain weakness for “going low.”<sup>31</sup> Williams asserts that “legions of fiends are largely recruited from the ranks of the dramatic

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<sup>29</sup> Allen S. Williams, *The Demon of the Orient and his Satellite Fiends of the Joints: Our Opium Smokers as they are in Tartar Hells and American Paradises* (New York: Published by the Author, 1883): 1.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

profession,” although he does not name names.<sup>32</sup> He adds, “these mimics, freed from all restraints, are at their best while among their fellow fiends, and together with a few brilliant Bohemians they compose the aristocracy of the joint.”<sup>33</sup> The den becomes a kind of heterotropic space as outlined by Michel Foucault.<sup>34</sup> It is a site of inversions where hegemonic conditions are eschewed. In the secret confines of the dens, new hierarchies are constructed, placing the actor and the nonconformists in elite positions. Within this inverted space, the actors’ capacity to play and shape the world around them is at height of its power. The unnatural agent of the drug elicits their natural state. It is only when stoned that they reveal their full talents. There is, however, another factor at work: The actor is impulsive and emotional, but he or she operates behind an orchestrated façade; they are controlled dissemblers. In the opium den, there was a rare chance to glimpse the actor sans frontage of character.

This was an intrigue on which people could capitalize. Williams discusses a particular den, run by a man named Bessinger not far from Union Square in Manhattan, who welcomed those fans hoping to spot a celebrity in the act. They came,

to see whom among the actors had fallen into the clutches of ‘The Demon of the Orient,’ and perhaps the hope of seeing also some favorite actress, whom they might easily approach did she exhibit no reserve beyond that required by the rules of fiendish society. For this little amusement they had to produce a fee.<sup>35</sup>

Williams refers to the practice as Bessinger’s “hippodroming policy,” likening it to a

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>34</sup> Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces, Heteroropias,” Trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16:1 (Spring, 1986), 22-27.

<sup>35</sup> Williams, 86.

contemporary circus or horse show.<sup>36</sup> This den combined the popular practice of slumming with celebrity sighting. It is a fascinating situation in which an entrance fee is proffered in order to witness actors in the flesh and under the influence. The potential sexual availability of the female smoker is something that this research will explore in detail. Essentially, the female addict was not only considered hypersexual, but the act of smoking opium itself was highly eroticized. As objects to be voyeuristically consumed, wherever actors went, they brought the show with them. The opportunity for spectatorship extended to the den, which becomes part of the theatrical encounter. It was a continuation of the life of the performance and the addition of a sideshow to the main event. The den, like the theatre, was a location of mystical potentials where audiences and actors alike could play out fantasies. Bessinger's enterprise merely brought this quality of the den to the fore. Thus, the theatre was roped into the network of social enterprises where drug use was a component and where both participant and spectator were available subjectivities. The fact that Williams dedicates a full chapter to the phenomenon of actors with opium habits emphasizes the interest in how the realms of the den and the theatre overlapped.

Geographical factors enhance this conflation, as theatres were in the vicinity of many of the opium dens as well as other locales, such as poolrooms and dance halls, which became havens for drug use. Katie Johnson sites a similar overlapping between the theatres and brothels (another location where drug use was especially common), which created "an interstitial space in which identity, particular female identity, became destabilized."<sup>37</sup>

Those coming and going from the theatres on the Bowery and Union Square of New York

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Katie Johnson, *Sisters in Sin, Brothel Drama in American, 1900-1920* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 13.

City would join foot-traffic of those doing business in brothels, dens, bars, and poolrooms.

As Broadway theatres crept north at the beginning of the twentieth century, the dens maintained close vicinity. Contrary to popular belief, larger city's opium dens were not limited to Chinatown districts. In 1896, poet Stephen Crane noted that, before the "hammer of reform," dens lined the streets of New York's Tenderloin district, between Twenty-Third Street and Forty-Second Street.<sup>38</sup> These dens catered specifically to the white smoker, a number of them supplying in-house entertainment and posh settings.<sup>39</sup> Even as opium smoking faded in the 1910s and the dens closed, urban entertainment centers were still a commingling of performance venues and locations where drug use was well established. Just as Johnson describes an "unstable semiotic space where it was often impossible to distinguish society women from prostitutes," there were not markers to differentiate the addict from the audience member.<sup>40</sup> This ambiguity created apprehension among the Broadway audience. The act of going to the theatre involved a heightened awareness of the potential degeneracy of those around you.

This is not solely a New York phenomenon. Cities such as Chicago and San Francisco also saw a mixing of their theatres, dens, and other underworld venues. There was a constellation of urban vices of which both drug abuse and the theatre were a part. Hyperbolic newspapers stories, plays about addicts, and slumming literature like that by Williams only furthered the associations between these activities in the public's mind.

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<sup>38</sup> Stephen Crane, *Prose and Poetry*, Vol. 4 (New York: Library of American, 1984), 853.

<sup>39</sup> Luc Sante, *Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1991), 147.

<sup>40</sup> Johnson, 14.

## **INCLUSIONS AND EXCLUSIONS**

The earliest definitions of addiction concerned alcohol use. Rush's eighteenth century tract on the disease of inebriety laid a foundation for later explanations of opiate and cocaine addiction. Modern medical conceptions of addiction patently define alcohol as a narcotic with all the devastating effects and addictive potency of other drugs. However, this dissertation does not include an examination of the representation of alcoholism. There are clear ways that the drug addict and drunk overlap; society considers both a threat to the general public and both embody fears over the loss of self-control. However, the two remain distinct in the public's mind. This study examines the reasons behind these divisions in the succeeding chapters; they include the fact that alcohol is primarily a domestic product (beer and bourbon) and the public perceives narcotics as foreign products infused with alien cultural practices and the enrichment of overseas interests. Reform efforts rarely discussed both problems at the same time; there was no unification amongst activists. Legislation too saw the habits as distinct and regulated the substances and treatment of those addicted to them in different ways. The Harrison Act of 1914 was a precursor to the Eighteenth Amendment of 1919, but only one of these prohibitive measures survives today. Indeed, we maintain the distinction between vices, as drinking is a widely accepted national pastime and drug use still occurs primarily secreted away in sub-cultures that may be widespread, but remain covert.

In addition, the stage-drunk has been such a common figure in the U.S. theatre over the last two hundred years that his inclusion would render this project unmanageable. From the 1840s on the evils of drink was a common theme in U.S. melodrama. The popularity of temperance plays has already received substantial scholarly attention and my

hope is to pinpoint the intersection between the histories of anti-drug and anti-drink dramas. For example, in plays like Charles Reade's *Drink* (originally *L'Assommoir* by Émile Zola) and Smith's *The Drunkard* the performance of the *delirium tremens* was a major draw.<sup>41</sup> Amy Hughes has noted that the spectacle of Smith's performance of the "DTs" was highly effective in engendering the spirit of temperance in the nineteenth century audience.<sup>42</sup> Establishing whether there is a dramatic equivalent for the *delirium tremens* for the dope fiend is of particular interest and viewing the structural characteristics of drug plays in the light of temperance dramas will help guide reflection on the works covered throughout this study.

Also in need of clarification is the difference between "the drug user" and "the addict." This is a distinction that many struggle with even today. Modern clinical definitions of drug dependency present a range of behaviors that potentially signal addiction, but avoid strict parameters of diagnosis.<sup>43</sup> It is difficult to lock down at what point drug use indicates addiction, but in theatrical presentations any narcotic use inevitably signals corruption or weakness. Similarly, throughout the first half of the twentieth century, there is little differentiation made between behavior driven by the effects of taking a drug and behavior resulting from being an addict. That is, it does not seem to matter if a character is "high" or not; if they are a drug user, they are by nature unpredictable and troubled. The user and the addict are essentially the same thing. Following the traditions of the "one

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<sup>41</sup> Frank Rahill, *The World of Melodrama* (University Park and London: Penn State University Press, 1967), 242.

<sup>42</sup> Hughes, 84.

<sup>43</sup> *The Diagnostics and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* offers 7 criteria that indicate addiction to drugs. Diagnosis of addiction is the result of the presence of three or more of these criteria over a one year period. See *DSM, IV* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

drop” rule of temperance reformers, any one who uses a drug, even once, is potentially lost in total.

For example, explored in the second chapter, opium addiction is supposedly the cause of the madcap behavior exhibited by the dope-fiend character that Junie McCree performed on the vaudeville stage. Yet, McCree’s character never consumes the drug onstage nor is he supposedly stoned during the time of the performance. Regardless, his status as “addict” defines his character. At the same time, Charlie Chaplin’s tramp is by no means an addict, but when we see him accidentally take drugs in two of his films (*Easy Street* (1917) and *Modern Times* (1936)), his reactions offer important insight into how narcotics supposedly influenced behavior. McCree is an addict, the Tramp is an accidental drug user, but both tell us something about the perceived effects of drugs. Thus, this research uses the terms “drug user” and “addict” interchangeably as dramatic representations of the time do not make a distinction.

It is important to note that this study examines not a single kind of drug addiction or the theatrical life of a single drug, but considers drug use in general. This is a testament to the fact that there was so much confusion regarding narcotics and addiction in the period. Narcotics themselves maintained an unstable status throughout the period. Medicines could quickly move from the position of curative to that of intoxicant and the years this study covers proved a period in which medical practice concerning the pharmacopeia shifts greatly. Between 1890 and 1930, U.S. policy concerning chemical substances went from completely unregulated to the gradual prohibition of a wide array of drugs that came under the categories of “controlled” and “illicit.” There were also important changes in the ways the nation designated addicts as they went from figures that were eccentric and

disconcerting to the status of indefensible criminals in response to legal and public opinion. Drugs moved in and out of favor depending on availability, price, and local culture, and the theatre reflected these shifts. The earliest theatrical portrayals were of opium smokers and those who consumed laudanum (an opium tincture preferred by De Quincey). Cocaine and morphine users became the most widely portrayed addicts in the 1910s and '20s. By the 1930s, the cannabis smoker and the heroin addict became part of this *mélange*. However, “straight” society essentialized the addict regardless of his poison of choice. “Dope” as a term transfers, and the word applies to whatever substance captured the minds of the public at the time. For each period in U.S. history, the country had its “dope fiends.”

Aiding in this continuity, the drug could change but the addict often did not. When the Opium Exclusion Act of 1909 outlawed smokable opium, many den habitués turned to subcutaneous injections of morphine and snorting cocaine. When those substances were finally regulated, users turned to heroin. Each of these addicts was counted as more dangerous than their predecessors. In this way, examining the theatrical conventions becomes the analysis of accumulation, each new drug and each new addict population adding to the representational practices that preceded it.

## **CHAPTER CONTENT**

Across this extended period of time, the performance of addiction follows a tortuous path through a number of overlapping genres, characterizations, and conventions. Thus, chapter organization involves thematic and generic groupings. There is significant overlap amongst these chapters, and they intersect substantially in their chronology. However, this division helps to avoid a survey, creating clear lines of investigation for each chapter.

Chapter one, "Opium Den Plays," looks at the first conventionalized genre of plays that deal with drug addiction. Beginning in the 1890s, the U.S. audience saw a rash of plays set in opium dens and revolving around the abduction of white women by Chinese immigrants. Though there has been scholarship dedicated to these "white slave plays," I demonstrate the centrality of drug use to melodramas such as Joseph Jarrow's *Queen of Chinatown* (1899), Theodore Kremer's *The Bowery After Dark* (1904) and Billy Getthore's *Slaves of the Opium Ring* (1908). In effect, these plays helped to craft the first drug scare in the country. I examine in detail the way in which the legacy of the temperance drama influences these "blood and thunder" melodramas. These plays exemplify Progressive Era tendencies to turn urban degradation into spectacle under the guise of reform. I additionally examine the way in which Orientalist notions, as determined by Edward Said and others, infuse the den setting and the act of smoking opium with exoticism, eroticism, and mystical properties. Moving beyond the Progressive Era, I follow the evolution of the genre over the next decades to later iterations of the den drama that feature opium smoking and orientalist prejudices, but use the generic conventions to offer new diversity in their conceptions of addiction.

Chapter two, "Prohibition Plays," examines a broad variety of works that demonize drug use and drug users for the sake of regulating the behavior of the theatregoing public. These plays range from direct polemics against drug use that urge specific legal reforms to more subtle melodramas that represent the burgeoning interest in theatrical realism. This chapter includes investigation of the earliest play to make the U.S. stage that centers on a drug addict, that of Haddon Chambers's 1895 *John-a-Dreams*, which explored the utility of the addict to the standard European style "problem play." Much of the chapter focuses on a

ten-year period between 1909 and 1919 during which the public saw intensive lobbying over national drug policies and in which significant changes in legislature and medical policies occurred. The negotiations over what to do about the addict and who had the right to monitor narcotics in the country play out on stage. The policies set in place in this period have changed little even today. This chapter extends investigation chronologically, examining how the arguments for narcotic control evolve into the gangster-obsessed works of the 1920s and the exploitation films of the 1930s that are so popular today for their outrageousness. Embedded in a number of these plays are signs that the subject position of the addict was slowly growing in complexity, moving away from demonization to humanizing portrayals.

Though I have categorized works from this chapter as “prohibition plays,” analysis will show how this label belies the variety and complexity of these works. I aim to identify, categorize, and interpret these works as they relate to the legal, medical, and moral standards of the day. In part, I follow Bruce McConachie’s directive to question not only what an audience is escaping from when they attend the theatre, but also what they are escaping to.<sup>44</sup> Plays that are part of this investigation include Clyde Fitch’s *The City* (1909), Alexandre Bisson’s *Madame X* (1909), Walter Montague’s *The Hop Head* (1912), Joseph Graham’s *The Needle* (1915), and Pendleton King’s *Cocaine* (1917). It also includes a number of films of the era, which greatly influenced public perception at the time, including *For His Son* (1912), *The Devil’s Needle* (1916), *Human Wreckage* (1923), and finally, *Reefer Madness* (1936).

Chapter three, “Drug Slang and the Comic Dope Fiend,” is divided between two

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<sup>44</sup> Bruce McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations: American Theatre and Society, 1820-1870* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), 6.

subjects of inquiry. The first is vaudeville performer Junie McCree, who originated the character of the comic dope fiend on the popular stage. In his act he established slang as the primary signifier of the addict. His performance exploited belief that addicts were endemic to Western cities such as San Francisco and Denver. With the largest populations of Chinese immigrants in the country at the turn of the century, the frontier seemed the natural habitat of the opium addict. Thus, McCree's performances were as much about assuaging anxieties over the figure of the addict as they were about allaying concerns over the corrupting influence of the Wild West. McCree's caricature joins the well-documented ethnic and racial characters that also made the vaudeville stage at the time, including the stage Jew, stage Irishman, Dutch act, and minstrel. Each of these figures helped in the formulation of the nation's self-image, and in the affirmation of standard signifiers of what it meant to look, sound, and act "American."

From McCree, this chapter moves to examine the ways in which drug addiction becomes sutured to blackness in the national imaginary. Building off the foundation provided by minstrelsy, nineteenth-century popular culture tacked drug use onto the long list of negative traits that it typically assigned to African Americans. This connection between blackness and addiction may have had the most staying power of any of the historical precedents outlined in this research. I will argue that the modern conceptions of such tropes as the black "crack head" and addicted "welfare queen" are inherently tied to these early representations. Slang remains an important element, as the argot of McCree's dope fiend migrates to the vernacular of black drug users.

Here too, I focus on a single figure, that of the dynamic band-leader Cab Calloway who fronted the jazz orchestra at Harlem's famous Cotton Club in the early 1930s. Calloway

infused his popular songs with “jive” speak and drug references, enabling listeners a peek at the underworld through his music. This commercialization and commodification of black drug culture is significant and I explore Calloway as a figure of “cultural transference” between white and black communities. However, I also highlight the ways in which Calloway used the addict and drug slang to signal to other African Americans the existence of alternative forms of black behavior that stood in opposition to the New Negro movements of the Harlem Renaissance. I envision a “jive aesthetic” that determines not only music and language, but behavioral repertoires that present a formal challenge to the adoption of middle-class values as promoted by the Harlem elite at that time. The spirit behind these new ways of being also served to challenge the denigration of the black community by white slummers who consumed that community’s culture as a leisure activity.

Chapter four, “Addiction as Metonym,” examines a set of plays that employ addiction as a surrogate for discussing a range of social and existential conditions. This chapter most fully explores the affliction of addiction removed from the narcotic itself, but as a manifestation of the philosophical burdens of modern life. Plays examined in this chapter include William Gillette’s *Sherlock Holmes* (1899), Arnold Bennett’s *Sacred and Profane Love* (1919), Noel Coward’s *The Vortex* (1925), and Eugene O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* (1941). Each of these plays exploits the characteristics of addiction in particular ways to engage with different social, psychological, and ethical questions of self-hood. This chapter also involves a return to Chambers’s *John-a-Dreams* in order to fully explore the De Quincean elements within that drama’s treatment of the artist-addict. This investigation of De Quincey’s influence sets the tone for the chapter, demonstrating the literary foundations

that prompt twentieth-century dramatists to seek new potentials within the concept of addiction.

### **UNMAKING THE MODERN MENACE**

In his new book, *High Price* (2013), Columbia University neuropharmacologist Dr. Carl Hart explains how recent scientific studies undermine almost every popular assumption we have about the drug addict. The book works to debunk a well-entrenched set of stereotypes that Hart asserts have led to a failed national drug policy and the misapplication of billions of dollars of government money. His findings have been difficult to accept for some, and the controversy surrounding his work has been covered by the *New York Times*, *The Huffington Post*, and *Fox News*. Early on in *High Price*, Hart discusses the power of entertainment to shape the presumptions we have concerning drug addicts. Referencing his own early biases, he notes, "I thought of [drug addicts] in the disparaging ways I'd seen them depicted in films like *New Jack City* and *Jungle Fever* and in songs like Public Enemy's "Night of the Living Baseheads."<sup>45</sup> These supplied Hart with a vision of the crack-cocaine user as a poor, urban African American who is driven to a state of animalistic desperation. These same crack addicts appear in almost every film that was a part of the short-lived genre of "Gangster Hood Movies," which flourished in the early 1990s and of which *New Jack City* is a prime example. Other films in the genre include *Boyz in the Hood* (1991), *Menace to Society* (1993) and *Strapped* (1993). It is significant that Hart mentions not only widely distributed films, but also popular music by African Americans about drug use. This study will show that it is exactly this combination of entertainments that formed racially tainted

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<sup>45</sup> Carl Hart, *High Price: A Neuroscientist's Journey of Self-Discovery That Challenges Everything You Know About Drugs and Society* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2013), 2.

conceptions of drug addiction nearly seventy years before those mentioned by Hart.

Hart recognizes that crack cocaine was a problem in black communities. However, he argues that the “crack epidemic” was more a symptom of institutionalized racism across the social spectrum that left black communities destitute. He re-categorizes drug use not as the cause of crime and poverty, but as a result of debilitating economic and social oppression. He groups drug use with other symptoms such as domestic abuse, high drop-out rates, and gun violence. Throughout his argument, he makes use of sociological studies and calculations culled from police records. However, the foundation of his thesis lies in observations he made during scientific studies into the behavior of drug addicts:

Not one of them crawled on the floor, picking up random white particle and trying to smoke them. Not one was ranting or raving. No one was begging for more, either - and absolutely none of the cocaine users I studied ever became violent. I was getting similar results with methamphetamine users. They too defied stereotypes. The staff on the ward where my drug study participants lived for several weeks of tests couldn't even distinguish them from others who were there for studies on far less stigmatized conditions like heart disease and diabetes.<sup>46</sup>

In this dissertation, I aim to create an historical context for Hart's expectations. I will reach back before the films and music that he believes formed his assumptions to the origins of the characterizations he conjures. I will reveal the connections that were forged between race, class, gender, violence, insanity, and addiction through a long history of performance on the U.S. stage. In doing so, I hope to join Hart's study in having real-life effect regarding the way we as a culture perform, imagine, and treat addiction.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 3.

## CHAPTER ONE

### *The Opium Den*

“It is only at night that you may see the Mongol quarter of New York in its quickened phases, for there the people come to life with darkness and disappear with the dawn.”

- William Brown Meloney, *Munsey's Magazine*, 1909.

Smoking opium is no simple task. To begin with, turning bulging poppy blossoms into the substance that smokers put in their pipes requires a long process of simmering, reducing, skimming, and aging. Smoking the treacle-like product of this process necessitates sundry tools (cumulatively referred to as a “lay out”) including a pipe, bowl, steel needle, scraper, scissor, sponge, and peanut oil lamp. Save for the most practiced smoker, it also requires a “cook” to roll the processed opium into a “pill” and clean the pipe.<sup>1</sup> As the smoker lies on his or her hip, the cook manipulates the putty, burns it, pierces it, and stokes the pipe by pulling on it himself before placing it in the hands of the smoker. The whole endeavor is exotic, erotic, and innately theatrical. At the turn of the twentieth century, periodicals exploited interest in the practice by printing detailed images of the tools; reportage explained the method and the described the places in which it occurred; and the theatre presented the entire smoking process for their viewer’s fascination if not edification.<sup>2</sup>

**[Fig. 1, *Harpers Weekly* of opium smoking paraphernalia, 1881.]**

Though the Chinese introduced opium smoking to North American with their arrival

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<sup>1</sup> The processes of refining and smoking are outlined in detail in David T. Courtwright, *Dark Paradise: Opiate Addiction in American before 1940* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1982), 72; Luc Sante, *Lowlife: Lures and Snares of Old New York* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1991), 146.

<sup>2</sup> Early film too took advantage of the interest in the den and opium smoking. Among them, Thomas Edison’s Biograph Company produced the short film *Rube in an Opium Den* in 1905.

in the mid-nineteenth century, it was in the 1880s that the masses began to take note of the new leisure activity and its attendant strangeness. Drug use was not new to the country and addiction had been a growing problem amongst leisured women and Civil War veterans, but it was opium smoking that generated the nation's first drug scare. In the seminal study of U.S. drug use, *The Opium Problem* (1928), authors Charles E. Terry and Mildred Pellens explain that, "As so frequently happens in social reform, it required this more spectacular method of opium use, the character of the places in which it was smoked, chiefly in Chinatown, and the associated social evils, to awaken public and official interest."<sup>3</sup> Opium smoking captured the North American imagination because it involved not simply an alien vice, but an alien people, in an alien setting.

Craig Reinerman argues that all drug scares feature what he calls "media magnification" or "routinization of caricature" by the mass media in which worst case scenarios are "rhetorically re-crafted . . . into typical cases and the episodic into the epidemic."<sup>4</sup> Working within the context of Progressive Era reform and late-century urban expansion, the theatre became a primary means of this "media magnification." This chapter sheds light on a subgenre of melodrama, labeled simply the "opium-den play," that proliferated in the decades bracketing the turn of the century, enacting both the media magnification and caricature routinization on which the drug scare concerning opium smoking was founded. Plays such as *The White Rat* (1895), *The King of the Opium Ring* (1896), *The Queen of Chinatown* (1899), *The Bowery After Dark* (1900), and *Slaves to the Opium Ring* (1908), disseminated a complex, but powerful narrative regarding addiction in

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<sup>3</sup> Charles E. Terry and Mildred Pellens, *The Opium Problem* (New York: Bureau of Social Hygiene, 1928), 808.

<sup>4</sup> Craig Reinerman, "The Social Construction of Drug Scares," *Constructions of Deviance: Social Power, Context, and Interaction*, ed. P. and P. Adler (Boston: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1994), 96.

the country, connecting drug use to foreignness, licentiousness, and corrupted gender norms. These plays lay the groundwork for representations of addiction throughout the twentieth century.

In order to investigate how the theatre crafted these representations, I begin by clarifying necessary background regarding the history of drug use in the U.S. and the opium-den play's theatrical antecedents. I then "set the stage" by detailing the significance of the opium den as a charged theatrical space infused with all manner of Orientalist stereotypes. The den, as the definitive setting in these plays, became a site of inverted Western ideals and innate carnality. From there, I examine the conventions that appear throughout the genre in its depiction of drug use and addiction. These include connecting opium smoking to sexual congress with Chinese immigrants; the conflation of addiction narratives with those of the femme fatale and the vampire; the expressions of concern over the economics and global politics of the drug trade; and, finally, the complex ways den plays portrayed addiction as both a disease and a vice. This thematic ordering loosely follows a three-stage chronology between the 1890 and 1926. In the first stage, den plays portray drug use paired with white slave narratives. These spectacular "blood and thunder" melodramas appeared in affordable "ten-twenty-thirty" theatres across the country that catered to a primarily working-class audience. In the second phase, playwrights shift their attention specifically to addiction, abandoning the threat to white female purity that runs throughout earlier versions. These first two stages, which overlap chronologically, occur between 1896 and 1911, ending soon after opium smoking was officially outlawed on a federal level in 1909. The third phase in the progression of the den drama emerges in the 1920s, appearing after a decade in which opium-den plays rarely appeared on stage.

This third phase involves the diversification of the understanding of addiction. Plays like *The Opium Pan* (1925) and *The Shanghai Gesture* (1926) were not part of the original drug scare that popularized the opium-den drama, but they are certainly the inheritors of conventions founded in those early plays.

Attending the theatre and seeing an opium-den play in the early decades of the twentieth century was part of a range of activities that constituted “slumming.” The experiencing of the lower depths and the dangerous was an obsession at the time, primarily for the middle and upper classes. Slumming took many forms, from actual tours of poor neighborhoods (especially Chinatowns) to collecting photographs of urban degradation by people like Jacob Riis. The practice shows up in the theatre. Charles H. Hoyt’s *A Trip to Chinatown* (1891) was the longest-running Broadway musical in history until 1919. The characters never make it to Chinatown, but it is worth mentioning as it signals the popularity of the area as a slumming destination. Elsewhere, the theatre not only portrayed slumming tours on stage, but became an agent of the practice. Audiences could view the unsavory from the safety of their theatre seats. Chad Heap argues that slumming was “firmly embedded in bourgeois ideology,” and “actively created the very balance of pleasure and danger that, in alternate guises of benevolent reform and amusement seeking, it both pretended to rectify and exploit.”<sup>5</sup> The opium-den drama enacted a similar balance in which the plays seemed to both promote ideologies of Progressive Era reform, while indulging an audience’s need for adventure.

The result was a kind of negation that Benedict Giomo calls “mystification.” In his work *On the Bowery: Confronting Homelessness in American Society*, Giomo describe the

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<sup>5</sup> Chad Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885-1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 23

capacity of the late-nineteenth century populace to rationalize the impoverishment it saw in U.S. cities. He explains that the nation's public was able to obfuscate the conditions and causes of poverty through their very attempts to examine them. He elaborates,

The result [of investigation] was not a penetration of mystery, but rather the reinstatement of its mystifying presence and the elevation of poverty to urban spectacle. The secret was kept intact, as were the dominant cultural values of the era, through the exercise of a mode of detection characterized by grand social deception.<sup>6</sup>

I believe that addiction as it is represented in the opium-den plays undergoes a similar process of mystification; one that elevated drug use to "urban spectacle." The den plays were not formal undertakings of inquiry into the evolving concepts of addiction, but they did reflect certain developing ideas and general misunderstandings. They served to broadcast a number of muddled beliefs that were inserted into a melodramatic contrivance operating in concurrence with a benevolent Christian morality. These plays evaded the complexities and unsettling truths of addiction, sacrificing social discourse for the sake of digestible narratives of poetic justice. Thus, the opium-den play reduces the social and biological phenomenon of addiction - insurmountable and terrifying - to moral individualism and racial inferiority.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, investigation avoids directly confronting the larger political issues of immigration policy, urban poverty, and sexual trafficking that were part of the drug trade. The result of these efforts is that the representation of drug addiction in den plays could be thrilling its authenticity, but primarily function to establish

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<sup>6</sup> Benedict Giamo, *On the Bowery: Confronting Homelessness in American Society* (Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 1989), 31.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

and reinforce parameters of normality rather than urge any kind of social transformation.

### **ANTECEDENTS AND ASSOCIATES**

Not surprisingly, the opium-den drama owes much to the extensive history of anti-alcohol temperance plays that dominated U.S. stages throughout the nineteenth century. These plays were important to the formation of U.S. culture, especially in the formation of middle-class identity. Within theatre studies, John Frick and Amy Hughes have demonstrated how plays such as *The Drunkard; Drink; Ten Nights in a Bar-Room; Saved, Or Woman's Influence;* and *Little Katy, Or Hot Corn* served as potent weapons in the arsenal of temperance workers beginning in the 1840s. The plays were effective in urging audience members to take the "total temperance" pledge, as well as filling the coffers of theatre producers, and making the careers of a number of performers.

This chapter pinpoints the ways in which the temperance play influenced the depiction of drug addiction in the opium-den dramas. However, the ways in which the two subgenres of melodrama diverge may be more telling. Drug plays, though popular, were never as widely produced as temperance dramas. This is primarily due to the fact that there was never as much of an open discourse over drug use (whether it was smoking opium, snorting cocaine, or injecting morphine) as there was over alcohol consumption in the country. The temperance movement was the most significant reform effort in American history. As Frick notes, "No single issue - not even the abolition of slavery - had a greater capacity for arousing the American passion than it did the cause of temperance."<sup>8</sup>

Prohibition reform constituted large-scale organizations from the early American

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<sup>8</sup> John Frick, *Theatre, Culture and Temperance Reform in Nineteenth-Century America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003), 1.

Temperance Society and the Washingtonians to the Prohibition Party and the Anti-Saloon League, the latter of which was able to pass national prohibition in 1920. Organizations dedicated to anti-drug use were simply not as big or as familiar. More often, drug reform was the rallying cry of individual demagogues such as Hamilton Wright, who almost singlehandedly pushed through the national prohibition against opium smoking in 1909. Though it might seem natural that those opposing alcohol consumption would welcome additional targets, the overlap simply did not exist on an institutional level. There was a clear divide in that alcohol was a national product, made in American factories and sold in drinking establishments visited by white Americans. Opium was a foreign product that was made, handled, and used by a primarily foreign population. This framed the conversations in decidedly different language.

In producing William H. Smith's *The Drunkard* in 1850, P.T. Barnum transformed his theatre into a temperance palace, drawing in women, families, and activists who would rarely be seen in a theatre. Audience members could sign the temperance pledge without leaving the theatre. None of the den plays had such extra-theatrical fare or direct political action attached to the performances. Audiences were seeking escapist entertainment, rather than the affirmation of their ideals and there was never such a thing as a pledge for opium smokers. Actors in temperance dramas and speakers at rallies could be reformed drinkers, who were celebrated for finding the self-control to redeem themselves. There was no such relationship with smokers. Smoking was done in secret and addicts would rarely announce their identity in public. Even if they did, there was little confidence that a cure for drug addiction was possible. The addict was essentially unsalvageable.

There is additionally no evidence that those who wrote and produced the den plays

were concerned with reform. These theatre makers lacked any connection to temperance or reform movements. Nor did advertisements or reviews label the den dramas as “temperance plays,” which would have designated them as part of typical reform efforts. Theodore Kremer was prolific in his city dramas, famous for turning out two of them in a single week, but he never detailed a political agenda of any sort. Similarly, R.N. Stephens and Joseph Jarrow were also known writers of melodrama without discernible ties to progressive organizations. In an 1899 review from the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, playwrights Charles Blaney and Charles Taylor’s defend their play *The King of Chinatown* by claiming that they had made “no attempt to introduce high art, but have taken care to discourage vice and offer no offence to the morals.”<sup>9</sup> Though this seems to allude to an activist platform by placing social good over aesthetics, it is just as likely a way of avoiding accusations that their depiction of drug use corrupted the audience. The reviewer does not find it necessary to harp on the social value of the work, and instead concludes lightly that the drama is a “most diverting play.”<sup>10</sup> The authors of den dramas are less activists urging change and more showmen working in a particular milieu for a lower and middle-class audience. It is not until later in the Progressive Era that we find drug plays written by reformers and containing clear political messages about regulation, but these plays deal with medicinal narcotics like cocaine and morphine. Investigating these plays is the focus on the second chapter of this study.

Aside from institutional and political motivations, opium-den plays diverge from a number of standard conventions of the temperance drama. The smokers in most of the den

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<sup>9</sup> “King of the Opium Ring,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (Nov. 27, 1899).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

plays are either white women or racially marked men. The victims of drink in temperance works are almost inevitably white males. As Amy Hughes notes, “Although female drunkards did exist, they rarely appeared in popular culture.”<sup>11</sup> Temperance propaganda, almost from its origins, focused on the threat that inebriety posed to the American family through its corruption of the patriarch. Plays such as *The Drunkard* (1844) or *Ten Nights in a Bar-room* (1854) showed fathers as the primary consumers of intoxicating agents, leading to the bankrupting of the family and domestic abuse. Depictions of wives and children left to live in ragged penury as the father drinks away any income were a ubiquitous part of temperance propaganda. These dominant tropes do not transfer to the den plays. Children are almost never a part of the narrative. The rare exception may be Theodore Kremer’s *Bowery After Dark* in which the traitorous Morris kills his own child in a fury. However, Morris is not a dope fiend, rather he is a white man who has been outmaneuvered by his Chinese business partner in the control of a New York opium ring. There is no equivalent in the den plays of the famous line from *Ten Nights in a Bar-room*, “Father, dear father, come home with me now.”

Part of this is structural. Temperance plays were concerned with the reform of their central characters who had fallen into drink. The early den dramas featured addicts and the threat of addiction, but they center on captured girls who had to be rescued by middle-class heroes. The addicts in these dramas are the lowest street-urchins, Chinese immigrants, or fallen members of the idle rich who did not have the moral foundation of the virtuous bourgeoisie; the reform of the characters is not the point. The addict’s struggle to assert his will and save himself is more a part of the second and third phase of den plays. In plays like

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<sup>11</sup> Hughes, 59.

*The Opium Fiend* and *An Opium Den*, from 1907 and 1908 respectively, the addict and his salvation are central, but the appearance of children in a den, or the existence of children between a mixed-race couple (often present in the dens) is still out of the question.

Membership in a temperance organization became a way to broadcast one's commitment to middle-class values. Frick notes that attending a temperance play and signing the pledge was a public declaration and affirmation of that allegiance. Joseph Gusfield further argues that temperance became a way to separate oneself from newly arrive immigrants, especially in the later half of the nineteenth century. "If the lowly Irish and Germans were the drinkers and drunkards of the community, it was more necessary than ever that the aspirant to middle-class membership not risk the possibility that he might be classed with the immigrants."<sup>12</sup> Such thinking was symptomatic of the growing nativism in the country.

Attending an opium-den play could function in a similar fashion, but there was never the expression of such a specific doctrine. As den dramas were deeply tied to xenophobic concerns over Chinese immigrants and miscegenation, audience members could affirm their social and racial positions through abstinence from smoking and through cheering on the middle-class hero in his victory over the Chinese. In fact, the den plays often feature immigrants of different origins banding together to help the hero. In this scenario, those German and Jewish immigrants, whom at the time fell into categories that Matthew Jacobson designates as "probationary whitenesses," could demonstrate their

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<sup>12</sup> Joseph Gusfield, "Temperance, Status Control, and Mobility, 1826-1860," *Antebellum Reform*, ed. David Brion Davis (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 129.

worthiness of an elevated status through their opposition to anything Chinese.<sup>13</sup> The theatre served to assess and negotiate these shifting identities. Thus the den play, with its cast of diverse characters, could assert middle-class and white superiority, while also allowing ethnic immigrants to align themselves with the dominant culture by insisting on their difference from the more drastically foreign Chinese.

Recently, Katie Johnson has discussed plays like *The Queen of Chinatown* as part of a set of “white slave plays” from the period. This is not a surprising categorization, as the plays from the 1890s set in opium dens invariably feature the endangering of white female purity at the hands of licentious Chinese aggressors. At the time there was widespread fear that the Chinese were abducting innocent white women and forcing them into prostitution or to live as concubines to “Celestial” highbinders. Stories of captured white women flooded popular newspapers and reformers raged against the dangers of Chinatowns. Father Barry, a New York minister who gained a name for his sermonizing on the threat of the foreign immigrant to American purity, declared that the Chinese were “destroying the daughters of respectable parents by an organized system.”<sup>14</sup> As late as 1910, texts like Ernest Bell’s *Fighting the Traffic in Young Girls; Or, War on the White Slave Trade* helped create a preoccupation with the protection of female innocence against the evil “Chinee” and led to the formation of the famous Committee of Fifteen in New York in 1902, the launching of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in 1908 (which was originally concerned specifically with prostitution and human trafficking), and Rockefeller’s Bureau of Social

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<sup>13</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 174

<sup>14</sup> Williams, 34.

Hygiene in 1911.<sup>15</sup>

What I propose here is that opium addiction plays a far larger part in the cultural discourse of the period than previously thought. The eventual findings of all three organizations mentioned above were that the “white slave trade” was a myth. Reformers and reporters found no evidence of women held in brothels against their will. White women were indeed working in Chinatowns as prostitutes, and they were occasionally marrying Chinese immigrants, but not on account of abductions. Searching for a plausible explanation, many began to suspect drug addiction.<sup>16</sup>

A lengthy article in *Munsey's Magazine* from September 1909 follows the author's trip through New York's Chinatown where he meets some of the white women who had married Chinese immigrants. He finds one young woman called Lulu Shu stretched out on her floor with “her layout spread before her on a pallet . . . drinking in the fumes of the drug as they escaped over her shoulder.”<sup>17</sup> The author, William Brown Meloney, declares that the “white slaves are all fiction. No bars or strong doors keep them there. They are slaves only in the sense in which Lulu Shu is one. Addiction to opium is their only warder.”<sup>18</sup> Jacob Riis also cites the opium pipe as the primary cause of miscegenation. In *How the Other Half Lives* he notes, “There are houses, dozens of them, in Mott and Pell Streets, that are literally jammed, from the ‘joint’ in the cellar to the attic, with these hapless victims of a passion

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<sup>15</sup> It is important to note that the Chinese were not the only immigrants accused of engineering a “white slave trade” and that reform propaganda and journalism frequently identified Eastern European men (specifically Italians and Jews) as being behind the abductions.

<sup>16</sup> Heap has argued, “Not even the threat of the notorious Chinese “white slavers,” so prevalent and virulent in San Francisco and other parts of the West, carried much weight in northern U.S. urban centers.” *Slumming*, 127.

<sup>17</sup> William Brown Meloney, “Slumming in New York's Chinatown,” *Munsey's Magazine*, Sept. 1909, 828.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

which, once acquired, demands the sacrifice of every instinct of decency to its insatiate desire.”<sup>19</sup> locates the degradation he photographs as rooted in the underground opium dens. There, the newly arrived are initiated in secret. Once addicted, these unfortunate women settle more permanently, spending their time “worshipping nothing save the pipe that has enslaved them body and soul.”<sup>20</sup> In similar form, the opium-den plays portray drug use as the primary cause of sexual congress between different races, rather than a peripheral vice adopted by those who had already fallen into carnal sin.

Admittedly, it is impossible to disentangle opium smoking and prostitution from each other in the early plays, as the two were profoundly intertwined in the national imaginary and I do not mean to dismiss the category of the “white slave play.” Rather, playwrights exploited the two evils in tandem in order to express particular anxieties from the period, but the importance of mind-altering substances in these works has been overshadowed. Thus, by re-categorizing these plays as “opium-den dramas” and centering examination on their depictions of addiction, I add significantly to our understanding of the period.

## **EXOTIC ORIGINS, ENDEMIC ENTERTAINMENTS**

The majority of the Chinese immigrants that came pouring into the U.S. in the mid-nineteenth century headed for the frontier and the Gold Rush of 1848. They quickly established Chinatowns in most cities and large towns throughout the West.<sup>21</sup> A large

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<sup>19</sup> Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* New York (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1914 (1881)), 96.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Barbara Hodgson, *Opium: A Portrait of the Heavenly Demon* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1999), 63.

portion of these migrant workers came from Canton, which had a long association with the opium trade, “serving as a the sole point of entry for the drug [in China] prior to 1842.”<sup>22</sup> Where there were Chinese, there were opium dens and as the Chinese migrated east, so did the dens. By the 1870s there were opium dens in most American cities.<sup>23</sup>

However, for the greater part of the nineteenth century, the opium trade was of little interest to the average citizen as it was almost entirely the domain of a foreign community. Opium smoking was limited to the social life of the Chinese laborer. In the 1880s, it started to become clear that whites had taken up the pipe as a leisure activity. Attempting to trace the origins of this new trend, H.H. Kane claimed in 1882 that the first white person in North America to smoke opium as a woman called Clendenyn who tried the drug in California in 1869. The second white person to smoke, according to Kane, did so at Clendenyn’s urging in 1871; from there, the vice pullulated steadily among whites.<sup>24</sup> Though Kane’s stories are almost certainly apocryphal, the country was witnessing a steady increase of non-Chinese indulging in opium smoking. These early smokers were primarily members of the underworld and “between 1870 and 1890 smoking opium made considerable inroads on morphine as the drug of choice” for a community of criminals, pimps, prostitutes, and their johns.<sup>25</sup> Popularity continued to spread and there were eventually dens in some cities that catered solely to whites. In New York there were rumors that such dens featured opulence

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>23</sup> Dave Williams has identified *The Queen of Chinatown* as the only the opium-den play to be set in New York, implying that the perception was that the West Coast was the nucleus of Chinatown drama. Other scholars have followed Williams’s lead. However, Kremer’s *Bowery After Midnight* was extolled for its representation of New York’s down town and the types that inhabited it, and Harold Poore’s play *The Curse of Drugs* (1912) is also set in the Bowery.

<sup>24</sup> Harry Hubbell Kane, *Opium Smoking in America and China* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1882), 1.

<sup>25</sup> Courtwright, 61.

befitting the luxury class, where smokers could bring their own bejeweled pipes. In fact, David Courtwright asserts that whites developed their own smoking subcultures as early as the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>26</sup> However, the importation and refinement of the opium was an entirely Chinese-run operation and without the Chinese in an area, opium smoking did not exist. Thus, smoking opium for whites typically meant crossing into physically demarcated areas that were inhabited by Chinese, entering their establishments, and commingling with foreign bodies in an untoward way.

There were no regulations on the importation or use of opium in the U.S. for most of the nineteenth century. When legislation was enacted, it was aimed at ensuring that whites were not given access to the pipe. The first anti-opium legislation was passed in 1875 in San Francisco, a town notorious for its expansive Chinatown slums and a hub for anti-Chinese sentiment. Phillip Crowley, the San Francisco police chief for all but a few years between 1867 and 1899 observed candidly that “the laws were invented to prosecute Chinese proprietors of commercial dens that attracted white clientele, particularly young women.”<sup>27</sup> South Dakota’s infamous town of Deadwood also outlawed opium smoking in an effort to curb white involvement in the activity.<sup>28</sup> New York State implemented a law prohibiting smoking in 1882 and a law regulating who was allowed to manufacture smokable opium in 1890, both to little effect.

In general these laws were part of a “larger pattern of legal harassment that can be traced to the Gold Rush,” and were in place to serve as anti-miscegenation measures as

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>27</sup> Jim Baumohl, “The ‘Dope Fiend’s Paradise’ Revisited: Notes from Research in Progress on Drug Law Enforcement in San Francisco, 1875-1915,” *The Surveyor* 24 (June 1992): 6.

<sup>28</sup> Jill Jonnes, *Hep-Cats, Narcs, and Pipe Dreams: A History of America’s Romance with Illegal Drugs* (New York: Scribner, 1996), 27.

much as to curb drug use.<sup>29</sup> Dens that whites visited were more likely to be raided, and new stories of racial intermingling or potential instances of white-slave trade would fuel a round of den raids in a particular area. William White notes that the ordinances regarding opium smoking were part of a larger context of “Nativism, immigration, racism, and social and class conflict . . . and the myth of “Yellow Peril” – the delusion that opium was being used as a political weapon to weaken America as the prelude to Chinese invasion of the United States.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, the anti-opium campaigns were less the result of Reform Era activism and more due to anti-Chinese fervor.

Xenophobic sentiment found its way easily into the entertainment of the period. Plays like *The Chinese Must Go* by Henry Grimm made both professional and amateur tours of the West Coast in the 1880s.<sup>31</sup> Such prejudice found footing across the country as the Chinese established a larger presence in eastern cities. Between 1880 and 1910, the Chinese population of Chicago went from 171 to 1778. In New York City during the same period, it rose from 731 to 3476.<sup>32</sup> Like immigrants and refugees of today, the Chinese were accused of stealing jobs, undermining national values, and polluting the gene pool. They were also perceived as being particularly vicious. In variety and burlesque theatres on both coasts, acts featuring yellow-face performers abounded. Indeed, the practice of yellow face far outlasts that of black face on the American stage and screen. Early incarnations of the “Chinee” assuaged anxieties by presenting the Chinese as incompetent, bewildered, and

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<sup>29</sup> Baumohl, 4.

<sup>30</sup> William White, “The Lessons of Language: Historical Perspectives on the Rhetoric of Addiction,” *Altering American Consciousness*, 49.

<sup>31</sup> Further examples of anti-Chinese dramas and analysis can be found in Dave Williams, *The Chinese Other, 1850-1925* (New York: University Press of America, 1997).

<sup>32</sup> Heap, 23.

weak. The underlying fact that the Chinese characters were almost invariably played by whites in make-up rendered the stage versions safe for public consumption. However, the overwhelming fear had to do with the mixing of raced bodies (white with Chinese, Lascar, and Malays). In the imagination of the nation's public, the opium den itself was the premiere site for these inappropriate cultural interactions.

### **DEN TOPOGRAPHY**

In 1885, reformer William B. Farwell wrote of the experience of walking into a den:

The air is thick with smoke and fetid with an indescribable odor of reeking vapors. The atmosphere is tangible. . . . Tangible to sight, tangible to touch, tangible to taste, and, oh, how tangible to smell! You may even hear it as the opium-smoker sucks it through his pipe bowl into his tainted lungs, and you breathe it yourself as if it were of the substance and tenacity of tar. It is a sense of horror you have never before experienced, revolting to the last degree, sickening and stupefying.<sup>33</sup>

Similarly, in 1907, Herman Scheffaner wrote in *Macmillan's Magazine* of "the rank air reeking with a mephitic virulence, the thin streams of smoke curling upward in serpentine forms, the red glow of the pipes and the sickly glimmer of the tiny oil-lamps in the semi-darkness and the silence, made a scene full of strange and awful enchantment."<sup>34</sup> Both John Seed and Christopher Fraying assert that the opening description of an opium den in Charles Dickens's unfinished novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), created "the

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<sup>33</sup> William B. Farwell, *The Chinese at Home and Abroad, Part II* (San Francisco: A.L. Bancroft & Co., 1885), 25.

<sup>34</sup> Herman Scheffaner, "The Old Chines Quarter," *Macmillan's Magazine* (Boston: The Living Age Company, 1907), 362.

archetypal image of the dockside opium den, though [Dickens] was utilizing accounts already in circulation . . .”<sup>35</sup> Many of the clichés associated with the den come from observations Dickens made while on his own slumming trips through London’s Shadwell district. These conventionalized descriptions, Gothic in tone, demonstrate a simultaneous repugnance and intrigue regarding the den, the drug, and those who use it. It also shows how the sensory experience of the den space was a preoccupation. Those interested in slumming savored the atmospheric details that these writers conjure regarding smell and sound. Those details also lent themselves to the aesthetics of theatrical realism.

Reviews for plays like *The Queen of Chinatown* and *The King of the Opium Ring* typically pay close attention to the design of the den settings. Advertisements for the shows also inevitably mention the quality of the designs. An advertisement for *The Queen of Chinatown* at the Harford Opera house from 1900 specifically identifies the New York scenic artist that created the backdrops for the play.<sup>36</sup> The *San Francisco Chronicle* highlights that the same production had “special scenery accurately depicting the Chinese quarter . . . prepared for the occasion.”<sup>37</sup> All of this signals audiences’ desires for assurances of authenticity in the dramatic reproductions of the den. The den was more than a place to smoke opium, it was a location of sexual, mystical, and subversive possibility that defined

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<sup>35</sup> John Seed, “Limehouse Blues: Looking for ‘Chinatown’ in the London Docks, 1900-40,” *History Workshop Journal* 62 (Autumn, 2006): 69; Christopher Fraying, *Dr. Fu Manchu and the Rise of Chinaphobia* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2014), 87 and 101. Though Dickens visited a notorious den in Shadwell in the 1870s, by the 1890s, it was the Limehouse district and the docs that were associated with the Chinese and opium dens in London.

<sup>36</sup> “Harford Opera House,” *The Harford Courant* (Sept. 5, 1900); Other advertisements that mention or detail the locations featured in the plays include: “King of the Opium Ring,” *Atlanta Constitution*, Jan. 9, 1910; “Queen of Chinatown,” *Boston Daily Globe*, Feb. 5, 1901; “King of the Opium Ring,” *Boston Daily Globe*, March 5, 1899; “Chinatown Charlie,” *Hartford Courant*, March 7, 1906; “Queen of Chinatown,” *Hartford Courant*, Nov. 23, 1899.

<sup>37</sup> “Queen of Chinatown,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, Sept. 22, 1903.

the genre of den plays. As Seed notes, “the Victorian opium den was transformed into a broader space for the interplay of sexuality, Empire and drugs,” one which heightened “anxieties surrounding inter-racial sex.”<sup>38</sup> These anxieties percolated in the U.S. as well as the U.K., where Progressive Era ideologies sought to understand and tame the den space.

Inspired by the advances in the sciences such as those produced by Charles Darwin and Gregor Mendel, people considered discovery a newly acquired right of the entitled and educated. Progressive Era thinking embraced a desire to know the unknown and to reveal that which had formerly been excluded from respectable consciousness. Embedded in this was the urge to control those things considered troubling or mysterious. Driving so much reform era activity, aside from evangelism sparked by the “Third Great Awakening,” was the desire to order the chaos of the modern landscapes and counteract those forces that seemed to be upending traditional systems. This was a kind of epistemological colonization, and it was acutely aimed at regulating all things oriental. Chinatown specifically represented what Ruth Mayer calls a “sensory overload . . . beyond the bounds of an intelligible identity and coherent self [in its] lack of order.”<sup>39</sup> According to both Mayer and Sabine Haenni, the desire to control this incoherent and foreign space was the reason for the proliferation of Chinatown settings in films of the period. Theatre makers exploited the same desire in their presentations of the den.

In the den plays, the Chinese often hide in the dens, or bring their captured women there with the understanding that they are out of the reach of white jurisdiction. The dens

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<sup>38</sup> Seed, 76.

<sup>39</sup> Ruth Mayer, “The Glittering Machine of Modernity: The Chinatown in American Silent Film,” *Modernism/modernity* 16.4 (Nov. 2009), 672.

were supposedly impossible to navigate for any Westerner who was not initiated. Reports from slumming expeditions often recount the tortuous routes that visitors needed to travel to find joss houses or opium dens.<sup>40</sup> Popular depictions portrayed Chinatowns as a connected maze of secret passages with the dens as the hubs of these tunnel systems. In Billy Getthore's *Slaves of the Opium Ring*, the sinister Hop Lee attempts to blow up a house in to order to destroy the stolen maps of his secret Chinatown tunnels. The dime novel series, *Secret Service*, features the travails of two crack detectives named Old and Young King Brady who spend much of their time wending through these secret paths and discovering the terrors hidden deep in the heart of Chinatown. The two often are often made up to look like "Chinamen," enacting the fantasy of unseen access for the reader.<sup>41</sup> The plays that featured the dens offered audience members the same kind of access.

This haunted house aspect of the opium den provided theatre makers with opportunities to enhance the spectacular elements in their plays. Trap doors often led to hidden chambers where vicious or exotic animals awaited. In *Queen of Chinatown*, the advertisements for the show made much of a stunt in which the hero falls through two sets of trap doors to land in a rat pit. Similarly, Theodore Kremer's *The Bowery After Dark* features a snake pit, kept conveniently under the floor of the opium den. The unpredictability of the physical space of the den imbued the scenes with the promise of infinite dangers. These sensational stunts were the specialty of the "ten-twenty-third" houses in which these melodramas played.

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<sup>40</sup> A reporter for *Harper's Weekly* on a slumming trip in 1909 is lead through an endless maze by a guide to an opium den. However, once he pays, he is quickly led out a direct route to the stairs. John Lopez, "China for the Country Trade," *Harper's Weekly*, n.d., 1909, 12-13.

<sup>41</sup> "The Bradys' Opium-Joint Case," *Secret Service*, no. 120 (May 10, 1901); "The Bradys and the Opium Ring; Or, The Clew in Chinatown," *Secret Service*, no. 170 (April 25, 1902).

**[Fig. 2, Advertisements from *The Queen of Chinatown* (1899)]**

Intensifying the need to regulate the opium den was an implication that the space represented an extension of the physical continent of Asia. Within the den's confines foreign hierarchies were in effect. There was an assumption that Chinese immigrants remained loyal to the traditions of their home country. As evidence that the Chinese caste system had been transplanted to Western cities, terms such as "coolie," "highbinder," and the organized crime syndicates known as "tongs" entered English vernacular.<sup>42</sup> The dens became a site of insurgency against the dominant culture where the inhabitants enforced the dark and superstitious practices of the Chinese homeland. Enacting these alien traditions served as a spectacle for the audience. Perhaps the most grotesque example of the imposition of foreign barbarism is the scene in *Bowery After Dark* in which the evil Twang Lee nails the hands of a Chinese woman to a wall as punishment for disobedience.

In examining representations of the Orient in British dramas during the same period, Edward Ziter discusses the capacity of spatial formations in the theatre to communicate "power structures and their supporting ideologies." By doing so, Ziter asserts, "the space itself is dramatized."<sup>43</sup> In the case of the den plays, the hierarchies inherent in Edward Said's conception of "Orientalism" suffuse the representational space with the West's conception of Asia as decidedly "backward, degenerate, uncivilized, and retarded."<sup>44</sup> But, Said also stresses that the West imagined the East as a place of "untiring

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<sup>42</sup> Herbert Asbury's *Gangs of New York: An Informal History of the Underworld* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1927 reprint). Asbury discusses the inner-workings of the Tong's racketeering and the warfare that raged amongst the competing organizations.

<sup>43</sup> Edward Ziter, *The Orient on the Victorian Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2003), 5.

<sup>44</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 207.

sexuality, unlimited desires, [and] deep generative energies.”<sup>45</sup> The darkened stage-space of the den, adorned with Chinese hangings, burning incense, and the curtained beds that concealed any number of incapacitated smokers created a space with the heightened sexuality conferred upon the Asian continent. Simply the presence of white femininity in the environment activates a special terror. By secluding the captured girl in the den, the Chinese male - played in yellow face with mincing physicality - posed the potential usurpation of white male sexual privilege. The den plays unanimously end with the rescue of the female victim, reuniting her with her lover, husband, father, or brother. This necessitated the infiltration of the space of the opium den. When the walls of the den are finally breached (with the American flag waving in the case of *Slaves of the Opium Ring*) the plays dramatize the restoration of white male dominance.

At times, the den additionally appears as a mystical liminal space, serving as both opium den and joss house, without clear borders separating the two. Gibney Morgan’s *Secrets of an Opium Den* and Charles Blaney and Charles Taylor’s *King of the Opium Ring*, both set scenes in opium dens that are also houses of Chinese worship. “Joss” is a distortion of the Portuguese word for “god,” used to describe the idols, incense, and traditions of ancestor worship by Chinese that is distinct from Taoist or Buddhist practices.<sup>46</sup> By blending the house of worship and the den, U.S. playwrights were denigrating Chinese religious traditions, but also “spiritualizing” the act of smoking. Westerners saw the Chinese joss worship as somehow conflated with mysticism and a belief in the Chinese potential to mesmerize; what one reviewer of a den play called “the wonder effects of

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>46</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 2013, “Joss.” [www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com) (Accessed October 11, 2014).

Oriental hypnotic influence.”<sup>47</sup> At the time, there was a general obsession with mental suggestion due to the work of psychologists such as Jean-Martin Charcot in France and William James in the U.S. On the popular front, characters like Svengali and Dracula used mesmerism to control and seduce their victims. Opium lent itself to associations with mesmerism, as it was a foreign agent that clouded the mind and set the smoker into a deep, trance-like sleep. In the dens, clouded by the smoke of the narcotic, reality and perception became malleable.

In R.N. Stephen’s *The White Rat*, the villain Burgenhoff brings the play’s heroine to an underground den and drugs her with opium. In a room full of burning incense, Chinese ornaments, and decorative inscriptions, Burgenhoff dons a Chinese mask and silken robes and interrogates the girl, who takes him for a Chinese man.<sup>48</sup> This kind of mistaken identity appears in a number of the den plays. Georgette from *King of the Opium Ring* mistakes her captor Wah Sing for her lover George after she is forced to consume opium. Thus, the drug can upend a person’s senses so drastically that they can mistake racial identities in either direction. This aspect of mesmerism typically translated into the confusion of the infallible divisions between the races upon which nineteenth century social hierarchies depended. Thus, the den was a place where social constructs became unstable at their foundations.

David Belasco staged opium dens on two occasions: first in 1897 with *The First Born* and then again in 1913 with *The Man Inside*. However, he refused to apply his famous ability to create realistic sets to plays that happened in brothels. Johnson notes that “While Americans had witnessed countless prostitute characters on the stage before, they were

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<sup>47</sup> “King of the Opium Ring,” *Atlanta Constitution*, Jan. 8, 1910.

<sup>48</sup> These setting details are part of R.N. Stephen’s *mise en scène*. R.N. Stephens, *The White Rat* (Typescript, Library of Congress, 1895), Act 3, 15.

unprepared for the portrayal of the array of underworld characters found *in* the brothel itself.”<sup>49</sup> While opium dens and brothels were, in reality, similar locals of underworld licentiousness, the den seemed to toe a particular line. The brothel was unquestionably prurient, whereas the den, a space organized by the exotic Oriental, was the realm of fantasy.

### **THE PHALLACY OF THE PIPE**

The aphrodisiac qualities of opium are part of numerous mythologies. Marco Polo brought the story of the “Old Man of the Mountains” back from his travels in the Orient, which he retells in his thirteenth century travelogue. In the story, a Persian warlord called Hassan-i Sabbah extracts extreme loyalty from his followers through an initiation right in which he drugs them, leads them to a secret garden of earthly paradise that features concubines, and then promises them a return to the garden if they serve him well. The followers were known as *Hashishin*, from which we have the word “assassin.” As the name hints, it was typically thought that hashish was the drug offered the initiates, but the oft-repeated legend sometimes substitutes opium as the hallucinogenic.<sup>50</sup>

These early mythic narratives gave way to more scientific observations of opium’s ability to cause sexual arousal. John Jones warned in his 1700 tract *The Mysteries of Opium Revealed* that the drug could cause “a great promptitude of venery, erections . . . venereal dreams, nocturnal pollutions,” and even “venereal fury.”<sup>51</sup> In the 1880s, H.H. Kane found an

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<sup>49</sup> Johnson, 142. Emphasis in original.

<sup>50</sup> Alethea Hayter, *Opium and the Romantic Imagination* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), 21.

increase in sexual appetite in the smoker, and Alonzo Calkins reported that opium use could cause insatiable sexual desire, enhanced orgasms, and indifference to respectable bonds of wedlock. However, Calkins also asserted that long-term use could cause impotence.<sup>52</sup> The majority of these early considerations examined men specifically, but as many of the earliest North American smokers were female prostitutes, there was an assumption that opium smoking similarly elevated female desire. However, whether drug use *caused* nymphomania or was a sign of it, was not entirely clear.

The den plays engage this history to explicitly connect opium smoking to Chinese male sexuality. As noted, the den itself was sexually charged through its associations with the Orient. As an extension of this, the inhalation of the drug signifies a submission to Chinese desire and the penetration of a foreign substance into the white female smoker. Performing the suggestive process of smoking opium became a way to portray the sexual interaction at which white-slave tales could only hint.

Joseph Jarrow's *The Queen of Chinatown* toured widely to New York, Boston, Hartford, Washington, and San Francisco between 1899 and 1902. The *Boston Daily Globe* recognizes the centrality of drug use to the work, describing the play as concerning the "lives of many of the white slaves of the dreaded drug opium [which] are depicted in realistic manner."<sup>53</sup> In the play, a naval lieutenant, Harry Hildreth, seeks to save his sister Mary, who is being held in the back alleys of New York's Chinatown by the Chinese merchant Hop Lee and his white compatriot Dan Driscoll. Driscoll's position is significant in

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<sup>51</sup> John Jones, *The Mysteries of Opium Reveald* [sic] (London: Printed for Richard Smith at the Angel and Bible without Temple-Bar, 1700), 24-29.

<sup>52</sup> Kane, 51; Alonzo Calkins, *Opium and the Opium-Appetite* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1871), 71.

<sup>53</sup> "Queen of Chinatown," *Boston Daily Globe*, Feb. 5, 1901.

the drama as he represents a conventionalized character that I call the “traitor-to-the-race” figure. These characters are typically white men who go into business with Chinese gangsters and often end up paying dearly for their betrayal to their country. A traitor-to-the-race figure appears in *The White Rat* (1895), *Bowery After Dark* (1904), *The King of the Opium Ring* (1899), and the Copeland Brother’s *The Opium Fiend* (1907). In most cases, these white figures are demonized more gravely than their Chinese counterparts; their fiscal preoccupations damned as anti-American.

The titular character in Jarrow’s drama is the fallen aristocrat Beezie Garrity. She is an opium addict and Driscoll’s lover. She helps Driscoll capture young women to be sold as slaves to men like Hop Lee. Beezie explains that she is trapped in her position due to “society first, and opium. I am an opium fiend.”<sup>54</sup> She has fallen victim to the same snare she now uses on her unsuspecting victims and she cannot escape because she relies on Driscoll to feed her addiction. Once hearing Beezie’s story, Hildreth declares, “I now see how that the drug is responsible for crime.”<sup>55</sup> The play dramatizes Beezie return to the light before her death as she helps Hildreth save Mary.

Beezie acquired the habit during a slumming expedition to Chinatown, an activity associated with her aristocratic origins. She notes that it began with “a trial of the pipe for sport. I became fascinated; came again and again. Gradually, I lost lover, friends, family, all. Society turned its back upon me and now I have no other world.”<sup>56</sup> Reformers and newspaper reportage often warned that slumming tours could lead to this kind of fall.

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<sup>54</sup> Joseph Jarrow, *The Queen of Chinatown*, 1899, in *The Chinese Other, 1850-1925*, ed. David Williams (New York: University Press of America, 1997), 191.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

Running throughout the den plays are tacit warnings that interaction with the Chinese was dangerous for young women regardless of the circumstances. Driscoll kidnaps Mary while she is doing missionary work and the “missionary-turned-dope-fiend” became somewhat of a trope. Rillie Anita Deaves’s 1907 playlet *The Female Dope* follows the decline of Hazel Irvine who meets the rich Hop Yo as his teacher in a local Sunday school. After marrying him, Hazel quickly falls into opium addiction. In 1909, the murder a twenty-year old missionary worker named Elsie Sigel made national headlines and set off a wave of anti-Chinese hysteria. Her assailant was thought to be Leon Ling, whom she met while doing missionary work and with whom she became romantically involved. Such terrifying tales only facilitated the interest in seeing the dens from the safety of a theatre seat.

By withholding her opium, Driscoll forces Beezie to lure Mary and her friends to Chinatown. She brings them to an opium den where she “tempts them to smoke.” The set calls for the den to consist of two separate floors. Beezie leads the three women, members of a local parish, into the lower apartment. There, they witness Mercedes, a white women, smoke opium and call for more. Beezie instructs them that “women cannot wear stays, my dear, when they indulge in this vice,” and invites them to change into silken smoking robes.<sup>57</sup> This explicit linkage of undress with the act of smoking establishes the sexually charged nature of the act. Clad in revealing robes that released the female form from the restrictive corsets of the late-Victorian era, the den begins to resemble a harem. The fact that the smoker must recline, grasping a phallic pipe, only heightens the erotic inference.

The image of the recumbent young woman in varying states of undress with an opium pipe in her hand appeared on theatrical posters, dime novel covers, and as

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 209.

accompaniment for reportage like that of Allen Williams. It was so prevalent as to qualify as a Progressive Era obsession. Under the guise of social commentary, the print media could indulge the reader's fantasies. The *National Police Gazette* was famous for publishing salacious accounts of opium dens along with images. An article from 1880 idles with long descriptions over the "well-moulded leg" of a female den habitué, detailing the "raving shape of a woman's limb, exposed from the rounding knee downward, the swelling calf gently tapering to a narrow ankle embroidered with hose of the most delicate flesh color, fastened with a pair of silk garters . . ." <sup>58</sup> The stage could bring to life this kind of pornographic literary slumming.

Fittingly, Jarrow's den is filled with women. As Bezzie notes, "in every room in this house women are hitting the pipe."<sup>59</sup> Advertisements for the play picture the two-story den with white women strewn about on almost every flat surface. However, any sexual titillation provided by the scene is undercut by the quiet, but menacing presence of Chinese men. The collection of women that Bezzie leads around creates the impression of sisterly experimentation that borders on the Sapphic. But, as they leave the room, a silent Chinese den worker called Sam, threatens this illusion of safety by lifting Mercedes off the couch and placing her in a curtained bunk, reiterating the dominant male "other" that governs the space. The ominous presence of Chinese potency runs throughout these plays. Non-speaking Chinese supernumeraries like Sam often haunt the den settings, lurking in the darkened corners embodying an insidious threat.

At the same time as Bezzie is entertaining the ladies, Hop Lee attempts to drug Mary

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<sup>58</sup> "Slave to a Drug," *The National Police Gazette*, July 3, 1880, 5.

<sup>59</sup> Jarrow, 210.

in the upstairs apartment.

Lee: You no likee smoke, you no likee Hop; you no likee Chinatown. Velly hard to please. (*Picking up pipe*)

Mary: Please don't make me use that, it makes me so ill.

Lee: You like him velly much after while, then you like Hop.

Mary: I won't touch that vile thing again. Oh, restore me to my family -- my brother --

Lee: Ah! You ready smoke now. Smoke. Smoke -- quick -- Swallow smoke.

You smoke velly bad; next pill you smoke, or (*flourishing bastinado. Pause.*)

Me heapee likee you.<sup>60</sup>

By linking the two scenes in succession and having Mercides continue to smoke on the bottom floor while Mary is tortured above, Jarrow signals the inevitable dark side of opium smoking. What Mercides does for pleasure and the slumming tour indulges in for a thrill, is also used as a tool by the Chinese to ransack white female virtue. Tellingly, Hop designates the pipe and the opium in it as male with his line, "You like *him* velly much after while." The action in the upstairs apartment becomes a metaphoric act of rape as the foreign agent is forced into the body of the innocent girl. Becoming an opium addict comes to mean the submission to Chinese desire and the acceptance of sexual intercourse with a foreign body. Like all the maidens in the opium-den plays, Mary is rescued before the figurative penetration is actualized.

Significantly, the scene puts on equal footing the opium smoke that Mary ingests and the blows she receives from Hop Lee's bastinado; both are agents of persuasion and

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 210.

corruption. Lee's curious line "Me heapee likee you" while wielding a weapon, invests Chinese male sexuality with an inherent violence. A cliché that is perhaps related to the West's understanding of the Chinese tradition of foot binding, which involved the woman suffering great pain for the sake of a culturally specific concept of beauty. Lee's sexual abnormality is a part of standard representational practice that depicted the Chinese as maintaining an "ambiguous gender and sexuality."<sup>61</sup> Portrayals highlighted the braided queues, long fingernails, and silken robes that some Chinese wore. Additionally, the Chinese employment in the female occupation of clothes laundering and the absence of Chinese women in the country amplified this queering of Chinese masculinity.<sup>62</sup> Lee's sexual violence and his use of a dangerous aphrodisiac symbolize the greatest threat posed by the "Yellow Peril."

Even when representations depict the spiritual superiority of the Orient, Chinese sexuality still appears as irrevocably non-normative. In his film *Broken Blossoms* from 1919, D.W. Griffiths attempt to show a pure interracial love, partially in the hopes of counteracting accusations of racism that followed his *Birth of a Nation* four year earlier. Among other things, Griffith received criticism for his depiction of black sexuality as brutish and violent. *Broken Blossoms* focuses on the possibility of pure love between a Chinese immigrant known only as "Yellowman," and a waifish street-urchin called "Girl," played by Lillian Gish. The film is an adaptation of a Thomas Burke story from his *Limehouse Nights* (1916) called "The Chink and the Child." It stars Richard Barthelmess as Yellowman, played with squinted eyes and effeminate physicality. Griffith often films the

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<sup>61</sup> Sean Metzger, "Charles Parsloe's Chinese Fetish: An Example of Yellowface Performance in Nineteenth-Century American Melodrama," *Theatre Journal* 56, no. 4 (Dec. 2004): 632.

<sup>62</sup> Chinese women comprised less than 10% of the Chinese population in America. *Ibid.*, 633.

slight and angular Barthelmess with a Sartov lens, providing a soft-focus typically reserved for classic Hollywood starlets, further effeminizing the actor.<sup>63</sup> Though problematic by today's standards, Barthelmess's performance and Griffith's treatment of the Chinese figure is a good deal more sympathetic and humanizing than most films of the period. Yellowman begins the film as a Buddhist missionary who comes to America to spread the teachings of peace. He ends it shooting the Girl's abusive father for killing her and committing hara-kiri.

In order to clarify the purity of the relationship between Yellowman and the Girl, Griffith opens the film in an opium den, where Yellowman has gone to escape his loneliness in the New World. Griffith envisions the opium den as a locale of wide ranging racial interbreeding in which he depicts white women in troubling positions. They sit in stoned silence next to a swarthy man in a turban or in hushed conversation with a figure in blackface. An uncomfortably long shot at the end of the scene shows a young white woman leaning across a low table, perilously close to a kiss with a Chinese man. Filmed with green tinting and referred to as a "scarlet house" in the title cards, the den represents a terrifying space of racial mixing. Griffith's orgiastic scene, manifesting the fear of interbreeding and the power of oriental seduction, is facilitated by opium intoxication.

Susan Koshy argues that, "Although Griffith's Chinatown is geographically located in London, it is discursively located in the U.S."<sup>64</sup> The U.S. rendered its Chinese immigrants wholly unassimilable and provided no tolerance for interchangeability of racial signifiers. Therefore it is not surprising that Griffith ensures that the romance between Yellow Man

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<sup>63</sup> Barry Keith Grant, *Shadows of Doubt: Negotiations of Masculinity in American Genre Films* (Wayne State University Press, 2011), 23.

<sup>64</sup> Susan Koshy, "American Nationhood as Eugenic Romance," *Difference: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 12, no. 1 (Spring, 2001): 70.

and the prepubescent girl remains unconsummated. Hidden away in Yellowman's rooms above his curio store, he dresses the Girl in the silken robes (like those donned by the women in Jarrow's opium den). Still clutching a child's doll, Gish portrays only innocent interest in the Yellowman, while he struggles with his urges. The scenario protects her virtue while inviting what Barrie Keith Grant calls "fetishistic scopophilia," by placing her as the potential victim of the Yellowman's lust.<sup>65</sup> Griffiths wrings suspense out of watching Yellowman watch the Girl, dragging out the possibility that he will take advantage of her. A slow shot capturing his approach to the bed where she lies frames only Yellowman's eyes. Only when he falls to his knees and presses her robe to his mouth can the audience rest assured that he will not violate the sanctity of white girlhood. It is at that moment that the film veers officially away from the white slave narrative to the expression of "the holiest of affections" as it is described in the title cards. For our purposes, Griffith asserts that a non-threatening oriental sexuality is one necessarily devoid of physicality. He uses the den as his reference point for the height of corruption. Griffiths offers Yellowman greater dignity, but at the price of his masculine potency.

### **LE FUMÉE AND THE FEMME FATALE**

Billy Getthore's 1908 *Slaves of the Opium Ring* also appeared under the titles *The Opium Smugglers of 'Frisco* and *The Crimes of a Beautiful Opium Fiend*. In addition, some reviews list John Oliver, who directed the play's original tour, as co-author. The play departs from a number of the standard conventions found in the earlier den dramas. Most prominently, the central addict is male. Jack is a feeble young man from a good family who has fallen in

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<sup>65</sup> Grant, 25.

with a rough crowd. The capture-and-rescue narrative remains as Jack's sister, Kate, is taken captive by Lee Bock Dong. He does so because he believes that Jack knows too much of his opium-smuggling operations and wants to use Kate as leverage. The hero, Lieutenant Frank Martin, receives assistance from a conventional cast of urban caricatures, including the rascally Foxy Cohen "cousin to Shylock Holmes," an Irish cop, and a German beer maid. Perhaps appropriately, Getthore's male addict appears with the only female version of a traitor-to-the-race character, the vampish Belle Carter. Belle is known as the "Empress of Chinatown," but she is not an addict like Beezie, nor is she a concubine to Dong, who "has a dozen wives and is the richest Chinaman in Frisco."<sup>66</sup> Belle serves as a madam figure, partnering with Dong and running his opium smuggling operations. Like Shaw's Mrs. Warren, Belle is a liberated woman who finds authority in the underworld. By placing a feminine force behind the spread of addiction, Getthore exacerbates the disruption to social and gender norms posed by the drug menace. This threat appears primarily in the relationship between Belle as a pusher and Jack as her victim.

Rather than suffering sexual stimulation from opium, the drug emasculates Jack. At multiple points throughout the play, Belle presses opium upon him, disarming him and leaving him impotent. In one scene, he must beg Belle for assistance simply to stand. Instead of the menacing Chinese heathen pressing the pipe upon the innocent girl, the play depicts the enfeebled Jack tempted to smoke by either Belle or a team of silent Chinese women who serve the opium den. Getthore notes in his stage directions that the den girls are to be "in deep shadows . . . only their faces are lighted by the crown of burning punks

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<sup>66</sup> Billy Getthore, *Slaves of the Opium Ring* (Typescript, 1908), 5B. Sherman Theatre Collection, Southern Illinois University.

which is arranged in their heads [*sic*].”<sup>67</sup> In the particular scene, Belle appears wearing a “white lace house gown, negligee, bare neck and shoulders, hair down.”<sup>68</sup> This exotic vision of a band of crowned Asian harpies and their white female leader presents a formidable threat to white masculinity.

The mongrelization of the white race was at the heart of the plays in which white femininity comes under threat by Chinese aggressors. However, in Getthore’s work, the threat posed to white maleness by addiction seems to take on larger implication of social devolution. Jack’s dependence endangers the natural order that would seem incontrovertible in any other context. In a disintegration of essential structures, Jack almost kills his own sister while under the influence. As Belle blows opium smoke into his lungs, she orders him to execute Frank and his sister or watch her minions do it for him:

Belle: I am going to rob you of your senses. . . . You may not shoot Martin just yet, but you will when this opium paralyzes [*sic*] your senses of right and wrong.

Jack: Stop Belle, my God, my head is reeling, my throat burns for a draw of the drug like the throat of a drunkard for the last cup. Pray for me Kate. Pray, my sister. God help me; I am lost. Stop, Belle, stop; In Heaven’s name I beg you to stop; stop or give it to me; Give me the Pipe.<sup>69</sup>

The sororicide does not occur and the entire group is saved, but the scene demonstrates the drastic breakdown in the social order that drug use poses. Addiction could turn young

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 7F.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 8F.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 14F-15F.

men from protectors of the meek into assailants.

Thus, the male addict embodies a number of late century concerns expressed primarily through the social sciences. Max Nordau's work *Entartung or Degeneration* was translated into English in 1895 and came to dominate thinking in the era. "Degeneration" became shorthand for all types of perversity including criminality, homosexuality, prostitution, and decadence. Nordau additionally suggests that degenerates were especially susceptible to narcotic stimulation and vulnerable to addiction. There was perhaps no better setting to manifest Nordau's haunting fear of the West's fall into decay than the decrepit vault of the opium den. Scientists such as J.E. Chamberlain and E. Ray Lankester believed that devolution was also a possibility through a process of "cultural drift." Essentially, the spread of the unfit members of the race could cause general atrophy. Lankester specifically marked as unfit the people that flourished in London's underworld, a population that included the Chinese and opium addicts.<sup>70</sup> There was a popular belief that time spent in Chinatown could effectively transform a white person into a Chinese person. Stumbling from his bunk in a London opium den, Dickens's John Jasper observes that the den's hostess, a white woman, "has opium-smoked herself into the strange likeness of the Chinaman."<sup>71</sup> Smoking opium, as an ingestion of an oriental product, seemed a particularly potent way to cause such racial transformation.

Upon Jack's first entrance, the loutish sailor Big Tim asks him "Have you got enough hop under you skin to keep yer nerves steady?"<sup>72</sup> Jack's addiction is not simply a character

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<sup>70</sup> James Sturgis, "Britain and the New Imperialism," *British Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. C.C. Eldridge (London: Macmillan, 1984).

<sup>71</sup> Charles Dickens, *Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870) (Boston: Dana Estes & Company, 1913), 4.

<sup>72</sup> Getthore, 3B.

trait. Rather, it is attributed to his suffering from the pathological condition that James Beard famously labeled “neurasthenia.” The modern world’s growing industrialization and mechanization created a clerical class of workers that was relegated to a stationary life at a desk and subject to overstimulation by the bustling city. There was worry that men and women were suffering debilitating illness as a result of an overwhelming environment and a stifling disconnect with the natural world. This atmosphere could lead to effeminized men and masculine women, reversals that were explicit in the characters of Jack and Belle. In the preface to his 1881 work *American Nervousness*, Beard gives prominence to the growing drug problem in the country as a sign of the disease’s spread. The symptoms of neurasthenia included “susceptibility to stimulants and narcotics and various drugs, and consequent necessity of temperance.”<sup>73</sup> Jack is by no means an anomaly. The history of the representation of addiction on stage is filled with portrayals of the addict as a neurasthenic young man and this study examines the characterization in numerous iterations. At the time, the neurasthenic youth was a “line of business,” that included characters like Oswald in *Ghosts* and Konstantin in *Seagull*. Crumpled, gaunt, and turned inward, (Like Vsevolod Meyerhold as the original Konstantin or August Lindberg as Oswald in the early Swedish production of Ibsen’s play) these characters were part of a typology that was frequently used in portrayal of drug addicts.

Following Beard’s conception of the neurasthenic, Jack needs opium as a leveling agent to balance the deficiencies of systematic perturbation. Thus, his addiction is a symptom, rather than a disease itself. The fundamental cause of his intemperance was neither vice nor inheritance, but Jack’s inability to keep pace with modern urbanity.

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<sup>73</sup> George M. Beard, *American Nervousness: Its Causes and Consequences* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1881), ix.

Framed within the etiologies of nervousness, Getthore's portrayal obscured legitimate reformist investigations of drug use as a social ill for the sake of vilifying individual frailty of constitution. In the age in which the notion of the "self-made man" came to prominence, Beard's concept of nervousness was a way to pathologize weakness of character. His diagnosis, along with the social theories of Nordau, Lankester, and others all became a way "to enforce prescriptive normality and morality by the scientific demarcation of behavioural characteristics considered challenging to the *status quo*."<sup>74</sup> In this way, the den plays are a part of a larger movement that warned that the structures deemed essential for Anglo-American survival were under threat by the conditions of modern urban life.

As the agent of Jack's emasculation, Belle embodies the quintessential late-Victorian trope of the *femme fatale*, a figure that is also connected to concerns over degeneration. The *femme fatale* reemerged at the end of the century in endless iterations that scholars such as Rebecca Stott and Jennifer Hedgecock have explored in detail. Prominent versions of the dangerous seductress come from works like Wilde's *Salome* and the serialized novel *She* by Henry Rider Haggard, making her a common figure throughout popular culture. The *femme fatale*'s rise as a character was part of the discourse over the New Woman, who simultaneously embodied the successful institution of Progressive Era ideals and an unnatural challenge to the traditions of the patriarchy. As a *femme fatale*, Belle was a gross exaggeration of this liberated woman, augmented to enact a predatory nature that Mario Praz calls "sexual cannibalism."<sup>75</sup> Single, educated, and "having escaped the polar definitions of domestic or fallen woman" the *femme fatale* challenges "bourgeois ideology

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<sup>74</sup>Rebecca Stott, *The Fabrication of the Late-Victorian 'Femme Fatale': The Kiss of Death* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992), 18.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

in that she threatens to destroy the structure of family and obscure the definitions assigned to domestic women.”<sup>76</sup> Fittingly, Belle is neither a concubine nor a slave. August Strindberg would have qualified her as a “demi-femme.” Like his Miss Julie, Belle is a seductress who is not entirely a woman; her masculine position makes her unnatural.

Belle’s involvement with and potential dominance of Dong and his henchman represents her appropriation of phallogentric authority. The perceived effeminacy of the Chinese men who surround Belle enhance this reversal. Belle subsumes the male prerogative that is denied the queered Chinese immigrant, while also manifesting their perceived viciousness. She does so while maintaining a beguiling feminine sexuality. As Foxy says of Belle’s power over Jack, “She has him hypnotized - that woman wears the pants.”<sup>77</sup> Belle is Svengali-like, with her troubling femininity and dangerous beauty standing in for Svengali’s Semitic otherness. As designated by Rebecca Stott, the *femme fatale* “stimulates male sexual anxieties and . . . brings moral atrophy, degeneration, or even death to the male protagonist.”<sup>78</sup> Belle acts as an agent of death, marking people (typically young white men) for execution by placing a red poppy that she wears in her bosom on the intended victims. Dong’s henchmen then carry out the order. Thus, Belle might be more appropriately labeled a vampire, a fixture of the late-nineteenth century literature and a figure closely tied to both the *femme fatale* and the history of addiction.<sup>79</sup>

John Keats’s “Lamia” (1820), Sheridan LeFanu’s *Carmilla* (1871) and the female

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<sup>76</sup> Jennifer Hedgecock, *The Femme Fatale in Victorian Literature: The Danger and the Sexual Threat* (New York: Cambria Press, 2008), 3.

<sup>77</sup> Getthore, 6B.

<sup>78</sup> Stott, xi.

<sup>79</sup> The ways in which vampirism manifests the conditions of addiction are discussed in chapters 2 and 4 of this study.

harpies in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) symbolized female sexuality run wild. In such literature, female vampires were typically "assertive, voluptuous and seductive," representatives of an evolutionary regression away from proper Victorian womanhood. The figures portrayed an inner beast that was capable of easily trampling moral sensibilities.<sup>80</sup> Belle drains Jack of vitality, sapping him of strength and dismantling his moral compass. Her ability to control Jack once he is under the influence of opium and "paralyze" his sense of right and wrong to the extent that he could conceivably execute his own sister, is similar to the vampire's power to cloud the minds of her victims. As Jack describes it, "the woman holds some power over me - which I cannot shake off - I see no escape for us - but death - death for one or both of us."<sup>81</sup>

As the one who wears the poppy and uses the opium pipe as a weapon, Belle's vampirism is a manifestation of the drug itself. She represents the physical incarnation of opium's debilitating powers. Throughout the play, characters seem to conflate Belle and the drug she wields. While she presses the pipe on Jack, Frank denounces her: "Fiend! You despicable incarnation of all evil, may the hand of God forever be raised against you."<sup>82</sup> And later on, in the climactic scene, while again plying Jack with opium, Belle is called "fiend incarnate" by numerous characters. It is easy to confuse the target of such aspersions, as the characters seem to be denouncing the drug as much as the pusher. Stephen Kandall highlights both the iconographic and semantic traditions of investing illicit substances with female characterizations and sobriquets. Examples include the nude woman featured in

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<sup>80</sup> Stott, 57.

<sup>81</sup> Getthore, 8B.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 8F.

advertisements for Vin Mariani, or the myriad street names for drugs such as Cocaine Lil, Pink Ladies, and Mary Jane that are still in use today. In conflating Belle and the drug she supplies, her eventual death at the hands of Jack is a symbolic killing of his own addiction and, consequently, the reclamation of his masculinity.

Admittedly, *The Slaves of the Opium Ring* had a less significant stage life than a number of the other den plays discussed here. It received short runs in Chicago, Washington, and Boston. Written almost ten years after *The Queen of Chinatown* and *The Bowery After Dark*, Getthore's drama was one of the last of the full-length opium-den dramas that maintained the standard structure of the captured girl, middle-class hero, and traitor-to-the-race character. Its use of the *femme fatale* and vampire trope in order to portray the perils of the drug dealer and the preternatural appetite of the addict translates to later portrayals, especially the sensational representations of pushers and addicts that are part of the exploitation films of the 1930s. *Marihuana: The Devil's Weed* from 1936, has a *femme fatale* character similar to Belle at the center of a drug ring. Getthore's drama reveals the way that drug addiction was intrinsically connected to anxieties regarding racial degeneration and inverted gender norms as the nation continued to industrialize and both the addict populations and the drug trade continued to expand.

## **FROM YEN TO YUAN**

Urging support for an early version of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, Thomas H. Brents, the Republican delegate from the Territory of Washington, asked if the U.S. must "permit [the Chinese] to maintain in the midst of our populous cities their loathsome dens reeking

with lust, crime, and pestilence . . . debasing the morals of our youths?”<sup>83</sup> There was a general consensus that stemming the flow of Chinese immigrants to the country would also end the opium trade and lead to a reduction in the number of addicts.<sup>84</sup> This notion proved to be entirely faulty. In the 1870s, the U.S. imported 487,050 pounds of smokable opium. By the 1880s, it was 859,889 pounds. After the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act, in 1882, importation continued to increase, reaching its peak of 1,481,686 pounds in the first decade of the twentieth century.<sup>85</sup> These numbers broadcast a rocketing demand for the drug in its smokable form and calculations cover only the legally imported opium at a time when smuggling was rampant. As imports increased, so did profits, and with Chinese immigrants still the dominant figures in the traffic of non-medical opium, there were serious concerns about their economic empowerment. There was anxiety over the idea that the Chinese were essentially “achieving the American dream too quickly,” a process that was not effectively stemmed by anti-immigration legislation.<sup>86</sup> There was a fear that the Chinese were either shipping their amassed wealth back home to China’s coffers, or using it to enhance the clout of the Chinese immigrant in America.

Though a feature in almost every one of the opium-den plays, economics may be most prominent in *The King of the Opium Ring*, co-authored by Charles Blaney and Charles Taylor in 1899, and toured widely until at least 1907. Set in San Francisco, the play goes to great lengths to depict scenes with verisimilitude, offering its audiences in New York,

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<sup>83</sup> Diana L. Ahmad, *The Opium Debate and Chinese Exclusion Laws in the Nineteenth-Century American West* (Reno: University of Nevada, 2007), 75.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>86</sup> Johnson, 122-3.

Boston, Chicago, and Atlanta a peek at the hub of the “Wild West” and the gate to the Pacific.<sup>87</sup> Taylor directed the work himself and used a number of actual Chinese to play the supernumeraries, often suffering “Punch and Judy” style violence at the hands of white characters. The presence of the authentic Asians may have intrigued the East-Coast audiences to which the show primarily played. In 1899, eastern Chinatowns were growing, but the West was still considered the Chinese immigrant’s natural habitat with places like San Francisco boasting Chinese populations of 26,000.<sup>88</sup> The opening scene of the play is set on a wharf and calls for the Golden Gate Bridge to be visible in the distance along with “a revenue cutter at anchor. Three-masted merchantmen in tow of tug outward bound. Small sails etc. Practical Revenue cutter to pull on . . . A piling stringer, piece of wharf, Barrels, Bales, [freight] trucks [*sic*].”<sup>89</sup> Crowded with symbols of trade and travel, the *mise en scène* indicates the importance of commerce to the drama.

Blaney and Taylor’s play follows the fall of George Macey, the “King of the Opium Ring,” at the hands of his Chinese accomplice, Wah Sing. On the run from authorities, Macey and his girlfriend, Georgette, arrive at Sing’s underground opium den. Georgette is a woman of low beginnings who falls for Macey’s wealth and his promise of the high-life. Once she finds herself in the den, surrounded by the Chinese, she recants her actions and denounces the drug trade as having terrible international consequences:

This is a disgrace to civilization, and to think my education, my jewels, my  
very clothes were bought by the money these poor wretches squander in

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<sup>87</sup> Reviews for the show can be found in *The New York Times*, *Boston Daily Globe*, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, and *The Atlanta Constitution*, and we can be assumed that the show toured further.

<sup>88</sup> Census Bureau, “Population States and Territories,” *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900*, v.1, <https://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html> (accessed January 10, 2016).

<sup>89</sup> Charles Blaney and Charles Taylor, *King of the Opium Ring* (Typescript, Library of Congress, 1923), 2.

vice. Oh George, how low I've fallen . . . And I've sacrificed, for what? Harsh words, association with low people, yes even thieves, for you are robbing the United States Government.<sup>90</sup>

It is in this same scene that Sing claims the title of "King of the Opium Ring" from Macey. Sing declares to Macey that, "Your power is on the wane. I let you wield the scepter, for it flattered your vanity. Now you must bear the odium of your crime. I am your serf no longer. Today I am the power. You see the water that has passed the mill."<sup>91</sup> The warning is clear: the danger of doing business with the alien immigrant is that he will come to control you. Sing naturally seeks to cap his achievement with the appropriate status symbol, a white woman.

Sing is a rare deviation from of the typical menacing "Chinee." He is listed as a "Chinese Highbinder," but he represents a completely assimilated foreigner. He is well-educated, dressed in Western style clothes, and speaks without accent or dialect. Sing's embodiment of Western refinement alters his predatory nature. He does not pose the same threat to Georgette as the Chinese aggressors in *Queen of Chinatown* or *Slaves of the Opium Ring*. Standing over her incapacitated body, Sing reigns in his baser nature saying: "I break the laws made by civilized man, but I will not break the laws of their God."<sup>92</sup> His assimilated understanding of Western culture might postpone his advances, but his desire for a white woman is the result of his higher education. In soliloquy, he explains, "I could easily purchase for my wife the costliest Belle of the Orient, yet I would pay double her value

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 50.

could I call that American Beauty mine. Yet, I am ONLY a Chinaman, and should be devoid of all sentiment. So much for education. It has robbed me of piece of mind.”<sup>93</sup> Sing broadcast the inevitable danger of Chinese acculturation. Left savages, they will remain satisfied with their own kind, but invite them into the fold of American success, they will naturally adopt a taste for the superiority of all things Western.

Sing forces Macey to stand as witness to his marriage to Georgette. At the altar, she condemns her former lover, “A crown of gold transformed into a wreath of opium upon the brow of a convict. King of the Opium Ring, a monarch dethroned say I.”<sup>94</sup> The remark clarifies the overriding importance of the opium trade to the tragic circumstances. The play recasts Macey, the traitor-to-the-race character, and the gold-digging Georgette as the tragic figures in the work; they shift from villains to victims. Their materialism has placed them in a subservient position to their Chinese counterpart. Typically, the den-plays end with the death of the racial traitor, often at the hands of his Chinese partner (Hop Lee kills Dan Driscoll in *Queen of Chinatown*). However, Macey escapes such a fate in a whirling denouement in which they trick Sing into marrying a veiled Chinese woman who works for the U.S. Secret Service. For his treason, Macey receives a beating and he loses Georgette for good. At the heart of his ruin is a message about cheating the American dream. Performed for a primarily working-class audience, the play disparages those who attempt to rise above their place, especially by illicit means. It portrays the achievement of middle-class prosperity and stability as an appropriate goal for its characters. Accordingly, Georgette ends up with the reliable harbor-police captain, called Stout.

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 23. Emphasis original.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 85.

Reformers like Hamilton Wright made the economic enrichment of the Chinese via the opium trade a public issue. However, between 1870 and 1899 the United States Treasury collected nearly eighteen million dollars in tariffs on smokable opium, far more than they collected on medicinal opium.<sup>95</sup> A *New York Times* article discussing the first International Opium Congress that was held in Shanghai in 1909 and to which Wright was an ambassador, proposes that the income from the tariff had previously given legislators pause in outlawing opium smoking outright.<sup>96</sup> This being the case, *King of the Opium Ring* questions the price of involvement in this global economy and the price of North America's growing heterogeneity. The opium trade in particular represents the intersection of international politics, federal and local legislature, Progressive Era reform efforts, and concerns over national identity. As popular entertainment, the den plays provided a way for audiences to organize the complexities of this web into a digestible, if not reductive, order. Helped in part by the prejudices engendered by the popular opium-den plays, Wright and his advocates passed the 1909 Smoking Opium Exclusion Act, shuttering the majority of the opium dens in the country. By doing so, Wright set the stage for the Harrison Act of 1914, which outlawed recreational narcotic use of all kinds and criminalized addicts of all stripes.

### **THE DEN ADDICT: DEATH AND DEMENTIA**

Having examined the social, cultural, and economic implications of opium smoking at the turn of the century, it is important to look directly at the way that den plays formulate the conception of addiction as a psychological and medical condition. As discussed in the

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<sup>95</sup> Ahmad, 70.

<sup>96</sup> Allan Benson, "Nation Joins in a War to Stamp Out Opium," *New York Times*, Feb. 7, 1909.

introduction to this work, there are a number of explanations for addiction at the time, ranging from concepts of biological inheritance to the ideas of LeVinson that led to the creation of autoimmune treatments. However, the opium-den plays communicated a perception of addiction that was somewhat in contrast to these advanced considerations.

Appearing primarily between 1899 and 1911, the den plays never incorporate the inheritance concept into their plots. Doing so would excuse the Chinese predators of wrongdoing, holding the bloodline of the captured girl, fallen patriarch, or emasculated youth as the cause of their fall. Nor do the plays manifest disease concepts of addiction in any full-fledged form. There is no discussion of a medically sanctioned cure and treatment is left to the steeling of the addict's will against vice. Save for Jack's neurasthenia, the genre spends little time searching for a cause of addiction. The den plays do, however, demonstrate an interest in the end result of addiction. In formulating the dramatic results of their character's dependence, the playwrights rely on a range of beliefs rooted in the popular sciences, reform propaganda, and the theatrical conventions of earlier temperance dramas. These help establish the inevitable end of addiction as either death or madness.

When Bezzie of *The Queen of Chinatown* first discusses her addiction, she explains, "I smoke \$1.25 worth every day of my life. They give me three years."<sup>97</sup> Today, Bezzie's habit amounts to about \$25 a day, but it is hard to account for the street value of smokable opium in 1899, and we can imagine that it would be an even more expensive habit to maintain. The idea that the use of opiates inevitably led to death was popular at the time. Jarrow gives Mercedes, the girl who smokes for the entertainment of the slumming tour, a similar expiration date. In his memoirs from 1904, Chuck Connors details the story of Kitty Mock

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<sup>97</sup> Jarrow, 192.

Shue, a white woman whom he finds on her deathbed after a long battle with the opium habit. Her Chinese husband complains to Connors, “She too muchee dlink, an’ too muchee smoke opium. Now she makee die.”<sup>98</sup> Though Kitty survives, her husband shared the same understanding of addiction as Beezie, which is that death is the inevitable end to drug abuse. Billy Getthore actualizes this morbidity by using the red opium poppy as the mark of death upon Belle’s victims; the poppy literally kills people. Regular reports of suicide by drug overdose in the newspapers probably bolstered this belief, though those suicides were typically administered in the form of laudanum, opium pills, or injected morphine.

By the 1920s, there was a general consensus that “the long-term effects of opiates on various organ systems and tissues were fairly benign” and that the more likely explanation for most deaths linked to drug use at the turn of the century was poverty, starvation, unhygienic living, and the rampant spread of disease in the tenements.<sup>99</sup> However, at the turn, as Levinstein’s translated title suggests, people imbued drug use with an inherent morbidity. It was thought that the drug user was drawn towards death, having given up on life. In Freud’s limited writing on addiction, he labeled the addict’s pursuit of such ephemeral pleasure as the “death-drive” in that it “is neither in the service of human life nor in the service of the common good.”<sup>100</sup> In testing the human capacity for pleasure, there is a nihilistic shrugging off of responsibilities of growth, productivity, and personal progress; these endeavors were highly valued during the Progressive Era in which there was a firm belief in the perfectability of man. However, Freud did not introduce the concept

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<sup>98</sup> Chuck Connors, *Chuck Connors: Mayor of Chinatown* (New York: Richard K. Fox, 1904), no page.

<sup>99</sup> Caroline Jean Acker, *Creating the American Junkie*, 214.

<sup>100</sup> Rik Loose, *Subject of Addiction: Psychoanalysis and the Administration of Enjoyment* (London: Karnac Books, 2002), 62.

of the “death-drive” until 1920 with the publishing of his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and its implications are far more evident in the next generation of U.S. drug plays. Here, there are merely glimpses of an existential view of addiction, born of the moralist’s tendency to frame vice as intrinsically fatal.

While addiction’s existential features were vaguely present in the theatre, the connections between addiction and insanity have more discernable foundations. Rush’s eighteenth century treatise lists not only apoplexy and madness as potential results of dipsomania, but also proposes a drunkard’s asylum in which to treat the sufferers. The conflation of insanity and inebriety in terms of alcohol was well established in the nineteenth century. Amy Hughes notes that “Alcohol abuse became one of the most frequently cited reasons for sending individuals to lunatic asylums, second only to masturbation.”<sup>101</sup> Temperance narratives often end with characters falling into madness. George Cruikshank’s 1848 cautionary cartoon “The Bottle” contains eight plates that depict the ruination of a paterfamilias through drink. The series ends with the drunken father murdering his wife and ending up a “hopeless maniac,” confined to an asylum. Temperance plays follow suit.

The *delirium tremens* was an early-nineteenth century term that originally denoted the shaking of the hands due to alcohol withdrawal, but grew to signify a temporary episode of insanity. The representation of these fits became essential draws for the audiences of temperance dramas. Actors achieved great acclaim for their portrayal of these sensational scenes of mania that involved narrating their hallucinations and enacting fits of

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<sup>101</sup> Hughes, 57.

seizure.<sup>102</sup> In the late nineteenth century, the *locus classicus* of the convention is Émile Zola's novel *L'Assommoir* (*The Dramshop*) (1877), which made the reputation of actor Gil-Naza in his performance of Coupeau's *delirium tremens* in the stage version. A translation of the play by Charles Reade entitled *Drink* similarly made the career of actor Charles Warner in both Great Britain and the United States, traveling as far as Australia.<sup>103</sup> Prior to this, the performance of William H. Smith's *The Drunkard: Or, the Fallen Saved* from 1844, featured a famous depiction of the *delirium tremens*, and was one of the most popular North American melodramas of the mid-nineteenth century, perhaps second only to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Opium-den plays do not embrace this kind of spectacular presentation of addiction in their early incarnations throughout the 1890s. Of the den plays that I have located, none depict a scene of mania brought on by either taking the drug or its withdrawal before 1907.

The Copeland Brothers copyrighted *The Opium Fiend: A Four Act Sensational Western Drama* in 1908 and the play was part of their touring repertoire until the early 1920s.<sup>104</sup> Their small outfit covered primarily the Midwest.<sup>105</sup> Set in Dead Injun Gulch, Nevada on the cusp of a precipice, the play follows the undoing of the honest, though addled, John Hargraves. The villain of the work is Caleb Crow, Hargraves's friend and a fellow addict. Crow is after both Hargraves's gold mines and his daughter, Mary. Interestingly, Hargraves's addiction is so consuming that he is unable to work his own

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<sup>102</sup> Amy Hughes bases a chapter of her book on these scenes and the actors who portrayed them. Hughes, 46-48.

<sup>103</sup> Frick, 174. The play was subsequently brought to the North American stage by Dion Boucicault and Augustin Daly. D.W. Griffith also used it as a play-within-a-play-device in his film *The Drunkard's Reformation* (1909).

<sup>104</sup> I have only been able to confirm one of the brother's names. Edwin Lincoln Copeland also registered for copyright the plays *Her Soldier Boy* (1909), *The Burglar Boob* (1913), and *Tampico* (1916).

<sup>105</sup> *The Billboard* 20, no. 43 (Oct. 24, 1908): 13; *The Billboard* 32, no. 3 (Jan. 17, 1920): 22.

mine, which is apparently “the richest prospect in Nevada.”<sup>106</sup> Implicit is the potential threat to American commerce.

Crow stabs Hargraves and pins it on Mary. As he spirals out of control, enacting his evil plans from the confines of Lee Chow’s opium den, Crow slowly descends into madness. He is unable to flee due to his dependency on opium and once Lee refuses him the drug, Crow falls into a fit that features hallucinations of creeping animals and visions of the man he murdered. The scene is worth quoting at length:

Caleb: My God man don’t you see that I must have opium. I can feel my hair at the roots creeping, my eyes refuse to see, I can feel a thousand insects crawling all over me, my bones ache as though I were being torn to pieces limb from limb. Give me just a little, just a smell of it. Give me opium or I shall go crazy.

Lee: Go clazy, me no care.

Caleb: I’ll kill you (*starts and stops*)(*goes crazy*) Why kill why want a word [*sic*]. Hello John (*shakes imaginary hand*) Why (*laughs*) I didn’t see you. (*Violent*) But he wont give it to me. He wont give me opium. (*looks around*) Don’t look at me that way John. John. Those eyes they burn into my soul. . . . What’s that? (*staggers, screaming*) A green devil, with fire flaring out of his eyes and smoke out of his nose. No it’s a chinaman, it’s Lee Chow. He’s going to throw me over the precipice. No please don’t (*crouches back*) No don’t touch me (*Comes out of it . . .*) Not it ain’t a dream, its you.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> The Copeland Bothers, *The Opium Fiend: A Four Act Sensational Western Drama* (Typescript, Library of Congress, 1907), 10.

Caleb's mad scene matches closely the rantings that were part of Edward Middleton's fit of *delirium tremens* in Smith's *The Drunkard*. Middleton is the fallen patriarch of the play whose life spirals out of control due to his alcoholism. William Downton discovers him sleeping in a gutter. Middleton undergoes a paroxysm before trying to kill himself. He writhes in madness, battling imaginary snakes and seeing visions of the wife he abandoned:

Middleton: (On ground in delirium) Here, here, friend, take it off, will you—these snakes, how they coil round me. Oh! how strong they are—there, don't kill it, no, no, don't kill it, give it brandy, poison it with rum, that will be a judicious punishment, that would be justice, ha, ha! justice! ha, ha!

Downton: He does not know me.

Middleton: Hush! gently—gently, while she's asleep. I'll kiss her. She would reject me, did she know it, hush! there, heaven bless my Mary, bless her and her child—hush! if the globe turns round once more, we shall slide from its surface into eternity. Ha, ha! great idea. A boiling sea of wine, fired by the torch of fiends! ha, ha!<sup>108</sup>

The Copelands' inspiration is clear. Marjorie Williamson's one-act play *An Opium Den* (1910), has a similar mad scene in which the addict John Cawston raves while he "staggers up and down as if drunk - seems about to wreck the place - then goes to his bunk and throws lamp savagely on to floor, and falls down in a fit of hysterical weeping and groans and mutters curses in a maudlin state of collapse [*sic*]."<sup>109</sup> Like Middleton, Cawston is able

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>108</sup> W.H. Smith, *The Drunkard; or, the Fallen Saved* (New York: WM. Taylor and Co., 1850), 51.

<sup>109</sup> Marjorie Williamson, *An Opium Den* (Typescript, Library of Congress, 1910), 5.

to eventually free himself from the clutches of his addiction.

Hughes has detailed how important the spectacle of the *delirium tremens* was to the success of mid-century temperance drama. The audience viewed the body at the lowest point in its fall from grace, a revelation of that which “was being hidden from public view.”<sup>110</sup> Hughes finds ample proof of the effectiveness of these scenes to drive audiences to tears, if not to total-temperance.<sup>111</sup> A similar portrayal of the drug-wracked body of the addict might have had a comparable effect on the audience. However, I have been unable to locate reviews of *The Opium Fiend* or *The Opium Den* to provide information regarding audience reaction. What can be said is that by removing the captured girl from the narrative, the den dramas take a much more direct interest in the addict’s capacity for reform and redemption. The central conflict in the drama is not between a middle-class hero and a Chinese highbinder, but between the white male smoker and his own will. In plays like Williamson’s *An Opium Den*, Cawston survives his apoplexy through the help of his wife and the play stresses the power of the traditional family structure to defend against addiction, a theme we will see elsewhere.

It is surprising that it took until 1907 for madness to become a trope in drug plays when it was so popular in temperance drama as early as 1844. The inclusion of these mad scenes is a result of the growing awareness of the drug problem in the country. A 1910 article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* describes an addict suffering through withdrawal in the holding cell of the local jail. It notes, a “fellow, who but a few days before was steady-nerved and boastful is now but a cringing, crawling thing, with little resemblance to

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<sup>110</sup> Hughes, 48.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

manhood . . . How he begs for his “dope,” beating the cement of the cell with his forehead . . . the fellow works himself up to hysteria, throwing himself full length upon the flags and fairly groveling in his suffering.”<sup>112</sup> Such mad scenes became standard in portraying drug addiction in not only den dramas, but in the numerous propagandistic anti-drug plays concerning cocaine and morphine that begin appearing after 1909. Moving out of the Progressive Era the trope had staying power. Madness concludes both the 1933 film *Reefer Madness* and Darren Aronofski’s *Requiem for a Dream* from 2000 about heroin and amphetamine users.

Thus, the later den plays joined other forms of popular culture, as well as reform discourses and the rapidly changing sciences, in their discussion of drug addiction with the aim of drawing clear lines of normalcy. These forms and movements were working in concert (if not in unison) in the presentation of the addicted body as a physicalized incarnation of the consequences of abnormal behavior. These plays promote standards of discipline, will power, and moral order as defense against insanity, weakness, and chaos.

## **DEN REVIVALS**

Plays concerning opium dens or opium smoking were rare between 1911 and 1920. This is interesting considering that intense xenophobia persisted in the country even as the Chinese ceased to pose a threat through immigration or as an international power. Sax Rohmer’s serialized *Fu Manchu* stories about a Chinese mastermind working for world domination were wildly popular after their launch in 1913 and they contained many of the conventions found in the den plays. Chinese Villains abounded in Broadway thrillers of the

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<sup>112</sup> “Held in the Thrall by Morpheus,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, Nov. 27, 1910.

1910s and 1920s, and films of the 1930's like *The Bitter Tears of General Lee*, *The General Dies at Dawn*, and *Shanghai Express* all featured warlords and chinoiserie (set in China rather than the U.S.), but few of these portrayals involved drug use.

However, during Prohibition there was a resurgence of opium smoking as a recreation activity. This new batch of opium smokers was primarily a more affluent group, though, Courtwright notes that joining society's pleasure-seekers in taking up the pipe were "playboys, impresarios, show girls, high-class prostitutes, successful hustlers, and big-time gangsters."<sup>113</sup> As a result, there were a few opium-den plays written in the 1920s. These plays employ the opium den or similarly orientalized settings to explore addiction in ways that depart from earlier den dramas. I would like to discuss two plays in particular from this later period. The first is *The Shanghai Gesture* (1926), which was a widely produced work by a known playwright. The second is *The Opium Pan* (1925), a play by an amateur California playwright that may have never received a staging. In one, the playwright uses drug addiction to signal the need for a regulatory social agenda. In the other, there is a seemingly genuine investigation of addiction as a medical and social condition, moving away from the mystification of social factors.

John Colton's wrote *The Shanghai Gesture* as the follow-up to his successful play *Rain*. The latter was an adaptation of a Somerset Maugham story about a prostitute and the missionary who falls for her. *The Shanghai Gesture* similarly plumbs the risqué. The play is set in the opulent Shanghai brothel of Mother Goddamn, a Chinese madam of impressive political clout, who was originally played by Mrs. Leslie Carter on tour and Florence Reed in the New York premiere. In the play, Mother Goddamn has invited a number of powerful

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<sup>113</sup> Courtwright, 84.

European businessmen and politicians to her Chinese New Year's celebration. Included in the party is Sir Guy Charteris, a British executive of high repute. Also present at the brothel that evening is the Japanese Prince Oshima and his love interest, the impetuous and well-named, Poppy.

Goddamn reveals in sensational style that Charteris was her lover twenty years ago. Not only did he jilt her after promising marriage, but he robbed her, sold her into the sex trade, and went off to marry an English woman. Goddamn has arranged the entire evening so that she can enact her long-awaited revenge. In a slightly convoluted twist, Goddamn and Charteris's wife had both borne daughters at the same time, though the wife had died in childbirth. In a desperate state, the young Goddamn switched the babies to ensure that her own daughter was raised in luxury, while she raised the other daughter in penury, keeping her in the confines of Shanghai's "Blood Town" slum. Charteris is appropriately devastated by the revelation. However, Goddamn realizes that the daughter that she left to be raised as a lady is the profligate Poppy, who has been debasing herself with outrageous behavior, alcohol, and opium. Though Goddamn hopes to reconcile with her daughter, Poppy is so infuriating that Goddamn throws her from a high balcony. Goddamn is left to mourn, bringing "the curtain down to a threnody of sobs and lamentations," as noted by Brooks Atkinson.<sup>114</sup> Her grand revenge scheme backfires and she is denied her long-awaited triumph. Similar plotlines appear in a number of other narratives concerning addiction. In the silent film *West of Zanzibar* (1928) starring Lon Chaney, a man believes he has captured the love child of his wife and her lover, and turns her into a dope fiend as an

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<sup>114</sup> Brooks Atkinson, "Melodrama of the Orient," *New York Times*, Feb. 2, 1926.

act of retaliation. Only at the end does he discover that the girl is his own daughter.<sup>115</sup>

Colton's play ran for over two hundred performances at Broadway's Martin Beck Theatre. It was popular enough to warrant the marketing of a record with a truncated version of the play voiced by the original cast. In listening to it, one realizes that Mother Goddamn is the tragic figure of the piece and that the great accomplishment of Colton's writing is engendering sympathy for her character once she reveals how she suffered on account of Charteris's duplicity. Most reviewers snubbed the work as crude. Atkinson thought the play "thin" and "highly embellished," with characters culled from the "idiom of the melodramatic stage."<sup>116</sup> Colton depicts in the flesh all the prurience that earlier opium-den plays veiled with suggestion. A white girl is stripped naked and auctioned off to a mob of filthy Chinese "junk-men" who operate floating brothels; Asian prostitutes are plainly displayed in bamboo cages; and the mixed race couple of Poppy and Oshima are physically intimate on stage. The play's content was so lascivious that the critic for the *Wall Street Journal* felt compelled to prompt his review with an apology for covering what he thought was "lurid, but ingenious."<sup>117</sup> By setting the play in Shanghai, rather than the Bowery or San Francisco, Colton had more license to portray these scenes of debauchery. In addition, Goddamn's customers are British imperialist, rather than Americans. This removed the miscegenation to a safe distance from the U.S. audience. Earlier den plays had stopped short of depicting the consummation of interracial relationships, signaling it only through metaphors of physical violence and forced drug abuse. *The Shanghai Gesture* portrays the

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<sup>115</sup> Similar plotlines abound in instances concerning members of the medical profession whose children become addicts. These are discussed in the second chapter.

<sup>116</sup> Atkinson, "Melodrama of the Orient."

<sup>117</sup> *The Wall Street Journal*, "Shanghaied," Feb. 3, 1926.

result of miscegenation between Goddamn and Charteris in *Poppy*. By making the relationship between an Chinese woman and white man, Colton could exploit the long-standing fetishization of Asian women. The play is a depiction of what happens when men taste of the forbidden fruit.

*Poppy's* debauches, too, are radical compared to the earlier iterations of female drug users in den plays. Her consumption is ravenous. Not only does she drink alcohol and smoke opium, but she is a self-declared nymphomaniac with inexhaustible sexual appetites. Her debasement is even more troubling in that her behavior resembles childlike impudence, rather than hardened criminality.

*Poppy*: [*Screaming.*] I want a pipe - I tell you! [*Stamps her foot.*] I will have a pipe.

*Oshima*: A pipe will make you go to sleep - I don't want you to go to sleep....

*Poppy*: Pipe never makes me go to sleep - makes me wilder, you'll see....

*Poppy* further reveals that *Oshima* is not her first sexual experience and that she anticipates "lots more" after he goes.<sup>118</sup> *Poppy's* corruption is all encompassing. She declares with pride that she "Love[s] everything - wine - men - drugs! Oh, I am a bad one... Yes, I'm a bad one! That's what I want to be! - Want to live my life like a man!"<sup>119</sup> This desire to be a man again brings to mind Strindberg's "demi-femme," who is not completely a woman and thus has no proper place in nature. Some reviewers interpreted *Poppy* as a "flapper carried to her extreme limits,"<sup>120</sup> the embodiment of the Jazz Age's self-destructive decadence. However, Colton script is far more specific in its explanation of *Poppy's*

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<sup>118</sup> John Colton, *The Shanghai Gesture* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1926), 186.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>120</sup> *The Wall Street Journal*, "Shanghaied," Feb. 3, 1926; The same notion is expressed in *Variety*, "Shanghai Gesture," Feb. 3, 1926.

appetites. Colton makes it clear that it is her “half caste” status - her Asian mother and British father - that has left her so imbalanced. The impossibility of successful interbreeding is explicitly at the heart of the play. The actress who played Poppy, Mary Duncan, had dark features, a prominent nose, and a small mouth that suited her for ethnic roles. For instance, Duncan went on to play Zeleekha, the harem girl, in John Francis Dillon’s lost 1930 film *Kismet*. Her ethnic ambiguity was important to Poppy’s characterization as she could appear white, with hints of ethnic difference that would not draw attention until her background was revealed at the close of the third act.

**[Fig. 3, Image of Mary Duncan as Poppy.]**

It is not simply Asian-ness that imbues Poppy with demonic impulsiveness. Goddamn was not naturally debauched as an Asian woman. She makes a point of bragging about her purebred Manchurian ancestry and aristocratic upbringing. Her position as a madam was forced upon her. Witnessing Poppy’s impropriety, Goddamn declares, “She is like leprosy - like some foul disease - some unclean animal.”<sup>121</sup> And upon final reflection of Poppy’s death, Goddamn declaims Colton’s thesis:

Feye! - Manchu and English - they do not mix! In one body - four things fight -  
two minds - two souls - I knew it was the law! But I would not have it so! - I  
thought my hands the law! But I would not have it so!<sup>122</sup>

Thus, Poppy’s drug use is the result of an inherent lack of harmony; something caused by the impurity of her blood. A *New York Times* review of the touring production notes that Poppy’s body, which was prominently revealed in a skimpy dress while she was alive, is

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<sup>121</sup> Colton, 189.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.

covered with a white shawl in death, “symbolical of innocence [*sic*].”<sup>123</sup> This staging suggests that Poppy went to her demise unsullied. Her end was not her own fault, but the inevitable result of her parents’ sins. Thus, the play expresses the familiar fears of degeneration and racial suicide that drove earlier plays to rail against whites mixing with Chinese. The idea had resonance: Josef von Sternberg turned the sordid plot into a successful film in 1941. In the film, Gene Tierney plays a sanitized version of Poppy, who is addicted to alcohol and gambling. Her penchant for opium is excised for the sake of decency, but her mixed blood remains indefensible.

Poppy’s drug use is a way to signal the depth of her depravity. It is not a careful manifestation of the scientific understanding of addiction. That being said, if one attempts to disentangle Colton’s depiction of addiction from his racial prejudice, it becomes evident that Poppy’s drug abuse is due to two interacting factors: environmental influence and inborn tendency. Much as it functioned in the earlier den-plays at the turn of the century, the den topography is essential in enabling Poppy’s behavior. Mother Goddamn’s lush and suggestive brothel proposes in its architecture the potential for limitless consumption, a hallmark of Orientalism. The atmosphere of the play is heavy with suggestions of an inexhaustible carnality and overblown extravagance. The titles of the different settings such as “The Gallery of the Laughing Dolls,” “The Grand Red Hall of Lily and Lotus Roots,” and, finally, “The Little Room of the Great Cat,” denote Colton’s intention for the stage design. This environmental stimulus works in concert with the idea that addiction or the compulsion for substance abuse can be an inherent trait, if not an inherited one. There is a presumption that Poppy’s wild behavior is due to her predetermined genetic makeup, that

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<sup>123</sup> “New Plays in the Provinces,” *New York Times*, Dec. 20, 1925.

emerges regardless of class or upbringing. Poppy's careful aristocratic rearing does little to stifle her natural urges. The atmosphere of the den/brothel unleashes her predilections. Though clouded by reductive assumptions regarding racial determinacy, *The Shanghai Gesture* signals a developing understanding of the causes of addiction.

The most direct treatment of addiction within the opium-den genre comes from an unlikely source. Clara Shepherd Reid was an amateur playwright and society woman from Stockton, California. She registered her play, *The Opium Pan*, with the Library of Congress in 1925, though there is no evidence of the work ever being produced. This is unfortunate, as it is striking in its originality. Analyzing an unproduced work has its limitations, but the impulse to write the play is evidence of a growing desire to understand the phenomenon of addiction as something more than the result of an individual's flawed moral compass or the fatalistic result of interbreeding. Reid might have had reformist intentions for the work. There is evidence that she was closely involved with local social organizations and wrote plays for church productions.<sup>124</sup> *The Opium Pan* is designed to educate, an endeavor that results in slightly stilted, let alone contrived dialogue. Her central point is the need for sympathy for the addict, rather than finger pointing or chastisement along moral lines. In fact, she seems to be carrying out earlier Progressive Era ideologies that sought to investigate the causes of social ills, but she does so without falling into sensationalism or moral absolutism that leads to mystification. Her play still exhibits elements of exoticism and eroticism along Orientalist paradigms, but the focus is squarely on the experience and causes of addiction.

Reid's play opens with a pantomime set in a dingy opium den in China. A young

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<sup>124</sup> Max Binheim, Ed., *Women of the West* (Los Angeles: Publishers Press, 1928), 77; "Personals," *Woodland Daily Democrat*, Jan. 8, 1934: 3; *Berkeley Daily Gazette*, April 7, 1928.

addict kills a white opium pusher, thus freeing himself and another young man from the dealer's control. It is never explicitly stated, but we are to assume that one of the young addicts grows up to be Edgar Randall. The next time we see him, Edgar is newly married to a young flapper named Eloise and the two of them are on their honeymoon to San Francisco. There, they tour the city with the dilettante Herbert Meadows and his wife, Judith. The two are part of the city's smart set, and they spend their time accumulating fashionable Chinese curios and attending parties. While at a Chinese shop, Eloise purchases a large opium pan, which would have originally been used in the process of refining the crude product into a smokable substance. Significantly, the opening pantomime features a similar pan, tended by a "coolie" who stirs the bubbling sludge. Edgar bristles at the way his friends obsess over all things Oriental, but he only reveals his past addiction and the reason for his disdain to Herbert. Back at Herbert and Judith's house, with the pan center-stage and the set dominated by their abundant Chinese *objets d'art*, the overwhelming visual and environmental stimulus rekindles Edgar's cravings for opium.

The second act features a party at Herbert's house. The group is drunk and dressed in Chinese robes, save for Edgar. In a moment alone with Herbert, Edgar seethes:

What kind of friend are you, anyway, to create an atmosphere like this for me? Knowing what you do, can't you see that you are distilling constantly that subtlest of all poisons -- suggestion? Can't you see that you are crippling my resistance; that the old weakness is beckoning fiercely in all this? You know how one's strength of purpose is shattered after one has once been a slave, especially when he had to make a superhuman effort to break the

bonds.<sup>125</sup>

This two-pronged hook of atmosphere and suggestion relate Reid's work back to other den plays, including the *Shanghai Gesture*, that draw attention to the *mise en scène* of the den as weakening the will. It also harkens back to Svengali's use of suggestion that was so popular at the *fin de siècle*. However, Reid re-purposes markers of Orientalism and the den topography for the explicit aim of explaining drug addiction. Embedded in Edgar's complaint is the idea that addiction is never cured or overcome, it is a malady with which one must constantly struggle.

The tipping point for Edgar comes in the form of a surprising scene in which the partygoers, still robbed in Chinese silks, decide to re-enact the experience of an opium dream. Equipped with opium pipes that Herbert had acquired as props, they lie on large pillows and pretend to nod off into oblivious dreams. An actor named Gerald Adams enhances the re-staging by narrating an opium dream for the would-be smokers. Adams's retelling is an ecstatic and erotic description of the smoker's ascension to the throne of the "Daughter of Heaven" with the help of the Moon. Passing through "intoxicating vistas of handmaids clothed in pearly dew drops imprisoned in a mesh of gold," the dreamer eventually surrenders himself to a "joy almost too tremendous to be borne, bliss that almost kills" on the "palpitating breast of All Perfection [*sic*]." <sup>126</sup> Adams's long monologue is highly sexualized, depicting the effects of the drug as analogous to a woman's embrace. This intriguing moment has hints of De Quincey in its depiction of travel and landscapes embroidered with riches. De Quincey borrows from William Wordsworth's epic poem *The*

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<sup>125</sup> Clara Shepherd Reid, *The Opium Pan* (Typescript, Library of Congress, 1925), 18.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-22.

*Excursion* to express the vision of cities “far sinking into splendor - without end!” made of “fabric it seemed of diamond and of gold,” similar to Adams’s landscapes.<sup>127</sup> Yet, De Quincey typically sunk into the “chasms and sunless abysses” of his hallucinations, and ascension always escaped him even after waking from his dreams.<sup>128</sup> Nor does De Quincey depict his visions with such candid reference to erotic love. Thus, Reid has provided a dramatization more directly culled from a popular conception of drug use as linked to sensuality. This connection had been especially shaped by the legacy of earlier opium-den plays.

The performance by Adams is enough to push Edgar over the edge. After a final appeal to his young wife for help goes unanswered, he gives in. A young Chinese girl brings him the drug. She is dressed in traditional Chinese garb and seems to provide the finishing touches of the suggestive atmosphere. Once Eloise returns, Edgar declares his allegiance to his opium habit. However, she rises to the occasion, providing the sympathy she early seemed lacking, and convinces Edgar that she can help him kick his addiction. In order to supply him with the proper foundation, Eloise must confess her past superficiality. “I was being tempted to be frivolous, shallow, pleasure-loving. If you went down, so did I. I am prepared to manage *my* weakness, dear. Won’t you try to conquer yours? Oh, promise me Edgar . . . I am here to help you. Husband, let me fight it with you.”<sup>129</sup> Eloise foregoes the excitement of the fast life that they have experienced in San Francisco for the sake of middle-class conformity.

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<sup>127</sup> Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater, and Suspiria de Profundis* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1864 (1822)), 115; De Quincey lifts the quotation from William Wordsworth’s *The Excursion*, Book 2, Lines 839-841, first published in 1814.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 110-111.

<sup>129</sup> Reid, 35-36. Emphasis in original.

In this way, Reid stresses the importance of a stable family foundation in order to maintain normalcy and control. This stability, not surprisingly, requires the subservience of the female to male needs. Eloise's final lines attest to her adoption of traditional family values. "It took this tragedy to teach me the meaning of love. It will all come right, dear one . . . I understand at last. Now you are my beloved child as well as my adored husband. Shall we fight it out together?"<sup>130</sup> She calls into existence an addict-subjectivity for Edgar that allows him to retain his patriarchal position while simultaneously embodying the childlike helplessness that is innate in addiction. By adopting traditional mores of family and excising the negative stimulus of outside cultures, Edgar's addiction can lie dormant.

Within the genre of the opium-den play, Reid's approach is novel. It is the first den play to introduce the unsettling possibilities of relapse. Relapses by their very nature trouble the attempts of the dramatist to bring finality to a play, as the addict's regression is always a possibility. Reid is ahead of her time in other ways as well. It is not until the graduate work of Bingham Dai in the 1930s in Chicago, that there was a focus on social stimulus as an explanation for addiction.<sup>131</sup> To Dai, addiction was a social behavior, "one conditioned by the individual's relation to his or her social surroundings."<sup>132</sup> Though Dai's interpretation of addiction is far more complex than the one Reid poses, Dai's work best illustrates how social environments enable drug use. Thus, for Reid, there is no menacing Chinese individual as in so many of the other den plays. Rather, it is the danger of seduction by the outside world that leads people astray, leaving a potentially permanent mark. Reid

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>131</sup> Dai's work was published in 1937 as *Opium Addiction in Chicago* (Commercial Press, 1937).

<sup>132</sup> Acker, *Creating the American Junkie*, 195.

makes natural use of the conventions of the den play to express a new etiology of addiction, while pairing it with more traditional cures of domestic stability.

Written at a time when plays and films about drug use proliferated, Reid and Colton's works stand out in their late employment of conventions of den topography and Orientalism as related to drug use. They do so while bringing the opium-den play up-to-date with contemporary concerns and theatrical practices. The fact that one was wildly popular and the other is unknown is a reflection of, among other things, the limited interest in understanding addiction outside the context of the sensational. Colton demonizes British imperialist with secret pasts within a *mise-en-scène* of fantastical and prurient sumptuousness. Reid urges sympathy for an upper-middle class husband, whose life and position are unremarkable. Edgar could have been a member of any community. By the 1920s, Poppy's downfall would have been more entertaining than Edgar's salvation.

What is worthy of consideration is that, more than twenty years after the debut of plays like *Queen of Chinatown*, opium-den plays were still being written for both Broadway stages and local amateur theatres. The conventions of the sub-genre enabled evolution and adaptation as time went on. However, the requisite Orientalism limited the possibility of exploring addiction beyond certain narrative fixtures of xenophobia and racial determinism. Moving into the 1910s, opium smoking as both a practice and a cultural obsession wanes and attention shifts to a different set of narcotics, each with their own symptoms and corresponding addict stereotypes. Many of the conventions founded in the opium-den plays resurface in the next generation of drug plays, but the removal of the Chinese figures from the dramas, and therein the elements of xenophobia and mysticism, drastically alter the plays' scenarios. Playwrights craft new villains and new paradigms of

addiction that they incorporate into dramatic schema as more and more drug users appear on the nation's stages.

## CHAPTER TWO

*The Prohibition Play*

“I am sure I am right in fearing that in the morphia hunger and consumption of one of the greatest evils of the future is looming darkly above the horizon of society. Warnings against this poison of body and soul cannot be too solemn or too strong.”

- E.P. Roe, *Without a Home* (1881)

The Smoking Opium Exclusion Act of 1909 shuttered U.S. opium dens and curbed the practice in the country. However, the narcotic pharmacopeia (including morphine, heroin, cocaine, and chloral hydrates) was still almost completely unregulated. Doctors prescribed these substances freely and over-the-counter patent medicines included them in their (undisclosed) recipes. At the same time, a growing black market provided access to narcotics when more legitimate sources were unavailable. It is in the first decade of the twentieth century that the drive for national regulation of narcotics gains significant momentum. Reports detailing the destructive capacities of drug addiction increased and claims regarding the size of the addict population in the country escalated. A 1906 article from the *Chicago Daily Tribune* by a local priest warned, “Seventy thousand Chicagoans are laboring under the curse of cocaine. Thirty thousand young boys and girls in the city are being dragged down to the lowest depths of depravity and infamy by the most terrible drug ever invented.” The article goes on to claim, “in certain schools, every room down to the kindergarten grades has its quota of cocaine users.”<sup>1</sup> Reformers and reporters gave similarly overblown estimations in other urban centers. When federal legislation did arrive in the form of the Harrison Act of 1914, it permanently altered both the national policy

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<sup>1</sup> Father Haslam, “Cocaine the curse of Chicago...” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Feb. 25, 1906.

towards narcotics and the way in which the nation treated its drug users. The Harrison Act officially criminalized addiction and placed the addict firmly in the position of deviant. As Susan Zieger notes, it is in the twentieth century that the “history of addiction really becomes the history of drug control.”<sup>2</sup>

This chapter examines the way that the theatre and, secondarily, film manifested the national calls for drug reforms. The theatre helped to publicize new narratives regarding addiction that typically worked in service to the growing prohibition efforts. Once established in the Progressive Era, these new narratives continue to evolve into the 1920s and 30s; in some instances, they survive today. I categorize the works covered in this chapter under the heading of “prohibition plays,” marking them as emblematic of efforts to assert regulatory influence on national thinking and behavior. The prohibition play served to cement in the national imaginary the threat of drug addiction to family stability and individual autonomy. Addiction represented not only loss of self-control, but a self-indulgence and hedonism that could grind the gears of national progress to a halt. Much like the alcohol temperance plays of the nineteenth century, the prohibition play was particularly connected to the formation of middle-class identity, though it is not restricted to this socioeconomic group. The prohibition play posed drug addiction as an outcome of deviation from national norms and promoted those same norms as protection against the defect of addiction.

Jacques Derrida envisions the regulation of the pharmacopeia as having extraordinary connotations. He claims,

By means of this law, at once supplementary and fundamental, these institutions protect the very possibility of the law in general, for by

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<sup>2</sup> Zieger, 11.

prohibiting drugs we assure the integrity and responsibility of the legal subject, of the citizens and so forth. There can be no law without the conscious, vigilant, and normal subject, master of his or her intentions and desires. This interdiction and this law are thus not just artifacts like any other: they are the very condition of possibility of a respect for the law in general in our society.<sup>3</sup>

The addicted individual, lacking stability and the capacity for moderation, undermines the possibility of rule of law at its very foundations. Regulations of narcotics establish assurances of a population that is capable of adhering to the strictures that define the nation as an institution. Thus, at the heart of the prohibition play is the assertion that drug use endangers the continued existence of U.S. society.

In communicating the importance of self-making, self-control, gender compliance, and family centrality, prohibition plays do not follow a single, paradigmatic dramaturgy. Rather, portrayals are widely heterogeneous in aesthetic, genre, and ideological underpinnings. For many of the works featured here, form follows content, and the style of the drama depends on its aim. Some of these plays are deliberately propagandistic in nature, urging specific legal changes. Others plays are in the form of melodramas, “problem plays,” suspenseful crime dramas, or evidence of the growing allegiance to theatrical realism in the country. Finally, some of the plays examined here are examples of lurid works of exploitation, appearing primarily in the 1930s. In all of these formats, the prohibition play offers interdictions against drug use that created a complex, though damning, image of the addict. The “prohibition play” as a category pullulates throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century, with diminished existence in later decades. Throughout, these plays enact ideologies of prohibition that encapsulate the intertwined social, socioeconomic, political, philanthropic, and ethical dogmas that wrestled for

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<sup>3</sup> Derrida, “The Rhetoric of Drugs,” 230.

supremacy during the Progressive Era.

Much of this chapter focuses on a ten-year period between 1909 and 1919 in which there is an explosion of plays and films that feature drug addicts. I refer to this period of proliferation as the “Harrison Era,” signaling the centrality of the Harrison Act and the controversies that stemmed from its institution to this history. This significant federal legislation went hand in hand with growing temperance regulations such as the Webb-Kenyon Act of 1913 that restricted the shipment of liquor between states. In many ways, the Harrison Act was a trial run for the Volstead Act and the nation’s experiment with alcohol prohibition. The Harrison Era, as I define it, begins in 1909 with growing lobbying efforts for drug reform that entered the public sphere through numerous channels, including that of the theatre. After its original passing in 1914, there was intense controversy and negotiation regarding the law’s actual reach. The wrangling came to a head in 1919 with the consequential Supreme Court decision in *Webb et al v United States* that solidified the parameters of the law. The court offered a severe interpretation of the law that effectively instated full prohibition of any non-medical narcotic use and officially criminalized addiction in all forms. The ruling defined U.S. drug policy for nearly a century after its was handed down. Only with the recent decriminalization of marijuana in certain states has the country seen a slackening of drug laws since the 1919 decision.

In order to fully plot the evolution of the prohibition play, I begin my investigation by identifying an important “first” in the history of drug plays that predates the Harrison Era. Haddon Chambers’s *John-a-Dreams* from 1895 was the first play staged in the U.S. that centered on a drug-addict character. Both the British and American productions demonstrate the growing impulse to consider the addict as a valuable character in drama.

Investigation then moves to the start of the Harrison Era and Tully Marshall's 1909 performance in Clyde Fitch's *The City*. Marshall delivered what became the archetypal performance of a male drug addict, originating a performative repertoire that still exists today. From there, I move to the heart of the Harrison Era and the negotiations over the medical profession's connection to addiction in plays such as *Hop Head* (1912) and *The Needle* (1915). Exploration then shifts specifically to representations of the female addict. This includes Henry Bisson's *Madame X* (1909) (which established a prototype for female addicts just as Fitch's play had done for the male addict the same year) and Pendleton King's *Cocaine* (1917). By comparing these two works, I highlight how a shifting dramaturgy in the country altered the composition of the stage-addict.

Advancing from the Harrison Era, this chapter proceeds chronologically to discuss plays and films of the 1920s and 30s. According to Caroline Jean Acker and David Courtwright, there is a significant shift in addict identity after the Harrison Era, and these later plays and films reflect this shift. Representations on the stage and screen intimately tied drug use to crime, both because the organized syndicates controlled the black markets and because dominant scientific theories of the period connected addiction to innate criminal psychosis. It is in the 1930s that anti-drug campaigns reach a fever pitch, creating some of the most troubling and hyperbolic images of addicts, primarily in film. This persists until the start of the Second World War, at which point attention to drug addicts dissipates.

Extending the work of the first chapter, I examine the way the theatre communicates conceptions of addiction founded in the medical and social sciences. Throughout the varied history of the prohibition play, the roots of addiction remain ambiguous. Both medically sanctioned authorities and popular pundits continued to

discuss addiction as both a disease and as the result of individual failings. This contradiction remains, yet performances rarely endorse a clear cause for addiction. The result is that popular entertainment does not provide a single explanation for drug dependence, but a set of ideas that include theories of environment, inheritance, and the importance of a fortified will against modernity's degenerative forces. Plays engage these explanations individually, or, more often, in tandem, blurring clear lines of attribution.

### **EARLY INCARNATIONS: RIVALING THE FALLEN WOMAN**

Charles Frohman produced *John-a-Dreams* at New York's Empire Theatre in 1895.

Frohman had purchased the rights from Herbert Beerbohm Tree, who had premiered the play at his Haymarket Theatre in London a year earlier. The author, Haddon Chambers, was Australian born and London based. Thus, his play is decidedly British in the way it articulates class and formulates drug use along clearly De Quincean lines. Concerning an aristocrat with a penchant for drinking laudanum (just like De Quincey), the play is not wrapped up in Progressive Era politics related to the urban problem of drug abuse or quack doctors that are so typical of reform plays after the turn of the century. However, *John-a-Dreams* represents an early attempt to fit the drug addict into the moralistic and socially minded framework of the "problem play." With the arrival of Ibsen and the growing popularity of playwrights such as George Bernard Shaw and Eugene Brieux, social activism and the theatre became formally intertwined. Thus, Chambers's forgotten play is important as both as the first attempt to incorporate the troubling figure of the drug addict into this new model and as a part of the growing debate over the direction of the theatre.

*John-a-Dreams* concerns a love triangle between the beautiful Kate Cloud, Harold

Wynn, and Harold's brutish college friend, Sir Hubert. Kate is a successful singer, living in society, while hiding her past as a prostitute. Harold, whom Tree played in the London premiere, has begun taking opium in an effort to write inspired love poetry. He is the "John-a-Dreams" of the title, a reference to Hamlet's line that bemoans his impotence in that he is "Like a John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause, And can say nothing."<sup>4</sup> Kate promises herself to Harold and admits her past transgressions. Harold, too, divulges his secret and eventually promises that he will abstain from his vice. When Sir Hubert learns that he has been bested in love, he poisons Harold's brandy with opium, throwing him into a potentially fatal faint. At the last moment, Kate and Harold are reunited and Hubert is left to row off into the moonlight, ostensibly to his death. The lovers sail off across the Mediterranean to begin a new life.

Early reviews of the British production point out the novelty of an addict character. A *National Observer* review from 1894 refers to Chambers's frenetic hero as "unhackneyed and somewhat daring."<sup>5</sup> However, what drew more attention, and a decent amount of opprobrium, was Kate's status as a fallen woman. Reviews and editorials compared the play to Arthur Pinero's *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, which premiered in 1893. Both plays depict women with shady pasts trying to fit into high society. Beyond this thematic connection, the same actress who played the tainted Paula Jarman in Pinero's work played Kate in *John-a-Dreams*. Mrs. Patrick Campbell received high marks for her performance in Chambers's play and for her ability to distinguish Kate from her portrayal of the "vivacious Mrs. Tanqueray." However, there was a profound fear that the characters signaled a new

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<sup>4</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, Act II, Scene 2.

<sup>5</sup> *National Observer*, Nov. 17, 1894.

(and unwanted) pattern on the English stage.<sup>6</sup>

Tree must have expected the controversy, perhaps welcomed it. When a particularly livid critic who went by the pseudonym “X.Y.Z” described Kate as a “reclaimed harlot” and Harold as “an opium-drinking sot,” both Chambers and Tree came to the defense of the work in the newspapers.<sup>7</sup> Tree skirted the personal attacks that some leveled at his acting in favor of questioning the effects of such criticism on “the freedom of the thinking community - which in the best interest of art should always remain untrammelled.”<sup>8</sup> He chose to frame the argument in terms of artistic expression and free speech. The general dispute continued, reaching heights with Shaw’s *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* in 1902, another fallen-woman play that also made its way to the United States.

All in all, the London production was a success for Tree and Chambers. Tree was to embark on a highly publicized tour of the U.S. just after the play’s closing and it was announced in the *New York Times* that *John-a-Dreams* would be part of his touring repertoire.<sup>9</sup> It seems the script made the trip overseas with Tree, but he chose to sell the rights to Frohman. Tree’s performance in London had received mixed reviews and he might have anticipated that a play about a courtesan and a dope fiend was too provocative for the North American audiences who were thought to be more puritanical than the English. It is worth noting that Tree remounted *John-a-Dreams* on his return to London in April of 1895 and followed it with another work by Chambers, *Tyranny of Tears*, which proved to be the

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<sup>6</sup> *The Saturday Review*, Nov. 10, 1894, 507.

<sup>7</sup> “The Modern Society Play,” *London Times*, Dec. 5, 1894.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *New York Times*, Nov. 12, 1894.

playwright's greatest success.<sup>10</sup> Considering Tree's involvement, the play's multiple runs in London, and the amount of attention it garnered, the absence of any scholarship on *John-a-Dreams* is surprising.<sup>11</sup>

Unlike the English reviews, the American critics placed Harold's opium use as central rather than focusing primarily on Kate's dark past. A *New York Times* article summarizes the work as "the story of an opium eater, and the troubles in love which resulted from his unfortunate habit."<sup>12</sup> Even before its performance on American shores, Peter Robertson of the *San Francisco Chronicle* determined that the arrival of the opium fiend to the stage signaled, "the modern 'problem drama' is going to pass quietly away into the limbo of all other fads. . . . As long as it held up a pretty woman and her wickedness it met with attention, but the introduction of a weak-minded opium idiot to the public as a moral lesson was more than even cranks could stand."<sup>13</sup> This is intriguing and may signal a particular U.S. sensitivity to the dope fiend. The addict, it seems, was the limit. Either way, Tree's concerns regarding U.S. audiences were prescient. The general reception of the play was negative. A different *New York Times* review entitled "Simply a Stupid Thing: That is all there is to say, honestly, about 'John-a-Dreams,'" denounces the work as "an exquisitely immoral play," decrying it as overwrought and trite. Frohman's production, however, was not a total loss and the play ran for 100 days and eventually moved to a limited national

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<sup>10</sup> *The London Times*, April 15, 1895, 6.

<sup>11</sup> *John-a-Dreams* was never published. The only extant copies of the script are a set of original promptbooks held by the University of Bristol. I am indebted to the Bristol librarians and research associates for copies.

<sup>12</sup> *New York Times*, March 17, 1895.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Robertson, "Theaters," *San Francisco Chronicle*, Feb. 3, 1895.

tour.<sup>14</sup>

Regardless of its lukewarm reception, the appearance of *John-a-Dreams* on a Broadway stage is significant in the history of addiction in the theatre. Primarily due to its English origins, this first stage-addict was De Quincean in his formation. Harold Wynn is a requisite poet of sensitive, though manic, constitution. He is the kind of Hamlet played by Henry Irving - irritable, yet utterly refined and absent of cruelty.<sup>15</sup> Images of Tree in character show him staring dreamily off into the distance with searching eyes. He appears delicate and pale in a tuxedo, with a slight feebleness about him. Frohman's leading man, Henry Miller, was far more the rustic hero. He appears in images with a thick mustache, well-oiled hair, and a suit that shows off his broad shoulders and capable arms. There is no hint of the neurasthenic about Miller, nor of the artist, for that matter. Miller's performance is essentially passed over in reviews.

**[Fig. 4, Tree as Harold Wynn with Mrs. Campbell as Kate Cloud. Fig. 5, Miller as Harold Wynn with laudanum bottle.]**

William Archer, who thought the play contrived save for a few scenes, seemed to sense the dramatic potential in the addict character, but finds this potential unexplored:

Harold Wynn is not a John-a-Dreams at all, but a veritable John-a-Deeds. His dreaminess, his rodomontade, his unpracticality, are only skin deep. He takes the pledge against opiates, and he keeps it like a man. Even when his Kate seems fickle, and he is very wretched, he feels no temptation, it would appear, to fly to the comforter. . . . He conquers his vice in the twinkling of an eye, and it takes him about a minute and a half to overcome his prejudice

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<sup>14</sup> *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Sep. 15, 1895.

<sup>15</sup> Austin Brereton, *The Life of Henry Irving* (London: Longman, Green and Co., 1908), 106.

against his lady-love's past.<sup>16</sup>

Though the part of Harold provided opportunities for both Tree and Miller to explore some uncharted territory, the investigation of the addict is only surface level. It seems apparent that the characterization of this early dope fiend was lacking in surprise, devoid of any of the tics or writhing madness that became standard for the figure in later entertainments.

Chambers attributes Harold's opium eating to a family history of intemperance. After discovering Harold's vice, his father explains that not only is inebriety a family trait, but Harold specifically takes after a "great-uncle Hugh Wynn" who was "a disciple of De Quincey." Harold, his father tells him, bears "a striking resemblance" to his uncle, who eventually died in an opium den.<sup>17</sup> Thus, it is not just Harold's status as a artist that drives him to intoxication. By attributing his drug use to an inherited trait, Chambers releases Harold from blame and posits him more as a victim. Chambers protects himself by doing so: he has not simply unleashed a reprobate inebriate upon the public (another degraded artist in the spirit of Nordau's theories). Chambers's tactic was effective, as Tree specifically highlighted this theme of inheritance in the play as part of his published defense against X.Y.Z.'s condemnation.<sup>18</sup>

I do not mean to disregard the importance of Harold's clear connection to Thomas De Quincey. The character of the artist-addict is important to the history of representation of drug addiction. However, I am not going to discuss this theme here. Rather, I want to focus on the way in which Chambers used the addict as a character in a social context. The

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<sup>16</sup> William Archer, *The Theatrical 'World' of 1894* (London: Walter Scott, LTD, 1895): 307-8.

<sup>17</sup> Haddon Chambers, *John-a-Dreams* (Typescript, 1895) Act II: 6. HBT/000060, Herbert Beerbohm Tree Collection, University of Bristol.

<sup>18</sup> *London Times*, Nov. 9, 1894.

ways in which he formulates the De Quincean elements of Harold's character and the larger philosophical implications of that connection are the subject of examination in the fourth chapter of this study. There, I revisit *John-a-Dreams* with attention to the connections between intoxication and inspiration.

The novelty of Chambers's drama is that he tests the potential for the male drug addict to serve as a balanced counterpart to the fallen woman. As a reviewer for *The Illustrated American* notes, Chambers "wanted a hero who should be approximately as hopeless as his heroine in the matter of antecedents. A rake, a libertine, a drunkard, a gambler - the mysterious morale of society deems none of these beyond rehabilitation. But the opium-fiend - there you have a companion-piece of Aspasia!"<sup>19</sup> The addict presents the ideal figure as both he and the former prostitute seem out of the reach of salvation, whether social or divine. By providing the fallen woman with a male complement, Chambers offers his heroine a way out of the standard dramatic structure that punishes her with banishment or death. Whereas Marguerite of *La Dame aux Camelias* or Paula Jarman in *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* can find redemption only in death, in *John-a-Dreams* the need for the male lover to reform *alongside* the fallen woman enables her survival. The play demonstrates the dynamic potential of the drug user as a character convention.

However, the juxtaposition of the fallen woman and drug addict is not necessarily a well-matched one. Kate turns to prostitution out of desperation (to care for a dying mother), while Harold's vice is one of fancy, partially attributed to inheritance. Kate's position in society is unstable, while Harold's worthiness remains unquestioned. Harold can quit his vice, while the permanence of Kate's stain requires a forgiveness that few were

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<sup>19</sup> *The Illustrated American*, Apr. 6, 1895.

able to muster. Chambers's desire to avoid offence while dealing with risqué subject matter dictates the play's ending. Kate and Harold embark on a voyage of the Mediterranean, ostensibly to seek a new life together. The serious dilemma of how to place these two troubled figures in respectable society is not broached. Rather, the two problems fade off into the moonlight, leaving the status quo well intact.

*John-a-Dreams* served as a model for the later genre of prohibition plays that came to prominence during the push for national drug reform. Chambers's play incorporates the drug fiend into the ongoing national conversation regarding deviancy, degeneration, and social engineering. In the end, it seems the U.S. audience was not friendly to the addict as a starry-eyed romantic who eventually gets the girl. Social transgressions in plays required clarified political and moral resolutions; or, they had to feed the growing appetite for slumming in their displays of degradation. Chambers's play was too concerned with aristocratic codes of behavior and poetic whimsy for the popular audiences of the growing U.S. cities.

### **TWITCHING AND ITCHING: TULLY MARSHALL AND THE DOPE FIEND EXEMPLAR**

Perhaps the most influential performance of a drug-addict character on the North American stage during the first half of the twentieth century was that of Tully Marshall in Clyde Fitch's *The City*. Marshall's turn as the morphine-addicted George Hannock in 1909 set the standard for performing drug addict characters throughout the Harrison Era and elements of his characterization are still evident in modern performances. Marshall was a relatively unknown actor prior to the attention he attracted playing Hannock in the Broadway premiere of Fitch's work. Marshall also played Hannock on the subsequent

national tour and key to his significance is that audiences across the country saw his characterization. While Chambers's Harold Wynn and the white addicts in the den dramas were victims, Fitch's play presents addiction as a mark of villainy and a sign of inherent vice. Prior to this, it was only with the racially marked Chinese opium-smokers that addiction signaled criminality. Though Fitch's drama is not directly propagandistic, it makes clear that drug addiction posed a threat to family stability and embodied a perversion of bourgeois values; these are themes that come to define drug plays of the 1910s.

As the title suggests, *The City* concerns the corrupting influence of urban spaces, a dramatic motif borrowed perhaps most directly from late-nineteenth century rural melodramas. Fitch's play centers on the Rand family, who appear to be of wholesome town stock. In reality, the father has made his money in shoddy bank dealings and his bank assistant, George Hannock, is blackmailing him. More than this, Hannock is actually Rand Sr.'s son from an affair, though only the father is aware of the connection. There is a hint that malfeasance exists in the rural townships, but it remains hidden and under control, while in the city, vice and criminality run wild and overcome all who are vulnerable.

Unfortunately, Rand Sr. dies and the family moves to New York City, at which point it immediately begins to fall apart: the son enters into corrupt political and business dealings; the eldest daughter gets a divorce; and the younger daughter falls for Hannock, her own half-brother. When Hannock learns of his relation to his betrothed, he shoots her and attempts to kill himself. As the family implodes, the son decries not the city, but their own wickedness: "Don't blame the city. It's not her fault! It's our own! What the city does is to bring out what's strongest in us. If at heart we're good, the good in us will win! If the bad

is strongest, God help us! *She* gives a man his opportunity; it is up to *him* what he makes of it!"<sup>20</sup> According to the play, the city itself is not bad, but it provides the opportunity for those with bad intentions to flourish. In essence, the city reveals a person's true nature.

Fitch was a prolific playwright, well recognized in the period for plays such as *Beau Brummell*, *Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines*, *The Girl with the Green Eyes*, and *Sapho* (which was the source for a dope-fiend burlesque, to be discussed in the following chapter). Fitch died shortly before the premiere of *The City* and, as the play was his last, critics approached it with significant interest. Though *The City* is little remembered today, some believed it to be the playwright's finest work. It was a change for Fitch who was known typically for being "most triumphant when drawing women" and exploring what a reviewer referred to as "feminine foibles."<sup>21</sup> Reviewers celebrated *The City* for its roughness and the brutal honesty of its design. The *New York Times* called the play "strong as raging bull, an elephant in passion, a hungry tiger."<sup>22</sup> And the *New York World* claimed it "was at once the most repellent, most daring and most successful work."<sup>23</sup> Fitch's depiction of a miscreant drug addict was the primary source of the play's perceived brutishness.

Fitch paints Hannock as vicious in demeanor and desperate in his appetites. Rand Sr. comments that the city is Hannock's "hunting ground," signaling that Hannock is an example of how low a person can sink when he fully embraces the illicit opportunities and

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<sup>20</sup> Clyde Fitch, *Plays by Clyde Fitch*, ed. Montrose J. Moses and Virginia Gerson (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1915), 627-8. Italics in original.

<sup>21</sup> "Last Fitch Play Opens at Lyric," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 28, 1911.

<sup>22</sup> Qtd. in "The Abuse of Dramatic Criticism," *Billboard*, Sept. 24, 1910, 13.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 40.

degenerative forces of the urban scene.<sup>24</sup> Drug use remained a decidedly urban problem in the country throughout the Progressive Era and drug users rarely appear outside of urban environments. Thomas Dormandy reports that, even as late as 1926, “ninety per cent of heroin addicts lived within 180 miles of Manhattan.”<sup>25</sup> Fitch does provide Hannock with one redeeming quality (a sign of his sympathy with the character), that of his honest admiration for his freethinking half-sister. There seems to be potential salvation in their mutual love. The incestuous coupling is not the result of Hannock’s non-normative sexuality. Rather, Hannock’s ill-fated love is the tragic result of his father’s indiscretions and secrecy. The plot point is pulled almost directly from Ibsen’s *Ghosts* in which Oswald Alving and the maid, Regina, learn that they are half-siblings as a result of Captain Alving’s adultery.

**[Fig., 6 - Marshall as George Hannock (right) after shooting his fiancée.]**

Fitch depicts Hannock’s addiction, its causes and effects, in a number of ways. On stage alone, Hannock injects morphine into his wrist, one of the earliest appearances of a syringe on stage (William Gillette’s 1899 play *Sherlock Holmes* is a rare earlier example).<sup>26</sup> After a rambling monologue concerning his distaste for Rand Sr. and the upper crust, he chides himself: “Damn it, when am I going to stop talking in my sleep when I’m wide awake? (*Looking at the place on his arm, and smoothing it over.*) Too much of the needle, I guess!”<sup>27</sup> This kind of ranting is similar to that portrayed in the late opium-den plays such

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<sup>24</sup> Fitch, 489.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Dormandy, *Opium: Reality’s Dark Dream* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 241.

<sup>26</sup> Hannock is also the first character to say “Goddamn” on the national stage, a moment that Marshall tempered by purposely turning upstage to say the line.

<sup>27</sup> Fitch, 512.

as the Copeland's *The Opium Fiend* from 1908. As argued in the first chapter, these flights of madness come from the alcohol-temperance dramas of the nineteenth century. However, in Hannock's case and moving forward, there are no narrated hallucinations of insects or snakes. The ravings of the addict function more to signal how dangerous and potentially violent an addict can be when under the influence.

In the climactic scene, after Hannock learns of his relationship to his fiancée, his reaction signals a hazardous instability:

Hannock: (*His mind deranged, rises unevenly; he is loud, partly incoherent, and his face is twitching and distorted, his hands clutching and clenching, his whole body wracked and trembling, but still strong, with a nervous madman's strength.*)

It's all a *lie* ---to separate Cicely from me!

Rand Jr.: (*Goes to him and sees the change.*) Hannock!

Hannock: I'll never believe it!

Rand Jr.: (*Taking him by the shoulder*) Have you gone out of your mind!<sup>28</sup>

Fitch's depiction of Hannock's body - "twitching," "distorted," "wracked," and "trembling" - is culled from popular writings of the era and is more a sign of withdrawal than it is the natural comportment of a drug user. It is in this state of trembling incoherence that Hannock shoots his beloved rather than let her learn of their familial connection. This potential for violence is a departure from earlier portrayals of addicts who are more often emasculated than aggressive. It is here that we see criminal nature and drug addiction beginning to intertwine. Once the Harrison Act criminalizes most drug use, this kind of

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 582-3.

stage-addict becomes standard.

In reality, Hannock is secondary to the action of the play. On the surface, he is the villain against whom Rand Jr. must triumph. However, considering that Hannock is Rand Jr.'s half-brother, Kim Marra labels the drug addict a "specter of [Rand Jr.'s] shadow self" who has fallen prey to the city's degradation.<sup>29</sup> Marra suggests that Fitch's depiction of a secret vice that develops from time in an urban environment might represent Fitch's own struggle with his closeted homosexuality, which blossomed after his move to New York City as a young man. She notes that Hannock is a man "in the grip of a shameful affliction he cannot shake . . ." <sup>30</sup> The play ends with Rand Jr. choosing to reveal all past and present sins, a dedication to openness that was denied Fitch himself. This may be the case and I discuss a similar scenario in reference to Noël Coward's *The Vortex* (1924) in the final chapter of this study. But, as numerous reviews make clear, Marshall's performance of addiction rather than Fitch's dramaturgy became the primary draw of the play in performance. *The Philadelphia Enquirer* notes, "As the degenerate drug eater Tully Marshall affords a remarkable characterization, and makes of the role a histrionic figure not easily forgotten."<sup>31</sup> *The New York World* is one of many periodicals to claim that Marshall "emerged as an actor of wondrous and proved power, the shouts of the audience [for him] were the loudest and most prolonged that have been heard in a playhouse in a year."<sup>32</sup> And, finally, the *Hartford Courant* spends ample time discussing Marshall's acting as "possessing

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<sup>29</sup> Kim Marra, "Clyde Fitch's Too Wilde Love," *Staging Desire: Queer Readings of American Theatre History*, eds. Kim Marra and Robert A. Schanke (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 47.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>31</sup> "Last Fitch Play Opens at Lyric." The reference to Hannock as a "drug eater" rather than needle user is a sign of the remnants of nineteenth-century, and specifically British, nomenclature that remained.

<sup>32</sup> "The Abuse of Dramatic Criticism," 40.

qualities that make it positively uncanny; he lives his part . . . to a remarkable degree and his portrayal of the drug-sodden wretch . . . is one of the biggest pieces of acting of the present day.”<sup>33</sup> The impact of Marshall’s performance was memorable enough that, in 1930, a *Variety* article entitled “Things Have Changed Since” has among its nostalgic list: “Things have changed since Tully Marshall played the dope fiend in *The City*.”<sup>34</sup>

There are two specific sources that hint at how Marshall portrayed Hannock. One is an interview Marshall gave to *The New York Tribune* shortly after the Broadway debut of the play in which he discusses his creative process in detail. The other is Marshall’s performance as another drug addict in the silent film *The Devil’s Needle* (1916), seven years after the premiere of *The City*.

In the interview, Marshall discusses his process and the inspiration for the character:

I never saw a ‘dope fiend.’ I just imagined the part - my lines suggested it. I have seen many men under the influence of liquor and cocaine in my lifetime of forty years. I have often visited lunatic asylums. I have known drunkards. But I never saw a man take an injection. My brother is a physician, and he explained how a man would feel after an injection. The wrist after an injection is naturally itchy. I play the part as the lines suggest and as I imagine Fitch conceived it. I just worked up to what I thought were the ravings of a maniac.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> “‘The City’ Visits Hartford Again,” *The Hartford Courant*, Feb. 14, 1911, 6.

<sup>34</sup> “Things have Changed Since,” *Variety*, Apr. 9, 1930, 66.

<sup>35</sup> “Actor Tells Story,” *The New York Tribune*, Dec. 25, 1909, 7.

Unlike so many actors who performed ethnic or degenerate types at the time, Marshall does not claim to have observed the authentic original.<sup>36</sup> His sources are telling: the drunk, the cocaine user, and the maniac. Cocaine was widely popular for recreational use in the period, available either in its pure form with a prescription or diluted in soft drinks and nostrums such as Grey's Catarrh Powder. Cocaine addiction was just beginning to receive public attention as a social ill. Though the effects of cocaine and morphine are essentially diametric, Fitch's play promotes this muddling of specifics. The description in Fitch's stage directions portrays the hyperactivity typically connected to the cocaine user as a trait of the morphine addict. These traits are all in service to the understanding that the addict inevitably stands on the brink of lunacy.

Marshall's mention of his physician brother as a source for his characterization is particularly interesting. It may seem a trivial comment, but the recommendation to itch at the place of injection is an intriguing detail. Can we trace the incessant itching and scratching of actors who play drug addicts today, a performative signifier of addiction that is clichéd in its recurrence, to the advice offered by Marshall's brother? As far as I have found, reporters and reformers from the period who detail the appearance and plight of addicts do not mention scratching as a trait; nor do reviews of other plays that feature addicts. H.H. Kane's authoritative 1880 work *The Hypodermic Injection of Morphine* goes into great detail regarding the physical signs of addiction and Marshall seems to enact a number of them, but Kane never mentions scratching.<sup>37</sup> In efforts to reject addicts from

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<sup>36</sup> Other actors who portrayed drug addicts did boast of their real life sources. Frank Darien, who played a dope fiend in the 1914 drama *Kick In* by Willard Mack, discusses the prototype for his performance as a "hophead whom he discovered in Chinatown." "Dope Fiend Prototype," *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 28, 1915.

<sup>37</sup> H.H. Kane, *The Hypodermic Injection of Morphine* (New York: Chas. L. Bermingham & Co., 1880), 290. Kane details the signs of the addict as: "The patients begin to sneeze, and have paroxysms of yawning; they start if

service in the build-up to World War I, the Army Surgeon General detailed signs of addiction in recruits including “cringing,” “restlessness,” “anxiety,” and muscle pains, but not an incessant need to scratch.<sup>38</sup> Marshall’s need to identify the source for his interpretation is due to the fact that it was novel. This indicates that the best observational science of the time did not promote the idea that is, today, so common. Rather Marshall and his physician brother originated the trend. Marshall establishes a kind of Brechtian *gestus* in the particular action of the scratch. More expressive than dialogue, the action represents the inner turmoil that was supposedly part of the addict’s nature.

Demonstrating how these ideas translated to performance, *The Devil’s Needle* features Marshall as a temperamental artist who turns to morphine for inspiration. His portrayal includes a set of manic gestures in which he frequently scratches his wrist and neck, gnashes his teeth, twitches and strains, and even runs the hypodermic needle along his tongue in a particularly jarring moment. As the character reaches his nadir, Marshall collapses on the floor of his model’s dirty tenement flat, licking cocaine from an envelope. This silent depiction of torment brought on by addiction hints at the ways in which Marshall portrayed Hannock’s “ravings of a maniac” in *The City*.

Marshall developed a hyperbolic performance tradition encompassing a repertoire of gestures and poses that set the standard throughout the coming era of prohibition plays. He institutes as a trope the manic hyperactivity and wracked physicality of the stage-addict

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any one approaches them; touching their skin causes cramping movements and convulsions; the trembling of hands, if not already evident, now becomes distinctly perceptible. The power of speech is disordered; lisping and stammering take place.” I believe Marshall portrays a number of these, including shaking and stammering in his performance. But it is my impression that he was the first to do so, as there is no evidence from either stage directions or periodical reviews that addicts from the opium-den plays undertook such behavior.

<sup>38</sup> Pearce Baily, Frankwood Williams, and Paul Komora, *The Medical Department of the United States Army in the World War*, Vol. 10, *Neuropsychiatry* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1929), 69.

that expressed outwardly the frenzied psyche attributed to drug users. No representation was more discussed or celebrated. Nor did any performance of addiction from the period appear before a larger audience. Actors have endlessly reiterated these exaggerated performance conventions, and though theatrical performances of the 1920s slightly tempered the wracked physicality of the Marshall's addicts, the wild gesticulations reappear in plays such as D. Hubert Connelly's *Crucible* and in films such as *Reefer Madness* of the 1930s. This physicality is also part of Frank Sinatra's turn as the heroin addict in the groundbreaking *Man with the Golden Arm* (1955). However, in that case, Sinatra's physical torment occurs during his struggle with withdrawal, rather than as a part of his typical demeanor. Marshall's physical repertoire has become so entrenched that the constantly scratching addict is now a modern comic trope. Dave Chappelle's caricature of a crack-smoking derelict, Tyrone Biggums, makes much of this frantic tic.

### **NEGOTIATING THE HARRISON ACT: THE DOCTOR-DOPER DYAD**

The Progressive Era saw significant changes in the field of medicine. As medical science advanced, the doctor ascended to a respected position as the keeper of the public health. However, this rise to prominence for the physician was a hard won promotion. Being a doctor in the nineteenth century had the guarantee of neither esteem nor financial security. Early on, agrarian traditions of home-treatment dominated, and doctoring was done within the family. The population often viewed medical professionals with distrust, seeing them as charlatans or as pedants who intervened in family matters. Paul Starr notes, "In the Jacksonian era, professional monopolies were assailed in the same spirit as business

monopolies.”<sup>39</sup> The result of this attack was the abandonment of licensing for both doctors and their medical schools in many states in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Essentially, there were no standards of qualification for the profession. There was not a full restoration of license requirements until the 1880s as a result of collective efforts by physician to consolidate the profession and revoke less-educated practitioners’ claims to the title of “Doctor.” Attempts to normalize professional standards led to a number of reforms in the early 1900s orchestrated primarily by the American Medical Association, which was officially incorporated in 1897.<sup>40</sup> Timothy Hickman notes that it is only after 1900 that medical professionals succeeded in distinguishing “themselves as the locus of scientific knowledge and authority” in the country.<sup>41</sup>

A particularly frustrating obstacle to the establishment of a national trust in the medical profession was the iatrogenic addict. An 1893 newspaper headline exclaimed the commonly held idea that “Doctors are Largely Responsible for Drunkenness and the Opium Habit,” with the subheading, “Alcohol and Opiates Are Too Frequently and Carelessly Prescribed by Medical Men.”<sup>42</sup> Not only doctors, but the entire medical profession including pharmacists and the producers of medication came under attack. Samuel Hopkins Adams famously prompted a massive reform of the patent medicine industry through his series of damning articles published in *Collier’s Weekly* in 1905. The series, entitled “The Great American Fraud,” revealed that many of the over-the-counter nostrums that were widely

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<sup>39</sup> Paul Starr, *The Social Transformation of American Medicine* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), 140.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 109-112.

<sup>41</sup> Hickman, 186.

<sup>42</sup> “Use and Abuse of Stimulants,” n.p., May 7 1893, *The Dope Chronicles, 1850-1950*, ed. Gary Silver (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 25.

available were ineffective, dangerous, and addictive. He additionally asserts that drug producers were well aware of the recreational use of drugs like cocaine and catarrh powders and that they fueled these addictions because “Making cocain [sic] fiends is another profitable enterprise.”<sup>43</sup> Adams vehemently denounced the practices of the businessmen involved, as well as the doctors who prescribed the drugs in question. The articles held up for opprobrium the “renegade physician making his millions” by maintaining addicts who needed regular prescriptions, as well as those who “claim to cure the drunk habit or the drug habit by mail.”<sup>44</sup>

Adams’s articles, along with Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, revealed the urgent need to pass protective regulations, which came in the form of the 1906 Pure Food and Drug Act. The law, a classic piece of Progressive Era legislation, enacted regulations in numerous industries. For those in the business of patent medicines, it insisted that they abide by stricter labeling guidelines when using cocaine, morphine, or other addictive substances as ingredients. They had to either register their recipes or remove dangerous additives. Nostrum makers were also required to legitimize the claims they made regarding their product’s applications.

The AMA distributed 150,000 copies of Adams’s “The Great American Fraud.” Though it critiqued doctors of a particular caliber, it also emphasized the importance of “good” physicians. The Pure Food and Drug Act endorsed doctors as the population’s best defense against charlatans and snake oils. The law asserted that physicians officially outranked the uncertified creators of patent medicines. Taking control of the pharmacopeia

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<sup>43</sup> Samuel Hopkins Adams, *The Great American Fraud: Articles on the Nostrum Evil, and Quacks*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed. (Chicago: American Medical Association, 1907), 42.

<sup>44</sup>Adams 37; Acker, 112.

in general was a significant step in establishing the authority of the medical field; it was a select and powerful body of knowledge that they could wield for curative ends. In addition, the rise of the doctor was in direct correspondence with the growing ethos of the Progressive Era reform movements. Vice reformers required the drawing of strict lines of legitimate and illegitimate behaviors, and doctors became *the* respectable authority on these designations.

The Pure Food and Drug Act did not, however, effectively limit recreational narcotic use in the country. Cocaine, heroin, and a range of other opiates were still available in local pharmacies. And although prescriptions were required, the upholding of that stipulation depended on the pharmacists and doctors. Regulating this supply-and-demand chain became the target of new reform campaigns that made use of the theatre in rallying support behind legislative changes. In the fight to pass national drug regulation, reformers and audiences alike redirected their attention away from addicts and businessmen and toward the people that, they believed, created and enabled addiction. As evidence of this shift in focus, the resultant Harrison Act says little about addiction or how to deal with the addict. Instead, its focus is the regulation of supply: it tracked the number of prescriptions that doctors wrote and limited the amount that pharmacists dispensed.

Thus, there was a sincere interest in the relationship between the doctor and the addict. The doctor-addict dyad became fixed in the public mind and the relationship presented a fascinating “Catch 22”: doctors were indicted as the source of addiction, while, at the same time, the nation turned to them for a cure. Plays of the Harrison Era use this

connection to investigate the legitimacy and virtue of U.S. physicians.<sup>45</sup> The addict became a crucial way to explore the ethical dilemmas and potential dangers posed by the doctors' empowerment. In the Progressive Era, with a firm belief in the perfectibility of mankind, both the doctor and the doer were in need of reform.

The representations of doctors prior to the concerns over drug addiction were, for the most part, innocuous. In European problem plays throughout the nineteenth century, doctors served as the trusted *raisonneur*. He is an educated man and keeper of the family secrets who advised people on how they should live, serving as the author's mouthpiece or as a general moral authority. Ibsen problematized this character as a way of undermining assumptions regarding social standards. Dr. Rank of *A Doll's House* suffers from inherited syphilis, a sign of the troubling realities underlying traditional rectitude. In American popular theatre, the doctor was a peripheral character, typically brought in for deathbed scenes. After the Harrison Era, dramas featuring doctors portray them as protectors of the public health, a consummation of the goals set forth by the AMA. In 1934, Sidney Kingsley's Pulitzer Prize winning *Men in White* set the standard for plays in which a team of doctors work together for the common good. He established an archetypal scenario that survives today in television programs such as *ER*, *Grey's Anatomy*, and *Chicago Hope*.

Harrison Era representations of the medical establishment range from villainous dope doctors to more subtle portrayals of physicians who lack ethical sophistication. Produced the same year as the Harrison Act went into effect, Owen Davis's *Drugged* features Dr. Malone, a physician of questionable certification who, according to Davis's

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<sup>45</sup> George Bernard Shaw's *The Doctor's Dilemma* covers similar ground, examining the moral conflicts faced by a developing medical field.

description, “plays on the weakness of hysterical women and nerve broken men.”<sup>46</sup> The play depicts how the morally corrupt Malone wields codeine and cocaine as a weapon against a respectable family. Malone is not only manipulative, but a murderer who employs a gang of toughs that he controls through their addictions. He represents the most extreme version of the “dope doctor” from the period, designed in the tradition of the merciless Professor Moriarty.

Davis, who claimed to have written 150 melodramas, only slightly gestures toward any potential social significance of his work with what one reviewer calls a “hackneyed warning against the evils of the drug habit.”<sup>47</sup> Davis found in Malone a completely immoral figure well suited for his sensational style. The melodrama toured widely playing to “popular price” theatres that attracted middle and working-class audiences. The two principal addicts in the play, one a poor criminal and the other a bourgeois housewife, both reform at the end once they free themselves from Malone’s influence. The leveling of class differences in the depiction of addiction is significant. Criminals and hysterical women make up the dominant population of drug users in almost all print and performance material of the time. In Davis’s play, both the addicted mother and criminal posed a threat to middle-class livelihood. It was the patriarch’s charge to protect one while defending against the other. However, the dope-doctor as melodramatic villain did not take off as a theatrical trope in the period. Other depictions of doctors and their relationship to narcotics are less hyperbolic, though rarely positive.

Two short plays in particular represent attitudes regarding doctors at the time.

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<sup>46</sup> Owen Davis, *Drugged* (Typescript, Library of Congress, 1914), Act III, 27.

<sup>47</sup> “Mason the Star in Owen Davis’ Play,” *Boston Daily Globe*, Sep. 29, 1914, 3.

Surprisingly similar in form and content, Walter Montague's *Hop Head* (1912) and Joseph Graham's *The Needle* (1915) both feature unsympathetic portrayals of doctors with drug-addicted sons. Montague's piece ends with the addict's suicide at the urging of his own father, while Graham's concludes with the assumption that the youth will find a cure. These seemingly contradictory conclusions both enact concordant accusations that doctors are inefficient as fathers, lacking in human compassion, and are limited in their ability to remedy the disease of addiction.

Montague, who wrote a host of melodramas about the low and vulgar, sets his sketch in the rich home of Dr. and Mrs. Charlton.<sup>48</sup> It is the twenty-third birthday of their long absent son, Jack, a cocaine addict. While Mrs. Charlton (the rare mother in these plays) pines for her son, grieving over his boyhood possessions, the doctor finds relief in the fact that "[Jack] cannot live much longer."<sup>49</sup> Jack returns, "pale and emaciated," wracked with cravings. He holds his father responsible for his addiction, portraying himself as a victim of his father's ambitions. "Yes, had you done a father's duty -- this curse would never have fallen on me. But money was everything to you you [sic] were busy getting it."<sup>50</sup> Montague is sure to substantiate Jack's claims. In the opening moments of the play Charlton apologizes to his wife for his constant absence due to work and for the fact that his concerns for his patients outweigh his worry for his son. The failure of doctors to nurture their children properly due to ambition is a theme that runs throughout the period. D.W. Griffith's portrays a similar situation in his film *For His Son* of the same year. A financially

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<sup>48</sup> Montague's other relevant works are *The Slave Girl* and *Queen of Rags* both from 1913.

<sup>49</sup> Walter Montague, *The Hop Head: An Intense Episode of a Modern Curse* (Typescript, Library of Congress, 1912), 2.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

ambitious doctor creates a cocaine-laced soft drink to which his own son becomes addicted and from which he eventually perishes. The lost film *The Drug Terror* (1914) also featured a physician who breaks newly-passed drug laws and ends up with a drug-addled daughter.<sup>51</sup> These works bear striking resemblance to the aforementioned *Shanghai Gesture* and the film *West of Zanzibar*. In each we find a form of poetic justice aimed at those who misuse their position.

Under the influence of cocaine, Jack is a scattered young man, expostulating without provocation about the world, the masses, the evils of money, and the sanctity of his dreams. There are hints in his ramblings of an imminent break with sanity, brought on by drug abuse, one less violent than George Hannock's in *The City*, but no less serious. Charlton convinces his son that he has two options: take his own life or end up "a living casket for a dead brain."<sup>52</sup> Charlton provides Jack with a syringe filled with enough cocaine to end his life and the young man exits misquoting Hamlet - "to bed -- to sleep -- perhaps to dream."<sup>53</sup> His body is shortly heard hitting the floor off-stage.

In Montague's configuration, addiction marked the limits of medical knowledge, as Charlton could not save even his own son. Yet, the play provokes questions regarding the doctor's significant moral authority and the fallibility of his position.<sup>54</sup> Charlton is not the villain of the piece, though his failure as a father, his rough treatment of Jack, and his absolutist reckoning leaves him a troubling figure. Charlton's contention that his son is

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<sup>51</sup> The plot of *The Drug Terror* is recounted in *The Billboard*, April 18, 1914, 73.

<sup>52</sup> Montague, 5.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>54</sup> William Douglas Caddel's *The Opium Eater* (1909) is another play in which a doctor is shown to struggle with having the moral authority over the life and death of a drug addict. The doctor become judge and jury regarding whether an old friend, once honorable, is deserving of a cure.

untreatable and doomed to insanity anticipates the dominant thinking of the 1920s at which point the belief was that addicts were naturally psychotic.

Charlton implores Jack to end his own life as a responsibility to American manhood. The doctor places addiction in direct opposition to masculinity, urging his son, "If you had one spark of manhood in you -- you would make an end of it yourself."<sup>55</sup> He further defines American manhood as "the quality that bore your ancestors through the Revolutionary war of 1812 [*sic*]. The manhood that sustained your grandfather through the four long years from 61 to 64, the soul of a real man --- who with his back against the wall plays the game."<sup>56</sup> Addiction as antithetical to manhood and masculinity has roots in the popular literature of the late-Victorian period. The first novel published in the U.S. to feature a drug addict, E.P. Roe's *Without a Home* (1881), follows the deterioration of a middle-class father through his addiction to morphine. His fall is consistently envisioned as the loss of his manhood in that it constitutes his inability to control his own impulses, desires, and baser nature. As the father falls deeper into addiction, Roe writes, "every moment with more terrible distinctness revealed to him the truth that he had lost his manhood."<sup>57</sup> Stage representations continued to feminize and even queer the addict into the 1920s and beyond.

Addiction joined Nordau's "degeneracy" and Beard's "neurasthenia" as sapping the nation's men of their virility. Recapturing that lost manhood was a central project of the Progressive Era. The propagation of such characters like Montague's Jack or E.P. Roe's

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<sup>55</sup> Montague, 6.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> E.P. Roe, *Without a Home* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1881), 283.

patriarch coincided with the national idolization of strongman Eugen Sandow who had sculpted himself from a whelp into the ideal mix of brawn and refinement. The nation likewise celebrated Teddy Roosevelt for his similar transformation (though perhaps less refined in its outcome). At the time, the nation embraced a large-scale project of self-making (especially amongst the middle class) and endorsed self-control as the most valuable of traits. In Montague's play, enforcing norms of masculinity was a potential remedy for addiction. However, in his estimation, the addict can only reclaim his manhood by ending his life.

The need to eradicate the addict for the sake of the nation links the play to popular eugenics theories of the period. Zieger points out the regularity with which addicts appear as parasites "sapping life from the social body."<sup>58</sup> Russ Castronovo notes that it is during this period that "self-reliance as a corporeal principle became a national concern," leading to growing support of theories that sought to regulate the biological makeup of the country and legitimized Charlton's belief that the addict was a threat to national security.<sup>59</sup> Addicts were prime subjects for eugenicist consideration and Montague's work does not so much promote the theory as showcase the reality of its implications.

Similar to Jack in Montague's play, the son in Graham's *The Needle* has fallen victim to drugs due to the lack of his father's involvement and the negative influence of his urban surroundings. Graham describes Bob Vernoy as "a boy of about twenty-two. After the death of his mother, left pretty much to his own care, he has fallen victim to his chosen

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<sup>58</sup> Zieger, 25.

<sup>59</sup> Russ Castronovo, *Necro Citizenship: Death, Eroticism, and the Public Sphere in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century United States* (Durham: Duke University, 1988), 63.

environment - he is addicted to morphine.”<sup>60</sup> Dr. Vernoy is convinced that Bob is “bad all the way through,” but both Bob and his sister Edna claim that their father’s unkindness and cruelty is the cause for Bob’s turn from the light. Bob claims: “It’s all your fault - I’m this way on account of you - All you could see were your books and your medicines? You didn’t give a damn what we did so long as we didn’t bother you. . . . And I wouldn’t be like this if you’d have paid more attention to me and less attention to your women patients.”<sup>61</sup>

Accusations of lechery against his father accentuate fears regarding a doctor’s access to female patients, their secrets, and their bodies. The inference of Dr. Vernoy’s libidinousness could be read as another eugenicist commentary: the hyper-sexed father produces a son with troubled masculinity, signaled by his addiction. However, what is more at play is the notion that an incomplete family unit (dead mother, distracted and potentially philandering father) retards the development of good sons. These plays portray the doctor as educated, but inept and over ambitious. This dispels any insistence that a medical education provided one with heightened integrity.

In order to stop her father from beating Bob, Edna shoots the doctor when he is off-stage. Bob then goes into a fury when Edna denies him drugs and he sicks the police on her. At the final moment, Bob takes the blame for the shooting, reclaiming some semblance of manhood. The play concludes with the revelation that the bullet only grazed Vernoy and Bob is taken off to jail with a kindly reassurance from the police inspector that “we’ll straighten this out.”<sup>62</sup> Far less extreme than *The Hop Head* in its conclusion, Graham’s play

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<sup>60</sup> Joseph H. Graham, *The Needle: A Comedy-Drama in One Act* (Typescript, Library of Congress, 1915), 1.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

has a more damning view of the physician as a sneering and physically abusive tyrant.

The glimmer of hope for Bob at the end of Graham's play asserts a belief in the possibility of salvation for the addict, available through the wonders of medicine. Dr. Vernoy claims that he has "cured every drug fiend under my care, that wished to be cured." In his son's case, Vernoy asserts that he had "freed [Bob's] body from every craving for the drug," but the habit had returned due to the weakness of his son's will. Reform literature like Peter Clark Macfarlane's *Those Who Have Come Back* (1914) features stories of broken-down addicts who are rescued from death's grip by medical cures, but they had to be willing to give up the drug.<sup>63</sup> This formulation casts addiction and the addict as seemingly separate problems. Addiction was a disease that science could cure. The addict was a flawed individual who had to cure him or herself. To Graham and Macfarlane, modern medicine could only accomplish wonders for those fully-formed individuals who were deserving of its progresses.

The ethical concerns over doctor empowerment reach their zenith, perhaps, in the *film noir* from 1942 *Bowery at Midnight*. Bela Lugosi plays a psychotic criminal who murders anyone in his way. Lew Kelly portrays a drug-addicted doctor who works for Lugosi. Kelly made his bones in vaudeville playing a comic version of an opium-smoking professor, an act that is discussed in the following chapter. In the 1942 film, Kelly's character uses his skills as a physician to bring Lugosi's victims back to life as mindless zombies. Fittingly, these walking dead devour Lugosi at the film's conclusion. By the start of the Second World War, medical professionals enjoyed stability in their respected status and only a wild-eyed drug fiend could abuse his knowledge of the pharmacopeia in the way

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<sup>63</sup> Peter Clark MacFarlane, *Those Who Have Come Back* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1914).

that Kelly's character does. Kelly's necromancy conflates the dope-doctor with mad scientists such as Drs. Moreau and Frankenstein, but with a moral purpose in mind; there is no intimation that Kelly will continue to raise an army of the living dead. The message is that evil gets it due and the deranged meet a deranged end.

The Supreme Court closed the loophole that allowed doctors to knowingly supply addicts with narcotics with their 1919 ruling. The decision had significant consequences for both addicts and doctors. It left drug users without their prime source for narcotics and robbed them of legitimate treatment options if they did want to quit. Curing an addict at the time involved tapering their consumption toward cessation, thus the 1919 decision criminalized the standard approach to drug treatment. As a result, most of the treatment centers in the country closed. Doctors who wrote too many prescriptions for morphine, codeine, or cocaine could find themselves under review with the possibility of losing their license. Courtwright calls the 1919 decision the starting point of the "classic era of narcotic control" in the country; a period that he claims lasts until 1964 with the introduction of methadone as a treatment option.<sup>64</sup>

### **WOMEN OF THE HARRISON ERA: AESTHETICS OF ADDICTION FROM MOTHERS TO STREETWALKERS**

Typically, Harrison Era prohibition plays focus on young male addicts. This is a reversal from earlier opium-den dramas in which female addicts were the ones who needed saving. Attention had shifted from white slave narratives to the dangers posed by the degradation of U.S. manhood. When female drug users do appear in prohibition plays, they are typically

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<sup>64</sup> David Courtwright, Herman Joseph & Don Des Jarlais, *Addicts Who Survived* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1989), 1.

secondary characters. Most frequently, the female addict is a beautiful young aristocrat who functions as a blocking figure, coming between the central romantic couple. She is either a first wife, or a girl to whom the male lead is engaged through family connections. These women serve as a foil for the ingénue who demonstrates her purity and worth through her difference from the hysterical and selfish addict. Such addicts appear in *Morphia* (1908) by Mary McDonough and *The Unknown Woman* (1919) by Marjorie Blaine and Willard Mack. This same figure carries over to films such as *The Rise of Susan* (1916) and *That Royale Girl* (1925). These plays and films usually end with the death of the addicted woman, either through drug-fueled apoplexy or suicide. Her passing makes way for the deserving lovers to unite. Embedded in these narratives is the Progressive Era conviction that the idle rich are without utility in the modern world. There was a growing disdain for the privileged in a country that newly valued social mobility and personal productivity.

There are a number of important works that depart from this conventional representation of the female user. These are plays in which the female addict is central, rather than peripheral, and in which playwrights treat her position with sympathy. I want to examine two in particular that bracket the Harrison Era. The first is *Madame X*, the melodrama by Alexandre Bisson that became a standard of on the U.S. stage after its premiere in 1909. The second is Pendleton King's one-act play *Cocaine* that was part of the Provincetown Player's season in 1917. These works exhibit the female addict in service to two distinct genres: melodrama and realism. By establishing the potency and importance of Bisson's drama to the history of drug addiction in the theatre, I draw attention to King's attempt to undermine the narrative that *Madame X* helped establish. In pitting Bisson

against King, I hope to show how these portrayals of addiction embody the shifting aesthetics in U.S. dramaturgy. Thus, arguments over what should be represented (poverty, intemperance, prostitution, crime, addiction) were entwined with commentary over *how* they should be represented.<sup>65</sup>

Bisson's play opens with a prologue in which the beautiful Jacqueline begs her husband to forgive her recently revealed adultery. The husband, Fleuriot, rejects Jacqueline's pleas, casting her out of their Paris home and denying her access to their young son, Raymond. The first act begins twenty years later, with the arrival of Jacqueline in Bordeaux, now ragged from decades of drinking, drugging, and loose living. Jacqueline's companion is her con-artist paramour, Laroque, who notes that he found her in an opium den in Buenos Aires where she spent her time "brutalizing herself with morphine, ether, opium - all sorts of drugs."<sup>66</sup>

Jacqueline eventually kills Laroque in an ether-inspired fury when she learns that he is planning to hustle Fleuriot for her dowry. Jacqueline refuses to speak at trial in the hope that her silence will keep the news of her shameful life from reaching Raymond. Her sole desire is to ensure that her transgressions will not tarnish her son's reputation. Jacqueline remains silent even after she realizes that her attorney is none other than Raymond who does not recognize her. In an emotional speech that became a highlight for audiences, Raymond wins an acquittal for the woman known only as "Madame X." All is finally revealed and Jacqueline enjoys a moment of reunion and redemption with her husband and

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<sup>65</sup> I make this comparison with full recognition of Thomas Postlewait's calls to avoid the simplifying of North American theatre of the time to a battle of melodrama versus realism. I do not mean to further this limited and positivistic narrative of theatre history, but to discuss the complexity and overlap of genres at the time.

<sup>66</sup> Alexandre Bisson, *Madame X*, trans. John Raphael and William H. Wright (Typescript, Billy Rose Collection, New York Public Library, 1909), Act I, 14.

son. However, the stress has been too much and she promptly dies, surrounded by her forgiving family. The plot of *Madame X* bears striking resemblance to a number of important nineteenth-century precursors, especially *East Lynne* in the U.S. and England and *Frou Frou* in France. These plays track the fall of adulterous mothers and their long, heart-rending journeys to redemption, inevitably ending with their death.

This was Bisson's first serious drama, as he was known primarily for farces "of the Parisian air."<sup>67</sup> The work premiered in Paris as *La Femme X* with Jane Hading playing Jacqueline to great successes. Charles Frohman produced an English version with Lena Ashwell in the lead role at London's Globe in 1909, and twelve days later, Henry W. Savage opened the work in Rochester, New York. For the English-language versions, John Raphael and the actor William H. Wright translated the script, sticking closely to the French original, retaining both the French character names and the settings of Paris and Bordeaux. Savage's production starred the relatively unknown Dorothy Donnelly as Jacqueline. Donnelly had gained some attention as Candida in one of earliest American productions of Shaw's play in 1903, but it was her portrayal of Jacqueline that brought her into the limelight. Savage quickly moved the production to Chicago and then New York. He mounted two touring companies in addition to the Broadway run and the play traveled the country to rave reviews. Called "the most notable emotional melodrama of the past decade" and the "most thrilling play of the season," *Madame X* was almost unanimously celebrated for its ability to wring tears from its audience members, regardless of gender.<sup>68</sup> A *Variety* review of the Chicago production notes, "with the box office clamoring for a play that uncovers as much

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<sup>67</sup> "Music and Drama," *Current Literature*, ed. Edward J. Wheeler 48 (New York: Current Literature Publishing Company, 1910): 649.

<sup>68</sup> "Madame X in City Next Week," *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 28, 1910, 15.

of the degenerate as the police with permit, 'Madame X' stands forth as a revelation of a highly strung 'heart interest,' with a moral that can not fail to stamp indelibly."<sup>69</sup> Four years after the police had shut down *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, Bisson's drama was well tailored to excite without offending, revealing something of the lower depths without upending the status quo.

In a surprising turn, Savage made the rights for the play available to Sarah Bernhardt, who was in the U.S. on tour, while his own productions were still running. Bernhardt's interpretation was anxiously awaited as some reported that Bisson wrote the play with her in mind.<sup>70</sup> She offered the work in the original French for a short run of performances using her own company.<sup>71</sup> Bernhardt was well suited for the role of Jacqueline. She had already played Gilberte in *Frou Frou* and her performance of Marguerite Gautier in Dumas's play was the definitive interpretation in that it established the "prototype of an undomesticated and therefore rootless woman falling victim to the tortures of love."<sup>72</sup> Reviewers claimed that, in *Madame X*, she offered "the most amazing exhibition of historionism imaginable," in which she "oozes out at the pores the physical embodiment of complete abandon," impersonating the "role of degenerated mother with an exactness unapproachable by American stars."<sup>73</sup> Bernhardt went on to perform the work when she returned to Paris and the play became part of her regular repertoire. On an

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<sup>69</sup> "Madame X," *Variety*, October 23, 1909: 18.

<sup>70</sup> "Bernhardt in Madame X," *The Billboard* 22.43 (Oct. 22, 1910): 6.

<sup>71</sup> One of Bernhardt's performance was scheduled to coincide with a dark night for the Donnelly production so that the American cast could come see the French version.

<sup>72</sup> Leigh Woods, "Two-a-Day Redemptions and Truncated Camilles: the Vaudeville Repertoire of Sarah Bernhardt," *New Theatre Quarterly* 10.37 (Feb. 1994): 15.

<sup>73</sup> "Bernhardt's Power Shown in 'Madame X,'" *New York Times*, Dec. 13, 1910, 7; "Bernhardt in Madame X," *The Billboard* 22, no. 52 (Dec. 24, 1910): 12.

American tour in 1917, she often doubled *La Dame aux Camelias* and *La Femme X* on the same bill.<sup>74</sup> At the same time, the play ran steadily into the 1920s on U.S. stages featuring an endless list of ambitious leading ladies, accompanied by a number of film adaptations. To put it plainly, *Madame X* was a cultural phenomenon and the character of Jacqueline entered into the consciousness of the nation's public as part of a pantheon of fallen women, commensurate with the likes of Gautier, Gilberte, Phèdre, and Hardy's Tess of the D'Urbervilles.<sup>75</sup>

In the play, drug abuse is front and center, defining Jacqueline's character after her banishment from her bourgeois home. The stage directions note that she arrives in Bordeaux "dressed in cheap and tawdry finery, is deathly pale and shows the carelessness of herself and her surroundings which drugs induce."<sup>76</sup> She sips from a small bottle of ether throughout the first act, steadily becoming more intoxicated as she works up to the dramatic murder. Ether addiction was not widespread in North America, though it was a problem in parts of Europe, especially Ireland and Poland.<sup>77</sup> Jacqueline may in fact be the only ether addict to make the stage. Bisson portrays the effects of the drug on the ravaged woman as unpredictable. Laroque tells his co-conspirators that "It's queer stuff that. She's a silent kind of woman as a rule, but when she's been drinking ether, she gets talkative about her past and if she doesn't get maudlin too soon flies into furious rages and says anything.

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<sup>74</sup> Woods, 13.

<sup>75</sup> Another marker of its popularity was the burlesque *Madame 10* starring Eddie Cantor that travesties the play.

<sup>76</sup> Bisson, Act I, 1.

<sup>77</sup> Ether served as a general anesthetic in the nineteenth century and has the potential to cause temporary dependence. Richard Lawrence Miller details its rampant use in Ireland and Poland where it was drunk straight and chased with sips of water. *The Encyclopedia of Addictive Drugs* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002), 153-4.

She won't live very long. She's worn out, poor thing."<sup>78</sup> While reading tarot cards for a servant girl, Jacqueline relates that, ether "makes me think of other things - That helps. . . . But sometimes it gets on my nerves and then I either cry my heart out or smash all the furniture."<sup>79</sup> The narcotic ether stifles Jacqueline's raw emotions or exacerbates them to terrific levels. In this, her addiction propels her toward the melodramatic eruption that comes when she shoots Laroque.

**[Fig. 7 - Dorothy Donnelly as Jacqueline talking to the servant girl. Note the glass bottle of ether on the table. New York Public Library, Billy Rose Collection.]**

Jacqueline's one redeeming quality is that of maternal love. Of the Donnelly production, the *New York Times* notes, "Though a hopeless victim of the ether habit, she retains one great virtue - love for the son she left," and, in a later review adds that, "At bottom [the play's] strength comes from a primal instinct, the love of parent for child."<sup>80</sup> Regarding a 1913 revival of the work, the *San Francisco Chronicle* similarly describes Jacqueline as "a woman who has sunk to the sewer and who, in the ultimate destiny of the narrative, is lifted into a living expression of what is, possibly, all life's most dominant passion, the love of the mother for her young."<sup>81</sup> Jacqueline plummets from adultery to drug abuse and sexual promiscuity, then finally to murder, but she portrays the capacity of the lowest wretch, marked by her turn to drug use, to achieve redemption. At the heart of this is the idea that the outward degradation of the drug addict belies the survival of some

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<sup>78</sup> Bisson, Act I, 15.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, Act I, 20.

<sup>80</sup> "Savage Gives 'Madame X,'" *New York Times*, Sep. 14, 1909, 9; "Madame X Opens Salty Floodgate," *New York Times*, Feb. 3, 1910, 9.

<sup>81</sup> Waldemar Young, "Madame X Is Alcazar Bill, Miss Vaughan in Title Role," *San Francisco Chronicle*, Nov. 11, 1913, 9.

atavistic goodness that is part of human nature.

A number of reviews made direct comparisons between Donnelly's Jacqueline and Tully Marshall's performance in *The City*. Critics wondered at the "increasing dramatic popularity of drug fiends."<sup>82</sup> Much as they had questioned Marshall's process, reviewers wondered at how Donnelly created what was perceived to be an authentic portrayal of the drug addict. In a *New York Times* interview from 1910, Donnelly discusses a trip to Paris in which Savage arranged for her to visit sanitariums and meet with addicts. She used her time there "to observe their characteristic poses, and in that way they helped to compose the mental picture I was making of Madame X."<sup>83</sup>

Donnelly embraced a growing belief that she was something of an expert on addiction and the effects of ether. In October 1909, she lent her expertise to a *Chicago Daily Tribune* article on ether addiction. The piece features images of Donnelly in costume and make-up, portraying "the effects of the absorption of ether into the system," which she claims occur in a number of specific stages. These stages include "Dreams," "Defiance," "Maudlin and Sentimental," "Despair," and finally, "Tragic Grief." Each stage appears with a corresponding image of Donnelly in a dramatic pose, embodying the emotion or state of mind.<sup>84</sup> A second article about addiction written by a local physician accompanies Donnelly's piece in the newspaper. Significantly, the two authors are treated as equally knowledgeable and Donnelly actually receives more column space. As a publicity item, the article promotes Donnelly's performance as a realistic demonstration of addiction.

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<sup>82</sup> Ralph Renaud, "Tense Melodrama Grips Audience," *San Francisco Chronicle*, Dec. 12, 1910, 4.

<sup>83</sup> "Unconscious Suggestion -- the Part it Plays in Acting," *New York Times*, Feb. 13, 1910. Donnelly mentions this trip in a number of other articles as well.

<sup>84</sup> Dorothy Donnelly, No Title, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Oct. 31, 1909, G6.

Audiences were privy to something dark, mysterious, and real.

**[Fig. 8 - Donnelly poses in the stages of ether's effect.]**

In a *New York Times* interview from just a few months later, Donnelly discusses “the phases a drug fiend passes through,” and how the effects of the ether drive Jacqueline to the eventual “paroxysms of passion, in which she kills her lover.” Asserting the authenticity of her performance, she concludes: “Just in such a way do the symptoms follow one another in real life.”<sup>85</sup> These articles present Donnelly’s process of developing an arc for her character as something beyond a facet of verisimilitude; rather, it borders on empiricism. Formally legitimized as a portrayal of drug addiction, Donnelly’s interpretation of Bisson’s character becomes an accepted reality in the American mind. However, Donnelly’s stages of addiction that end in “Tragic Grief” are not based in any recorded actuality, rather she has orchestrated them to correspond with and legitimize the play’s narrative. The actress formulates her portrayal of addiction in a way that frees Jacqueline of blame for her actions and from accusations of innate wickedness; this enables the focus on her maternal goodness. In a way, Donnelly’s portrayal of Jacqueline and its reception embodies the central conceit of this study: a performance, highly inflected with the conventions of a particular genre, is promoted as reality.

As noted, the influence of *Madame X* cannot be underestimated. Not only was it regularly performed, but it also prompted adaptations of its central plotline. *The Fortune Teller* (1919) by Leighton Graves Osmun is a version of the same story, with a cocaine-fueled mother saving the son she formerly abandoned. Osmun’s mother does not die at the play’s conclusion, but her final sacrifice means never revealing herself to her son and never

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<sup>85</sup> “Unconscious Suggestion.”

seeing him again. Film versions of *Madame X* began appearing in 1920, and there have been as many as a dozen adaptations in various languages over the years, including Lionel Barrymore's directorial debut in 1929 that cast Ruth Chatterton as Jacqueline. The most recent version is the 1965 film with Lana Turner. However, as early as 1927, a *Billboard* review claims, "the one-time tear-wringer has lost its grip . . . little sympathy or interest can be felt for the characters who in more naïve days swayed the emotions to the breaking point. Today the play seems stilted and devastatingly improbable."<sup>86</sup> Beyond the creakiness of its plot, the dark and enigmatic element of drug addiction was on the decline as a dramatic device. Under the auspices of the censorious Production Code, the film versions excise Jacqueline's drug use, typically portraying her as a drunkard rather than a dope fiend. In the Lana Turner version, she has a taste for absinthe, but the film mentions addiction only in passing during the courtroom scene.

The proliferation of *Madame X*s on stage and screen fixed the convention of the female addict as a fallen woman whose demise is eminent. However, in 1917, with battles over drug control still in the headlines, Pendleton King's *Cocaine* offered the rare deviation from this standard narrative. He did so with self-awareness and with a dedication to the experimental mantra of the Provincetown Players, who premiered the work. His play is emblematic of a cultural shift that J. Chris Westgate identifies as a move away from "Victorian principle of decorum that maintained that the theatre represented the noblest themes, characters, and stories to supply society with the exemplum of social harmony."<sup>87</sup> *Madame X* and *Cocaine* represent a shift from Victorian bienséance to Progressive Era

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<sup>86</sup> "The New Plays on Broadway," *The Billboard* 39, no. 29 (July 16, 1927), 4.

<sup>87</sup> J. Chris Westgate, *Staging the Slums, Slumming the Stage: Class, Poverty, Ethnicity, and Sexuality in American Theatre, 1890-1916* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 1.

humanitarianism as part of what Susan Harris Smith calls the “regenerative force of the Little Theatre movement.”<sup>88</sup>

King sets *Cocaine* in a darkened attic bedroom, off New York’s squalid Bowery. The stage directions call for a single window and a pitched ceiling that “slopes down at the back to within a few feet of the floor.” This creates a restrictive and unnatural cave with a few rickety pieces of furniture and a bed, all of which are “in terrible disorder and confusion.”<sup>89</sup> It is 4:00 am on a still summer night. Heat permeates the space. An ambiance of destitution and hopelessness pervades the tenement home. The action begins with the return of Nora from a fruitless night of streetwalking, partially due to a visible fever blister on her face. Her lover, Joe, a former prizefighter, has been waiting. The short play works quickly, revealing much and driving toward its curious ending. King’s title alone clarifies the centrality of drug use to the scenario. Joe and Nora are both cocaine addicts, but Nora’s recent inability to attract any business has left them without “a good old sniff” for four nights. Joe can no longer fight after a devastating loss that almost killed him; thus, Nora’s prostitution is their only income. The play only hints at Nora’s background, but her ability to quote Oscar Wilde’s poetry and her dislike for Joe’s use of slang intimates a well-to-do birth.<sup>90</sup> As Joe remarks, “dope brings funny people together,” a note not only of their odd match, but also, as Katie Johnson points out, “their addiction is the basis of their romance.”<sup>91</sup> As the play progresses, the two admit that the situation is dire. Joe suggests

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<sup>88</sup> Susan Harris Smith, *Plays in American Periodicals, 1890-1918* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 8.

<sup>89</sup> Pendleton King, *Cocaine in Sex for Sale*, ed. Katie Johnson (University of Iowa, 2015), 43.

<sup>90</sup> Nora offers two lines from Wilde’s poem “My Voice” and asks that Joe not use the British slang “Ta” for “thanks.”

<sup>91</sup> King, 45/41.

that the landlady might be willing to forgo rent if he were to show her some affection, an idea that Nora rejects. Johnson believes this to be the inaugural portrayal of male prostitution on the American stage.<sup>92</sup> The connection between sex and drugs that *Madame X* hints at is transparent in *Cocaine*.

As their options seem to slip away, Nora talks Joe into ending it all. They extinguish the candle, which has until now provided the only light for the scene, plunging the stage into darkness and they turn on the gas. They lie in each other's arms, wondering whether anyone will care, and waiting to die. After a time they realize that the gas has run out and there is not a cent in the house to turn it back on. The play ends with them watching the sunrise through the window; Joe relieved, Nora desperate.

In terms of the portrayal of addiction, *Cocaine* takes a rare honest look at the addict devoid of any hyperbolic or pseudo-scientific conception. There is no actual drug use in the play, no typical moment of sensationalism when the addict imbibes or shoots up and then rants, raves, or rampages. Nora and Joe are living with the craving of addiction and its consequences: Joe cannot work and Nora is deteriorating at age thirty, with signs of her trade and venereal disease written on her body. King ignores social explanations related to environment in favor of a focus on the exhaustive and all-encompassing agony of addiction. As Nora says, "It's terrible to be so dependent on *anything* as that."<sup>93</sup>

The play originally appeared as a kind of addendum to the Provincetown Players' regular season in April of 1917. For six nights, *Cocaine* played along with works by Susan Glaspell, Rita Wellman, and one by both Glaspell and her husband George Cram Cook.

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 44 (italics in original).

Reviews of the evening typically highlight King's work, calling it "the most impressive" of the four and a review of a 1919 revival of the evening singles it out as "the most theatrically effective."<sup>94</sup> Burns Mantle of the *New York Times* marks *Cocaine* as the play that drew attention to the Provincetown Players from the "up town" audience, and engendered controversy regarding its power, artistic merit, and social value. Mantle imagines the work's reception as a sign that the Provincetown Players will rival the popular Washington Square Players within in a year and, within ten or twenty years, they will be the theatre that "took up the American drama and began to shake it into a new activity."<sup>95</sup> The "shake" to which Mantle refers may have something to do with the King's effective subversion of deep-seated theatrical conventions in his work.

Not only is Nora from a different class than her lover, she seems to be from a different play. She speaks with a dramatic whimsy that is not simply more cultivated than Joe's but is an entirely different idiom. Joe continually undercuts her quixotic language with a practicality devoid of the romance that Nora finds in their situation. Lying in Joe's arms, Nora dreams:

Nora: The Elevated sounds like the wind. Like a spirit that can't rest. The spirit of the city, that goes on and on day and night and never stops and never will stop, no matter what becomes of you and me. But when I am lying close to you like this, touching you - there's a sort of electric current that radiates from you all over because you're so alive. What was I going to say?

What was I talking about?

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<sup>94</sup> Clayton Hamilton, "Seen on the Stage," *Vogue* 49, no. 10 (May 15, 1917): 67; "Four Plays Revived by Provincetown Players," *New York Tribune*, April 26, 1919, 13.

<sup>95</sup> "Burns Mantle's New York Letter," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 25, 1917, D2.

Joe: You was talking about the El.

Nora: Yes. I was going to say while I am lying close to you like this it all seems so far away, doesn't it? It is like lying snug in bed and listening to the sea. There may be death and storms and shipwrecks and things out there, but they're far away. They can never touch us.

Joe: I wisht we could get a good old sniff, and forget our troubles right.<sup>96</sup>

Joe's interruption of her fanciful lovemaking with banalities or blunt questions runs throughout the play. At every moment, Joe's unadorned realism brings down to earth the heightened emotions of Nora's melodramatic tendencies. Though Nora has all the makings of a melodramatic heroine, the play's gritty realism refuses to let her narrative come to fruition. This subversion of melodramatic rhythms culminates in the final moment when their suicide attempt fails. The fallen woman (and, in this case, her lover) does not end up dead, nor do they attain any form of redemption. King knowingly breaks from the traditions set down by *Madame X* and the host of "fallen women" plays that came both before and after it. There is no promise of cure or reformation. Rather, this night's failed suicide only promises a future of extended suffering. The final sunrise does not represent hope, but the continuation of the cycle in which these two sad souls are trapped. Nora implores, "We've got to do something," but Joe easily negates any potential action, "Naw, I guess not."<sup>97</sup> They must face another day of hooking, of craving, of life within the cycle of addiction. King's play expresses what Brenda Murphy identifies as the ideological worldview behind American dramatic realism, which is "skeptical, ironic, deflating. It

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<sup>96</sup> King, 45.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

rejects both the tragic notion of ultimate transcendence and the comic notions of the ultimate emergence of a new order based on integration and harmony.”<sup>98</sup> The result is inevitably a “continual return to the mundane; not resolution or closure but irresolution and open-ended action . . .”<sup>99</sup>

In a way, King’s short work explores the potential for drug use to expand from a character trait that signals either victimhood or villainy, to serve as a central metaphor in a drama searching for new aesthetic principles. *Cocaine’s* breach of genre standards exemplifies the Little Theatre movement’s borrowing from European avant-garde at the close of World War I. With its stifling darkness, abysmal atmosphere, and interest in the low, King’s play is reminiscent of the kind of work mounted by Andre Antoine at the Theatre Libre and even of *fin de siècle* Symbolists. The single candle of King’s squalid flat brings to mind Maeterlinck’s *L’Intruse* and the production directed by Lugné Poe’s that was lit in the same way. King’s tenement flat is a far cry from the bourgeois world of *Madame X* or the horror-show sets of the opium-den plays with their trap doors and snake pits. At a time when *Madame X’s* Jacqueline was still a sought after role, King shows the potential for addiction to embody the shifting ethos of modernism. This is a potential further explored by another member of the Provincetown Players, Eugene O’Neill, in his *Long Day’s Journey Into Night*, which I examine in the final chapter of this study.

## **DRUG DRAMAS POST HARRISON: CRIME BOSSES AND PICKET FENCES**

In the last section of this chapter, I address the representations that appear in the 1920s

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<sup>98</sup> Brenda Murphy, *American Realism and American Drama, 1880-1940* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1987), xii.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

and '30s. Though stage addicts differ slightly between the two decades, there is a continuity that I hope to detail. The same year that the Supreme Court decided *Webb et al v United States*, Illinois congressman Henry T. Rainey leaked a report by the Treasury Department announcing that the nation was home to over 1,000,000 drug addicts.<sup>100</sup> Though Courtwright asserts that this figure is decidedly overblown, he notes that the report signals that “the American public was convinced that addiction was a problem of massive dimensions.”<sup>101</sup> With national prohibition of alcohol passed in October of 1919, reformers were newly invigorated in their attacks on vice and degeneracy and many turned their energies towards the drug problem. As a result, the 1920s saw some of the most virulent rhetoric against illicit drug use and some of the most damning representations of addicts. At the same time, the “Roaring Twenties” involved the glamorization of a number of transgressive and illicit behaviors. Drinking and drug use went fully underground, and the middle and upper classes followed them. Cocaine was widely used by the smart set of flappers as well as an underworld contingent of pimps, prostitutes, and criminals. Reports of “snowbirds” throwing “sniffing parties” were common. Opium smoking made a comeback for those who could afford it. And the intravenous injection of morphine and heroin was prominent. Slumming expeditions to Harlem or Chicago’s Bronzville introduced whites to both jazz music and a host of new social lubricants.

However, the new regulation of narcotics and awareness of the drug menace by the general populace did not lead to a corresponding increase in the number of addicts on stage. In fact, there are fewer dramas during this period that center on addicts than in the

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<sup>100</sup> “A Million Drug fiends,” *New York Times*, Sept. 18, 1918. The original report was the work of Andrew DuMez of the Treasure Department and was entitled *Traffic Narcotic Drugs*.

<sup>101</sup> Courtwright, 33.

two decades before. Those addict characters that do appear after 1920 are peripheral to the action. In part, this is due to the glut of drug-plays during the Harrison Era. Reviews of almost all dramas featuring addicts in the 1920s lament the over-use of the character and the staleness of the storylines in which they appear. In his excellent work on films from the period, Kevin Brownlow notes that with the end of the First World War, the subjects of drug use and addiction were seen as unpatriotic and hinting of bolshevism. What he calls the “drug-film cycle” that began prior to the Harrison Era comes to an end in the 1920s.<sup>102</sup> The theatre seems to follow suit. The drug plays of the ‘20s and ‘30s that do carry the torch of temperance are wrapped up in a post-World War I obsession with gangsters and crime.

Both reformers and scientists contributed to the perception of a link between crime and drug use. Reformer Richard B. Hobson, famous for his promotion of alcohol temperance, turned his attention to drug addiction, specifically heroin. Hobson “resorted to the by-then-familiar tactic of sensationalism, depicting addicts as dangerous and deranged individuals, bent on criminal acts and determined to enslave all with whom they came in contact.”<sup>103</sup> By 1928, Winifred Black declared in Hearst newspapers that sixty percent of violent crimes were the result of cocaine use.<sup>104</sup> Her articles were later collected into a widely-read volume entitled, *Dope: The Story of the Living Dead*.

Within the realm of the sciences, psychologist Lawrence Kolb publicized the idea that the addict was innately psychotic through three important papers beginning in

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<sup>102</sup> Kevin Brownlow, *Behind the Mask of Innocence* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1990), 109.

<sup>103</sup> Courtwright, 33.

<sup>104</sup> Winifred Black, “60 Per Cent of all Violent Crimes Traced to Cocaine,” n.p., February 23, 1928.

1924.<sup>105</sup> Adopting the language of psychopathology, Kolb (who later became assistant surgeon general) asserts that addicts had psychoneurotic deficiencies that predisposed them to particular vices. Kolb's larger argument was against the criminalization of addicts, but his belief was that addicts were beyond help. To Kolb, relapse was inevitable as "No elaborate system of rehabilitation will prevent [it] because the relapse is a mental relapse depending on their original pathological nature and due usually to the same causes that led to their original addiction."<sup>106</sup> Acker notes that, in publicizing such a claim, Kolb "unwittingly laid the conceptual ground for denying the addict a legitimate sick role," leaving them troubled but untreatable.<sup>107</sup> Kolb's aim was to assert that addiction and crime were not related, but policy makers selectively adopted his arguments, and the addict was increasingly charged with lawlessness.

Pharmacologists such as M.H. Seevers joined Kolb in claiming as late as 1939 that "the potential bank robber finds in the white crystals of 'snow' (cocaine) the temporary, but necessary, courage to complete his drama, even though murder becomes an essential to its success."<sup>108</sup> In conjunction with Hobson and Black's propaganda, such statements helped formulate the addict as a criminal with psychotic tendencies; a characterization that dominated the national drama. At the same time, it was in the 1920s that researchers arrived at a consensus that there were no external markers that distinguished addicts from

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<sup>105</sup> "Drug Addiction and Its Relation to Crime," *Mental Hygiene*, January 1925, 74-89; "Pleasure and Deterioration from Narcotic Addiction," *Mental Hygiene*, October 1925, 699-724; "The Prevalence and Trends of Drug Addiction in the United States and the Factors Influencing It," *Public Health Service Reports* 39, No. 21 (May 23, 1924) U.S. Treasury Department: 1193-1202.

<sup>106</sup> Originally quoted in Acker, 144. From Lawrence Kolb, "Re desirability of use of propaganda to acquaint the masses of consequences of using dangerous drugs" (typescript), July 28, 1925.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>108</sup> M.H. Seevers, "Drug Addiction Problems." *Sigma Xi Quarterly*, 27.2 (June, 1939): 96.

the general population. This helped to bring to an end the concept of criminal typologies that originated with the late nineteenth-century work of Cesare Lombroso among others. Thus, in 1920s America, anyone could be an addict, but the source of that addiction was no longer quack doctors, weak fathers, or foreign agents. Rather, the stage portrayed the addict as either cursed with criminal nature or the victim of an organized system of criminal enterprise.

Gangsters are central in popular works about drug use such as *Red Light Annie* (1923), *Kick In* (1925), *The Fall Guy* (1925), *Headquarters* (1929), *The Boy Friend* (1932), *The Crucible* (1933), *This is New York* (1935) and also in films such as *Human Wreckage* (1923), *Reefer Madness* (1933), and *The Pace That Kills* (1937). These works of the 1920s and '30s are focused on the ways in which criminal culture preys upon the lower classes, enabling addiction. Some plays, like James Gleason and George Abbott's *The Fall Guy*, do not feature addicts at all; instead they emphasize how criminal opportunity lures people into working for the drug trade when no other option presents itself. Those hit hardest by the economic depression were most vulnerable to the opportunities presented by illicit activity.

A number of these plays concern the search for shadowing kingpins who orchestrate the drug traffic. These figures sport sobriquets such as "The Works" or "Blight" and the plays end with their capture and unveiling, like so many crime mysteries of the era and today.<sup>109</sup> These nicknamed gangsters mirrored Charles "Lucky" Luciano, "Dutch" Schultz, and Meyer "Mob's Accountant" Lansky who had transformed the illegal drug trade into an organized business. The shadowy kingpin in these plays occasionally turns out to be

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<sup>109</sup> "The Works" is the shadowy villain in *The Fall Guy* by James Gleason and George Abbott, and "Blight" is the high-rolling Mafioso in *Crucible*.

a respected member of the upper echelon. There was a growing trend in the iconography of the day to portrayed the “International Dope Ring” or the “Big Fellow of the Opium Ring” as a faceless figure in tails and a top hat, trampling narcotics enforcers or chopping down the population without any regard to age, race, or class. The contention was that those who ran the drug trade were well-respected members of an untouchable class, feeding on the misery of the general population. This theme was especially prevalent in films such as *The Pace That Kills* and *Human Wreckage*, the latter of which opens with a narration claiming that the “Dope Ring” is managed by “men powerful in finance, politics and society, [yet] no investigator has penetrated to the inner circle.”<sup>110</sup>

**[Fig. 9, Newspaper cartoon of the “International Dope Ring,” 1930s. From Gary Silver, *The Dope Chronicles, 1850-1950*, New York: Harper & Row, 1979.]**

The lower and working-class victims in the plays represent a change in dramatic convention. The well-meaning young man or woman of low beginnings steps in for the fallen aristocrat of earlier works. This shift reflects a number of changes beyond the growing popularity of the mobster. It is in the 1920s that the idea of the “drug menace” comes into focus; the belief that drug use can spread through a community and destroy all in its path. It is a particularly significant idea within the confines of the middle-class communities that debuted as the backbone of U.S. culture in the 1920s. At the time, the nation was more and more geographically segregated along class lines and, in that, there was a growing defensiveness of these demarcated communities. Addiction as a contagion also reflected a growing paranoia over Bolshevism’s potential to spread and upend traditional values. Plays depict drug dependence as corroding the individual’s desire for social ascendancy and a stable family. As evidence of this, the drug plays of the 1920s

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<sup>110</sup> Brownlow, 122.

suddenly introduce the possibility of an addict having a family. There are still no children featured in these works, as the commingling of drug users and child remained too unsettling. But, plays like *Red Light Annie* and *Kick In* end with the revelation that the central female character is expecting. Young couples struggle against addiction and the criminal element with parenthood as the brass ring.

Written by actors Norman Houston and Sam Forrest, *Red Light Annie* premiered in 1923. It opened in New York at the Belasco Theatre with Mary Ryan in the part of Fanny (aka Red Light Annie), before a national tour under the management of A.H. Woods. Scripts of the play have proved elusive, however, I have been able to locate a one-act version of the script that was intended for the variety stage, as well as significant periodical material pertaining to the plot and reception of the full-length drama.

Houston and Forrest relate in interviews that they had set out to make a “propaganda play” with the aim of “educat[ing] the public about dope.”<sup>111</sup> The result is a play that is hackneyed, while providing subtle insight into how the end of the Harrison Era influenced the perception of addiction. Received as both a “moving human story” and a “simply nauseating” drama that “should be avoided by self-respecting people,” *Red Light Annie* follows what was, by then, a recognizable plot of an innocent country girl who falls at the hands of urban corruption.<sup>112</sup> The play involves Fanny and her husband Tom, as well as Fanny’s sister Dorothy and her gangster husband Nick. Soon after Fanny and Tom move to New York from the country, Dorothy and Nick pin a robbery on Tom, sending him to Sing Sing. Left defenseless, Fannie seeks help from her kin, only to be seduced by Nick, hooked

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<sup>111</sup> “Norman Houston Has Flair as Well as Liking for Melodrama,” *New York Tribune*, Oct. 14, 1923.

<sup>112</sup> “Frank Thomas in ‘Red Light Annie,’” *Buffalo Enquirer*, Dec. 22, 1923; “Red Light Annie,” *The Post*, Aug. 22, 1923.

on cocaine, and put to work in the brothel he runs.<sup>113</sup> Fanny makes it clear that it was her need for cocaine that made her so easy to manipulate. In this way, *Red Light Annie* represents the resurrection of the abducted girl narrative that the opium-den drama had popularized twenty years earlier. Here, gangsters stand in for the lecherous Chinese villain, shifting the play's focus to domestic concerns.

The first two acts follow Fannie's downward spiral as she becomes the sought after "Red Light Annie." The final act shows her back at home with Tom who is out of jail, newly employed, and ignorant of how his wife has spent the last two years. The couple discusses plans for a home outside the city and a new life of middle-class bliss. Nick and Dorothy arrive, looking for a place to hide after a heist in which Nick has killed a man. The two snort cocaine, tempting Fannie who struggles to resist. When they threaten to reveal all to her husband, Fannie shoots Nick, much to the appreciation of the local police, who let her go free. While some reviewers decried the lack of originality, calling the play simply "hoakum [sic]," the explicit drug use and brothel scenes were considered salacious enough to lead to protests and threats of censorship in Cincinnati and Philadelphia.<sup>114</sup> Drug use could still unsettle the moral majority.

What separates the drama from earlier works is the apparent rehabilitation and redemption of Fanny, validated by her attaining the position of mother-to-be. The portrayal of a fallen woman and drug user as pregnant was unthinkable in prior eras in which such women rarely survived the play, let alone assume the sacred position of nurturing a child.

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<sup>113</sup> In the one-act version available at the Library of Congress, Nick is called Sydney.

<sup>114</sup> Frederick Donaghey, "Major Sins and Minor Crimes," *Chicago Tribune*, Feb. 21, 1924; "Red-Light Annie' Censored," *Billboard* 36, no. 6 (Feb. 9, 1924) - details the protests by the Cincinnati Ministers' Association; "Cuts in 'Red Light Annie' Forced in Philadelphia," *Variety*, November 29, 1923 - reports that the play was partially censored on tour.

Fannie's reformation is intimately linked to her encroaching motherhood. In the play's climactic scene, she finds the strength to repel Nick in the object of the baby dress she has been knitting. Clutching it to her breast, she delivers the final triumphant speech against her former captors. "There's somethin' in me now ---- that makes me have somethin' to fight for . . . an' if you come between us, I'll hunt you down like a ferret hunts sewer rats . . ."

<sup>115</sup> Whereas Jacqueline of *Madame X* could only represent unparalleled motherhood from afar, *Red Light Annie* reverses the narrative; Fanny comes into motherhood having already been an addict and demonstrates that she is fit for the actual duties of raising a child. Fanny's triumph is that of middle-class values of self-control over the self-destruction and self-indulgence of addiction.

However, Fannie's redemption is complicated by the fact that she remains an addict, even if she is abstaining from drug-use. There is no silver-bullet cure that relieves her of suffering and ensures her rebirth as a sober, fitting mother. When Nick offers her cocaine, she is crippled with the desire to partake. Her struggle is a permanent contest, an idea explored in the first chapter with *The Opium Pan* from the same period. Thus, Fanny's return to the position of virtuous wife is not a transformation rather it is a performance, one that works to endlessly obscure and conceal her addiction. In the one-act version of the play, after driving her tormentors out in a state of fury, Fanny "slumps down behind the door, a pathetic huddled-up little figure."<sup>116</sup> She triumphs over her persecutors, but by no means conquers her addiction with any finality and it will remain, though potentially latent, throughout her motherhood.

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<sup>115</sup> Norman Houston and Sam Forrest, *Red Light Annie* (Typescript, Library of Congress, April 16 1923), 57.

<sup>116</sup> Houston and Forrest, 57.

Fanny demonstrates the capacity to shift identities within various social situations. So much so that she takes on a different persona of “Red Light Annie” when under the influence. This dexterity was part of the great appeal of the role, and numerous reviewers highlight it. A *New York Tribune* reviewer notes, “Miss Ryan is lovely as she alternates coke with scrambled eggs and moments of pleasure with her husband and her evil genius (pimp).”<sup>117</sup> A stock production that appeared in New York a year after the Broadway run discusses the many roles that the actress playing Fannie has to enact, claiming that the actress “as a small-town bride, in an ingénue gown of girlish simplicity, was admirable; as a novice poker player, laugh provoking; as a dope-sniffing inmate of a bawdy house, pathetic, as a little homebody dishing up fricassee chicken dinners, perfectly at home, and as a real woman resenting the attack of a lustful libertine, emotionally dramatic.”<sup>118</sup>

This variability of character represents more than simply an opportunity for virtuosity by the actress. Rather, it relates to Fannie’s status as an addict. Acker designates the end of the Harrison Era as an explicit shift in the behavior of addicts to encompass a nuanced “set of coping strategies for managing” their addictions. Users enacted a process of “identity management,” as they were required to “pass as nonusers with family or employers.”<sup>119</sup> Fanny’s enactment of myriad subject position and the skills required to succeed in each of them manifests this “identity management” in decidedly performative form. To wit, Fanny remains an addict while successfully playing the part of the housewife.

Sociologist Howard Becker considers deviant and dominant cultures as

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<sup>117</sup> Percy Hammond, “Red Light Annie,” *New York Tribune*, Aug. 22, 1923.

<sup>118</sup> “Red Light Annie,” *The Billboard*, 36, no. 40 (Oct. 4, 1924): 26.

<sup>119</sup> Acker, 5, 120.

corresponding “groups,” each with their own rules. He perceives deviant cultures as actively self-segregating and organized in much the same way as normative communities. Dominant-, sub-, and counter-cultures establish their related social worlds through a set of “constructed language, symbols, practices, identities, and social roles consistent with its basic values, rules [and] customs.”<sup>120</sup> He significantly asserts that, “people belong to many groups simultaneously.”<sup>121</sup> Becker believes that the “conflicts and disagreements” that arise between the dominant groups and those groups labeled as transgressive, are “part of the political process of society.”<sup>122</sup> Thus, Fanny’s journey between these worlds represents a growing recognition of the porous borders between deviancy and normalcy that came with the 1920s. As Prohibition and loosening social mores made certain criminal behaviors socially acceptable, dramatists exploited the growing recognition that people could indeed belong to a variety of Becker’s “groups.” Viewing the play and considering the malleability of Fanny’s identity was part of Becker’s “political process of society” in action. Inevitably, determinations of Fanny’s “success” in this negotiation rely on her ability to eventually acquire middle-class standing anchored in family security.

The multiplicity of personhood that *Red Light Annie* manifests did not survive into the 1930s. Addicts were not granted such sympathy or such complexity going forward. Three significant events stifled any progressive vision of addiction within a prohibitory framework. First, the repeal of Prohibition solidified a national consensus that drug use was definitively deviant. Striking down the Eighteenth Amendment while allowing the

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>121</sup> Howard Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: Free Press, 1963), 8.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 18.

Harrison Act to remain unchanged manifests the clear distinction that the nation made between spirits as acceptable and narcotics as nefarious. Second, new antidrug fervor helped create the Federal Bureau of Narcotics in 1930, which undertook the enforcement of drug policy in the country. At the head of the Bureau was Harry Anslinger, America's first "Drug Czar," a highly public figure who propagated some of the severest rhetoric concerning addict criminality in the country's history. Anslinger succeeding in officially framing "drug addiction as a problem of criminology rather than medicine" by leaning heavily on the belief that addicts were criminally insane.<sup>123</sup> Lastly, the adoption of the Hayes Code by the film industry explicitly rejected the portrayal of drug use or addiction. The addict was not to be part of the medium that quickly came to dominate American entertainment.<sup>124</sup>

In the theatre, representations of drug use and addiction continued to diminish. Those that did appear typically maintained a connection to the criminal underworld. D. Hubert Connelly's *Crucible* (1933) combined a growing interest in bohemian lifestyles with the well-established gangster narratives. Chad Heap details how post-World War One, slummers explored the bohemian tearooms and cabarets of Greenwich Village. There they found artists and radicals who had begun to "explore the creative energies, leftist leanings, and yearning for free love."<sup>125</sup> Connelly capitalized on this interest, portraying the infiltration of drug addiction into the lives of the well-meaning Tom Deering and his artist fiancée Rosemary Adair. The action takes place in Rosemary's New York walkup that is

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<sup>123</sup> Acker, 44.

<sup>124</sup> "The Production Code of 1930," <http://www.und.edu/instruct/cjacobs/ProductionCode.htm> (Accessed, May 27, 2015).

<sup>125</sup> Heap, 61.

strewn with paintings and through which a colorful group of bohemian characters comes and goes. The plot is tortuous, but seems to follow a recognizable line moving toward an optimistic resolution. However, Connelly departs drastically from earlier endings. The conclusion leaves Tom unemployed and on the verge of taking up crime that includes drug dealing; Tom's brother kills the kingpin of the dope ring, but his only prize is that he will die of tuberculosis before he can be executed for murder; Rosemarie is left alone; and one of the addict characters is heard killing himself off stage. The play ends with the declaration that "Life is a crucible, dear, but God's in his Heavens [*sic*]." <sup>126</sup>

The addicts in Connelly's work are deranged criminals and murders. A scene set in a prison features the echoing screams of addicts calling for "a shot" at intervals. An unnamed prisoner wails: "iron bars don't make a cage! Cells and iron bars: Ha, ha, ha! . . . I'll float through your bars to paradise. I'll get my violin out of pawn, and play - I still can play - and dream - and dream- and dream. You can't shackle my soul, Warden - you can't - you can't! I'll have my dope - and my violin - and I'll play - and play. Through bars, to Elysium - on dreams - dreams."<sup>127</sup> Though this has remnants of De Quincean tropes of fantasy, travel, inspiration, and dreams, the tirade is absent of any deeper meaning. *Crucible* joins the films of the 1930s like *Reefer Madness* and *The Pace that Kills* that extended Anslinger's propaganda efforts to create dehumanized images of the drug addict.

The play was poorly received. It is significant that *Crucible* was subject to the same complaints as *Red Light Annie* a decade earlier. Reviewers denounced both dramas as old-fashioned and belonging to the "blood-and-thunder" genre of melodrama that should have

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<sup>126</sup> D. Hubert Connelly, *Crucible* (Typescript, Library of Congress, 1933), Act III-14.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, Act II-8.

been played in the extinct “ten’-twent’-thirt’” houses where opium-den dramas were standard fare.<sup>128</sup> Ten years after *Red Light Annie* was dismissed as uninspired, Percy Hammond of the *New York Herald Tribune* went so far as to call *Crucible* “as senile and awkward as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.”<sup>129</sup> In essence, the prohibition drama had run its course in the 1920s and by the 1930s, was antiquated.

Though this study concentrates on theatrical representations, the present-day popularity of some of the drug-prohibition films of the 1930s makes it essential to momentarily explore their origins and character. The Hays Office did not grant approval to films such as *Reefer Madness* (1936), *Marihuana* (1936), and *Assassins of Youth* (1937). Producers like Dwayne Esper, who released both *Reefer Madness* and *Assassin of Youth*, were able to secure only limited runs in smaller theatres.<sup>130</sup> These films were either produced with educational aims or were an attempt to exploit the angle of education for the sake of lurid content. They pushed the conventional warnings of prurience and madness past any believable threshold for the sake of exploitation and titillation. Though these movies have cult status today for their hyperbolic and campy depictions of drug use, they did little in shaping the national perception of drug addiction at the time. The dire nature of their depictions embodies the rhetoric of Anslinger’s publicity campaigns, especially in their demonization of marijuana use. Anslinger’s lectures on the “killer weed” were largely responsible for the national-wide belief that the drug posed unspeakable dangers and that the country needed laws such as the the 1932 Uniform State Narcotic Act

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<sup>128</sup> “‘Red Light Annie’ Burns a fuse out at the Belasco,” *Washington Post*, Jan. 21, 1924; Brooks Atkinson, “The Play,” *New York Times*, September 5, 1933, 22.

<sup>129</sup> Percy Hammond, “The Theatre,” *New York Herald Tribune*, Sep. 5, 1933, 10.

<sup>130</sup> John Markert, *Hooked in Film: Substance Abuse on the Big Screen* (Baltimore: Scarecrow Press, 2013), 22.

and the 1937 Marijuana Tax Act that enacted full prohibition of cannabis.

The one film that did shape public opinion, *Human Wreckage* (1923), appeared prior to the full adoption of the Production Code, but still had to obtain special permission from Will Hays for a larger release. Along with Hays' dispensation, the film was co-sponsored by the Los Angeles Anti-Narcotic League and featured cameos by the Mayor and Police Chief of Los Angeles. Though the film is lost today, a shooting-script is extant. The work was a full-frontal attack on the drug industry incorporating every possible convention of the genre from xenophobic anti-Asian propaganda and the suicidal fallen-woman to paranoid accusations regarding the political protection afforded those involved in the drug trade.

*Human Wreckage* came in the wake of the death of the matinee idol Wallace Reid from complications connected to his morphine addiction. His wife, the actress Dorothy Davenport, spearheaded an anti-drug campaign after his death that included the making of the film. To borrow Marvin Carlson's oft-used term, Wallace Reid's death "ghosted" the story of *Human Wreckage*. To view the film was to connect the actor's passing to the degradation and systematic menacing of the American public that the film portrayed. The public nature of Reid's addiction bolstered a growing belief that Hollywood was a den of vice and that the film industry held too much sway over the viewing public. It was suspicion of this bad influence that prompted the adoption of the Production Code in 1933. By 1934, Hays was making his list of actors he thought were unfit to appear in films due to their personal lives. Anslinger too targeted movie stars, going after Hollywood with vigor.

Films such as *Human Wreckage*, *Reefer Madness*, *Assassin of Youth*, and *The Pace That Kills* all provide familiar warnings of the irreparable damage that narcotic use causes, but they differ from earlier works of prohibition in the way they trace the fall of the addict.

In almost every earlier drug narrative, the plot begins with the addict already in the grip of his (or her) dependence. The character typically discusses his former innocence and details the moment that he fell. It is a tradition that dates back to the temperance speeches of the Washingtonians of the mid-nineteenth century that featured speakers retelling their struggles with alcohol (a practice that is now a major tenet of Alcoholics Anonymous). However, in the films of the 1930s, the central character appears prior to his addiction. The films portray the character's seduction and first use under the influence of an overly friendly gangster who abuses the trust of the innocent victim. Audiences then observe the transformation from novice to confirmed dope fiend.

The speed with which the fall from innocence occurs is reminiscent of the nineteenth-century idea of "temporality" in which "it only takes a short amount of time, such as 'an hour,' to undo years of difficult self-management."<sup>131</sup> Temperance dramas often portrayed the drinker's abandonment of self to total vice as momentary, stemming from the first sip. W.C. Fields lampoons this notion in *The Fatal Glass of Beer* (1933). The drug-prohibition films perform the full cycle of the addict's initiation and fall pictorially represented in Nathaniel Currier's famous lithograph "The Drunkard's Progress." Zieger refers to this arc as a "bildungsroman in reverse" in which the promising youth who is on the verge of making his mark in the world shackles himself to a drug and loses "middle-class advantage, good reputation, prospects for further prosperity, romantic attachment and other kinship relations, self-respect, spiritual well-being, health, sanity, and, often, life itself."<sup>132</sup> In reality, portraying the full cycle of the fall provided filmmakers with more

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<sup>131</sup>Zieger, 182.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 22.

opportunity to show degraded acts, intensifying the lurid behavior as the young protagonist further departs from his or her upright beginnings. Though only peripherally significant in their own time, these films served as models for a generation of exploitation films that flourished in the 1950s and beyond.

Critics of these films typically accused them of being “how-to” manuals for drug use and debasement. *Variety* referred to *Human Wreckage* as an “enlightener” where the “young can see here things they should not know.”<sup>133</sup> Thirty years earlier, critics lodged similar complaints in reference to *John-a-Dreams*. In essence, between the 1890s and the 1930s, drug prohibition plays and films challenged the limits of what people should “know.” In revealing drug use to its audience, the works discussed in this chapter balanced edification, diversion, the promotion of fear, and the desire for a healthy public body. They did so in service to defining national norms through proscriptive and prescriptive narratives. The dramas discussed here worked to perpetuate convictions regarding the family unit, sustain middle-class identity by aggrandizing particular class-oriented aspirations, assuage concerns over both scientific advancement and the requisitioning of authority by the medical profession, and mediate contradictions between the ideals of social salvation and the need for clear lines of deviancy.

After widespread popularity, these narratives faded during the tribulations of the Depression and the Second World War. There was not a new theatrical language for understanding drug addiction until the 1950s at which time new political and class circumstances made exigent a need to “know” that which had been quietly tucked away. At that time, Beat writers such as William Burroughs and Jack Kerouac brought bohemian and

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<sup>133</sup> “Human Wreckage,” *Variety*, July 4, 1923, 22.

counter-culture coolness to intoxication. Soon after, the drug use of hippies and yippies for the sake of free love and mind expansion created an atmosphere in which audiences would accept a celebration of narcotics without the dire consequences of the prohibition play.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Drug Slang and the Comic Dope Fiend*

“We could roam around a town for weeks without digging another human who even knew what we were talking about.”

- Milton “Mezz” Mezzrow, *Really the Blues*, 1946

In a 1928 article for *American Speech*, psychologist Richard Paynter declares, “My observations have led me to believe that the drug addict is ‘hooked’ by ‘dope’ talk as well as by ‘dope.’”<sup>1</sup> He goes on to conclude that drug vernacular is so deeply connected to the pathology of addiction that if the therapist could crack the code of “dope talk,” he could reveal the addict’s “peculiar and isolated psychology.” Paynter was not alone in his interest in drug argot and his article is one of seven published in *American Speech* between 1928 and 1938 that examines and catalogues drug vernacular for the sake of study. Fascination with the cryptic language of the addict was not confined to academic inquiry and there is popular literature on the subject that dates back to the late nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup>

Not surprisingly, the theatre found ways to profit from the public’s interest. Audiences sought authentic representations of the addict and his slang as a way to experience the underworld vicariously without danger to health or social status.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard H. Paynter, “The Language of Drug Addicts,” *American Speech* 4, no. 1 (October 1928): 20.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to the Paynter article, articles concerning drug slang include: Achsah Hardin, “Volstead English,” *American Speech* 7, no. 2 (December 1931): 81-88; James D. Hart, “Jazz Jargon,” *American Speech* 7, no. 4 (April 1932): 241-254; David W. Maurer, “Junker Lingo,” By-Product of Underworld Argot,” *American Speech* 8, no. 2 (April 1933): 27-28; Maurer, “The Argot of the Underworld Narcotic Addict,” *American Speech* 11, no. 2 (April 1936): 116-127; Maurer, “The Argot of the Underworld Narcotic Addict: Part II,” 13, no. 3 (October 1938): 179-192; Victor Folke Nelson, “Addendum to Junker Lingo,” *American Speech* 8, no. 3 (October 1933): 33-34.

Entertainers and writers often sought the newest slang by going where their audiences were not willing to tread. Chad Heap reports that actors and writers defended their occasional tokes from opium pipes in Chinatown dens by insisting it was the best way for them to acquire the new slang that their audiences demanded. Theatre critic James L. Ford asserts that it was the only way for performers to master the slang of the “bunco-steerers, gamblers, prostitutes, ‘con’ men and thieves” for their stage performances.<sup>3</sup> The claim suggests that the drug world was the meeting place for a diverse underworld population. Narcotics seemed to be the common ground for a range of figures that were also welcomed as characters on the popular stage.

This chapter examines the commodification and dissemination of drug-related argot through two specific performers. The first is Junie McCree, who originated the comic dope-fiend on the vaudeville and burlesque stage in 1900. McCree, who has received little scholarly attention, created a harlequinesque character, distinct from the stage drunk or comic tramp. His characterization established slang as the dominant signifier of the drug user, influencing a long line of imitators. The second is Cab Calloway, the African-American bandleader who became famous primarily for his performances at Harlem’s Cotton Club in the early 1930s. Calloway too exploited the language of the drug underworld for the sake of a popular audience. His performances represent the commingling of McCree’s legacy with a related history that linked drug use to African-Americans through performance, imagery, and language.

Both McCree and Calloway present drug addiction within a comic frame, differing from representations examined elsewhere in this study. McCree’s work is most obviously

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<sup>3</sup> Qtd. in Chad Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885-1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 107.

in this style as his burlesque skit follows traditional comic structure, though reviews also note the pathos and realism he brought to the role.<sup>4</sup> Calloway was most famous for his cycle of “Minnie the Moocher” songs, which detail the love affair between the opium-smoking Minnie and her coke-sniffing paramour, Smoky Joe. While Calloway’s performances were part of a Harlem cabaret scene that was not necessarily comic in its genre, both reviewers and Calloway himself classified his signature songs as “novelty numbers.” The term signals the comic intent of the songs, as opposed to a ballad or a song appropriate for dancing. The songs were meant to highlight Calloway’s virtuosity as an entertainer, rather than the musicianship of his all-black band. Calloway’s performances were crafted to titillate audiences while also seeming humorously anodyne.

Providing safe versions of troubling characters, both performers enabled a form of theatrical slumming. Comic representations of the addict assuaged anxieties regarding the drug users whom audiences read about in newspapers or saw in the streets. These performers established ways of imagining particular citizens whose existence troubled traditional value systems or unsettled conceptions of the nation’s populace as uniform. McCree’s representation was informed by his time out West, specifically in cities such as San Francisco and Denver. He performed a particular kind of addict who was supposedly endemic to the frontier and its perceived wildness, a character that Eastern viewers found eccentric, if not alien. Examination sheds light on the way in which turn-of-the-century audiences envisioned the expanding nation and its foreign corners.

Calloway too worked within an important context. His performances catered to the droves of white slummers that made their way to Harlem in the 1930’s as part of the

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<sup>4</sup> *Toledo Blade*, Mar. 19, 1907; *Variety*, Dec. 10, 1910.

“negro vogue” that began in the decade prior. Whites sought opportunities to challenge social and sexual mores and they envisioned Harlem as a vice district that indulged every appetite. Consequently, Harlem was the hub of the drug trade in New York City, and drug use was an inseparable part of visiting the area’s clubs, speakeasies, and restaurants in the 1930s. Thus, this chapter investigates the ways in which jazz culture, definitively black in origin, became irrevocably entangled with drug culture. Calloway’s success came, in part, from his ability to exploit this intersection of the two cultures for the sake of an audience hungry for the experience of both.

### **JUNIE MCCREE AND THE YEN SHEE OF THE FRONTIER**

Junie McCree was the stage name of Gonzalvo Macrillo, born in Toledo in 1866 of Italian and German parentage. McCree is primarily remembered as one of the most sought-after skit writers and lyricists in variety entertainment as well as one of the early presidents of vaudeville’s first performer’s union, the White Rats.<sup>5</sup> McCree began his stage career as a member of the Bella Union Stock Company in San Francisco. In its earliest incarnations in the 1840s, the Bella Union Theatre was a gambling house that offered minstrel performances. It also hosted cockfights and freak shows.<sup>6</sup> By the 1880s, when McCree was working there, the theatre was a more traditional variety house, but it kept a semblance of its rough origins, offering risqué and comic entertainment to an exclusively male clientele.

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<sup>5</sup> McCree wrote for the following performers: Lydia Barry, Stella Mayhew, Byron-Merkel and Company, Armstrong and Milloy, Cohan and Harris, Becker, Lancaster, Sam and Kitty Morton, Taylor Granville, Laura Pierpont, E.B. Eddy, Bernard and Scarth, Lew Ward, Harry Crandall, The Rempel Sisters, Emma Carus, Frank Fogarty, Hallen and Fuller, Clara Morton, Leroy and Lytton, Joe Jenny, Girard and Gardner, Will H. Philbrick, Start Barnes, Al H. Wilson, and Gordon and Whyte. McCree served two terms as president of the White Rats from 1913 to 1916.

<sup>6</sup> Edmond M. Cagey, *The San Francisco Stage: A History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950), 107.

McCree likely took part in typical burlesque fare, the occasional stock play, as well as blackface routines and “coon” songs.

McCree’s performance as a dope fiend and its reception are deeply tied to the national perception of the “Wild” West and specifically, San Francisco, which was notorious for its immoderation, criminal culture, and colorful underworld types. Figures such as “Shanghai Kelly” (a saloon keeper who drugged his customers and forced them into merchant service) and famous courtesans such as Ah Toy and Selina were nationally known. The city produced enough scandal in the last decade of the nineteenth century, just as McCree began his dope fiend act in New York, that Curt Gentry dubbed the period “San Francisco’s naughty nineties.”<sup>7</sup> One of the most savored controversies involved the marriage of the son of a U.S. senator to a well-known madam. Prostitution was so widespread and institutionalized that one could purchase a number of competing “gentleman’s guides” to the city that included the names of madams, their addresses, and even a listing of the girls they employed.<sup>8</sup> Its vice district, known as the Barbary Coast, was notorious for its bawdy entertainments, the roughness of its honky-tonks, and the openness with which licentious activity was undertaken. As Herbert Asbury puts it, the Barbary Coast was “the scene of more viciousness and depravity, but which at the same time possessed more glamour, than any other area of vice and iniquity on the American continent.”<sup>9</sup>

San Francisco was also home to the oldest and largest Chinatown in the United

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<sup>7</sup> Curt Gentry, *The Madams of San Francisco* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1964), 169-70.

<sup>8</sup> Competing guides were the Green Book, the Red Book, and the Blue Book, differentiated in part by their selectivity.

<sup>9</sup> Herbert Asbury, *Barbary Coast: An Informal History of the San Francisco Underworld* (New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1933), 3.

States, a fact that contributed to the perception that the city was a foreign locale. The city seemed an exotic colony distanced from the national homeland. As a sign of the interest the area inspired, the slumming tourism of the Chinese district was institutionalized to the point that the Chinatown guides had their own union. It was a common belief that opium smoking was widespread amongst both the Chinese and the white communities in the city and San Francisco passed the first anti-drug law in the country in 1875, aimed directly at its Chinatown dens. However, the law was loosely enforced and ten years later, the city's Board of Supervisors reported that there were twenty-six dens in operation, providing 320 bunks that were open to the public, most of which were located in Duncombe Alley of Chinatown.<sup>10</sup> Many who arrived on the coast in search of fortune lost their way in these smoke-filled dens. As mentioned, H.H. Kane theoretically traced the practice of opium smoking by whites back to the city. The West took on the semblance of the opium smoker's natural habitat, much as it had for the Chinese immigrant. Thanks to this impression and the allure of the frontier, McCree quickly gained popularity performing a comic version of what was supposedly one of the area's native characters.

McCree debuted his dope fiend act in New York City in a skit called "The Dope fiend, Or Sapho in Chinatown." The short, three-scene playlet was a burlesque of the play *Sapho* that had opened that same year on Broadway to great controversy, upon which McCree capitalized. *Sapho* was an adaptation by Clyde Fitch of the French novel and play by Alphonse Daudet. The U.S. production starred the English actress Olga Nethersole, who also produced the work. Nethersole was famous for her feminist politics, revealing costumes, and the heightened sexuality that she brought to her performances. Almost immediately

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 166.

after opening, the police shut down Nethersole's production and arrested the actress, her co-star, and her fellow producer on charges of indecency. The scandal generated intense public debate and a media circus that reported on every aspect of the trial, including what Nethersole wore in court.<sup>11</sup>

The court found Nethersole and her co-defendants innocent after only two days of argument and she went on to perform *Sapho* to capacity crowds, thanks to the scandal. McCree was not the only performer to profit from the attention Nethersole received. Weber and Fields had a spoof called "Sapolio" at the time.<sup>12</sup> However, McCree continued to perform the burlesque even after the Nethersole controversy died down, listing it as simply "The Dope Fiend." In 1906, McCree resuscitated the bit after a few years absence under the title "The Man from Denver." The title change highlights the importance of the dope fiend's frontier roots as Denver rivaled San Francisco as an opium center. It was host to its own large Chinatown and an area known as "hop alley" where its many dens were located.

McCree's skit survives only in part. I have acquired a copy of the first scene of the playlet, which McCree registered for copyright with the Library of Congress in August of 1900. I have also identified substantial periodical evidence that reveals the plot of the piece, McCree's style of performance, and the reception of the work. Together, these suffice in clarifying the anatomy of McCree's characterization and the sources from which he was culling.

"Sapho in Chinatown" cleverly plays upon the plotline of Nethersole's drama. In

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<sup>11</sup> As the first censorship trial of the new century in the United States, *Sapho* has received substantial scholarly attention from scholars such as Katie Johnson, Anne Callis, John Houchin, Randy Kapelle, and Joyce Reilly.

<sup>12</sup> Sapolio was a brand of soap. The Weber and Fields skit was playfully subtitled "A Clean Travesty of 'Sapho.'"

Fitch's adaptation *Nethersole* played Fannie LeGrand, a loose woman who lures and then discards her male lovers. The play dramatizes LeGrand's choice to stay with one such lover who has returned from prison, as he will support their illegitimate child. In doing so, she rejects her true love and denies herself happiness. Thus, the play dramatizes LeGrand's selfless and maternal actions for the sake of her son. The controversy over the drama was more connected to *Nethersole's* staging than to the plot. Famously LeGrand and her lover ascended a long set of stairs to a bedroom; the raising and lowering of the curtain signaled the time that passed during their coitus.

McCree's skit undermines any maternal or romantic heroism on the part of the LeGrand character. In "Sapho in Chinatown," Ruby Belle is a fast city woman described by one reviewer as an "adventuress," who has been living well by stringing along men.<sup>13</sup> A former lover, Ludwig von Katzenfeldt, is free from prison and returns to claim her.<sup>14</sup> Ruby declares that she is married and promises to produce her husband. Molly, her maid, goes searching for a man to play the spouse and returns with a slightly bewildered opium-addict named Bill. Through quick thinking, comical subterfuge, and indecipherable slang, Bill is able to convince Katzenfeldt of his authenticity as Ruby's new husband. He "eventually brings peace from chaos," and sends the suitor off.<sup>15</sup> Once successful, Bill discusses his plan of spending the money he has earned to "get fifty dollars worth of room rent, and fifty dollars worth of dope and have a jubilee."<sup>16</sup> Exhibiting underworld sagacity, Bill advises

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<sup>13</sup> *Toledo Blade*, Mar. 19, 1907.

<sup>14</sup> The German word "Katzenfell" means "Catskin," which may refer to an inferior type of silk hat as a way to mocking the suitor, but it may also mark him as rich enough to afford a real catskin coat.

<sup>15</sup> *Variety*, Mar. 19, 1907.

<sup>16</sup>Junie McCree, "A Dope Fiend," (Typescript, Library of Congress, 1900), 6.

Ruby before leaving, “sister - when you mix up with a guy like that, cop his pocketbook, but don’t monkey with his heart.”<sup>17</sup>

McCree’s character wore a thick mustache, a fedora, a three-quarter length black coat, and a Western-style neckerchief. Various renderings of his character also show him in a black suit and carrying a cigar. The outfit connects him to the frontier and its underworld of saloons and gambling houses. Fittingly, Bill’s mentions his former occupation as a casino card dealer in Arizona. The neckerchief also has connotations of bohemian artists of the time, a group often connected to counter-culture ideals and drug use, especially via the Decadent writers who produced most of the well-known literature on addiction in the period.

**[Fig. 10, McCree in character (1907-1908). Robinson Locke Collection, Billy Rose Theatre Division, New York Public Library.]**

Bill functions as a re-imagined Harlequin in a traditional comic structure. He is the clever servant who solves the conflict for the sake of his master. Much like the *commedia degli Zanni* of Tristano Martinelli’s sixteenth-century performances, central elements of McCree’s comedy were verbal hijinks and dialect play.<sup>18</sup> However, unlike traditional *commedia* format, McCree does not thwart Katzenfeldt (who is a combination of the tough Capitano and the buffoonish Pantalone) for the sake of bringing two innamorati together. Rather, the goal of undermining the blocking figure is to ensure that Ruby can continue to live her life of corruption and extortion.

Called by a reviewer from the *Toledo Blade* a “study in life’s subway,” it is important

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<sup>17</sup> “Junie McCree’s Funny Sketch,” *New York Telegraph*, Mar. 30, 1906.

<sup>18</sup> Robert L. Erenstein, “The Rise and Fall of Commedia dell’Arte,” *Commedia dell’Arte and the Comic Spirit*, eds. Michael Bigelow Dixon and Michelle Y. Togami (Actor’s Theatre of Louisville, 1990), 12.

to note that the skit does not feature the infiltration of the upper echelon of society by an unrefined comic groundling. Instead, McCree's addict appears amongst con artists and convicts. In its original intention as a burlesque of Nethersole, the depiction of Fanny LeGrand as a low-class hustler in cahoots with a drug addict served to deflate the character's celebrated status. It turned her from a politically savvy and "liberated" woman into nothing more than an over-sexed schemer.

Consequentially, McCree's addict is never considered a potential suitor to the women he serves. One can imagine a scenario in which Ruby falls for the drifter, closing the sketch with strange but true love that promises to reform both sinners. Traditional *commedia* form might have McCree's clown coupling with Molly, the maid. But McCree's inadmissibility as a love interest is significant in a number of ways. McCree recounts in various interviews and in articles he wrote at the time, that dope fiends are generally disinterested in women. In a 1907 article, McCree relates a story from his time in Tacoma, Washington about a drug addict he knew called "Shorty" Wilson. When an attractive woman walks by, a friend remarks: "Shorty, . . . if I had the coin there's a girl that could cop me out all right, all right." "Bill," answered Shorty in his lackadaisical laconis [*sic*], "if I had the coin she couldn't cop me out – not if I was a lame man." McCree adds that "this illustrated how little a dope fiend cares for the things that normal men admire."<sup>19</sup> In McCree's estimation, the dope fiend is not a voluptuary, as the phallic pipe has robbed him of his potency. Essentially, McCree chose to represent the drug user as a gelding.

In the same article, McCree sums up the opium addict as a man who has essentially rid himself of normative desires:

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<sup>19</sup> Junie McCree, "The Dope Fiend," *Variety*, Dec. 14, 1907.

The dope fiend is a passive creature to whom nothing in this life is of any consequence except the procuring of opium. He is as blasé and indifferent to other things as the most pampered man of the world who has been satiated with every luxury that money can buy . . . He is calloused to everything.<sup>20</sup>

Whereas Jack from *Slaves of the Opium Ring* is emasculated, McCree's dope fiend is simply uninterested. Earlier literary tropes established this sexual indifference. Though McCree may not have been aware of these precursors, his performance registers their widespread influence. Works by De Quincey or the American Fitz Hugh Ludlow, whose memoir *The Hasheesh Eater* gained popularity in the late nineteenth century, are devoid of carnality. The latter work lacks women entirely save for two female demons who signal to Ludlow that he has descended into hell. More explicitly, Theophile Gautier's article "Le Club des hachichins" (1846) plainly states that, under the influence of hashish, Romeo would forget about his Juliet, as "the prettiest girl in Verona, to a hashisheen, is not worth the bother of stirring."<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Baudelaire in his "The Poem of Hashish," which was translated into English in 1895, concludes with the warning that the solitary pleasure seeking of the addict inspires a kind of onanistic "admiration of himself" that hurtles him toward the same fate as Narcissus.<sup>22</sup> McCree expresses this morbid self-gratification in materialist terms as the "indifference" to "every luxury that money can buy" save "the procuring of opium."

In part, this unnatural preoccupation makes Bill harmless, diminishing anxieties regarding the dangers he posed. It also made him the perfect foil for Ruby Belle as she

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. These same stories, or versions of them were reprinted in numerous periodicals.

<sup>21</sup> Theophile Gautier, "Le Club des hachichins," *Revue des deux mondes*, February 1846. Published in *The Marijuana Papers*, trans. Ralph J. Gladstone (New York: Signet Books, 1968), 173.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Baudelaire, "The Poem of Hashish," (originally publish 1860) trans. Aleister Crowley, 1895. [https://www.erowid.org/culture/characters/ baudelaire\\_charles/ baudelaire\\_charles\\_poem1.shtml](https://www.erowid.org/culture/characters/ baudelaire_charles/ baudelaire_charles_poem1.shtml).

stands in for the sexually liberated Fanny LeGrand. McCree manufactured a scenario in which the emasculating woman is snubbed by the lowliest of male creatures, whose particular vice frees him from her control.

The dope fiend's sexual lack or queered masculinity is explicit in the humor of the skit. In the opening scene, when Ruby orders Molly to find someone to play her husband, Molly asks, "What kind of man do you want? A tall man, a short man, a fat man or a skinny man?" Ruby responds, "Anything, so long as he is a man." This carries over to Molly's first interaction with Bill on the streets of Chinatown.

Molly: Are you a man?

Bill: I've often been accused of being one.

Molly: Are you sure you're a man?<sup>23</sup>

Having just finished telling a highly dubious story about beating up Tom Sharkey, the prizefighter, Bill's appearance and demeanor is meant to portray the opposite of all traditional signifiers of robust masculinity.

Zieger asserts that both homosexuality and addiction were conceived as the result of compulsive, unnatural behavior, simultaneously a moral failing and the result of pathology. Addicts and homosexuals were long associated with solitude, decadence, and deviance. These common traits mark addiction as antonymous to bourgeois norms. McCree's rejection of heterosexual desire was also a rejection of dominant ideologies of class mobility, reproductive sexuality, and gender compliance. The addict sons in *The Hophead* and *The Needle* are related to McCree's Bill in the way addiction erodes their masculinity. However, in McCree's indifference he exhibits a sexual identity that, according

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<sup>23</sup> McCree, "The Dope Fiend," 2.

to Zieger, is unassimilable to conventional understandings.<sup>24</sup> McCree establishes a benign version of a dangerous figure by neutering him, but he also creates an addict that is incompatible with family, and therein national, health.

At the same time, the character's insouciance from a position of moral, social, and economic destitution, and his ability to produce laughter from his audience, creates an entertainingly enviable figure. In part, McCree performs a comic version of the "legerdemain" enacted in vampire narratives that turn the protagonist's loss of individuality and autonomy (the terror of the temperance narrative) "into a pleasurable seduction."<sup>25</sup> Both vampirism and McCree's comic addiction "fulfill an unusual desire to be freed of the normative obligations of freedom."<sup>26</sup> This is part of the enjoyable fantasy that McCree's character enacts for the audience. At a time when aspirations of class ascension, self-improvement, and moderation weighed heavily upon the country's citizenry, McCree's character was happily resigned to a simple, singular dependence. He expressed the kind of pleasure in his humble status that made the tramp comedians of the vaudeville stage so attractive. To be a slave to a narcotic seemed, in this particular performance, to be a way to an unfettered existence.

The definitive motif of McCree's performance, and the element that most clearly carried over into future dope fiend performances is the slang that his character used. By 1908, seven years after its premiere, commentators referred to "The Man from Denver" as a "slang classic" and acknowledged McCree as the "creator of 'dope slang.'"<sup>27</sup> Even after

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 162.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 197

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

McCree stopped performing the character and focused solely on writing for the stage, reviewers continued to celebrate him as a “comedian-philologist” and refer to the inventive use of slang by other performers as “Junie-esque quips.”<sup>28</sup> McCree asserts in a *Variety* article that, “most dope fiends are clever at repartee,” and he offers a number of examples he claims to have overheard in the West such as, “Give me three soft-boiled eggs, and one of them must be good;” or, when noticing the high price of drinks at a bar: “Give us another round and make it grand larceny.”<sup>29</sup> This kind of aggressive verbal wit was central to North American vaudeville as it entered the twentieth century, as evidenced in the monologues and malapropisms of the stage-Jew and “Dutch” acts by performers such as Julian Rose, Ben Welch, and Weber and Fields. However, where the stage-Jew and other ethnic acts played upon the immigrant’s struggle to master American English, McCree’s Bill made English strange to those that already spoke it.

In the skit, Bill has a number of fanciful turns of phrase. In his first appearance, he explains his financial situation as “I’m flying lighter than a cork, if you’d cut my suspenders, I’d go up like a balloon. I hain’t [*sic*] actually handled enough dough in the last week to buy a canary bird his breakfast.”<sup>30</sup> After meeting Molly and hearing the plot, he demands more information, saying “put me wise, put me wise. Hand this to me straight, turn on your calciums and let me see this thing.”<sup>31</sup> “Calciums” refers the calcium light (or limelight) that

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<sup>27</sup> *New York Telegraph*, Sep. 27, 1908; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Dec. 3, 1910.

<sup>28</sup> “Theatrical News and Gossip,” *Washington Post*, May 17, 1908; “Empire Opens on Sunday with a Toledoan’s Show,” *Toledo News*, Aug. 4, 1917.

<sup>29</sup> Junie McCree, “The Dope Fiend.”

<sup>30</sup> McCree, “A Dope Fiend,” 3.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

theatres used throughout much of the nineteenth century, and manifests Bill's desire for illumination through language. When asked if he'd like a smoke, Bill assumes Belle means opium and describes the needed paraphernalia as "a clarinet and a lamp without a chimney."<sup>32</sup> Similarly, he refers to Belle's home as a "land office" and a "slab." Regarding the latter, the terms "slab-hut" or "slab-cottage" were in use by the 1890s to describe a cheaply made home of coarse board, but the truncated version may be a McCree original.<sup>33</sup> The joke is that Belle is living quite luxuriously on Katzenfeldt's dime. McCree was most certainly the originator or chief disseminator of a number of cant terms. Laurence Senelick identifies the expression "coffin-nails" for cigarettes as one of many that lexicographers have yet to recognize as coming from the performer.<sup>34</sup>

McCree's later writings for the stage often featured gangster-types, centering on their eccentric style of talk years before Prohibition made the mobster such a common figure on the national stage and screen. In the one-act melodrama *The System*, to which McCree was a contributing author, we can see his fingerprints on lines spoken by the notorious gangster the Eel, like "Gee! It's real oil for the wicks of my lamps to see you again."<sup>35</sup> "To lamp" someone was already a popular way of saying "to see" them and writers like McCree ensured that it remained popular slang into the 1930s. These, as well as a number of other terms from McCree's skits, appear in the "jive" dictionaries of the later

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>33</sup> "Slab," *Oxford English Dictionary Online*.  
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/181189#eid22448450> (Accessed, July 6, 2015).

<sup>34</sup> *The Cambridge Guide to American Theatre* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), s.v. "Junie McCree."

<sup>35</sup> Taylor Granville, Junie McCree, and Edward Clark, "The System," *Writing for Vaudeville*, ed. Brett Page (Springfield: The Home Correspondence School, 1915), 547-8. This may be a play on the phrase "Oil for the lamps of China," which was a Standard Oil slogan in the late 1880s.

decades that educated the uninitiated on the language of the hip. The cant of the Jazz Age absorbed much of McCree's style of slang, imbuing it with racially marked qualities to be reused by people like Cab Calloway.

As suggested by Paynter more than twenty years later, McCree's inventive "dope talk" embodied the drug experience. The cant of the addict conveys his or her altered consciousness, as it was the infiltration of the dream into reality embodied in alienating and poetic expression. Following the whirling logic of the metaphors in McCree's speech was a way to understand the addled mind of the drug user. Perhaps more than this, McCree's slang was an embodiment of his frontier roots (and the frontier roots of his character).

McCree lists as sources for his wordplay the faro table of gambling houses, the racetrack, the tramp, and the gangsters and "yeggmen" of the criminal underworld. Each had associations with the West and the lawlessness of the frontier cities. Thus, McCree's language enabled audience members to engage with and experience the Western cities that were so notorious for their prurience and danger. By understanding McCree's slang and laughing at the references in his dialogue, audience members were privy to a special body of knowledge, one typically reserved for those who ventured west. This relationship between representations of narcotic use and mental travel or transport begins with the work of De Quincey. Under the influence of laudanum, his hallucinations involved exploration of the British colonies and readers joined him on his "trips." As a literary descendant of De Quincey, Ludlow traverses the North American frontier in his

hallucinations, experiencing the West as De Quincey experienced the East.<sup>36</sup> In each case, the dreamer confronts an untamed and foreign locale. I argue that McCree offered a surrogate for the actual narcotic in his “dope talk,” through which the same mental transport is possible. His slang enabled the audience to access the distant frontier cities in which those behaviors kept underground and marginal in the East became dominant. Much like De Quincey’s orientalist conception of the East as a land of indefatigable splendor and fantasy, McCree enabled the exploration of the most notorious vice districts in the nation through his language.

Furthering this idea, McCree often explains that the opium smoker is an individual who had failed in his efforts to conquer the West. He describes the average addict as the “disappointed prospector [who] got rid of his money and then went in for the pleasure pipe.”<sup>37</sup> Elsewhere, he remarks that

[I]n the West one sees many victims. The freedom of a new country is partly accountable for the vices of opium smoking, drinking and gambling. . . . Men go West to endure hardships for the sake of acquiring fortunes. But their patience gives out if fortune doesn’t smile upon them immediately. Then they turn to the faro bank or roulette and to drown their sorrow at their losses take to drink; then to the drug.<sup>38</sup>

There was significant concern over the fall of those who sought their fortunes out West.

The frontier was supposedly the source of the nation’s manhood, where boys transformed

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<sup>36</sup> In his memoir, Ludlow takes hasheesh while a student in upstate New York, but experiences the far reaches of the country’s frontier. Fitz Hugh Ludlow, *The Hasheesh Eater* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1857).

<sup>37</sup> “Shakespeare First Used Slang, Says Junie M’Cree [sic],” n.p., 1907, Envelope 1391, Locke Collection, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library.

<sup>38</sup> Junie McCree, “The Dope Fiend,” *Variety*, Dec. 14, 1907.

themselves into men and those who emigrated from Europe could metamorphose into red-blooded Americans. As historian Frederick Jackson Turner noted in 1893, “the frontier promoted the formation of a composite nationality for the American people.”<sup>39</sup> At the same time, the frontier cities were modern Sodoms and Gomorrahs in which those well-meaning speculators came under the influence of unnamable vice. McCree’s character represented the unfortunate refuse of this process. He was not just a prospector who did not succeed, but one who ends up infected by the wickedness of place like San Francisco and Denver. He symbolized a troubling figure that was lacking any ethnic or racial markings, was fully assimilated, and yet was (like the homosexual) inadmissible to the “native” polis.

According to McCree, these fallen men were responsible for the “wave of slang that is washing away pure English all over the country.”<sup>40</sup> Vernacular language became a way to mark the East’s refinement and civility. Audience members could enjoy McCree’s slang while affirming their superior position as natives of the fully developed areas of the country where they maintained a “pure” English and an unsullied mind. In this, McCree’s drug vernacular helped demarcate regional identities.

Other significant elements that McCree introduced, and that persisted as part of dope-fiend acts, involved hallucinations of economic grandeur as a result of opium use. A story by McCree in *Variety* discusses the peculiarities of an addict who assured McCree that

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<sup>39</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” *The Turner Thesis*, ed. George Rogers Taylor (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1972), 17. Adding to the concern over the West was Turner’s announcement that the frontier was officially gone. This may have contributed to the concern over the characters who were now coming out of the West. See also, John F. Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001); and Michael S. Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

<sup>40</sup> “Shakespeare First Used Slang.”

he would pay him back for his kindness by giving him an entire hotel.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Bill refers to himself as the “Bill Hudson, the man who owns the river” and though the line is a play upon his name, Bill takes the claim seriously. These kind of grand hallucinations date back to *The Arabian Nights* and the story of two poor fishermen who take hasheesh and declare themselves sultans of the city while unknowingly in the presence of the actual ruler. In one of Ludlow’s many hallucinations from his memoir, he envisions himself as “exhaustlessly rich,” scattering gold amongst “kneeling files of poor,” and rejoicing “in the measureless pride of bounteousness.”<sup>42</sup> The comic interpretation of these literary tropes is natural, as the humorous opposition is built into the image of the opium addict as a derelict who has dreams of impossible wealth. Calloway adopted these ideas in his songs thirty years after McCree, singing about a “Reefer Man” who wants to “sell you North Carolina.”<sup>43</sup>

McCree goes to lengths to urge sympathy for the figures he caricatures. An obituary of the performer, who died in 1918, asserts that his efforts had “done more than much well-intended propaganda” in humanizing the dope fiend.<sup>44</sup> A poem McCree published in *Variety* entitled “Give Him Just Another Chance,” invokes the slavery of addiction and the torment of the addict as he moves toward death. It urges the reader not to condemn the man, but to offer him a “few kind words” that “might make his future bright.” The final stanza imagines a potential salvation for the addict, and invokes the possible reclamation of his masculinity: “Let me try and cleanse it if I can/ Give me just another start on another tack/ Give me one

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<sup>41</sup> McCree, “A Dope Fiend;” “The Man from Denver,” *n.p.*, Mar. 10, 1907, Envelope 1391, Locke Collection, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library.

<sup>42</sup> Ludlow, 98.

<sup>43</sup> Cab Calloway, “Reefer Man,” by Cab Calloway, Brunswick Radio Corporation, 1932, 78.

<sup>44</sup> *Toledo Blade*, Feb. 1918, Envelope 1391, Locke Collection, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library.

more chance to be a man.”<sup>45</sup> McCree’s concern may have come from a personal stake. There is evidence that he struggled with substance abuse himself and was hospitalized for “alcoholic mania” in 1903.<sup>46</sup> His drinking may very well have contributed to his death at the young age of fifty-three, after having lost most of his money. An obituary note in *Variety* lists “apoplexy” as the cause, and the term often referred to the paroxysms caused by alcoholism.<sup>47</sup> In the end, McCree established an addict who stood far apart from the horrifying images of opium smokers that audience members found in almost every other representation of the drug user. His humanized and approachable parody gave cultural cache to the demonized figure of the addict, turning the signifiers of his ill repute into charming idiosyncrasy.

### **THE DOPE FIEND’S DESCENDANTS**

Soon after the successful revival “The Man from Denver” in 1907, McCree abandoned the character. By 1910, other actors were playing Bill on variety stages.<sup>48</sup> A number of performers created their own versions of the comic dope-fiend, building off of McCree’s original. Charles Nichols did a “Western Style” dope act with a character “Dopy Dan from Cheyenne;” Tom Barret, who reviewers note “looks like June [sic] McCree,” had a dope fiend song called “Opium Tree;” comedy team Ashley and Lee had a bit called “Chinatown” that featured a dope fiend dreaming of riches and using “bright, snappy talk;” and Cassidy

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<sup>45</sup> “Give Him Just Another Chance,” *Variety*, Dec. 14, 1907.

<sup>46</sup> “Actor Taken to Bellevue,” n.p., Sep. 6, 1903, Envelope 1391, Locke Collection, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library.

<sup>47</sup> *Variety*, Jan. 10, 1918.

<sup>48</sup> James A Smith played Bill in a production at the Chutes Theatre in San Francisco. “Junie McCree in Slang Classic is Top of Bill,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 26, 1910.

and Logan did an act that portrayed the “hop dream of the dope fiend.”<sup>49</sup> At some point, it became standard to use a green spotlight for single acts doing a dope fiend character, and Charles Nichols, Joe Tenner, and Tom Barret used it. The unnatural color matched the disconnected dream states that the character supposedly experienced when intoxicated.

The most successful imitator of McCree is unquestionable Lew Kelly, who became far more famous playing his character “Professor Dope” or “Doctor Dope” than McCree ever did as Bill. Gaining attention as early as 1911, Kelly played the character into the 1920s, eventually starring in his own variety show, which often closed with the burletta, “The Dream Man.”<sup>50</sup> By 1918, *The Billboard* reported on the “mammoth salary” that Kelly was making and by 1920 *The Hartford Courant* called him “so well known that it seems foolish to even attempt to introduce his line to the readers.”<sup>51</sup> Kelly played the character in an almost identical costume to McCree, with a Western-style fedora or cowboy hat and a neckerchief, and his performance included the same kind of wild verbal play. However, Kelly seems to have distanced his characterization from the rough and tumble roots of McCree’s card dealer. Discussing the ways to catch a “Hump Back Herring,” and moaning about eating “skinless bananas,” Kelly’s language is described by reviewers as “ludicrous” and “delightful,” rather than reminiscent of the Barbary Coast.<sup>52</sup> Though Kelly claims to have invented his characterization, an obituary notice in *The Billboard* asserts that McCree

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<sup>49</sup> “Charles Nichols and Co.,” *Variety*, Jan. 2, 1909: 12; “Century Girls,” *Variety*, Dec. 28, 1907: 13; “Ashley and Lee,” *Variety*, Dec. 3, 1910; “Amusements,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, Sep. 3, 1916.

<sup>50</sup> “Lew Kelly’s Show at the Grand Theatre,” *Hartford Courant*, Sep. 26, 1920.

<sup>51</sup> “Lew Kelly Welcomed Back to Singer Fold,” *The Billboard*, Jan. 26, 1918: 12; “Lew Kelly’s Show at the Grand Theatre.”

<sup>52</sup> The Kelly joke lines are reported in “Lew Kelly’s Show at Grand Theatre.” The description of his act is from “Schaffer Amazes by his Versatility,” *Boston Daily Globe*, Nov. 3, 1914.

actually wrote Kelly's earliest material as an elaboration of the original "Sapho" sketch. A 1913 bit that Kelly used called "The Most Contented Man on Earth," may have been from McCree as the title alone sounds like McCree's conception of the addict as "blasé," "indifferent," and "callous to everything."<sup>53</sup>

**[Fig. 11, Lew Kelly in costume from *Variety*, December 23, 1911. Billy Rose Theatre Division, New York Public Library.]**

Kelly's success in the character came despite the national prohibition of opium smoking in 1909. His Professor Dope may have taken on a more general identity of a drug user, rather than specifically an opium smoker. At the same time, with fewer addicts in the streets and the dens closed, audiences could enjoy the character as old fashioned, rather than presently menacing. With the demise of variety entertainments in the 1920s, the comic dope fiend lost his natural performance environment. However, elements of McCree's characterization, especially his language, proliferated as drug use continued to intrigue audiences of the Jazz Age and beyond.

### **BLACK FACE - DARK VICE**

In a pair of pen-and-wash drawings from the late nineteenth century, the well-known comic artist Thomas Worth depicts an opium den scene in which a black woman confronts her husband who luxuriates on a bunk, smoking a pipe. Worth was famous for his "Darktown" series of lithographs for the Currier and Ives Company that featured buffoonish caricatures of African Americans. As was typical of his style, the figures in the den cartoons resemble minstrel stereotypes. Mrs. Maloney (the wife) is large, ugly, and muscular. She stands, legs akimbo, grasping a broom in one hand as she rolls up her sleeves with the

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<sup>53</sup> This skit is announced in "Behman Show," *Variety*, Nov. 21, 1913.

other. Her husband, Mr. Maloney, resembles a Jim Crow type with broad lips, dark skin, patched overalls, and a crumpled top hat. He gazes at his wife through the fog of the den with lazy and uncaring eyes while a Chinese man, drawn in equally stereotypical style, offers Mrs. Maloney a pipe. The second image of the set depicts what Mrs. Maloney has wrought. The den is in shambles, the Chinese proprietor has been beaten black and blue, and the irate woman carries her husband by his backside. The title of this second image reads “Mrs. Maloney’s Way of Breaking Her Husband’s Opium Habit.”<sup>54</sup> Worth’s before-and-after images are essentially a pictorial version of a minstrel scene.

**[Fig. 12-13, Worth renderings: “The Opium Smoker” and “Going for ‘Em.” (late nineteenth century)]**

I cannot confirm whether Worth published these images in any form, though his work was widely known and widely distributed. What is significant is the ease with which Worth inserts the minstrel figures into the *mise en scène* of an opium den. Readers and audiences of the period would have effortlessly connected the conventional blackface characters to drug use. As a lazy, shiftless, and unambitious wastrel, the sambo figure is a natural fit in an opium den. Worth’s images seamlessly suture racist conceptions of blackness to the stereotypical images of the drug addict. It is telling that the connections between blackness and addiction only appear within a comic frame at this point. Addiction was an “ironic narrative of self-loss” and it required subjects who had much to lose.<sup>55</sup> Within the racially biased imagination of the country’s dominant culture, this meant that only white men (and occasionally white women) were appropriate victims of addiction for dramatic treatment. In Worth’s minstrel scenes, there is no vestige of the melodramatic

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<sup>54</sup> These images are held by the Museum of the City of New York.

<sup>55</sup> Zieger, 22.

obsession with lost potential as viewers immediately recognize that the black caricatures have no social value or self to lose.

Similar representations appeared on stage, relying on the same inherent understanding that addiction of racially marked individuals posed no real threat to the social body. E.E. Price's *One of the Bravest* premiered in 1888 featuring a Jim Crow character called Pete who is an opium addict. The play toured widely for more than a decade and the actors became identified with their roles. This included Charles McCarthy as Larry Howard the fire chief, and William Cronin as a stage-Irishwoman called Mrs. Grogan.<sup>56</sup> *One of the Bravest* is the prototype from which the subgenre of "opium-den dramas" developed. It has many of the standard elements including a captured girl, middle-class hero, ethnic types, a den scene, and a villainous "Chinaman." However, the play is unformed in its structure and tone, without the division between the comic and dramatic that defined later opium-den plays.

In the play, which was deemed the "first to introduce the den in full blast," the only characters to smoke opium are racially marked. These include the Chinese supernumeraries, Pete, and Mrs. Grogan. The drugging of white women by lecherous villains or the fall of white men to the grip of the pipe are not yet serviceable as dramatic devices. The non-white characters could smoke opium as part of a comic bit without unsettling the primarily working and middle-class audience that attended the theatres in which *One of the Bravest* played.

The play's depiction of the effects of drugs on the ethnic characters became standard for comedy. Pete claims, "The world is mine, I'm walking on clouds," mimicking the

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<sup>56</sup> "One of the Bravest," *Boston Daily Globe*, Oct. 16, 1901.

fishermen in Scheherazade's tale, as well as lampooning De Quincean tropes of empyrean travel.<sup>57</sup> Mrs. Grogan experiences the same when Peter offers her a pull from his pipe: "I'm up like a balloon, I'm climbing up higher, stop the car, stop the car I've lost my diamond necklace. Is that the Duke of Marlboro [*sic*]? Put those green backs on the roof. Hop Way, I'm going, I'm going. I'm way out in San Francisco."<sup>58</sup> It is in comedy that the persistent De Quincean tropes of travel, opulence, and consumption can play out in a new context to an absurd end. One might connect this comic exaggeration of drug induced spiritual flight to the more contemporary film *Half Baked* (1998) starring Dave Chappelle, in which a particularly strong batch of cannabis actually causes the smoker to levitate.<sup>59</sup>

Along with Mrs. Grogan's obvious references to San Francisco, the idea of meeting with the Duke of Marlboro becomes an important standard in portrayals of comic drug addicts. A contemporary of McCree named Andy Lewis toured a skit called "The Cocaine Fiend" between 1901 and 1907 as part of Sam Devere's Own Company. The sketch lacks McCree's lingo but makes much of the dope fiend's imagined love affair with the Queen of Bavaria. In it, Lewis's addict character recounts his hallucinations of spending hundreds of millions of dollars, riding a gold carriage with "white horses" (a reference to cocaine use) through the sky amongst dragons that spit diamonds, and taking command of a fleet of hundreds of millions of warships.<sup>60</sup> Lewis may have been working directly from Price's

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<sup>57</sup> E.E. Price, *One of the Bravest*, (Typescript, Billy Rose Collection, New York Public Library, 1888), Act III, 15.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, Act III, 26.

<sup>59</sup> To "get high" as a term for intoxication was in use by the 1930s, specifically in African American communities, but it gains further popularity in the 1950s via the Beat writers. Of course, it was used to express the influence of alcohol as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century. African Americans in Harlem also used the terms "elevated" and "sailing" to describe intoxication from marijuana in the 1930s.

<sup>60</sup> Andy Lewis, "The Cocaine Fiend," (Typescript, Library of Congress, 1901), 1-2.

popular model, but dropped any racial or ethnic element from the character.

Aside from Mrs. Grogan's single experimentation with the pipe as a comic gag, Pete is the face of addiction in *One of the Bravest*. Prior to the turn of the century, it was the Chinese who supposedly had a weakness for the opium pipe. Worth's images and Price's play convey a shift towards the inclusion of a new racially marked addict to the national imaginary. However, after these early tidings of the "minstrel addict," the characterization quickly fades. There are a number of possible contributing factors to this disappearance. As the opium-den play developed into a fixed genre, drug use took on a more dangerous quality and the comic version of users seemed out of place. Plays such as *Bowery After Dark* and *Romance of the Underworld* always depict drug use as causing instantaneous debasement when smoked by anyone other than a Chinese person. The minstrel addict would have dulled the edge of the warning. The comedy of these later den plays more typically comes from urban types like the "Bowery boy" or "gal" who never take drugs themselves, whereas the countrified minstrel is naturally drawn to any sort of debauchery.

Additionally, the heightened rhetoric of anti-drug campaigns began circulating horrific accounts of blacks using drugs in order to terrify white citizens either for the sake of reform, or to sell copy. Reformer Hamilton Wright frequently employed such tactics and his official 1909 report from the Shanghai International Opium Commission notes, "cocaine is often the direct incentive to the crime of rape by Negroes of the South."<sup>61</sup> Intimated is that the victims of these rapes could include white women. Richmond Hobson, another well-known reformer, asserted in writings and speeches that the intoxicated Negro will

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<sup>61</sup> Hamilton Wright, *Report of the International Opium Commission*, Vol. 1, (North-China Daily News and Herald, 1909) Qtd. in David Musto, *The American Disease*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. (New York: Oxford University press, 1973), 43-44.

quickly “degrade to the level of cannibal.”<sup>62</sup> Similarly, a widely read *New York Times* article by Dr. Edward Huntington Williams from 1914, raises this thinking to a fever pitch, claiming that cocaine use by blacks in the South has given them “temporary immunity to shock - a resistance to ‘knock down’ effects of fatal wounds.” As a result, “Bullets fired into vital parts . . . fail to check the ‘fiend’ - fail to stop his rush or weaken his attack.” Williams reports that the local police had to exchange their service revolvers for “one of a higher calibre [*sic*],” because the normal pistol had no effect on the black drug users.<sup>63</sup> Coinciding with the “Great Migration” of Southern blacks to Northern cities, these reports signaled the dangers that the newly arrived population might pose. These assertions were part of a pattern in which drug use by a particular population (whether actual or imagined) heightened already established stereotypes for that group. In the case of American Blacks, this meant assumptions regarding the African American desire for white, female flesh; their inborn primitiveness that could give way to cannibalism; and, the black body’s capacity to withstand physical abuse.

The reports by reformers such as Wright, Hobson, and Williams laid the groundwork for a century of racially charged anti-drug propaganda and corresponding representations. They founded mythologies that reappear in connection to any new narcotic substance as the public becomes aware of it. Crack cocaine, methamphetamine, and phencyclidine (or PCP) were all rumored to cause super strength and excite the

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<sup>62</sup> Richmond Pearson Hobson, *The Great Destroyer* (Speech delivered to the Alabama Houser of Representatives, Feb. 2, 1911), 6.

<sup>63</sup> Edward Huntington Williams, M.D., “Negro Cocaine Fiends Are new Southern Menace: Murder and Insanity Increasing Among Lower Class Blacks Because They Have Taken to “Sniffing” Since Deprived of Whisky by Prohibition,” *New York Times*, Feb. 8, 1914. Other articles to site a connection between blacks and narcotic use: “Negro Cocaine Fiends,” *Medical News*, 81 (1902), 895; “The Cocaine Habit among Negroes,” *British Medical Journal*, pt.2 (1902), 1729; “The Cocaine Habit,” *JAMA*, 34(1900), 1637 & 36(1900), 330.

potential for sexual violence, especially in a racially or economically disadvantaged population.<sup>64</sup> These assertions are paradigmatic of drug scares in the country.

The early century emphasis on the dangers of black drug users contributed to the short stage-life of characters like Pete. At the time, black characters such as Gus, the brute rapist of white women in D.W. Griffith's 1915 *Birth of a Nation*, were dangerous enough without the derangement brought on by drug use. Essentially, the black addict faded from the stage for the first two decades of the century to reappear in a new, but related form. Ushered in by the "Negro Vogue" of the 1920s that ignited a craze for black culture, the black addict reappeared in the lyrics of jazz tunes and in the cabaret acts of African American performers.

## **THE SOUND OF VICE**

"Most of the ofays, the white people, who came to Harlem those nights were looking for atmosphere. Damn few of them brought any along."

- Billie Holiday, *Lady Sings the Blues* (1956)

Elmer Simms Campbell's famous illustrated "Night-Club Map of Harlem" from 1932, gives visitors the inside scoop on where to go for music, food, and even to buy "reefers." The map depicts Harlem as an uncontrolled bacchanal, in which every inch of the area is glutted with tantalizing activity. Far from scale, Campbell designed the map to entertain the imaginations of those whites who, in the 1920s and 30s, envisioned Harlem as what Jim Wilson refers to as a "pornographic playground."<sup>65</sup> Every night thousands of middle- and

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<sup>64</sup> Carl Hart, "Science Says We Should Decriminalize Drugs," *Reason TV*, (Lecture, Los Angeles, CA, June 21, 2013), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1JDfzzit5f4> (Accessed July 9, 2015).

upper-class whites journeyed above 110<sup>th</sup> street in search of bootleg liquor, “hot” jazz, and to relish if not indulge in what Heap calls “the primitive, libidinous atmosphere that they had come to associate with black urban life.”<sup>66</sup> There, slummers met opportunities for any number of untoward vices. Shane Vogel notes that Campbell’s illustration offers an “expressive geography” and “affective dimension” to the streets of Harlem, portraying the way the underworld seemed to bubble to the surface.<sup>67</sup>

**[Fig. 14, Elmer Simms Campbell’s “Night-Club Map of Harlem,” 1932]**

Campbell’s map gives prominence to the many cabarets in the area, which were the most popular destinations for slummers. Clubs could cater to segregated or mixed audiences, but the most famous, including the Cotton Club and Connie’s Inn, provided high-caliber entertainment for all-white audiences, performed by all-black casts. An evening’s entertainment resembled more a vaudeville bill than a traditional concert. Jazz, novelty numbers, comic bits, fan dances, and chorus lines of scantily clad women were all part of a typical show. The Cotton Club also produced two Broadway-style revues each year that included set changes and technical effects. With their white audience in mind, many of these performances reproduced jazzed-up versions of the problematic minstrel acts of the nineteenth century. And indeed, these clubs thrived off a kind of “love and theft” that Eric Lott outlines in his analysis of the earlier minstrel audiences, born of a commingling of fascination and revulsion.<sup>68</sup> The jazz club promoted a vision of blackness as hypersexed,

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<sup>65</sup> Jim Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance* (Detroit: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 25.

<sup>66</sup> Heap, 190.

<sup>67</sup> Shane Vogel, *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 149.

wild, and free of restrictive social obligations with which whites aligned themselves. Visitors relished the chance to adopt what they perceived as African American's natural lack of restraint and their licentiousness. The perception of black wantonness, aided by the suggestive if not lewd club acts, urged whites to loosen their own moral standards. The geographical distance from white areas of living promoted the scandalous behavior that whites enacted while in Harlem. At the same time, Heap has clarified the ways in which slumming trips "offered numerous occasions to take advantage of the supposed freedoms of black nightlife while simultaneously reinforcing a sense of white superiority."<sup>69</sup> The act of slumming highlighted the differences between the cultures and fortified the need to contain and cordon off the racialized others and their attendant vices.

The availability of narcotics to those visiting Harlem and Harlem's role in the city's drug trade is well documented. David Courtwright's collection of interviews with drug users from the period called *Addicts Who Survived* is full of references by subjects to the procurement of drugs from Harlem locales. Drugs were available within the cabarets, but adventurers could also travel off the beaten path to small, informal speakeasies called "buffet flats" that often existed within residential spaces. These catered to every imaginable desire, and each was designed for particular leisure activities, from simple barrooms to live sex shows. Many of them were in service to drug users, and a buffet flat might be set up as an opium den or for the hosting of cocaine "sniffing parties." Carl Van Vechten's widely read and controversial novel, *Nigger Heaven* (1926), was one of many literary works of the period that propagated the belief that drug use was an entrenched part of jazz culture. The

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<sup>68</sup> Erica Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (London: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>69</sup> Heap, 191.

work features provocative scenes in nightclubs, including an after hours locale called “Black Mass,” described as “a garden where champagne flows from all the fountains and the paths are made of happy dust [cocaine] and the perfume of the poppies is opium.”<sup>70</sup> Its central character, Byron Kasson (a well-meaning African American writer), falls victim to Harlem’s drugs, music, and women. Kasson’s narrative involves the kind of self-loss that was typically reserved for white heroes and heroines of drug memoirs and dramas concerning addiction.<sup>71</sup>

Jazz was effectively the soundtrack of this slumming experience, seeming to embody all of the exuberance, release, and sexual energy of Harlem after-dark. Jazz was not merely a kind of music, but a commodified form of racially specific expression. From its origins, jazz music was the sound of blackness, of struggle, and of underworld vice. In 1897, the Storyville section of New Orleans (the city long held as the origin point of jazz music) was set aside for legal prostitution. Jazz became the sound of the brothel, and many early jazz greats found their first jobs playing ragtime in bordellos that catered to white men seeking black women. Charles Winick points out that these origins linked jazz to “minority expression,” but it goes beyond this. These circumstances fixed the idea that “minority expression” was inevitably immoral and tied to a host of interrelated deviant behaviors.<sup>72</sup>

Many assumed that, as an agent of stimulation, jazz music itself had a degenerative effect on listeners. By the 1920s the term “jazz addict” becomes common in print and the

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<sup>70</sup> Carl Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven* (New York: University of Illinois, 1926), 252.

<sup>71</sup> This chapter does not discuss the play *Lulu Belle* by Charles MacArthur and Edward Sheldon that had an unprecedented Broadway run in 1925 under the direction of David Belasco. The play features perhaps the first black *femme fatale* as well as cocaine and morphine use. However, drug addiction is not central. The play is significant here as it promoted Harlem as a place of expansive vice, including a scene from a cabaret. The play’s popularity helped inspire the “negro vogue” and drive people to Harlem.

<sup>72</sup> Charles Winick, “How High the Moon: Jazz and Drugs,” *Antioch Review* 21, no. 1 (Spring 1961): 57-58.

phrase implies that the notes and rhythms of jazz have the capacity to cause erratic behavior and dependence. An article by E. Elliot Rawlins in the *New York Amsterdam News* from 1925 actually declares that “jazz is just as intoxicating as morphine and cocaine,” and that “jazz is killing some people” while “some are going insane.”<sup>73</sup> A sneering response from the *Pittsburgh Courier* refers to the piece as an “idiotorial.”<sup>74</sup> Though these articles constitute a dialogue between two black periodicals, they represent the larger conversation that the country’s urban population was having over the inherent morality of this new music. The ferocity of the body dancing to jazz or the barbarous behavior of the nightclub clientele (both white and black), struck many as similar to the loss of control and frenzied hysterics long connected to addiction.

Thus, jazz culture was synonymous with drug culture; the experience of one meant exposure to both. The “jive speak” of the era was the product of this synthesis. Defining “jive” in the supplement to his influential study, *The American Language*, H.L. Mencken calls it “an amalgam of Negro-slang from Harlem and the argots of drug addicts and the pettier sort of criminals . . .”<sup>75</sup> Fittingly, by the 1930s, you could talk, play, and smoke “jive.” “Jive” inevitably signaled blackness, but the term became a rubric for the interrelated world of African American urbanity, jazz culture, and the practices of drug users. The manipulation and negotiation of these entwined elements provided certain performers with excellent material.

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<sup>73</sup> E. Elliot Rawlins, “Jazz--a Drug,” *New York Amsterdam News*, April 1, 1925.

<sup>74</sup> George S. Schuyler, “Thrusts and Lunges,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 4, 1925.

<sup>75</sup> H.L. Mencken, *The American Language: An Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States*, suppl. 2 (New York: Knopf, 1948), 704.

## **CAB CALLOWAY, MOOCHING OFF MINNIE**

Cabell Calloway III was born in Rochester in 1907. His parents were educated professionals and Calloway received a high-school education in Baltimore. It was during this period that he began performing. His older sister, Blanche, was also a performer and occasional bandleader who stoked Calloway's hopes of a career. Moving to Chicago and enrolling in Crane College, Calloway joined a thriving club scene in the predominantly African American South Side that attracted large crowds of both blacks and whites. Calloway arrived in New York in 1929, joining the Broadway revue "Connie's Hot Chocolates," produced by the Harlem nightclub Connie's Inn. Soon after, he became a bandleader and less than two years later, he took the helm of Harlem's hottest nightclub at the age of twenty-four.

Duke Ellington and his orchestra famously held the stage at the Cotton Club from 1927 until 1931 when his popularity sent him on permanent tour. Calloway and his band, then called the Missouriians, had subbed for Ellington in 1930 and stepped in as his full time replacement. Calloway played a kind of jazz, like Ellington and Louis Armstrong, that was definitive of the era. This "hot" jazz (as opposed to "sweet," "hard," or "bebop") involved large bands playing music designed for dancing. The Cotton Club was big enough for a fifteen-piece orchestra and the jazz they played was polished, upbeat, and accessible.

The Cotton Club not only played to New York's richest and most fashionable whites, but performances were broadcast nationally over the radio twice weekly, filling the homes of both urban and rural areas of the United States with the sounds of Harlem. This was at a time when radio, film, and television still typically had white actors play black characters. Thus, the Cotton Club ostensibly provided the most exposure that a black performer could get. Calloway maintained his position at the club, with intermittent tours of the country,

until it relocated to midtown in 1935 by which point Harlem had cooled as a center for white entertainment. After his Cotton Club success Calloway went on to appearances in films like *Stormy Weather* (1943), as well as roles in the theatre such as Sportin' Life in *Porgy and Bess* and a successful tour of *Hello, Dolly!*

Both scholars and jazz enthusiasts often dismiss Calloway's work as derivative, saccharine, and overtly commercial. He is not considered a musical innovator like Jellyroll Morton, Ellington, or Count Basie. His work seems to lack the subversive quality of Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, or Howlin' Wolf in the way they challenged white culture or found new ways to express the plight of black Americans.<sup>76</sup> Typical critiques suggest that Calloway's performances exploited stereotypes of blackness, perhaps even benefiting from a white prejudice for light-skinned African Americans that elevated him above the community he treats in his lyrics.<sup>77</sup> However, Calloway was undoubtedly one of the most famous black performers of the 1930s and 40s. He was known for his wild stage presence, expressive dance style, perfect grooming, and blaring tenor. His cultural influence was substantial especially in terms of sartorial and dance trends, as well as the development of U.S. slang. In addition, it is precisely Calloway's ability to remain popular to both white and black audiences for such a prolonged period that makes him of interest. He crafted a sound and a persona, along with a repertoire of performative gestures that epitomized an era. His performances reveal the contours of certain cultural constructs, shaped through the interactions between white desire and black cultural commodification, as well as between

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<sup>76</sup> Both the challenges posed by Howlin' Wolf and Louis Armstrong are discussed in Eric Lott "Back Door Man: Howlin' Wolf and the Sound of Jim Crow," *American Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (Sep. 2011): 697-710.

<sup>77</sup> Charles Hiroshi Garrett catalogues similar reasons for Calloway's dismissal as a serious musician in *Jazz/Not Jazz* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012), 60.

white desire and the black body. Calloway contributed to these negotiations through his exploitation of the relationship between drug use and blackness.

In 1931, Calloway and his manager Irving Mills, created his first hit with “Minnie the Moocher.” He recorded the song that same year on the Brunswick label. The record was soon the number two and number three in sales in New York and Chicago respectively.<sup>78</sup> Calloway had been performing a version of the blues standard “St. James Infirmary” as his trademark song, but Armstrong had already recorded a version in 1928 and a number of other musicians, including Ellington, regularly performed it. Thus, Calloway needed something new that he could call his own. “St. James’s Infirmary” is about a low-class hustler viewing the corpse of his girlfriend who has died as the result of what is most probably a venereal disease. Calloway wrote “Minnie the Moocher” in the same musical style, concerning a similar set of disreputable types.

“Minnie the Moocher” consists of four stanzas, each ending in a chorus of call-and-response scat singing. Calloway became known as “The Hi-De-Ho Man” for the first chorus of the piece. On the recording, the band responds to Calloway’s scat singing by repeating his phrases and, in performance, audience members often took up the response part. The song first introduces the jezebel Minnie and her boyfriend, Smoky Joe. Joe teaches Minnie how to smoke opium in a Chinatown den, and the song relates the dream Minnie has of fantastic luxury and wealth.

Folks now here’s a story bout Minnie the moocher  
She was a red-hot hoochie coocher  
She was the roughest, toughest frail  
but Minnie had a heart as big as a whale  
hi de hi de ho (3 rounds of call-and-response)

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<sup>78</sup> *Variety*, May 20, 1931.

Now she messed around with a bloke names Smoky  
She loved him though he was cokey  
He took her down to Chinatown  
He showed her how to kick the gong around (*repeated by band*)  
Ho de ho de ho (3 rounds of call-and-response)

Now she had a dream about the King of Sweden  
He gave her things that she was needing  
He gave her a home full of gold and steel  
A diamond car with a platinum wheel  
Wa di wo di way (3 rounds of call-and-response)

Now he gave her his townhouse and his racing horses  
Each meal she ate was a dozen courses  
She had a million dollars worth of nickels and dimes  
And she sat around, counted it all a million times  
Ho di ho di (3 rounds of call-and-response)

Poor Min, Poor Min, Poor Min.<sup>79</sup>

The inspiration for Calloway's song is clear. A song with a similar theme called "Willie the Weeper" was already popular when Calloway debuted Minnie. In 1927, Frankie "Half-Pint" Jaxon recorded a version of "Willie" and Armstrong regularly performed it. That same year, a published version of the song listed Tin Pan Alley writers Grant V. Rymal, Walter Melrose, and Marty Bloom as the composers. However, also that year, Sigmund Spaeth included it in his *Read 'Em and Weep: Songs You Forgot to Remember*, dating it as far older and capturing the ambiance of turn-of-the-century honkytonks. Spaeth joins Nick Tosches, Luc Sante, Olin Downs, and Elie Siegmeister in dating "Willie" around 1900 and attributing it either to vaudeville or to an unspecified African-American blues tradition. Either way, Calloway's Minnie is clearly a derivative of the folksy original.

Calloway admits the influence in his autobiography, but noting the two songs' similarities is relevant here. To sum up the many different versions of "Willie the Weeper":

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<sup>79</sup> Transcribed from the 1931 recording on Brunswick label. Calloway altered the lyrics slightly in performance, often excising potentially risqué references for his television appearances.

Willie is a opium-smoking chimney sweeper who has a dream of travel to Siam and Monte Carlo, large wins at faro and roulette tables, love affairs with Cleopatra and the Queen of Sheba, and the acquisition of an “emerald-tree” and “a sapphire vine.”<sup>80</sup> “Willie the Weeper” shares tropes and images with Junie McCree, *One of the Bravest*, Andy Lewis, and the underlying literary inspirations from which those sources built their lampoons. These then carry over to Calloway’s “Minnie.” Much as Willie ends up waking from his dream to find himself in his “hall-room cot,” Minnie experiences a similar letdown when her dream ends, indicated in Calloway’s three calls of “poor Min” that conclude the song.

“Minnie the Moocher” remained Calloway’s signature song for his entire career, earning him a Grammy Hall of Fame award in 1999. Through film renditions, radio play, and inclusion in popular Betty Boop cartoons, Calloway, Minnie, and Smoky Joe became nationally known. He followed up the original “Minnie the Moocher” with a song cycle that expanded the life of both Minnie and Joe. These songs span the 1930s and include “Kicking the Gong Around”(1931), “Minnie the Moocher’s Wedding Day”(1932), “Zaz Zuh Zaz”(1933), and “The Ghost of Smoky Joe” (1939). Calloway also had hits with the drug related tunes, “The Viper’s Drag” (1930) (“viper” refers to a user of marijuana), “Reefer Man” (1932), and “The Old Man of the Mountain” (1933) (a reference to the Persian tale of the “Hashishin”). Calloway did not write all of these works and he was not the only jazz musician to perform songs about drug use, but through them he effectively made a career of commercializing drug culture.<sup>81</sup> Set lists from his performances often consist of a

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<sup>80</sup> Versions of “Willie the Weeper” and commentary regarding its origins can be found in Sigmund Spaeth, *Read ‘Em and Weep: The Songs You Forgot to Remember* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1927); John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax, Eds., *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1934); Margaret Bradford Boni, *Fireside Book of Folk Songs* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1947); Olin Downs and Elie Siegmeister, Eds., *A Treasury of American Song* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1940).

majority of songs with drug references.<sup>82</sup> These songs are rich in slang and underworld allusions. Calloway knowingly used each song to add to the lexicon of drug argot that he developed for his audience. Much of the song cycle reiterates the perception of the drug experience initiated in “Minnie the Moocher.” These later songs expand on references to meeting the King of Sweden and the dreams of opulence, adding visits with other dignitaries, travel to China, and the aforementioned “Reefer Man” who wants to sell you North Carolina. Calloway’s reliance on drug culture for his content stands in contrast to his own abstinence from drug use and his policy of prohibiting his band members from bringing narcotics into the club.

John Gennari notes “Jazz has never been just music - it’s been a cornerstone of the modern cultural imagination, an archive of mythological images, and an aesthetic model for new modes of writing, seeing, and moving.”<sup>83</sup> Minnie and Joe, as portrayed by Calloway, effectively formed a mythology through their many iterations and their widespread popularity. Within this mythology, Minnie and Joe represent romanticized versions of addiction and the fantastical world that addicts inhabit. The two assume positions of royalty, matched by the King and Queen of Sweden and the Prince of Wales, who join them in their hallucinations and on their wedding day.<sup>84</sup> Part of the enjoyment was imagining European royalty as secretly slumming, befriending underworld blacks and imbibing

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<sup>81</sup> Other significant jazz musicians to record or sing drug related songs include: Bea Foote, Chick Webb, Cootie Williams, Don Redman, Hazel Meyers, Fats Waller, Georgia White, Gertrude Lawrence, Noble Sissie, Stuff Smith, Willie Bryant, and Yack Taylor.

<sup>82</sup>Set lists in which Calloway plays drug songs appear in “Earle,” *The Washington Post*, Apr. 8, 1933 and “Tin Pan Alley Gets Ideas from Harlem Jibe,” *Afro-American*, Jan. 28, 1933.

<sup>83</sup> John Gennari, *Blowin’ Hot and Cool: Jazz and Its Critics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 4.

<sup>84</sup> All three are mentioned in “Minnie the Moocher’s Wedding Day.”

narcotics. Regardless of Minnie and Joe's grand status amongst the downtrodden, their domain was defined by poverty, addiction, and morbid overconsumption (Smoky Joe is a ghost by 1939). Their fixed social status tempers any celebration of the two and their exploits. The play on the words in the final stanza of "Minnie the Moocher" - "a million dollars worth of nickels and dimes" - reveals the milieu of poverty in which Minnie lives. Even in her drug-induced dreams, she is unable to imagine wealth outside of amassed mountains of small change.

In the original song, Calloway does not directly mention the race of Minnie and Joe. However, as subjects of a jazz tune it is inferred and in the 1947 film *Hi-De-Ho*, a light-skinned African American actress plays Minnie. Thus, Minnie's dreams of interacting with the King of Sweden signal potential interracial sex. This liaison between legitimate royalty and a dark-skinned "hoochie-coocher" alludes to the interracial and cross-class desires that slumming in Harlem made possible. Similarly, Vogel contends that the light skin of the Cotton Club chorus girls (referred to as "tall, tan, and terrific" in advertisements) "served as potent reminders of the cross-racial sexual desires that circulated" in the clubs.<sup>85</sup>

Calloway's songs seem to go a step further, commenting on the practice of keeping black women as mistresses and the economy of such arrangements. While Calloway hints at the accessibility to sex granted the privileged slumming audience, he playfully exaggerates the price of such pleasures to include "a diamond car with a platinum wheel."

The slang in Calloway's songs theoretically let audiences "in" on the underworld of drug use, much as McCree's had done. A "frail" was a girl; "To kick the gong around" referred to the practice in opium dens of striking a gong to signal that a pipe needed

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<sup>85</sup> Heap, 199.

refilling; “coky” meant cocaine addict, “hoppy” was an opium user, and “junk” referred to narcotics in general. These slang terms semantically communicate a diluted and humorous version of the drug underworld. Instead of connoting the deliriousness of the North American frontier as McCree had done, Calloway’s drug argot delivers the pimps, prostitutes, and the dark corners of not only Harlem, but also Chinatown. In this, Calloway implicates an underground network that spans community, race, ethnicity, and social groupings, one almost entirely undetectable to his uninitiated audience. At the same time, opium smoking and cocaine use had regained significant popularity in the 1920s amongst the urban smart set, and those who were “hip” could knowingly laugh along.

Like the sexual innuendo, these drug references remain playful, though explicit for the time. They are perhaps most unequivocally rendered in the three Betty Boop cartoons that featured the singer and his music. Between 1932 and 1935, the Fleischer Brothers built cartoons around “St. James Infirmary,” “Minnie the Moocher,” and “Old Man of the Mountain.” In each, Calloway appears through a process called rotoscoping, in which the animators draw the cartoon directly over film of the performer singing and dancing, giving surprising life-likeness to the animation. Calloway appears in the shorts as a long-legged ghoul for “St. James Infirmary,” an anthropomorphized walrus in “Minnie the Moocher,” and, lastly, as an oversized “man of the mountain.” These figures appear either without a discernable race or, in the case of the “man of the mountain,” as white. However, the cartoons open with live action clips of Calloway performing with his band, clarifying the identity of the singer. Christopher Lehman asserts that audiences were well aware of the characters’ race, but also identifies the Calloway shorts as some of the first North American

cartoons to feature black characters lacking any minstrel imagery.<sup>86</sup>

The cartoons bring the music's dark aesthetic and milieu to life. Unlike most of Calloway's television appearances, the Fleischers used unedited versions of the songs, keeping all of the drug references and sexual innuendo. The cartoons stand as a testament to the pre-code freedom that media makers enjoyed (this includes being able to see Betty's trademark garter). The animated characters that stand in for Calloway expand, contract, and transmogrify as he sings. In "St. James Infirmary," he morphs into a bottle of booze and pours himself a drink; in "Minnie the Moocher" he electrocutes his band members who appear as ghoulish prison inmates, flipping the switch when hitting a particularly high note in a scat section; in the same short, Calloway also appears as a cat whose kittens suckle her till she deflates. The sinister, dark, yet jaunty portrayals of the creatures at play capture the drug motif fully and the whole scene has the feel of an opium dream. The Fleischer's outlandish and risqué style manifests the other-worldliness of the song's slang.

**[Fig. 15, Cab Calloway from "St. James Infirmary" cartoon by the Fleischer Brothers (1933).]**

In each of the cartoons, Betty travels from the safety of her own home or town to a dark cave that Calloway's animated persona inhabits. There are menacing figures carved into the dark walls of the cavern, signaling that Calloway represented all that is tucked away from genteel life. Calloway's walrus and gangly ghoul embody all the things that go "bump" in the night. Lehman notes, "Betty always leaves these environments once she gets sufficient exposure to the jazz and dancing of the black entertainers."<sup>87</sup> Betty and her dog

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<sup>86</sup> Christopher P. Lehman, *The Colored Cartoon: Black Representation in American Animated Short Films, 1907-1954* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 31.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

Bimbo express both titillation and fear at the sight of Calloway. However, there is legitimate danger, even in the animated form. As the lecherous Old Man of the Mountain, Calloway manhandles Betty until forest animals subdue him. The haunted places where Calloway lurks, distant from Betty's domestic sphere, provide liberation, but they also involve the threat of miscegenation. The cartoons secure the jazz world as something distinct from and antithetical to the world of safety and moral order, mirroring the slumming experience.

Seeing Calloway live at the Cotton Club involved direct interaction with the performer within a very particular *mise en scène*. As the name implies, the Cotton Club featured nostalgia for the antebellum South and the culture of black servitude under slavery. The cabaret had a plantation motif of cotton plants, trees, and a cabin, all framing the bandstand. Calloway was not ignorant of the connotations, noting in his autobiography, "I suppose the idea was to make whites who came to the club feel like they were being catered to and entertained by black slaves."<sup>88</sup> The club enacted a fantasy that Vogel deems "Jim Crow Cosmopolitanism," which enforced white elitism and black subjugation. However, the performances could work in conjunction with the architecture of the club to trouble these supposedly secure racial divisions.

As David Savran notes, jazz was "a partly improvisatory practice that happens in the space between performer and spectator."<sup>89</sup> As the Cotton Club bandstand opened to a cleared area that was both Calloway's performance space and the dance floor, there was no explicit demarcation between the performance and the voyeur. Not surprisingly, the term "floor show" as something that happens in and amongst the audience comes into usage in

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<sup>88</sup> Cab Calloway and Bryan Rollins, *Of Minnie the Moocher & Me* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co, 1976), 88.

<sup>89</sup> David Savran, *Highbrow/Lowdown: Theatre, Jazz and the Making of the New Middle Class* (Detroit: University of Michigan, 2009), 15.

1927 to refer to cabaret entertainment.<sup>90</sup> As Vogel describes it, the close quarters and absence of a fourth wall combined with the performer's interactions "among the patrons before, after and even during the show . . . to create an effect of physical and psychic closeness and shared inwardness."<sup>91</sup> Essentially, the club worked to continually create and undermined divisions between performer and audience. In doing so, the floor show could momentarily evaporate the racially determined parameters of decorum by creating forms of intimacy. Dancing, laughing, singing along, or repeating Calloway's turns of phrase were ways to enact this abandonment of racial boundaries.

In this environment, Calloway was known not just to sing about his particular characters, but to embody them. Original recordings of "Minnie the Moocher" have Calloway singing not in the forceful, full tenor for which he became known but in a high-pitched and slightly muffled voice. He brings to the song a detached casualness that communicates the stoned lethargy of the drug users he discusses; he voices their mental state. In addition, as early as 1931, Calloway started performing his signature drug songs in settings that resembled opium dens.<sup>92</sup> In his regular appearances at the Cotton Club and while on tour Calloway made use of a backdrop that depicted a den or a "Chinese coke hang-out."<sup>93</sup> These performances occasionally employed extras who lounged in the bunks, smoking pipes.<sup>94</sup> Calloway often dressed to resemble the derelicts in his songs. He would change from his impeccable white tails (the famous zoot suit came in the 1940s) to a

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<sup>90</sup> "Floor show," *Oxford English Dictionary Online*.

<sup>91</sup> Vogel, 23.

<sup>92</sup> "The entertainment in the Supper Clubs," *NY Evening Post*, Oct. 24, 1931.

<sup>93</sup> Eva M. Warner, "Buffalo, Buffalo," *The Billboard*, Dec. 30, 1939.

<sup>94</sup> Herb, "Flatbush, B'klyn," *Variety*, Oct. 4, 1939.

crumpled dark suit and beaten fedora in which, it was reported by the *New York Evening Post*, he “gives a convincing impersonation of a drug addict.”<sup>95</sup> This impersonation involved “epileptic contortions,” as well as miming the snorting of cocaine, nose rubbing, and physical twitching.<sup>96</sup>

Key to the experience was Calloway’s shifting subject position. He did not just sing about Smoky Joe, he took on the identity, enacting the above-mentioned gestures to signal his movement in and out of character. An *Afro-American* article from 1947 confirms as much, describing the way that Calloway “essayed the role of a dope addict” in his performances. Smoky Joe became a kind of alter ego for Calloway, and Minnie became his imagined love interest. Fittingly, in the film *Hi-De-Ho*, Minnie is in fact Calloway’s lover. In the recording of “Ghost of Smoky Joe,” when Calloway sings “I want Minnie,” the band repeats the line with a difference, they echo back “*you* want Minnie,” (emphasis added) securing Calloway in the position of Joe, rather than leaving the voice of Joe as a universal that can be any of the performers. Unlike the call and response of Calloway’s scat singing that occurred freely with the audience, this is a rehearsed element that explicitly locates Joe as Calloway and vice versa.

In this way, Calloway served as an agent of cultural transference. He was a medium through which audiences could experience the slums. Calloway moved in and out of being the thing his audience sought, and communicating it from a removed position of narrator. He could be commentator or he could embody the subject of the narrative, portraying both the emotions and the character’s addict-ness from the first-person position. At the same

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<sup>95</sup> “The entertainment in the Supper Clubs.”

<sup>96</sup> “Cab Calloway and his Cotton Club Orchestra,” *The Billboard*, Sep. 6, 1930. The 1932 film *The Big Broadcast* features a young Calloway enacting all of these gestures while singing “Kicking the Gong Around.”

time, Calloway's carefully designed persona projected him as a protective shield against the real-life infiltration of these figures into the performance space. He was the tour guide, singing in "Minnie the Moocher's Wedding Day": "Oh let me take you down/To see them kick the gong around." With his gleaming white tuxedo, flawless grooming, light skin, and inviting grin, he assured the audience that he was not the thing that he represented. He may have been a playboy, but not a criminal or addict. Calloway's skin-tone disarmed audiences and enabled him to embody versions of blackness (in this case, addicted blackness) that would have disrupted the aesthetics of the Cotton Club with its carefully orchestrated color palette and the fantasy it promoted of black culture as exhilarating and intoxicating, but never dangerous.

**[Fig. 16 - Calloway in his signature white tuxedo, author's collection (early 1930s).]**

Calloway capitalized on his status as a reliable conduit for authentic portrayals of "jive" culture and slang became his chief commodity. In 1939, he published *Cab Calloway's Hepster's Dictionary*, which was reportedly "the accepted authority on jive of the New York Public Library," and the book eventually went through six editions.<sup>97</sup> A number of others joined Calloway in writing from an insider perspective and providing carefully indexed jive-talk: Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* contains a glossary for translating the dialogue of the many club goers in the book, and both Armstrong's and Milton "Mezz" Mezzrow's autobiographies contain appendices to clarify the lingo of the drug users and jazz addicts that they discuss.

In addition to the slang Calloway marketed, his scat singing similarly embodied the drug and jive experience through the aesthetics of jazz. Calloway was regularly credited

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<sup>97</sup> Anne Griffith, "Cab Calloway beats Chops in Hard Spiel," n.p., n.d. (General Clippings, Billy Rose Theatre Division, New York Public Library).

with having invented scat, and though this claim is untrue, it demonstrates how closely he was connected with the style of performance.<sup>98</sup> The “craze” for scat singing originated with Armstrong’s recording of “Heebie Jeebies” in the late 1920s, which he followed up with songs like “Oop-Sho-Be-Do-Bee.”<sup>99</sup> White reporters and reviewers often described scat singing as the outpouring of “Negro” emotion that was a result of the race’s African origins. A white South-African writer confirms the survival of this “jungle instinct,” writing in the *Afro-American* in 1928 that “In the cabarets you will see the real unchanged negro,” as they exist on the Dark Continent.<sup>100</sup> *Variety* described Calloway’s scat singing as “barbaric, jungle calls,” and, in another article as “rhythmic hosannas, weird and classification-defying shouting and jungle fervor.”<sup>101</sup> Calloway’s scat singing consisted of lightning fast enunciations and moments of explosive vocalization, moving through his entire vocal range.

However, within the black and jazz community, scat was more than primitive gibberish and it had significant meaning for those in the drug culture. In the Armstrong number, “Sweet Sue (Just You),” he informs his audience that the scat singing of his saxophonist is a “viper language,” which he then translates for the listener.<sup>102</sup> Brent Hayes Edwards makes note of this in his investigation of scat as cultural expression without

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<sup>98</sup> “Calloway Invented ‘Scat’ Singing by Accident,” *Daily Boston Globe*, Mar. 17, 1935.

<sup>99</sup> Neil Leonard, “The Jazzman’s Verbal Usage,” *Black American Literature Forum* 2, no. 1/2 (Spring -Summer 1986): 157.

<sup>100</sup> “Small’s Cabaret Meeting Place of Black-Yellow-White,” *Afro-American*, Jul. 21, 1928.

<sup>101</sup> Abel, “Cotton Club, N.Y.,” *Variety*, Feb. 21, 1933; “Paramount NY,” *Variety*, Mar. 16, 1938.

<sup>102</sup> Louis Armstrong and His Orchestra, “Sweet Sue (Just You),” Victor Records, 1933.

clarifying that “viper” designates a drug user.<sup>103</sup> In essence, scat was the articulation of the drug subculture. Mezzrow, who was a long time drug dealer to Harlem’s jazz community, reports that many of his customers memorized passages of Armstrong’s scat singing “and before long the lines became a form of street greeting among the initiated.”<sup>104</sup>

Calloway’s 1933 hit “Zaz Zuh Zaz,” best demonstrates the way in which Calloway uses scat singing to create specific meaning and communicate drug and jive culture.

Written with his trombonist Harry White, the song includes references to Calloway’s two famous protagonists.

Now, here's a very entrancing phrase  
It will put you in a daze  
To me it don't mean a thing  
But it's got a very peculiar swing

Zaz, zuh, zaz, zuh, zaz (2 rounds of call and response)

Now, zaz, zuh, zaz was handed down  
From a bloke down in Chinatown  
It seems his name was Smoky Joe  
And he used to hi, de, hi, de, ho

Zaz, zuh, zaz, zuh, zaz (2 rounds of call and response)

When Smoky Joe came into town  
And he kicked the gong around  
Any place that he would go  
Minnie the Moocher she was sure to go

With her zaz, zuh, zaz (2 rounds of call and response)

It makes no difference where you go  
There's one thing that they sure do know  
There's no need for them to be blue  
For the zaz, zuh, zaz will always see them through

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<sup>103</sup> Brent Hayes Edwards, “Louis Armstrong and the Syntax of Scat,” *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 3 (Spring 2002): 627.

<sup>104</sup> Leonard, 157.

Zaz, zuh, zaz, zuh, zaz (2 rounds of call and response)

Encoded in Calloway's phrasing and scat singing are multiple drug references. The phrase "zaz, zuh, zaz" itself will "put you in a daze," much the way that Smoky Joe's cocaine use or Minnie's opium smoking might. "Peculiar swing," too, hints at both the unconventionality of drug use and the effects of the drug on the user. Within the narrative, it is "kicking the gong around" and the "zaz, zuh, zaz" that Minnie and Joe rely upon to keep the "blues" away and Calloway's song lightly hints at the roots of dependence, as the drug (the "zah zuh zaz") is the thing they can trust regardless of where they go; it is both reliable and inescapable.

Scat singing comes to express the effects of these drugs, which are so hard to limn in semantic form. Arab cultures designated particular terms like *Kief* to express the complex experience of drug use.<sup>105</sup> Literally translated as "pleasure," *Kief* signals a feeling of displacement from one's own body. In Calloway's scat, black culture supplies a musically enhanced language for the expression of the drug experience. Limited by what language can supply, Calloway enacts a practice that Zora Neale Hurston identifies as "liquefying the words," which she believes is an ingrained element of African-American vocal expression, especially in music.<sup>106</sup> In performance, Calloway rarely sticks to the recorded choruses transcribed above, but improvises a range of different vocalizations. He disrupts any clear division between the lyrics and the choruses of scat singing, rather he flows between the two. His language seems to dissolve into the rapid, unintelligible sounds of the onomatopoeia of the scat sections. In this way, his choruses become especially suggestive

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<sup>105</sup> Theophile Gautier spends ample time in "Le Club de Hachichin" attempting to decrypt the term "Kief." Today it refers to the crystals of the cannabis plant in American drug vernacular.

<sup>106</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, "Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals" (1934), *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*, ed. Cheryl Wall (New York: Library of America, 1995), 872.

because he slips from the clear meaning of the written lyrics to the expression of that which cannot be said, or for which there are not words.<sup>107</sup> He offers a coded language of sounds, attitudes, gestures, and poses, all of which need to be read appropriately to capture his meaning.

Calloway's slang and scat singing communicate the meaningful rebellions and surreptitious expressions of self that Henry Louis Gates identifies as the product of "Signifyin(g)." Signifyin(g), as outlined by Gates, is a tradition that consists of various rhetorical and semantic practices of the African American community. These include playing the dirty dozens, loud talking or "louding," testifying, rapping, and what Gates refers to as "troping."<sup>108</sup> In each, the act of Signifyin(g) involves rhetorical games, figurative substitutions, and, most typically, repetition and revision or "repetition with a signal difference."<sup>109</sup> Regarding slang, the substitutions and adaptations of Signifyin(g) "tend to be humorous, or function to name a person or a situation in a telling manner," often yielding a visual or aural pun.<sup>110</sup> This pun has to be recognized for its meaning to be grasped; the participant or hearer must be able to parse the figurative from the literal in the language.<sup>111</sup> Within a community of drug users this figurative and coded speech is essential. The vernacular serves as a celebration of the counter-culture that unites them. It also serves as a form of defense, hiding the evidence of their drug use from those outside their

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<sup>107</sup> Calloway demonstrates this same seamless flow between clear lyrics and scat in his performance of "Jumping Jive" in the 1943 film *Stormy Weather*.

<sup>108</sup> Gates' efforts to define Signifyin(g) comprise the second chapter of his book. Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 49 and 51.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>111</sup> According to Gates, the confusion of the figurative and the literal is one of the central ways that those who Signify manipulate their targets.

community and providing a vetting system that determines whether a person poses a danger; those who can speak the language are those who can be trusted. This mirrors a historical precedent in which the ability to comprehend “a language of implication” enabled expression by slaves under the oppressive watch of masters.<sup>112</sup>

In the twentieth century, African Americans maintained the capacity to both play and read the coded linguistic interactions that comprise Signifyin(g) in order to defend against the white dominance of American English and white hegemony in general. For Gates, the creation of slang through the constant revision of the language is a profound subversion by African Americans that draws attention to the process of meaning making and “critique[s] the nature of (white) meaning itself.”<sup>113</sup> Calloway was essentially selling to his white audience the very subversion that was originally intended to undermine or exclude them. This is especially important considering Calloway had many black fans also. Though denied access to the Cotton Club, African Americans bought his albums, heard him on the radio, saw his films, and attended his concerts when on tour. According to Mezzrow, “Historically the hipster’s lingo reverses the whole Uncle Tom attitude of the beaten-down Southern Negro . . . Once they tore off the soul-destroying straightjacket [*sic*] of Uncle Tomism, those talents and creative energies just busted out all over.”<sup>114</sup> Mezzrow, who was a jazz musician as well as drug pusher, saw “hipster’s lingo,” jazz lifestyle, and drug culture as interchangeable. But, more importantly, he saw the colloquial language of the black cabaret community as a revolt against their subjugated social position for the sake of a new

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<sup>112</sup> Gates, 54.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>114</sup> Milton “Mezz” Mezzrow and Bernard Wolfe, *Really the Blues* (New York: Random House, 1946), 225.

identity based on free-flowing and racially specific creativity.

Perhaps even more than Calloway's slang, his scat singing was a rich form of Signifyin(g). Formulated in the moment as a completely figurative language, a listener can experience scat as sounds, or interpret it for more explicit meaning. Unlike a double entendre that can be locked down, scat remains an implication, refusing any formal exegesis. Indeed, in the vein of Gates's theory, Edwards argues that scat singing dismantles the rules of semiotic signification, suggesting an excess of meaning within the vocalization and its musical accompaniment.<sup>115</sup> At the same time, this expressive voice communicates a vision of a new world of black subjecthood and autonomy, as Mezzrow implies. Lott sees the grinding voice of Howlin' Wolf and the power behind the air pushed through Armstrong's trumpet as statements of empowered identity, and, simultaneously, the source of that identity.<sup>116</sup> Some found this simultaneity in Calloway's stage performance. An article from the *Afro-American* notes, "Both his manner of singing and his gyrations on the floor were unstudied and wholly spontaneous, the natural expression of his exuberant vitality and innate sense of rhythm . . ."<sup>117</sup> Calloway's soaring tenor, full-bodied howls, and rapid scat solos that would seem to exhaust, if not tongue-tie a normal person, all manifest and proclaim extraordinary self-control. It is that empowered identity and autonomy that Lott finds in Wolf and Armstrong. Calloway's scat singing embodies not just the drug experience, but also the rebellion against normative hierarchies that both African-American and jive cultures enact.

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<sup>115</sup> Edwards, 625-649.

<sup>116</sup> Lott, "Back Door Man: Howlin' Wolf and the Sound of Jim Crow," 701.

<sup>117</sup> "Tin Pan Alley Gets Ideas from Harlem Jibe," *Afro-American*, Jan. 28 1933.

Keeping this in mind, we can consider the way in which Calloway was part of a movement within the black community that countered the ideologies of the Harlem Renaissance and programs of “racial uplift.” Allan Borst, who intimately links jazz and drug cultures through their use of vernacular, argues that “For the jazz-addict subculture, a distinct vernacular in the Signifyin(g) tradition enables self-actualization through language, while also challenging the signifying machine of white capitalist or Talented Tenth hegemonies.”<sup>118</sup> By this, Borst extends the critique inherent in Signifyin(g) from white cultural dominance to the New Negro and Harlem Renaissance ideologies of the 1920s and ‘30s. “Talented Tenth” refers to the theories of W.E.D. Dubois that recommended that the majority of the black population work as subordinates in service to a few promising members of the community who would effectively improve the status of the race as a whole. Related efforts at social engineering included a call by upper-class blacks and certain intelligentsia, such as Alain Locke and Charles S. Johnson, for the adoption of traditional middle-class mores of refinement and family unity as crucial for the ascension of the African American in the country.

To this group of thinkers and artists the Negro Vogue that propelled Calloway to stardom distorted blackness through sensuousness, primitivism, and exhibitionism. To them, cabarets functioned in direct competition with the project of racial uplift. Yet, Vogel has argued that what he refers to as the “cabaret school” of writers (including Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Carl Van Vechten, Zora Neale Hurston and others), “enacted a radical break from and rebellion against the politics of normative uplift” including class

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<sup>118</sup> Allan G. Borst, “Signifyin(g) Afro-Orientalism: The Jazz-Addict Subculture in *Nigger Heaven and Home to Harlem*,” *Modernism/modernity* 16, No. 4 (Nov. 2009): 694.

ascension and traditional Western aesthetics in art.<sup>119</sup> Wilson poses a similar scenario in which popular entertainers of the time created “highly ambiguous, ambivalent, and bewildering” race and gender identities. These worked in opposition to the efforts of those who sought to “fasten and delineate” such categories within the black community for the sake of racial advancement.<sup>120</sup>

Vogel, Wilson, and Borst see Harlem’s underworld as a “location of social and subjective expansion” in which the celebratory spirit and the artistic expression of the African Americans in cabarets and popular culture created legitimate and multivalent ways of being.<sup>121</sup> In a number of ways, Calloway enacts this same expansion. His light skin, signature hair that flopped around to the music, and gleaming tuxedo all indicated to both black and white audiences the diversity within individual racial categories. As much as his light skin may have indicated safety to the audience, it also served as a reminder of both the nation’s history of cross-racial intercourse (Calloway had Irish heritage) and the cross-racial desires permeating the club. His hair seemed to confound traditional expectation regarding black physiology, moving in ways not thought possible for those with African heritage. His wild dance moves challenged the imagination of what could be done in a set of tails. Though the dinner jacket was typically a sign of refinement, Calloway was able to spin, leap, and twist without ever losing the balance that epitomized cosmopolitan elegance. Calloway was not the only jazz musician famous for rakish dress, Ellington was a fashion plate, but being a dancer freed Calloway from the static position behind a piano.

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<sup>119</sup> Vogel, 4.

<sup>120</sup> Wilson, 3.

<sup>121</sup> Vogel, 13.

Dressed in such raiment while celebrating and humanizing the lowly underworld characters of Minnie and Joe, Calloway promoted alternative or ambiguous narratives of black identity.

Aware that he emblemized this ambiguity, Calloway fixed his own identity clearly and with pointed language in his autobiography. He relates “I’ve always known, from the days when I was a nigger kid selling paper and hustling shoeshines and ‘walking hots’ out in Pimlico - hell, I’m a nigger and proud of it.”<sup>122</sup> Regardless of his unflagging grin and perfected sheen in performance, Calloway situates himself firmly within the unwavering position of “nigger” rather than “black,” “Afro-American,” or “negro.” The claim stands as a brusque rebuff of uplift ideologies that sought racial improvement through cultural revision. Calloway recognized the complexity with which he could express the subject position of “nigger.”

Calloway includes this commentary in his songs through critical references to the hierarchy of Harlem’s social scene. In “The Ghost of Smoky Joe,” Joe returns from Hades in search of Minnie. Recounting his demise he sings: “Remember when I kicked the bucket/ In my mansion up on Striver’s Row/ When they came and took me off-in/ A zillion dollar Coffin/ Cause I’m the ghost of Smoky Joe.” “Striver’s Row” was an upscale area of Harlem where only the wealthiest African Americans lived. Calloway infers the infiltration by the famous cocaine addict into Harlem’s most exclusive and privileged neighborhood. Smoky Joe’s presence diminishes the social elevation that those wealthy blacks maintained. It served as a ribbing snub of any desire for class ascension by blacks. Calloway poses himself and his alter ego as representatives of a freewheeling, jazz-infused Harlem underground

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<sup>122</sup> “Walking Hots” refers to the practice of cooling down racehorses after a run, which Calloway did as a young man for small sums at the Pimlico racetrack. Calloway, 42.

that stood in opposition to the bourgeois social climbing that was an important part of some New Negro ideologies.

As an alternative rhetoric to racial uplift, Calloway is not so much proposing the adoption of drug use or drug culture as he is using the figure of the addict and the altered reality of the user to signal another course for survival. The “zaz zuh zaz” is not only the electrified experience of drug use, but something vital that is inherently Minnie’s. It was “*her zaz zuh zaz*” (emphasis added) that could keep her afloat regardless of the place or position in which she found herself. The song identifies this buoyant essence as something “handed down” from a forbear and adapted along the way; as Calloway sings of Smoky Joe, he “used to hi, de, hi, de, ho.” Elsewhere in the song cycle, we find related forms of endurance and existence. In the original song, Minnie could be both the “roughest, toughest frail” and possess a “heart as big as a whale.” Minnie and Joe’s relationship too, was deemed worthy of empathy and sentimentality, best expressed in “Kicking the Gong Around,” in which Joe searches for Minnie to no avail. The song cycle in general proposes a reevaluation of a stigmatized population; using jive expression as a defense for a jive existence. Much as Calloway would not apologize for embracing his identification as a “nigger,” his performances declare the worth of those blacks in conventionally devalued positions. Through coordinated dance, music, and vocalization, Calloway offered a kinesthetic and sensorial expression of the untouchable and indefinable spirit within blackness that did not fit into the whitewashed milieu of the Cotton Club, the bourgeois society of Striver’s Row, or the Anglo-puritanism of the dominant U.S. culture.

## FROM HIP TO HIPPIE

There are other examples of drug use working as a comic device from the first half of the twentieth century. Perhaps most significantly, Charlie Chaplin involves drugs in two of his films, *Easy Street* (1917) and *Modern Times* (1936). In one, he sits on a needle and in the other he uses a saltshaker filled with contraband cocaine. In both, Chaplin as the tramp accidentally ingests narcotics and uses the boost to out-muscle the rough and inexhaustible world of urban aggression and modern machinery. It is only through artificial stimulation that the genial tramp can compete urban life. However, beyond McCree imitators and rascally jazz tunes in the spirit of Calloway, drug addiction rarely takes on a comic tone in performance before the Second World War.

Moving beyond the Harlem Renaissance, the connection between narcotics, blackness, and jazz remains intact if not strengthened. All three were essential to the bebop and beat movements of the 1950s and early 60s. Enhancing these associations were the many famous musicians, both black and white, who struggled with heroin addiction including Billie Holiday, Miles Davis, Charley Parker, Chet Baker, and Stan Getz, to name only a few. On stage, The Living Theatre famously used the hard bop of Freddie Redd to create an affective atmosphere in their 1959 production of Jack Gelber's *The Connection*. The production featured both live jazz performance and actual heroin addicts begging audience members for money to buy a fix. These connections continue to serve avant-garde theatre makers, specifically in works like Robert Lepage's *Needles and Opium* about Miles Davis and Jean Cocteau.

The gleeful bohemianism of the hippie movement spurred new drug humor in the 1960s. So too did the contemporaneous psychedelic movement that promoted the use of

narcotics like LSD for mind expansion. Examples include the “freakout” escapades of Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters, Abbie Hoffman’s threats to spray people with aphrodisiacs during the Democratic National Convention, the anarchism of the Digger’s “Invisible Circus,” and Frank Zappa’s absurdist film *200 Motels* (1971).<sup>123</sup> All of these deliver humor for the sake of cultural critique that either hinted at or directly promoted drug use. On the lighter side, we can point to the unruly goofiness of Cheech and Chong or the rock and roll outrageousness of the clown Jango Edwards. The list goes on.<sup>124</sup> While McCree urged pity for drug addicts and Calloway could only insinuate anything subversive, the works of artists from the second half of the twentieth century blatantly celebrate the rejection of normative culture through drug use. They were part of a new counter culture that was predominantly white in its ranks and that might have been interested in experiencing the “other side” but their frontier was purely psychological and spiritual rather than geographical or racial. Slumming too lost its appeal as the hopeful youth of the 1960s had as their ambition elevation rather than depravity. Then and now, drug slang continues to intrigue audiences who are eager to view and understand the closed world of the drug user, but the revelation of that language does not have the same effect. Today, “dope talk” may entertain, but it rarely transports.

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<sup>123</sup> Craig J. Peariso, *Radical Theatrics: Put-ons, Politics, and the Sixties* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2014), 28.

<sup>124</sup> Recently, there has been a host of films (*How High* (2001), *Knocked Up* (2007), *Pineapple Express* (2008), *Crystal Fairy & the Magical Cactus* (2013)) that demonstrate a Hollywood obsession with marijuana smoking. However, these films celebrate drug use as part of the perpetual adolescence of Millennials, rather than seriously counter cultural or transcendent.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Addiction as Metonym*

“Either the human being must suffer and struggle as the price of a more searching vision, or his gaze must be shallow, and without intellectual revelation.”

- Thomas De Quincey, *Suspiria de Profundis*, 1845

From the 1890s onward, the nation’s public increasingly associated drug use with deviancy. Addiction was connected to racial suicide, degeneracy, crime, and violence. The nation increasingly understood drug use as a social evil in need of reformation. As this study has shown this prohibitory spirit accompanied urban expansion, the maturation of medical authority, and the culture clashes that came with mass immigration. These various elements fueled the first national drug scares and the legislative changes that came in their wake. Most of the plays and performances featuring drug use in the decades bracketing the turn of the century corresponded with this ethos of condemnation and regulation. These representations employed addiction in order to explore the limits of human degradation on a physical and moral plane. However, certain authors sought new ground, conceiving of addiction not as a medical, economic, moral, or social concern, but as an affliction that illuminates complex aspects of human nature.

This chapter examines a set of plays that probe existential concerns by employing drug addiction as a metonym and an exploratory device for larger conceptual objectives. These plays diverge from the examples provided elsewhere in this study; they are unconcerned with medical etiologies or the moral distinctions between disease and vice. Rather, they use addiction as a stand-in for various psychological and philosophical states

of being. They exploit the cyclical nature of addiction and the self-destructive tendencies of the addict to study modern human's relationship to mental, psychological, and spiritual suffering. These plays filter the experience of modernity through the language of addiction in order to explore the condition of alienation that pervades day-to-day life in an industrialized nation. According to Alina Clej (from whose work this chapter borrows significantly in its theoretical underpinnings) addiction manifests the trends of simulation, parasitism, complicity, as well as the contrasting experiences of memory and oblivion "on which modernity thrives." In doing so, Clej avers, addiction becomes "one of the central paradigms of modernity."<sup>1</sup>

Plays examined here include Haddon Chambers's *John-a-Dreams* (1895), William Gillette's *Sherlock Holmes* (1899), Arnold Bennett's *Sacred and Profane Love* (1919), Noël Coward's *The Vortex* (1925), and Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (1942). I am not the first to discuss addiction in regard to a number of these works, particularly *The Vortex* and *Long Day's Journey*. However, it is my intention to historicize their use of addiction as it relates to both dramatic and literary traditions, something earlier scholarship has not considered. In addition, I eschew typical readings of these plays that envision addiction as peripheral by demonstrating the ways in which it functions as a central theme.

Significantly, most of these plays are either British in origin or related to British life. They are part of a cultural exchange between the English speaking nations that was well established by the turn. *John-a-Dreams*, *Sacred and Profane Love*, and *The Vortex* were written by English playwrights and concern English culture. *Sherlock Holmes* was written

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<sup>1</sup> Alina Clej, *A Genealogy of the Modern Self: Thomas De Quincey and the Intoxication of Writing* (Stanford: Stanford University, 1995), vii- viii; ix.

by an America, but is obviously English in source and setting. All but *Sacred and Profane Love* were major successes with U.S. audiences, and even though Bennett's play received poor notices, it was still much discussed in the press and adapted into a film starring a major Hollywood actress in 1921.<sup>2</sup>

Spanning nearly five decades, the circumstances in which each of these plays was written varies. Britain had its own struggles with the popularity and regulation of narcotics and I will discuss each play in both its original and its U.S. contexts. In most cases, the writer of the work was internationally known and the transfer from the West End to Broadway was the result of celebrity star-power and name recognition. I have already discussed the production history of *John-a-Dreams*, which involved both Herbert Beerbohm Tree and Charles Frohman. Sherlock was one of the most popular literary figures of the past two hundred years, and William Gillette was already famous as a romantic lead when he premiered in the part. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who was listed as co-author of the Gillette's script, had just killed Sherlock in *The Final Problem* (1893), and audiences were eager for more of the detective when the play premiered a few years later. Arnold Bennett was well established for his "Five Towns" series of stories and *Sacred and Profane Love* was based on one of these - the 1911 novel *The Book of Carlotta*. For Coward, *The Vortex* was his debut in North America after he had exploded onto the English scene. He was a decidedly hot commodity when he arrived in the U.S. in 1925. This chapter will go into further detail regarding what the drug use in these plays meant on both sides of the Atlantic, but the potential for large financial gain was a primary motivation for their appearance on the U.S. stage.

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<sup>2</sup> The film version of *Sacred and Profane Love* has Diaz addicted to absinthe rather than morphine, much like Lana Turner's *Madame X*.

The upshot of their foreign origins is that they were removed from the U.S. concerns over drug use that fueled many prohibition plays. Plays discussed here existed outside of Harrison Era policy wrangling or Anslinger's later propaganda. Unencumbered by these material concerns regarding policy, these plays engage addiction with more spiritual and metaphysical aims. Although these aims differ from play to play, this chapter demonstrates that the works discussed here all share a literary heritage, one that originates with Thomas De Quincey. I argue that De Quincey's treatment of drug use, especially his conception of its inspirational and destructive properties, spawned an important legacy. For some, the influence of this legacy is direct, for others it is more oblique.

Over time, De Quincey's conception of addiction and intoxication (as well as his characteristic expression of these ideas) was appropriated and adapted by a number of important artists, primarily poets and novelists. French Decadents such as Baudelaire and Gérard de Nerval adopt De Quincean ideals in the mid-nineteenth century. Their works become the primary inspiration for English members of the Decadent Movement who came to prominence in the 1890s. These include Arthur Symons, Ernest Dowson, Arthur Machen, and John Addington Symonds.<sup>3</sup> Virginia Berridge, who asserts the existence of this same artistic legacy, identifies Symons in particular as "in many ways the mediating influence" between the French Decadents and later English members of the movement, primarily though his promotion of drug use for the sake of inspiration.<sup>4</sup>

This De Quincean legacy extends from these *fin de siècle* authors such as Symons to

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<sup>3</sup> Symons commented directly on De Quincey's writing in "A Word on De Quincey," *Studies in Prose and Verse* (London: Dent, 1905). However, the influence of De Quincey on Symons is more second hand, the result of Symons's attempt to mimic Baudelaire. Machen's relationship to De Quincey is far more direct. Machen clarifies the extent of De Quincey's influence on his writing in the first volume of his memoirs *Far Off Things* (Library of Alexandria, 1923).

<sup>4</sup> Virginia Berridge, "The Origins of the English Drug 'Scene,' 1890-1930," *Medical History* 32 (1988), 55.

writers of the 1920s such as Evelyn Waugh, Aleister Crowley, and even Henry Green, who were writing at a time when opium smoking and cocaine use became popular in London artistic circles. This long process of influence, modification, and redirection defines the shift from Romanticism to modernism. What I aim to do here is to assert the place that playwrights such as Chambers, Gillette, Bennett, Coward, and O'Neill (strange bedfellows perhaps) have in this history that is dominated by primarily French and English Decadents.

This study has already demonstrated how playwrights of various genres easily exploited some De Quincean tropes. His Orientalism, hallucinations of ethereal flight, and his laments of agonizing perdition all lent themselves to theatrical sensationalism and comic exaggeration. However, authors such as Baudelaire, Symons, and Machen recognized the complexity inherent in De Quincey's treatment of intoxication. It was this complexity that prompted the playwrights discussed here to employ addiction in the forms that they did.

De Quincey realized the dissociative properties of narcotics and he exploited them in his writing in order to fragment and rediscover his own subjectivity. Writers followed this trend in their attempts to explore the disintegrations and dissociations of modern life. As Marshall Berman has described, modern man faced "agitation and turbulence, psychic dizziness and drunkenness, expansion of experiential possibilities and destruction of moral boundaries, . . . self-enlargement and self-derangement."<sup>5</sup> Reeling from the perpetual contradictions and ambiguities of the modern world, the artist had to find a way to avoid paralysis. He or she could do so through intoxication. Inebriety became a resistant act of alienation from the muddle of modernity. Only through such resistance could the artist

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<sup>5</sup> Berman, 18.

quell the overwhelming static of the urban and industrial landscape. However, the price for the transformation of bewildering experience into comprehensible meaning, as determined by De Quincey, was potential annihilation. As one of his most important contributions to the conceptual formulation of addiction, De Quincey conflates euphoria with depression, an elevated life with a tormented death.

Thus, in the dramatic form, drug use appears as a negotiation between contrary forces with the potential of dichotomous outcomes. This doubleness that infects the addict stems from the nature of the narcotic itself. As emphasized by Jacques Derrida in his essay "Pharmakon," "There is no such thing as a harmless remedy. The pharmakon can never be simply beneficial."<sup>6</sup> The narcotic substance is simultaneously a curative and a poison. Fundamental to the narcotic experience is that the moment of administration inevitably enacts dual outcomes of enlivenment and deterioration. In essence, the conflict that is typically manifested as an outward struggle between protagonist and antagonist occurs as an internal battle. The confrontation is with the self, which is fragmented into constituent elements most often including manifestations of "desire" and "will." Versions of this embodied dichotomy appropriately run throughout the plays discussed here.

By beginning my investigation with a return to Chambers's *John-a-Dreams* I aim to clarify exactly how these De Quincean tropes of narcotic inspiration made a transition to the stage in the form of a clear polarity. Like De Quincey, Chambers's protagonist, Harold Wynn, leverages his life against artistic output - the act of creation becomes one of self-destruction. This paradigm undergoes significant adaptation as other playwrights employ addiction to different ends, though the oppositional binary of death or oblivion lie at the

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<sup>6</sup> Jacques Derrida, "The Pharmakon," *Dissemination* (1972), trans. Barbara Johnson (New York: Continuum, 1981) 102.

heart of each interpretation. The examples discussed demonstrate the conflicted nature of addiction - the narcotic is both an analgesic and a source of pain, it diminishes grief while enhancing memory, it anesthetizes while deepening the wound.

### **DE QUINCEY'S MODERNIST (JOHN-A)DREAMS**

Discussed in the second chapter, Haddon Chambers's *John-a-Dreams* proposes a male counterpart to the fallen woman. At the time of its production, this element of social commentary was the primary concern of reviewers and commentators both in the U.S. and U.K. Chambers's Harold Wynn is a non-threatening version of an addict who could facilitate the redemption of the former prostitute. Moving beyond this social narrative, an examination of the design of Harold's character and his relationship to inebriety reveals the imagined mechanics of inspiration in the late nineteenth century. Chambers helped formulate addiction in drama in terms of excess, interiority, and self-destruction. At first sight, Harold's character is patterned after idealized Romantic poets such as Coleridge, Byron, and De Quincey in particular. Harold is both an aristocratic gentleman and a turbulent-minded artist who imbibes laudanum and feverishly writes love poetry. De Quincey's presence is so strong in the play that there is a scene in which characters read aloud from *Confessions of an Opium-Eater* in an attempt to dissuade Harold from his drug use. However, it becomes clear that later conceptions of the addict-artist, primarily those of Decadent poets, also influenced Chambers's portrayal of the addict.

De Quincey's presence in the play is no surprise. There was a resurgence of interest in both the man and his works in the last decades of the nineteenth century. In 1878, David Massey published a biography of De Quincey and in 1889 he edited the first printing of De

Quincey's complete works. *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* was widely available to the British public at the time. Machen reports buying the work as a young man at a railway station and the book was published in pocket size.<sup>7</sup> It was the same in the U.S., where De Quincey's *Confessions* was published in a variety of forms and available with a number of different introductions. *The American Catalogue* from 1900 lists five different editions of the work along with diverse collections of De Quincey's essays in circulation.<sup>8</sup>

Critical arguments over De Quincey's works involved some of the most important names in British *fin de siècle* scholarship and writing. In essays, Symons and Symonds both claimed that De Quincey was decidedly Decadent in his style. While Symons critiqued De Quincey's prose style, Symonds found true kinship in his memoirs.<sup>9</sup> In part it was De Quincey's linguistic excess and oratorical flourishes that lead G.K. Chesterton to describe him as "the first and most powerful of the decadents" in a 1913 review of Victorian literature.<sup>10</sup>

"Decadence" as a literary movement was a broad designation. In his widely read essay "The Decadent Movement in Literature" (1893), Symons essentially places both Symbolism and Impressionism under the umbrella of Decadence.<sup>11</sup> The interest that English members of the Decadent Movement had in De Quincey was in part the result of their attention to earlier French writers of the nineteenth century such as Baudelaire,

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<sup>7</sup> Alex Murray, "Enigmatic Intertexts: Decadence, De Quincey, and the Sphinx," *Decadent Romanticism: 1780-1914*, eds. Kostas Boyiopoulos and Mark Sandy (New York: Ashgate, 2015), 91.

<sup>8</sup> *The American Catalogue, 1900-1905* (New York: Office of Publisher's Weekly, 1905), 290.

<sup>9</sup> Murray, 93.

<sup>10</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *The Victorian Age in Literature* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1913), 24.

<sup>11</sup> Arthur Symons, "The Decadent Movement in Literature," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 87 (Nov., 1893), 858.

Nerval, and Théophile Gautier (Symons's essay includes references to these along with Paul Verlaine and Stéphane Mallarmé). These French writers idolized De Quincey and his use of narcotics for inspiration. Baudelaire translated his *Confessions* into French, publishing the translation as the second half of his *Les Paradis artificiels*. Baudelaire, Gautier, and Nerval joined Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas, and Honoré de Balzac as members of the "Club des Hashischins," experimenting with the drug for the sake of psychic exploration. Gautier most carefully recorded the experience in a number of published articles.

In what Berridge has identified as "a self-conscious literary aping of French fashion," Symons, Symonds, and Dowson also experimented with drug use as members of the literary circle known as the "Rhymer's Club."<sup>12</sup> Other members who met nightly at the Cheshire Cheese in the Strand included W.B. Yeats (their official chairperson), Edwin Ellis, John Todhunter, Richard La Galienne, John Davidson, William Watson, and Lionel Johnson.<sup>13</sup> Poems such as Symons's "The Opium Smoker" (c. 1888) or Dowson's "Absinthia Taetra" (1899) demonstrate how these influences and activities determined their choice of subject. At the same time, the aesthetics of the French Decadents is present in the later writers' demonstration of an acute sense of loss, the visceral experience of discovery, and the idea that truth could be an aesthetic principle. In his 1893 essay, Symons defines the Decadent Movement's literary character as sharing with De Quincey "intense self-consciousness, a restless curiosity in research . . . , a spiritual and moral perversity."<sup>14</sup> It was amidst this new interest in De Quincey and drug use that Chambers wrote his play. In

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<sup>12</sup> Virginia Berridge, *Demons: Our Changing Attitudes to Alcohol, Tobacco, and Drugs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 154.

<sup>13</sup> Not all of these authors experimented with drugs, but certainly, Dowson, Yeats, Symons, Symonds, and a number of others have been identified as doing so.

<sup>14</sup> Symons, "The Decadent Movement in Literature," 858-59.

effect, the tradition founded by De Quincey, altered by the French Decadents, and reiterated by the English Rhymer's, determines Chambers's portrayal of Harold Wynn in the commercial form of the popular theatre.

In order for Harold to fulfill the socially progressive message of the play his addiction needs to signal vice. Kate Cloud's past was one of licentiousness (though her fall was the result of circumstances out of her control as she had to support a dying mother) and Harold must balance this in his own failings. According to Clej, De Quincey's primary act in writing his *Confessions* in 1822 was "to transform opium eating from a working-class pleasure into a refined enjoyment by exploring the stimulating potential of the drug and its oneiric properties."<sup>15</sup> He reorients an intoxicant that was popular with Manchester textile workers, portraying it as an inspirational aide in the creation of great poetry. His literary appropriation was not, however, subversive. It was a novel conceptualization in which drug use (specifically opium eating) was paired with the Romantic tradition of sophisticated and impassioned self-exploration. Thus, Chambers's representation of Harold as suffering from vice engages elements that are more characteristic of later Decadent and bohemian artists such as Baudelaire, Verlaine, Symons, and even Oscar Wilde. It is these later modernists who interpreted De Quincey and his employment of narcotics as seditious.

By way of Baudelaire's influence, the English Decadents connected artificial stimulation with bohemian overindulgences. Mimicking Baudelaire's flâneur as well as the libertinism of Rimbaud, the English writers haunted the cafes of London's seedier districts. Symons captured these escapades in detail in his suggestive and often condemned *London Nights* (1895). Thus, Chambers's characterization of his protagonist as corrupted

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<sup>15</sup> Clej, viii.

communicates a particular kind of *fin de siècle* poet: when Harold's father refers to his son's poetry as "hopelessly modern," he has in mind the Rhymers rather than the Romantics.<sup>16</sup>

In the tradition of drug memoirs, Harold spends ample time narrating his drug experiences to other characters. He bursts with enthusiasm regarding his ability "to talk more brightly than usual, to argue more subtly – To laugh more spontaneously, to see things with a larger vision, to feel nearer the stars than the rest of the world."<sup>17</sup> De Quincey refers to his own writing as "impassioned prose," a phrase that has traditionally situated him squarely as a member of the Romantic Movement, and Harold embodies this kind of emotional overabundance. By the 1890s, seventy years after De Quincey's *Confessions*, Harold's state of intoxication is also redolent of more contemporary authors. Nerval declared that he wrote the collection of sonnets he called "Chimeras" in a "state of supernaturalist reverie."<sup>18</sup> Writing in the late 1850s, Nerval undertook deep contemplation of the "eidetic images and symbols" that emerged from his own waking dreams.<sup>19</sup> The English Decadents of the 1890s were similarly obsessed with such irrepressible sensory experiences. Symons's *London: A Book of Aspects* (1908) describes the overwhelming nature of the urban environment and the other-worldliness of his excursions into the lower depth. In it, he notes, "I have always been curious of sensations, and above all of those which seem to lead one into 'artificial paradises' not within everybody's reach. It took me some time to find out that every 'artificial paradise' is within one's own soul, somewhere

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<sup>16</sup> Chambers, Act II: 7.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, Act II: 4.

<sup>18</sup> Gérard De Nerval, *Selected Writings*, trans. Richard Sieburth (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 350. Nerval's references to "supernaturalist reverie" comes from his preface to *Daughters of Fire*, a collection he published in 1857 just before his death.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 350.

among one's own dreams."<sup>20</sup> His direct reference to Baudelaire's "artificial paradises" and the lionizing of intoxicated inspiration are standard examples of how the English Decadents maintained conventions originally founded upon the work of De Quincey. Harold too seems trapped in the contemplation of his heightened emotions trying to prolong the brief moments of excitation through artificial stimulants.

When Harold first appears on stage, he is in the midst of realizing that he has consumed an entire bottle of opium tincture during a night of writing. "How my brain burns. Dare I? [. . .] Bed? No – I can't sleep – too excited. Perhaps if I took just a little more – Good God! It was full – can I have possibly, my poem you are stained with – with a weakness."<sup>21</sup> Harold partakes in a kind of "sublime excess" that De Quincey and Baudelaire translated into allusions of self through literary bricolage.<sup>22</sup> It is a submission to desire that fragments the self, heightening some senses while dulling others; simultaneously concealing and revealing elements of the writer's psyche. Harold's language itself is fragmented as an indication of this psychic fracturing.<sup>23</sup> The result is an overindulgence of self-reflection or self-study. Berridge argues, "The 'new aesthetics' of the 1890s rested on a denial of society, a retreat into the individual with an emphasis on separation and inner consciousness and experience, rather than the vulgar materialism of the external world."<sup>24</sup> Addiction naturally fit this world-view as it embodies a turning inward that represents

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<sup>20</sup> Arthur Symons, *London: A Book of Aspects* (London: Chiswick Press, 1909), 48.

<sup>21</sup> Chambers, Act II: 1.

<sup>22</sup> Clej, v.

<sup>23</sup> Clej further includes Walter Benjamin's writings on hashish as enacting this same kind of fragmented construction of self. Clej, v.

<sup>24</sup> Berridge, "The Origins of the English Drug 'Scene,' 1890-1930," 53.

solipsism, if not narcissism, on the part of the addict. This self-obsession and separation can be dangerous and Harold draws close to arriving at one of the two conclusions available for addicts in literature and drama, madness or suicide. He almost meets this fate when he falls into an intoxicated stupor that resembles death. The contradiction embodied in drug use is that the eidetic can progress to the unconscious.

Harold's vulnerability to this danger is due to his excess of spirit. He demonstrates an exuberant drive to extract more from life. A reviewer of the Tree production keenly notes that Harold is "Searching, with the ideality of a poet, for that unknown happiness, that remote joy of which life has not the giving."<sup>25</sup> The conviction that the poet's search is in vain, that "life has not the giving," suggests that the creative personality is doubled-edged; those seeking to unfold the mysteries of life may find their own destruction in the process. Baudelaire expresses this succinctly: "To be sure, any man who does not accept life's conditions is selling his soul. It is easy to grasp the connection between the satanic creations of poets and the creatures who have yielded to the influence of the stimulant drugs. Man wished to be God, and soon he has, by virtue of an ungovernable moral law, fallen lower than the level of his true nature."<sup>26</sup> Charles Dickens's John Jasper is a fitting precursor to Harold as an addict-artist moving towards a fall. In the unfinished *Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), Jasper is an organist who allows his mania to overtake him, partially driven by his visits to opium dens. Famously, W.B. Yeats labeled the Decadent poets of the 1890s, the "Tragic Generation" for the debilitation they suffered in their search for inspiration (Symons experienced a complete mental collapse and a number of the Rhymer's

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<sup>25</sup> *The Saturday Review*, Nov. 10, 1894, 507.

<sup>26</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Artificial Paradises* (1860), trans. Stacy Diamond (New York: Citadel Press, 1996), 72.

took their own lives or died young from drink). Those who release themselves fully to the aesthetic are easily tempted by the similar release provided by drugs. This scenario remains prevalent throughout twentieth century. Seeking “unnatural” inspiration in intoxication and allowing the world of one’s dreams to supersede reality has become a trope, appearing more recently in films such as *The Doors* (1991) and *Basquiat* (1996).

These self-destructive tendencies manifest Freud’s “death-drive.” While under the influence, Chambers’s Harold expresses an ebullient vivacity that is, as his father describes it, “monstrous.” Harold declaims, “I could ride a mad horse - hang out on the yard-arm of a full rigged sailing ship in a gale of wind, or swim five miles in the open sea.”<sup>27</sup> This masculine pleasure seeking and youthful physical expression is tinged with recklessness. Here too we find Harold mimicking the Rhymer’s Club’s hedonistic adventures in London’s underworld, more than De Quincey’s agoraphobia.<sup>28</sup> According to Freud, the “death-drive” worked in opposition to normal tendencies of survival and sexual reproduction. Appropriately, Harold eventually curbs his aberrant behavior by initiating a normative heterosexual relationship with Kate. Assuming the conventional position of lover acts as a corrective cure. As the Decadent artists of the period were accused of “sexual abnormality and mental insanity,” Chambers play depicted the possible reformation of the type.<sup>29</sup>

At the same time, Chambers was working for a popular audience, one with limits in the prurience it would accept on stage. He suppresses the profligacy of the Decadent artists and sterilizes his depiction of the immense suffering that De Quincey relates in his

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<sup>27</sup> Chambers, Act II: 3.

<sup>28</sup> Petra Pointner details the trips to opium dens, gin shops, and bordellos that Symons, Dowson, Symonds and Johnson all undertook in her *A Prelude to Modernism Studies on the Urban and Erotic Poetry of Arthur Symons* (Heidelberg: University of Winter, 2004).

<sup>29</sup> Pointner, 11.

memoirs. By doing so, Chambers ensures that Harold is not dangerous to anyone but himself, and is easily restored, retaining no corrupt inner nature after he reforms. Harold is also completely non-threatening in his love making to Kate; it is instead his brutish friend Sir Hubert who is shown capable of duplicity. Harold's reliance on opiates hints at a childish impotence reminiscent of Hamlet's inability to act rather than any kind of deviancy or sexual abnormality that some attributed to the Decadents. Suited to Tree's Victorianism and mirroring De Quincey's refinement, the play and its characters lack any carnality or violence.<sup>30</sup> Chambers creates the prototypical stage-addict who can seemingly thread the needle between bohemian permissiveness and aristocratic sophistication. This characterization helps set a course on which certain versions of the addict - racially unmarked and male - could assume the position of dramatic hero and even exhibit qualities of renegade genius.

### ***SHERLOCK HOLMES AND THE 7% SOLUTION***

In the over fifty stories about the famous detective of Baker Street, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle saddles his character with a great many eccentric behaviors. In addition to indoor pistol practice, Doyle regularly describes Sherlock Holmes enjoying subcutaneous injections of cocaine and morphine. In the very first novel, Dr. Watson expresses concern regarding his new flat-mate: "I have noticed such a dreamy, vacant expression in his eyes, that I might have suspected him of being addicted to the use of some narcotic."<sup>31</sup> Doyle makes Holmes's drug use explicit in the second novel, *The Sign of Four* (1890), in which he depicts Holmes

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<sup>30</sup> De Quincey was known for his genteel manners if not meekness.

<sup>31</sup> Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet* (1897) (New York: Harper Brothers Publishers, 1901), 14.

injecting himself with a solution of cocaine and arguing with Watson over its dangers.<sup>32</sup> In Doyle's estimation, Holmes's habit is not a minor one. Watson notes that Holmes administers injections up to three times a day into an arm "all dotted and scarred with innumerable puncture-marks."<sup>33</sup> In fact, Holmes's addiction remains a factor in Doyle's stories until 1904 with *The Adventure of the Missing Three-Quarter*, when Watson reports that he has weaned his friend off of narcotics at the risk of the detective's total collapse.

Holmes's drug use has long puzzled readers. Much pseudo-scholarship has tried to explain or excuse Holmes's addiction for the sake of maintaining his hero status. W.H. Miller simply asserts, "the facts are against it," while G.F. McCleary believes it is a complicated ruse and Holmes was just "pulling Watson's leg."<sup>34</sup> These acts of selective denial treat Holmes as an historical figure whose biography must be explained rather than interpreted. However, the idea of his addiction does present a jarring discordance. Holmes's extraordinary faculties of ratiocination, his encyclopedic knowledge, and allegiance to empiricism manifest a purified Victorian ideal. Watson refers to him as the "most perfect reasoning and observing machine that the world has ever seen."<sup>35</sup> These are all qualities that seem to contradict traditional characterizations of drug users.

Anna Neil notes that Holmes presented an "antidotal influence to the aimlessness and excessiveness of Nordau's *fin de siècle*."<sup>36</sup> Yet, according to Nordau and his

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<sup>32</sup> Gillette lifts this argument from *Sign of Four* almost wholesale to use in his play.

<sup>33</sup> Doyle, *Sign of Four* (1890) (New York: Harper Brothers Publishers, 1901), 149.

<sup>34</sup> W.H. Miller, "The Habit of Sherlock Holmes," *Trans Coll Physicians Phila*, Series IV. 45 (1978), 252; G.F. McCleary, "Was Sherlock Holmes a Drug Addict?" *Lancet* 2 (1936), 1555.

<sup>35</sup> Doyle, *A Scandal in Bohemia*, (1892) (Ediciones Mr. Clip, 2015), 5.

<sup>36</sup> Anna Neil, "The Savage Genius of Sherlock Holmes," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 37, no. 2 (2009), 612.

contemporaries, a predilection for artificial stimulants was a trait of the degenerate. Rather than a clear antithesis of degeneracy, Holmes seems to embody particular extensions of the theories, especially those espoused by the likes of Bénédict Morel and Paul Guerrier, both French psychiatrists and scholars who assumed a link between genius and illness.<sup>37</sup> At the time of Gillette's premiere, Guerrier was applying these theories to the work of De Quincey, later publishing his findings in *Etude medico-psychologique sur Thomas De Quincey* (1907).

Diana Barsham adds that Holmes was a restorative for an estranged masculinity that, like Nordau's degeneracy and Beard's neurasthenia, plagued the civilized nations. However, addiction was decidedly feminine in the Victorian mind.<sup>38</sup> Dependence on narcotics was a sign of a weak will and the potential for hysteria. The use of the hypodermic, specifically, activated analogies of phallic penetration. These numerous contradiction jeopardize Holmes's status as an antidote for moral decay and as a masculine corrective. Thus, accounting for Holmes's addiction to a chemical stimulant is challenging, especially in terms of Gillette's 1899 play that exacerbates the importance of his drug use in its narrative.

Christopher Keep and Don Randall have argued that Holmes's injections are analogous to the struggle of the British Empire with its foreign colonies, specifically regarding the Indian Mutiny of 1857. The narcotic substance, as a product of the Orient, threatens the health of the individual body and of the empire. Chronologically these arguments seem misleading, as Doyle was writing popular literature thirty years after this

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<sup>37</sup> Julian North, *De Quincey Reviewed: Thomas De Quincey's Critical Reception, 1921-1994* (Columbia: Camden House, 1997), 59.

<sup>38</sup> Arguments regarding the feminization of addiction in popular literature can be found in: Stephen Kandall, *Substance and Shadow: Women and Addiction in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

conflict, but these explanations are especially ineffective in the context of Gillette's play. Keep and Randall are referring specifically to the story *The Sign of Four*, which differs distinctly from the dramatic adaptation.<sup>39</sup> And though the U.S. began its first experiments with colonialism in the Philippines around the time the play premiered, the country's audiences would hardly have made the connection.

Alternatively, Barsham envisions Holmes's struggle with addiction as an internalizing of the opposition between himself and his criminal opponent.<sup>40</sup> This struggle with the self is perhaps then reified in Holmes's dealings with Professor Moriarty who is posed as the criminal antipode to the detective. This explanation effectively recognizes Holmes's addiction as a conflicted interiority, but it defines his drug use as necessarily deviant and symptomatic of innate criminality. In 1890, cocaine (Holmes's drug of choice) was a celebrated cure-all and only beginning to warrant concern from physicians such as Doyle. It was not until the 1910s that there was a major push to curtail cocaine distribution amongst the general populace in the U.S. Not only that, but Holmes's use of a syringe to administer the drug was cutting-edge.

Alvin Rodin and Jack Keys report that significant medical publications regarding subcutaneous cocaine injection did not appear until 1891, a year after Doyle published *The Sign of Four*.<sup>41</sup> Thus, Doyle was using his inside knowledge as a physician to give Holmes what seemed like an eccentric and almost futuristic vice, one connected to the detective's special knowledge of chemicals, anatomy, and the sciences. Doyle would have been aware

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<sup>39</sup> Christopher Keep and Don Randall, "Addiction, Empire, and Narrative in Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Sign of Four," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 32, no. 2 (Spring, 1999): 207-221.

<sup>40</sup> Barsham, 106.

<sup>41</sup> Alvin E. Rodin and Jack D. Keys, *Medical Casebook of Doctor Arthur Conan Doyle: From Practitioner to Sherlock Holmes and Beyond* (Malabar: Robert E. Krieger Publishing, 1984), 257.

that the predominant characteristic of addiction for members of the middle and upper class at the time was secrecy. Those cases that were reported (typically involving morphine) often highlighted that husbands could go years without knowing of their wives' drug use and vice versa. The surprise in Holmes's case is that he uses drugs openly, rejecting any attempts to attach shame to the practice. It is the kind of counter reasoning and dismissal of what he deemed irrational social etiquette that made Holmes famous as a brilliant iconoclast.

Thus, similar to De Quincey, Holmes's drug use is not originally presented as a sign of wickedness. Watson expresses deep concern over his friends drug use, but it is in terms of mental and physical debilitation, not moral lapse. Cocaine was a serious medication that was used to anaesthetize patients before surgery, cure morphine addicts, and treat depression. Its distribution needed to be regulated, but as a toxin, not as a serum that caused criminal behavior (which was a later claim). Holmes's use was that of an aristocrat with a sensitive psyche and physiology rather than a criminal seeking cheap pleasure. As we will see, Holmes's drug use in Gillette's play is best understood as the result of a contradictory existential drive.

Gillette's script lists himself and Doyle as co-authors, but newspapers report that Doyle had relinquished total control to the star actor. In fact, Doyle thought himself done with Holmes and it was only after great demand that he returned to writing the mysteries in 1903. Gillette had been the recommendation of Charles Frohman to play Holmes after both Herbert Beerbohm Tree and Henry Irving had turned down the role. Gillette had authored scripts before and he began writing the adaptation while on tour of his play *Secret Service*, famously losing the first draft in a hotel fire. His plot uses elements from *The*

*Study in Scarlet*, *The Sign of Four*, and *A Scandal in Bohemia* along with a number of points of his own invention. The resultant play, entitled simply *Sherlock Holmes*, involves Holmes tracking down a parcel of letters that is being used to blackmail an unnamed member of a royal family. The letters contain evidence of a love affair between a prince and a young woman who has recently died. Key characters are Alice Faulkner, who is the sister of the deceased girl, and Professor Moriarty who also seeks the letters and attempts to orchestrate Holmes's murder along the way.<sup>42</sup>

The play, which debuted in Buffalo and quickly moved to New York's Garrick Theatre, came to define Gillette's career. He became the embodiment of the detective, playing the part more than 1,300 times in the U.S. and internationally. He continued to perform the play into his seventies. The *Hartford Courant* reports in 1930 that Gillette is Holmes "incarnadine [*sic*]," his characterization as definitive as Joseph Jefferson's was of Rip Van Winkle, and that illustrators who want to draw an image of Sherlock simply touch-up a portrait of Gillette.<sup>43</sup> In the initial reception of the play, reviewers praise Gillette's humor, manliness, nobility, and his capacity to please all class of audience member.<sup>44</sup> Commentators especially celebrate the play for its technical advancements, often discussing Gillette's stagecraft in reviews. It was said that he introduced the practice of darkening the auditorium completely, raising the curtain, and bringing the lights up to a scene *in media res*. The execution of Holmes's many subterfuges also required special effects such as a custom-made breakable lamp and a glowing cigar that floats in the

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<sup>42</sup> A 1916 silent film starring Gillette as Sherlock was recently rediscovered in a Dutch archive. John Barrymore also starred in a 1922 film that bases its script off of Gillette's.

<sup>43</sup> "Mr. Gillette's Return," *Hartford Courant*, Feb. 9, 1930.

<sup>44</sup> J. Brooks Atkinson, "Gillette, 74, Again is Sherlock Holmes," *New York Times*, Nov. 26, 1929; "Dramatic and Musical," *New York Times*, Nov. 7 1899; "Entertainments," *Hartford Courant*, Oct. 29 1900.

darkness.<sup>45</sup>

Gillette introduces Holmes's drug use in the second act. At home with Watson, Holmes carefully prepares a hypodermic and injects it into his wrist, one of the first demonstrations of the medical tool's use on stage. His injection is accented by music: "A weird bar or two --- keeping on a strange pulsation on one note for cocaine bus[iness]."<sup>46</sup> Gillette clearly recognized the unsettling and dramatic nature of narcotics. Watson asks whether Holmes is using cocaine or morphine in this particular instance. The exchange, which clarifies Watson's complaints, is worth quoting at length:

Holmes. Cocaine, my dear fellow. I'm back to my old love. A seven per cent solution. Would you like to try some?

Watson. (emphatically -- rise). Certainly *not*.

Holmes. (As if surprised) Oh! I'm sorry!

Watson. I have no wish to break *my* system down before its time.

Holmes. Quite right, my dear Watson --- quite right --- but, you see, my time has come. (Goes to the mantel and replaces case thereon. Throws himself languidly into chesterfield and leans back in luxurious enjoyment of the drug.)

Watson. Holmes, for months I have seen you using these deadly drugs --- in ever-increasing doses. When they lay hold of you there is no end. It must go on, and on -- until the finish.

Holmes. (Lying back dreamily) So must you go on and on eating your breakfast --- until the finish.

Watson. (approaching Holmes) Breakfast is food. These drugs are poisons --- slow but certain. They involve tissue changes of a most *serious* nature.

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<sup>45</sup> Though discussed in numerous articles, these stage-effects are described in detail in "Detectives on Stage," *Washington Post*, Nov. 25, 1900.

<sup>46</sup> William Gillette and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *Sherlock Holmes: A Drama in Four Acts* (London and New York: Samuel French, 1922), 54.

Holmes. Just what I want. I'm bored to death with my present tissues, and I'm trying to get a brand new lot.

Watson. (Going near Holmes --- putting hands on Holmes' shoulder) Ah, Holmes --- I'm trying to save you.

Holmes. (earnest at once --- place right hand on Watson's arm) You can't do it, old fellow --- so don't waste your time.<sup>47</sup>

A booklet from 1900 that relates the play's narrative in fourteen images contains a full-page rendering of Holmes injecting himself as Watson looks on with a grimace.<sup>48</sup> As this implies, the moment is not insignificant to the plot. It is especially important in communicating Sherlock's outlook on life. The scene makes clear that Holmes is aware that his drug use will eventually kill him. He meets this fact by revealing a zeal for his own death. This drive is as much ingrained in his nature as the need to eat breakfast and its conclusion no more consequential to him than the end of the meal. Drugs become a way to tempt that end. They provide a momentary and metaphoric experience of death, a euphoria that borders on complete evaporation of body and self.

**[Fig. 17, William Gillette as Holmes with syringe.]**

The only proxy Holmes finds for narcotic enjoyment is the stimulation he experiences during one of his investigations. Excited by the Faulkner mystery, Sherlock explains to Watson, "It saves me any number of doses of those deadly drugs upon which you occasionally favour me with your medical views! My whole life is spent in a series of frantic endeavours to escape from the dreary commonplaces of existence! For a brief

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 54-55.

<sup>48</sup> *William Gillette as Sherlock Holmes* (New York: R.H. Russell, 1900). The 8"x10" booklet was printed with the authorization of Charles Frohman, the play's producer. It is worth noting that Gillette portrayed Holmes's drug use in a second piece as well. In 1905 he wrote and performed a comic curtain raiser entitled *The Painful Predicament of Sherlock Holmes*, in which Gillette ends the five-minute piece with an injection of cocaine. The bit signals the centrality of drug use to Gillette's interpretation of the character.

period I escape! You should congratulate me!"<sup>49</sup> Unlike De Quincey, Baudelaire, and Harold Wynn, Holmes has no interest in paradisaal flight, oneiric inspiration, or the experience of celestial harmony. Rather, he seeks full activation of his mental capacities. However, as in all examples offered throughout this chapter, there is a dichotomous experience embodied in the search for heightened existence. At the same time as his investigations drive him toward a state of sublime cognition, they invoke the possibility of death. Holmes admits that the Faulkner mystery will likely end in his death. In response, he muses:

Holmes. Oh well! What does it matter? Life is a small affair at the most---a little while---a few sunrises and sunsets---the warm breath of a few summers---the cold chill of a few winters--

Watson. And then---?

Holmes. And then.<sup>50</sup>

His patent acceptance evinces a poetic morbidity, which contains inklings of Hamlet (which incidentally was Gillette's follow-up role after the premiere of Holmes). When not in the throws of discovery, Holmes's drug use enacts an identical set of criteria: the moment of injection is a conflation of his dichotomous urges for stimulation and annihilation. Behind this morbidity is Holmes's desire for total detachment from the world. He disdains the corporeal, the bureaucratic, and the unrestrained machinations of the rank and file. These make up the mire he so dearly wants to escape. His addiction, like his work, is physically degrading, but it serves (perhaps paradoxically) to elevate him above the normality he dreads.

Aside from Holmes's battle with Moriarty, Gillette's play dramatizes a love affair

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<sup>49</sup> Gillette, 56.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 113-4.

between Holmes and Alice Faulkner. In *Scandal in Bohemia*, Doyle makes Faulkner a con artist who blackmails a prince with whom she had an affair. Faulkner then evades Holmes by assuming a disguise. Thereafter, Holmes maintains a quiet respect and infatuation with the figure he refers to simply as “the woman.” This is the extent of Holmes’s interest, as Watson notes, the detective “never spoke of the softer passions, save with a gibe and a sneer.”<sup>51</sup> Gillette’s most significant break from the original stories is that he has Holmes fall in love with Faulkner and vice versa. In order to make her a suitable love interest for his hero, Gillette portrays Faulkner as innocent of anything illicit by introducing the deceased sister. Faulkner now appears as a mournful young girl who justifiably wants to avenge the ill treatment her sister received at the hands of her royal lover.

Gillette’s insertion of a romance for Holmes is an unsurprising symptom of the melodramatic form, yet it provoked most of the complaints against the play. The *Washington Post* reviewer notes “Passion is rather an unexplored field for Mr. Holmes, and it is queer sensation to hear this cocaine-soaked, hard, cold, reasoning, and self-possessed man make love to a pretty girl.”<sup>52</sup> The only solace that reviewers found is that the relationship is not brought to fruition. Though the play ends with Holmes and Faulkner in embrace, the script makes it clear that they cannot be together.

Holmes’s refusal to act on his love for Faulkner is directly related to his drug use. He is forthright in admitting his passion, but when Watson brings up the possibility of a life together, Holmes insists: “You mustn’t tempt me --- with such a thought. That girl! ---

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<sup>51</sup> Doyle, *Scandal in Bohemia*, 5.

<sup>52</sup> “William Gillette in *Sherlock Holmes* at the New National,” *The Washington Post*, Nov. 20, 1900. Other articles to chastise Gillette for his inclusion of a love story include “Music and Drama,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Dec. 5, 1900; and “Mr. Gillette in London,” *London Times*, Sep. 22, 1901.

young--- exquisite --- just beginning her sweet life --- I--- seared, drugged, poisoned, almost at an end! No! no! I must cure her! I must stop it, now --- while there's time!"<sup>53</sup> Though the word "addiction" is never used, the terms "seared," "drugged," and "poisoned" all refer to his irreparable dependence on narcotics. Holmes's admission demonstrates his awareness that he is unable to cease his self-destructive actions. It is not simply his choice to partake; rather, he has been habituated.

When Holmes learns that Moriarty has burned down the Baker Street flat and that he has lost everything, he celebrates: "I'm so glad of it! *I've had enough.*"<sup>54</sup> Faulkner becomes the final string he must cut with the material world. There is something bohemian in this element of Holmes's personality. Similar to Berridge's earlier observations, Petra Pointner demonstrates how Decadent writers like Symons and Dowson desired to "remain uncontaminated by the vulgarity, triviality and leveling materialism of worldly society."<sup>55</sup> Like Holmes, Symons sought distance from the mundane, but his methods took on more the semblance of slumming. Symons recorded his late night jaunts through the streets of London and visitations with prostitutes for the sake of shocking his reader. He and Baudelaire were both intrigued by the possibility of complete submission to desire as a move away from material concerns. Holmes, on the other hand, seeks to rid himself of all sensuality for the sake of cerebral ascendance. Once freed of any and all temporal burdens, Holmes can function completely unencumbered. He can face the ultimate stimulation liberated from concern over his survival.

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<sup>53</sup> Gillette, 114.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>55</sup> Pointner, 112.

We can view Holmes's obsession with death as it corresponds to Walter Benjamin's notion of suicide as modern man's greatest act of resistance. According to Benjamin, self-murder is an "act which seals a heroic will that makes no concession to a mentality inimical toward this will. Suicide is not resignation but heroic passion. It is *the* achievement of modernity in the realm of passions."<sup>56</sup> For Holmes, as for Benjamin's modern hero, acquiescence to death becomes the ultimate iconoclastic expression of individuality. It is a rebellion in the spirit of the Nietzschean superman who rejects the dominant social order for the sake of reaching his potential. Embracing death, whether in its fully realized form or in the symbolic form of drug use, becomes an act of resistance against the repressive irrationality and inimical mentality of modern society.

Gillette performed Sherlock into the 1930s. Holmes's famous injection may be the most traveled and well known in the first half of the twentieth century. As time went on, perception of cocaine shifted and the drug was considered a corrupting agent related to vice and crime. However, later reviews of Gillette's performances in the U.S. do not register this change. It seems a well-established assumption that Holmes's extraordinary nature and superiority comes with necessary weaknesses and idiosyncrasies.<sup>57</sup>

## **VAMPIRIC INSPIRATION OF THE SACRED AND PROFANE**

Arnold Bennett's 1920 adaptation of his novel, *The Book of Carlotta*, begins with a famous pianist seducing a young woman who seems quite willing to submit. Of the pianist, Emilio

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<sup>56</sup> Gillette, 104.

<sup>57</sup> Basil Rathbone's performance as Holmes in the film *The Hounds of the Baskerville* (1939) was edited by censors, excising his reference to his syringe ("Oh, Watson, the needle!"). The line was restored in the 1975 rerelease. The recent series starring Benedict Cumberbatch as Holmes has made his drug addiction a significant plot point.

Diaz, the first act reveals that he is perhaps the greatest living interpreter of Chopin, that he feels trapped by his lonely existence on tour, and that he occasionally takes morphine to quell the pain that remains from a past illness. Of the maiden, Carlotta, audiences learn only that she is a passionate girl of twenty-one, an orphan who lives with her aunt, and that she has promise as a writer. At this early point, Bennett makes clear that much in life is not what it seems. When Carlotta cuts into a piece of cake that has been left for Diaz's supper, she realizes with a shock that "Why it's only jam roly-poly with sugar on it!"<sup>58</sup> Roly-poly was a cheap dessert favored by school children that could be made on the quick. The realization that what lies beneath is deceptive and perhaps even corrupted is a theme that runs throughout *Sacred and Profane Love*, revealing itself in numerous metaphors similar to this culinary one.

The second act begins seven years later and finds Carlotta living in London as a successful novelist. She learns that Diaz has fallen from favor and become a hopeless morphine addict, living in a furnished flat on "a dubious street in Paris."<sup>59</sup> She drops everything and tracks him down, finding him destitute and raving. After he accidentally tries to shoot her in his mania, she pledges her life to him. Nearly a year later, Diaz is cured and on the verge of a comeback, which he solidifies with a triumphant first concert. In the final scene, it seems as if he is going to leave Carlotta, forsaking the sacrifices she has made for him. However, he returns at the final moment to pledge his love and ask for her hand.

*Sacred and Profane Love* opened in London in 1919 to lackluster reviews. The plot seemed tepid and contrived to most critics. However, David Belasco decided to bring the

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<sup>58</sup> Arnold Bennett, *Sacred and Profane Love* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1919), 44.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

work to New York. For the part of Carlotta, he was able to secure Elsie Ferguson, who had been a major draw in the past, but had left the stage for film. Interestingly, her previous stage success had been in Hubert Henry Davies's *Outcast* (1914), in which she played a low-class girl who reforms her aristocrat lover of his drug addiction. That play was a commentary on love across class divisions. In Bennett's play she essentially revitalized her role, except that Carlotta is a more refined character, exploiting Ferguson's celebrated mix of lady-like polish and girlish beauty.

Reception in the U.S. was similar to that in Britain. The greatest acclaim went to Jose Rubén as Diaz, who received high marks for his "forceful, distinguished and flawless performance as the morphine addict."<sup>60</sup> It was his ability to depict the "tortured nerves, and degraded body" of the addict in the throes of his cravings that pleased audiences both in New York and on tour.<sup>61</sup> Significantly, *The New York Times* review notes that Rubén's performance was similar to the one he gave in his celebrated appearance as Oswald in Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* three years earlier. The reviewer notes that Rubén plays the part of the addict "much as you think he would if you saw his Oswald."<sup>62</sup> Among other things, this points to the "line of business" that the neurasthenic young man continued to represent well into the twentieth century. Earlier versions included not only Oswald, but a number of important Russian precursors including Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov and Tsar Fyodor Ioannovich from Tolstoy's history play. The comparison of Rubén's two performances signal the correspondence between the portrayal of addiction and that of the neurasthenic

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<sup>60</sup> "Elsie Ferguson Returns," *New York Times*, Feb. 24, 1920.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*; and, Patterson James, "Sacred and Profane Love," *The Billboard*, Mar. 27, 1920.

<sup>62</sup> Rubén's performance as Oswald is highlighted in the original review of the Ibsen revival: "Satisfying Revival of Ibsen's *Ghosts*," *New York Times*, May 8, 1917.

in his lassitude, fragility, and hysteria. The two characters seemed to grow from the same repertoire of gesture, expression, and physicality.

The close attention to Rubén's performance was due to the fact that he provides the central interest of the play. At the heart of *Sacred and Profane Love*, is an exploration of the creative impulse and its potential dangers. As *The Sun and New York Herald* review notes, "The artistic temperament was, perhaps, the dominating theme of this latest drama, and maybe for that reason the profane seemed to predominate over the sacred when it came to loving."<sup>63</sup> Diaz's ability to create is dependent on the strength he receives from others in the form of adoration and sacrifice. Through their adulation, he is able to siphon their life force. his relationship with Carlotta is parasitic from its beginning. Playing for her in the first scene, Diaz is stunned by the way his music affects the young girl. She is so moved that she begs him to stop and offers herself as a receptive "vase" for his art. At the height of this sexually charged exchange, Diaz expresses his desire to consummate her passion:

Diaz: Listen! I will tell you something mysterious and inexplicable. The most beautiful things and the most vital things and the most lasting things - come suddenly.

Carlotta: I am helpless.

Diaz: You! With your character! It is your strength that I have envied . . . .

Give it to me.<sup>64</sup>

The sexual act in which they then engage, the de-flowering of Carlotta, is preemptively defined by Diaz's request as a transfer of strength. This sets the dynamics of their

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<sup>63</sup> "Miss Ferguson Appealing in Arnold Bennett Play," *The Sun and New York Herald*, Sep. 24, 1920.

<sup>64</sup> Bennett, *Sacred and Profane Love*, 49.

relationship for the rest of the play. However, Diaz cannot enact this transfer until many years later, as Carlotta flees the home at dawn. The immediate result of their lovemaking is that Carlotta is released from her girlhood. The next scene finds her seven years later having become one of England's finest female novelists. She herself contends that it was Diaz who set her free; it was by him that she was "transformed into a woman."<sup>65</sup> However, Carlotta eventually pays dearly for the freedom she receives as the "vase" for Diaz's passion.

In the seven years that Carlotta matured as an artist, Diaz has fallen into complete debasement. His addiction is the result of his vampiric nature. His reliance on morphine represents a turning inward of the destructive tendency of the artist. Feeding off himself, or off the artificial stimulant of morphine has little yield save for his own disintegration. He cannot sustain himself without another life providing him with sustenance. Like some of the earlier representations of artists who use narcotics for inspiration (as in *The Devil's Needle* (1915)), art produced under the influence suffers. This trope betrays a clear bias against inauthentic states of alterity in the artistic process, a rejection of De Quincean and Baudelairean traditions of narcotic inspiration. As Derrida argues, drugs generate "a pleasure taken in an experience without truth."<sup>66</sup> When Carlotta chooses to stand between Diaz and the object of his addiction, she inadvertently becomes the fuel for his vampiric need. Her love is an authentic source of inspiration. As she says, "You've always lived alone. It has been morphine or nothing. But I am here now, I am the alternative. I will be your

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>66</sup> Derrida, "The Rhetoric of Drugs," 236.

morphine.”<sup>67</sup> She steps in as the substance that gives him strength, but unlike morphine, which exchanges euphoria for the addict’s vitality, Diaz can sap Carlotta of her spirit without suffering physical or spiritual impost. The exchange begins almost immediately and as the two are fleeing Diaz’s decrepit flat, Carlotta suddenly notes, “Oh, I feel so weak!” to which Diaz responds, “You’re giving your strength to me.”<sup>68</sup>

Bennett does not dramatize the struggle to free Diaz of his addiction, though there are hints of the “terror,” “vileness,” and “humiliations” that Carlotta suffers while trying to cure him.<sup>69</sup> What is clear is that in the year that it has taken to rebuild Diaz’s strength, Carlotta has ceased to write, has lost any inspiration, is deeply exhausted, and is nearly financially destitute. In this way the play is an inversion of the Svengali-Trilby trope from George du Maurier’s original novel and the wildly popular stage play from the period. Diaz is a Svengali-like mesmerist, but instead of granting Carlotta artistic ability as his Trilby, he empowers himself as a musician. Bennett is working from a long tradition in which music incites an inspired state and the musician serves as a conduit for that inspiration. However, Diaz’s exploitation of Carlotta eventually translates into his attempt to destroy her. In the final moment before Diaz leaves for his first concert, he requests that she not join him. The request seems a final and ultimate attempt at enervating his victim. Diaz effectively robs Carlotta of any fruits of her labor, keeping her from both his art and the public recognition of her importance as the architect of his rebirth. Carlotta lets him go, and though he returns in triumph, he then moves to leave her again in order to savor his success amongst high-

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<sup>67</sup> Bennett, *Sacred and Profane Love*, 130.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>69</sup> Diaz’s recovery is detailed in a conversation between Carlotta and the character, Rosalie. *Ibid.*, 161.

society. Even then Carlotta is powerless to stop him. "You're a g-g-great artist - again. And - g-g-great artists must not apologize. Don't you remember I said to you - that night - that artists like you were autocrats."<sup>70</sup> Her earlier reference to Diaz as an "autocrat" came at their first meeting and it indicates the tyrannical nature of his talents to reduce the autonomy of those who experience his art, again an adaptation of the Svengali narrative.

The play features a number of other romantic couples that each embodies some form of "sacred" or "profane" love. What becomes clear is that it is the fantasy that characters maintain of their lover that defines the kind of love they have. None of the relationships is balanced; each requires the sacrifice or corruption of one of the partners for the sake of the other. As Carlotta admits to her publisher regarding love, "I am one of those who believes that the illusion is worth it and that it's divine."<sup>71</sup> In part, this belief permits Diaz to wield such power over her. Her illusion of their love enables his untrammelled attenuation of her strength. The end of the play seems at first to break this cycle of illusion and abuse. At the last moment, Diaz returns and pledges his love. This is a departure from the original novel, in which Diaz leaves the country without Carlotta, asking that she follow him at a later date. However, in the novel, Carlotta suddenly dies of appendicitis. The book closes with her obituary that significantly does not list Diaz as one of the mourners present at her funeral.<sup>72</sup> His full return to power concludes with her total obliteration.

Numerous reviews comment on how disappointing it was that Bennett changed the

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<sup>70</sup>Ibid., 177

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>72</sup> Arnold Bennett, *The Book of Carlotta* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1911), 294.

conclusion for the sake of the medium. *The New York Times* fittingly referred to the new plot point as a “revenue stamp” to end the play.<sup>73</sup> However, the script ends with a telling moment. Diaz returns and declares, “You see this man and this artist standing in front of you, . . . you created him. He’s all yours.” He embraces Carlotta and, held in his arms, she closes the drama uttering: “He doesn’t know his strength. (*lightly*) He’s hurting my wrists dreadfully.”<sup>74</sup> The line of dialogue infers the continuity of Diaz’s destructive appetite. He will proceed to feed off of Carlotta, sapping her life force for the sake of his vampiric nature. Carlotta’s final line infantilizes the artist, solidifying her in the position of a mother suckling a child with an inexhaustible appetite. The play presents artistic creation as deeply tied to concepts of addiction, in which dependence shifts from one substance to another. The artist-muse relationship parallels that of the addict and his drug.

The expression of Diaz’s artistic vampirism reflects a long history of associations between drug addiction and the living dead. Addiction was imagined as a state of incipient death, and literary metaphors engage the language of death in expressing the pains of dependence. Already mentioned in this study are Peter Clarke MacFarlane’s *Those Who Have Come Back* (1914) and Winifred Black’s *Dope: The Story of the Living Dead* (1928). The film *Bowery at Midnight* (1948) literalizes these death-obsessed interpretations, portraying the capacity to bring the dead to life through chemical embrocation. Popular imagery often used a hooded grim reaper to represent addiction, narcotics, or the drug pusher. The redemption of the addict, returning to the side of the living was nearly inconceivable. Diaz’s salvation is one of only a few examples in which the possibility of a cure appears in a

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<sup>73</sup> “Elsie Ferguson Returns.”

<sup>74</sup> Bennett, *Sacred and Profane Love*, 179-180.

dramatic portrayal.

In forming his narrative, Bennett sought particular refinement and social penetration. Prior to becoming a novelist, Bennett spent several years as a drama critic in London. When he began writing plays, he took the opportunity to write a critical theory regarding modern theatre-making. He published this essay, entitled “The Crisis in the Theatre,” as the preface to his play *Cupid and Commonsense* (1910). The essay essentially argues that George Bernard Shaw is evidence of the “racial impulse toward fresh artistic expression by means of the drama” in England.<sup>75</sup> *Sacred and Profane Love* contains some Shavian elements. There is something of *Candida* in *Carlotta*: a woman sacrifices for a man and acts as the source of his success. However, Bennett is far more morbid in his work than Shaw was known for, writing about drug addiction and depicting scenes of Diaz’s ravings. These are features seemingly too fleshly for Shaw to stage in such a direct way.

Considering Bennett’s employment of addiction and the popular associations it had with the living dead, it might be more appropriate to investigate August Strindberg as a theatrical predecessor. Vampirism is a consistent theme throughout his works and an essential element in his personal philosophy. Strindberg allowed his own self-destructive and manic temperament to feed his artistic output. His concept of “psychic murder” involved the siphoning of another’s life as a form of sustenance. Many of his most famous characters feed off of each other’s misery, a heightened version of how Strindberg envisioned real-life relationships. The Captain and his wife in *Dance of Death* (1900) are primary examples of this as they thrive off the destruction of the people around them. In

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<sup>75</sup> Arnold Bennett, *Cupid and Commonsense* (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 1910), 31.

fact, Strindberg considered calling the play “Vampires.”<sup>76</sup> For these characters, torturing each other is a path to feeling alive. Strindberg intensifies this motif with characters such as Hummel in *The Ghost Sonata*. A creditor, Hummel is an immortal vampire who eats up secrets, miseries, and pasts. It is important to clarify that Strindberg saw psychic vampirism as a basic human trait, present in every relationship.

Regardless, the repetition of these themes and characters evinces the broad application of addiction as a central metaphor in modernist works of art. In each, the individual is incapable of self-sustenance and, at the same time, yoked with an unquenchable craving. Satisfaction is limited to a momentary, isolated, and inauthentic experience of becoming - the oppression of another person, the shot of morphine. As this experience is impossible to maintain or extend, the formation of self becomes a process of repetitive consumption. Bennett’s play uses the trope of addiction to manifest this consumption as a psychic impulse within the artist to destroy in the act of creation.

### **“BRIGHT YOUNG THINGS” AND *THE VORTEX* OF POST-WAR DECADENCE**

Noël Coward was able to fund the 1924 premiere of *The Vortex* only through a loan from his friend, the author Michael Arlen. Earlier productions by Coward had garnered only meager success, but this show at London’s Everyman Theatre was to mark a new phase in his career. The play found favor with both critics and audiences, transferring to the West End’s Royal Theatre within the year and becoming especially popular with the young and posh. As he had done in earlier works, Coward wrote *The Vortex* with himself in mind, and was able to solidify his standing as both playwright and actor in a single production. In

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<sup>76</sup> Henrik Ibsen too explored the theme of vampirism in his *When We Dead Awaken* and *Little Eyolf*.

rapid succession three more of Coward's plays (*Fallen Angels*, *Hay Fever* and *On With the Dance*) also premiered in the West End, running simultaneously. Coward was soon on his way to New York to perform *The Vortex* at Henry Miller's Theatre on Broadway. The three other plays followed suit almost immediately.<sup>77</sup> Within two years, Coward was an international celebrity at the age of twenty-six.

*The Vortex* introduced Coward's signature style of sharp, biting humor, delivered by well-heeled and beautiful people in sumptuous drawing rooms. He seemingly invented a new form of suavity, with hints of Shaw and Wilde that the youth of both the U.K. and U.S. quickly sought to mimic. The play showcases Coward's capacity to celebrate frivolity, while exploring human emotions and even the tragic in life. The "vortex" of the play's title refers to what the *Chicago Tribune* called the "aimless, empty, insincere life of London society."<sup>78</sup> Simultaneously glorifying and lambasting the elite, the play is foremost a commentary on the spiritual vapidness of the post-war generation, especially the sect of party-going youth known as the "Bright Young Things." Through the play, Coward expresses the emotional, psychological, and spiritual ache with which some of these "society" youth were living.

Coward played Nicky, a neurasthenic young pianist who returns to his upscale London home after a year in Paris studying music. He brings in tow his fiancée, Bunty Mainwaring, whom he wants to introduce to his parents. Nicky's mother is a beautiful socialite named Florence who is clinging to her youth and desirability. She is desperately determined to remain a source of enchantment to the young men with whom she carries on affairs. Nicky's father is kind, though quiet, and chooses to remain distant from his

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<sup>77</sup> Coward was eventually replaced in the U.S. production of *The Vortex* so he could oversee the other productions opening on Broadway. His understudy was the young John Gielgud.

<sup>78</sup> "The Vortex," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Feb. 23, 1926.

fashionable family members and ignore his wife's extra-marital activities. At the time of Nicky's return, the object of Florence affection is the strapping Tom Veryan, who is no older than her son. More than Florence's actual adultery, it is her incessant need for attention and her indifference towards her son that drives the drama.

The overall action of the play is slight. Nicky and Bunty call off their engagement when they come to terms with the fact that there is little passion between them. Bunty absconds with Tom, her former lover, causing Florence to fly into a fury. Nicky reveals that he is deeply unhappy and has begun using cocaine. The real drama of the piece erupts in the final act; the *Washington Post* noted, "The end is the play."<sup>79</sup> The evening that Bunty and Tom run off, Nicky confronts his mother in her bedroom in a scene widely compared to the closet scene from *Hamlet*. She admits to her many lovers and he to his drug addiction. They recognize that they are both leading vacuous existences. The scene concludes after much hysterics with Nicky sweeping Florence's makeup (the symbol of her addiction to youth and beauty) off of the vanity table and demanding she take up her proper position as his mother. Similarly, Florence throws away the golden case that holds Nicky's cocaine and demands that he stop his drug abuse. The final tableau has them in the wreckage of their misery: Florence stroking the hair of her grown child as he is pathetically curled at her feet. Audiences are left to wonder if the two can provide each other with the strength to reform.

Coward never shows Nicky's drug use on stage, signifying it only by the mysterious golden case that he carries. Cocaine addiction as an actual social evil is not the play's concern. This helped avoid the ire of censors, as too realistic a portrayal would have met with claims that the play was teaching vice; this was a complaint levied at works such as

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<sup>79</sup> "English Play in American Debut at the National," *The Washington Post*, Sep. 8, 1925.

*Human Wreckage* (1923), which was banned in the U.K. Coward had to personally persuade the Lord Chamberlain that the play offered a wholesome message regarding a moral struggle with drug abuse in order to get the work sanctioned. However, there is something intentional in the way that Coward relegates Nicky's cocaine use to a thing lurking in the recesses of the drama. The ambiguity with which Coward portrays Nicky's addiction leaves it cloaked, thus allowing it to take on other shapes. In essence, Coward's opacity and avoidance of what should be a central element, invites interpretation.

A *New York Times* review of the play described the characters who populate Florence's London flat as a "a group of languid, bored, selfish people, stifling in their various affectations."<sup>80</sup> The plot of *The Vortex* essentially involves one drunken social event after another in either the flat or the family's country home. These parties involve dancing to jazz, inane conversation, and trifling arguments. Coward captures an echelon of English society that was more and more identified as a troubling sign of the times. Many accused these thrill seekers of decadence and associated them with the degeneracy of earlier bohemians. The fact that Florence and her older contemporaries were partaking in the same behavior was a sign that the intemperance of the age had spread too far.

Thomas Linehan describes the "Bright Young Things" as embracing a "spirit of gay abandon, lust for entertainment and questioning of established moral and sexual conventions."<sup>81</sup> On both sides of the Atlantic, flappers and their male equivalents ushered in an age of rebellious hedonism and self-expression that, according to Linehan, embodied

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<sup>80</sup> "In Theatre Idiom," *New York Times*, Sep. 27, 1925.

<sup>81</sup> Thomas Linehan, "A Host of 'Decadent' Phenomena," *Fascism: Critical Concepts in Political Science*, eds. Roger Griffin with Matthew Feldman (London: Routledge, 2004): 335.

“a cathartic desire to expunge the memory of the Great War.”<sup>82</sup> The post-war generation came of age during the most devastating military conflict in history. Their childhood and adolescence was shaped by a mechanized war that applied modernity’s greatest advancements to the decimation of its youth.<sup>83</sup> In Coward’s estimation, the trauma of the war persisted, veiled beneath this “spirit of gay abandon.” Investigating this conflict, Coward reveals what Christopher Ames calls the “deadly stasis behind apparently constant activity, ennui behind chipper amusement, and sordid death behind lighthearted gaiety” that defined the era.<sup>84</sup> The endless chattering, carousing, and cigarette smoking in the play is merely a smokescreen for the corruption of sacred social standards. This crumbling of theoretically incontrovertible mores is embodied not only in Nicky’s drug use, but in his sexual competition with his own mother as he loses his fiancée to her boyfriend.

However, it is Nicky’s stunted emotional growth and his deep-seated depression that most poignantly embodies the “deadly stasis” that Ames identifies. Raised within this corrupt environment, Nicky is incapable of experiencing genuine emotion; he is neurotic in his superficiality; and he attempts to camouflage his pain with frivolity and wit. Coward posits that it is Florence’s failure to offer her son a solid moral foundation that is responsible for his pain. In the final confrontation between Nicky and Florence, he stresses his lack of character:

Florence: You’re not a boy any longer - you’re a man - and --

Nicky: I’m nothing - I’ve grown up all wrong.

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> It is a theme that Coward revisits in his 1933 work *Post Mortem* about the war’s drastic effect on a soldier and his growing disillusionment.

<sup>84</sup> Christopher Ames, *The Life of the Party: Festive Vision in Modern Fiction* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 177.

Florence: It's not my fault.

Nicky: Of course it's your fault, mother - who else's fault *could* it be?

Florence: Your friends - the people you mix with -

Nicky: It wouldn't matter *who* I mixed with if only I had a background.<sup>85</sup>

Nicky further accuses: "You've given me *nothing* all my life - nothing that counts," claiming that her "endless craving for admiration and flattery" has sapped the life out of both him and her husband.<sup>86</sup> As a result, Nicky is essentially incapable of happiness. When a family friend asks Nicky if he can be happy with Bunty, he responds simple "I don't suppose I shall ever be that - I haven't got the knack."<sup>87</sup> Similarly, when Florence asks if Nicky was indeed in love with his fiancée, a friend answers "As much as either you or he are capable of it."<sup>88</sup> Nicky's drug use is merely a symptom of his self-hatred and inability to recognize his own self-worth.

In the late hours after a party, Nicky interrupts a confrontation between his mother and Tom. Florence has just seen Tom and Bunty in embrace and she flies in to a jealous rage. The scene forces Nicky to come to terms with what he has long suspected about his mother and her close relationships with a line of young men. In response, he sits behind the piano and begins to play jazz. As noted in the stage directions, "Nicky never stops playing for a moment" as the argument between Tom, Bunty, and Florence builds.<sup>89</sup> John Lucas interprets Nicky's playing as signifying a sudden "crisis of self-knowledge which is meant to

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<sup>85</sup> Coward, 59.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 61-62.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>89</sup> Coward, 50-52.

intimate a wider sense of despair . . .”<sup>90</sup> The music is Nicky’s ironic way of drawing attention to his pain. He creates a meaningful juxtaposition between the disintegration of his life and the music that defined the celebratory ethos of the period. In effect, Nicky’s own depression and the collapse of his family is the result of their allegiance to all that the music represents: loose morals, the worship of youth, and sexual promiscuity. Coward signals that this turmoil is what the Jazz Age hath wrought.

Coward was not alone in expressing this conflict between the frivolity of the Jazz Age and the inner despondency of its principal bearers. Authors on both sides of the Atlantic explored the absence of emotional life of the youth of the 1920s. Evelyn Waugh satirized the “Bright Young Things” in his *Vile Bodies* (1930). In it, his protagonists Adam and Nina fail to have any interactions of substance and call off their engagement without the slightest show of emotion. Nicky and Bunty are an earlier version of Waugh’s couple, as they similarly cancel their marriage plans with little more than resigned chagrin. Coward’s end, however, is not satire. While Waugh’s Adam and Nina are cartoonishly without sentiment, Coward’s characters have deeper emotions; they merely lack the capacity to express them. Joining Waugh were fellow members of a “postwar Oxford school” of authors including Aldous Huxley, Anthony Powell, and Henry Green who all wrote novels that focused explicitly on parties and the youth who attended them. F. Scott Fitzgerald offered a similar appraisal of youth in his *The Beautiful and the Damned* (1922), expressing a morbid humor regarding the insipidness of the Roaring Twenties. Fitzgerald, like Coward, found the tragic in this state of affairs.

Coward’s play also coincides with a resurgence of interest in the Decadent writers of

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<sup>90</sup> John Lucas, *The Radical Twenties: Writing, Politics, and Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University, 1999), 131.

the 1890s in the U.S. David Weir believes that this revival begins in 1916 with the reprinting of texts by Symons, Dowson, Walter Pater, and the drawings of Aubrey Beardsley.<sup>91</sup> Weir also recognizes a number of new writers of the period who were clearly indebted to the Decadents for their style and their exploration of self-destruction as a creative endeavor. Among these are Edgar Saltus (whom Arthur Symons himself declared a Decadent), Carl Van Vechten, James Branch Cabell, and Joseph Hergesheimer.<sup>92</sup> Much as Baudelaire translated and reprinted De Quincey in the 1860s, Aleister Crowley published his own translations of Baudelaire's "The Poem of Hashish" in his occult periodical *The Equinox* in the 1910s. Berridge identifies a number of other authors and artists who were part of a 1920s café culture that "provided the starting-point for an excursion into the illicit drug world."<sup>93</sup> These include Augustus John, Jacob Epstein, Frank Harris, Lord Alfred Douglas, Iris Tree. Thus, the 1920s saw the maintenance of the links between dissipation, self-exploration, and expression. Within the context of this new, primarily upper-class interest in bohemian perversity, Hannen Swaffer knowingly called *The Vortex* "the most decadent play of our time."<sup>94</sup>

Coward's focus on drug use as an indication of the excesses of the "Bright Young Things" stemmed from cocaine's growing popularity as a source of entertainment for those seeking post-war escapism. There were a number of highly publicized deaths from overdoses by members of the smart set that inspired Coward's writing. In particular, the

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<sup>91</sup> David Weir, *Decadent Culture in the United States: Art and Literature Against the American Grain, 1890-1926* (State University of New York Press, 2008), 152-167.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 158-189. Weir suggests a number of other authors as carrying the Decadent tradition into the 1920s.

<sup>93</sup> Berridge, "The Origins of the English Drug 'Scene,' 1890-1930," 63.

<sup>94</sup> "Introduction," *Noel Coward: Plays: One*, Sheridan Morley ed. (London: Methuen, 1991), xi.

widely reported death of Billie Carleton, an English music-hall actress who died at twenty-two of a cocaine overdose the morning after attending the Victory Ball at Albert Hall. The trial following her death in 1918 exposed the party culture of which Carleton was a part. Newspapers reported on a lifestyle in which actors and artists mixed with aristocracy at drug fueled soirées and dealt intimately with Chinese dope dealers. Tabloids made much of the salacious behavior and many blamed the vogue for American culture at the time, as cocaine use was popular amongst partiers in the U.S. This transnational culture exchange defined the 1920s and can be seen in the rising popularity of Jazz music in Europe and the export of American fashion to the U.K.

Coward knew Carleton personally and was connected to her social circle. Barry Day and Philip Hoare both propose Carleton as the inspiration for *The Vortex*.<sup>95</sup> It was even reported that Carleton was found with a small golden box containing cocaine on her bedside table, a detail that Coward borrowed for his play.<sup>96</sup> In 1922, just a few years later, a young nightclub singer named Freda Kempton also died of a cocaine overdose. Though not as famous as Carleton, the ensuing trial revealed similar scandal. Most notoriously, Kempton's death was linked to a dapper Chinese restaurateur named Brilliant Chang who was dope dealer to the West End smart set. In these stories, Coward found the dark side of the era's defining essence. As Lucas notes, "In literature, if not in life, drugs were associated with decadence: they signif[ied] the arid hedonism of the Bright Young Things or the deeper decadence of society living out its final days."<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Philip Hoare, *Noël Coward: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013); "Introduction," *The Letters of Noël Coward*, ed. Barry Day (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing, 2008).

<sup>96</sup> Lucas, 116. Sax Rohmer was also inspired by the story of Billie Carleton, basing a character in his novel *Dope* on the singer.

Some scholars have chosen to interpret Nicky's character, especially as played by Coward, as a coded portrayal of homosexual desire. This is not a surprising notion as such coding is a topos throughout Coward's canon.<sup>98</sup> Alan Sinfield notes that *The Vortex* deeply embeds inferences to this, "offering innuendo that is 'almost' homosexuality."<sup>99</sup> Scholars joining Sinfield in similar observations include Joseph Morella, George Mazzei, Martin Green, and W. David Sievers. They point to a number of textual elements that could indicate Nicky's queerness, foremost being that Tom refers to Nicky as "effeminate." Scholars also note the presence of one obviously gay character, the sharp-tongued Pawnie, whom Coward describes as an "elderly maiden gentleman."<sup>100</sup> To these scholars Pawnie's presence "establishes the *possibility* of homosexuality" as one of many "overt and covert innuendos" in the play.<sup>101</sup> In support of this argument, I might note that Nicky's drug addiction could function as a stand-in for his homosexual desire. Perhaps more than any other dramatic work covered in this study, Coward's play reifies Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's claim that "Drug addiction is both a camouflage and an expression of the dynamics of same-sex desire and its prohibition."<sup>102</sup>

There is precedent for this connection within both psychoanalytic theory and

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<sup>97</sup> Lucas, 113.

<sup>98</sup> Penny Farfan asserts Coward's coding of homosexual desire in "Noël Coward and Sexual Modernism: *Private Lives* as Queer Comedy," *Modern Drama* 48, No. 4 (2005): 67-88. I might note that *Private Lives* and *The Vortex* share structural elements. In each, the denouement involves two couples swapping. In the later play, Victor and Sybil take the place of Tom and Bunty as the secondary characters that end up together.

<sup>99</sup> Alan Sinfield, "Private Lives/ Public Theater: Noël Coward and the Politics of Homosexual Representation," *Representation*, No. 36 (Autumn, 1991): 46.

<sup>100</sup> Coward, 3.

<sup>101</sup> Sinfield, 46. (Emphasis mine); Joseph Morella and George Mazzei, *Genius and Lust: The Creativity and Sexuality of Cole Porter and Noël Coward* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 1995), 75.

<sup>102</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 172.

literary history. In his limited writing on addiction, Freud linked drug dependence to a more primal addiction to masturbation and the desire to quell “abnormal” sexual desire.<sup>103</sup> The Austrian psychologist Wilhelm Stekel, writing at the same time as Coward, was more direct. He saw psychoanalysis in its essence as locating the “truth of addiction within deep subjectivity such that it inevitably calls forth homosexuality.”<sup>104</sup> Sinfield notes that Nicky’s weak father and his infatuation with his empowered mother reinforce the notion of a homosexual stereotype in psychoanalytic tradition.<sup>105</sup>

However, there is a danger in following this psychoanalytic reading of the play without reservation. The inevitable conclusion is that Coward’s play promotes a weak mother as the source of sexual difference. Such a reading leads to the inference that homosexuality is a destructive disease caused by failed upbringing. What is more appropriate is an examination of Coward’s relationship to a literary tradition that linked the discursive identities of addict and homosexual in an effort to explore alternate ways of being. The result is a more nuanced view of difference than a diagnosis of causal degeneracy.

In detailing the links between addiction and homosexuality in novels of the nineteenth century, Zieger points to vampire narratives, Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), and popular works such as E.P. Roe’s *Without a Home* (1871). Borrowing from Zieger, my study has shown that the theatre too portrayed addiction as a loss of manhood. However, Coward’s dealings with addiction

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<sup>103</sup> Loose, 30.

<sup>104</sup>Zieger, 158.

<sup>105</sup> Sinfield, 46.

relate most appropriately to Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*, a work that Zieger examines closely.

Nicky shares much with Wilde's Gray, a character that exemplifies the Decadent Movement's obsession with art and decay. Both Nicky and Gray are incapable of properly aging. Like Gray, Nicky possesses delicate sensibilities and a dangerous impulsiveness that turn toward vice involving narcotics and carry the suggestion of the carnal. Gray has his own interactions with drugs, keeping hashish paste in an exquisite lacquered box and fleeing to an opium den in order to forget his crimes. For Sedgwick, Gray enabled "mutual recognition and self constitution" for a gay community.<sup>106</sup> Building off of this, Zieger sees Dorian's queerness and his drug use as forms of "delirious submission" to desire. She interprets this theme as Wilde's commentary regarding the relationship between compulsion, disease, and those behaviors that were ambiguously labeled "unnatural" vices.<sup>107</sup>

It is in this way that I believe Coward is employing drug use. Nicky's addiction serves as a commentary on the "unnatural" compulsions of the post-war generation (both regarding intoxication and sexual activity) and the spiritual deficiency that these compulsions mask. This commentary was meant to voice concern over the malaise that existed beneath the "delirious submission" to exuberance of the "Bright Young Things" in the U.K. and their counterparts in the U.S. Coward adopts the established trope of addiction in order to express and explore in sympathetic terms, a related form of alterity. Nicky could serve to enable a "mutual recognition and self constitution" by a queer community, but he

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<sup>106</sup> Sedgwick, 173.

<sup>107</sup> Zieger, 178.

could also allow recognition for those youth who were plagued by confusion, anger, and morbidity at a time defined by ebullient release. Coward expresses the inevitable dangers of complete submission to desire as a way to counteract deep-seated angst. As this angst triumphs in the play, Coward may signal that for both the addict and the homosexual, difference inevitably leads to pain. In order to do so, he engages a convention in which non-normative identities overlap. Coward employs addiction as an effective stand-in for that which does not yet have a serviceable vocabulary, creating a metonymic correspondence between aberrant states of being.

### **LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT AND THE UNITY OF ADDICTION**

“One of the oppressive shadows of that dark night was the ever abiding consciousness that self-mastery was utterly lost.”

- William Rosser Cobbe, *Dr. Judas: A Portrayal of the Opium Habit*, 1895

In the final moments of Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, the three men of the Tyrone family sit drunkenly in their living room. It is midnight and outside a dense fog rolls off the harbor and presses against the windows, trapping the men in a setting that resembles a graveyard or a tomb. From where they sit, they can hear Mary, the family matriarch, stirring in the rooms above, lost in a haze of morphine. The men have had it out with one another, each leveling accusations, and each admitting to his own culpability for the sad state of the family. Tyrone, the father, reveals that his childhood in penury is the source of his miserliness, a trait that may have led to his wife's addiction and may lead to his youngest son landing in a state home for invalids rather than a proper sanatorium for the treatment of his consumption. Jamie, the eldest son, has admitted to his brother that he hates him as much as he loves him, and that he will destroy him if given the chance. Jamie

also reveals that his mother's return to drug use has completely crushed his own hope of reforming his profligacy. Lastly, the youngest son, Edmund, has admitted that he is a failed poet, that he is weak, and that he is "a little in love with death."<sup>108</sup> Their cases aired, the men sit weighted with sadness, about to take one last drink that will plunge them into a safe, drunken stupefaction. But before they can tip the glass, Mary appears. She has taken enough morphine to drown out not only the pain of her rheumatic arthritis, but that of the memories that torment her. She floats in a dream of her maiden youth, before her marriage, before Jamie and Edmund, before her loss of a third son to measles, and before her addiction to morphine. That is when the play, if not the story, ends.

O'Neill finished *Long Day's Journey* in 1942, but placed a twenty-five year ban on its publication, and implied that it should never be produced. The reasons for this have been long debated, but it is likely that O'Neill wanted to shield his family from scrutiny in response to the play, which took the semblance of autobiography.<sup>109</sup> However, his wife Carlotta broke both embargos three years after O'Neill's death. In 1956, she allowed the play to be published and sanctioned a performance at the Royal Dramatic Theatre of Stockholm. Later that year, she chose the young José Quintero, who had recently resurrected *The Iceman Cometh* to great success off-Broadway, to direct the U.S. premiere. Winning a posthumous Pulitzer Prize for O'Neill, *Long Day's Journey* quickly entered the canon of great American plays.

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<sup>108</sup> Eugene O'Neill, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, *Norton Anthology of Drama*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2014), 1180.

<sup>109</sup> Scholars have endlessly debated the extent to which *Long Day's Journey Into Night* is a work of autobiography. I side with Doris Alexander and Thomas Connolly in their warnings against trying to cull autobiographical facts from O'Neill's works of fiction. However, O'Neill clearly had some concerns when he placed the ban on the play. It may have been that he wanted to avoid the inference of autobiography where there was none.

I would like to suggest that focusing on O'Neill's employment of addiction in the drama urges a number of new considerations. The following analysis involves two interrelated arguments. The first examines how O'Neill suffuses his drama with the patterns of addiction. So ingrained are these patterns, that the cyclical nature of habituation acts as a structural scaffolding for the dramatic action. O'Neill additionally infuses the behavior and dialogue of his characters with this same cyclical quality. The second aspect of my investigation considers Mary's specific relationship to opiates as it manifests De Quincean tropes regarding trauma and memory. These structural and psychological features work jointly to express an existential world-view that defines O'Neill's later works.

I do not mean to suggest that *Long Day's Journey* is a play *about* addiction. O'Neill's interests are loftier and more formidable than anything so formulaic. Some scholars have investigated O'Neill's portrayal of addiction in pathological terms, with a focus on the behavioral dynamics and coping mechanism related to addiction. Within families, the behavior of the addict has a profound impact on all other members, often leading to denial, recrimination, guilt, and destructive behavior. Stephen F. Bloom and Michael Bennett have explored these angles and they demonstrate the faithfulness of O'Neill's depictions of family strife to the diagnostic paradigms established by behavioral psychologists.<sup>110</sup> The Tyrones are, in this way, quintessential. However, extracting solely the "behavioral disorders" from the larger scope of the drama sterilizes O'Neill's artistry. Mary's addiction supplies O'Neill not only with the fulcrum about which the drama pivots, but it suffuses the

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<sup>110</sup> Steven F. Bloom, "Empty Bottles, Empty Dreams: O'Neill's Use of Drinking and Alcoholism in *Long Day's Journey into Night*," *Critical essays on Eugene O'Neill*, ed. James Martine (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1984): 159-77; Michael Y. Bennett, "Family Dynamics in O'Neill's Drama: The Diseased Body in *Long Day's Journey into Night*," *Eugene O'Neill: Critical Insights*, ed. Steven F. Bloom (Ipswich: Salem Press, 2013): 189-204.

drama with a distinct mood, hung heavy with the weight of the family's cumulative sense of guilt. The aesthetics of addiction work in service to O'Neill's extraordinary ability to portray self-destructive individuals and the world that seems to goad them. As Roger Forseth has argued, O'Neill presents "the somber dimensions of the human condition as the tragedy of addiction."<sup>111</sup>

Moving away from his earlier experimental work, O'Neill's later plays follow neoclassical unities of place, time, and action. *Long Day's Journey* occurs in the living room of the Tyrone's summer home over a single day, beginning after breakfast and ending just after midnight. The central action of the play is Mary's return to using morphine after having just come back from a sanitarium where she underwent detoxification. Thus, Mary's addiction creates (and shapes) the arc of the play. In the first scene, she is sober but struggling, and the last shows her in total submission to the drug, completing the cycle. There is never a moment in which Mary's addiction is not haunting the action. The opening dialogue between Tyrone and Mary involves him celebrating the weight she has gained since her return from treatment. Underlying this light playfulness is Tyrone's dread that she will relapse. Each line is a plea that she remains healthy and strong. This first scene portends the last. Even before her first shot, Mary's return is fated. By the end of the first act, she has begun to administer the narcotic again, driven by her fears regarding Edmund's illness. By the second scene of the second act, all members of the family are aware that she has relapsed.

What follows is a slow and excruciating build in the play's dramatic action that does not lead to a conclusion. Nothing is resolved at the play's end. Audiences are left only with

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<sup>111</sup> Roger Forseth, "Denial of Tragedy: The Dynamics of Addiction in Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* and *Long Day's Journey into Night*," *Dionysus* 1, no. 2 (Fall 1989): 3.

the assurance of a continuation of suffering and, perhaps, a repetition of the day's struggle. Tyrone cannot change his miserly ways, Jamie will not reform, Edmund will continue to seek death, and Mary will spend her days running from her past through the aid of morphine. The play uses the cycle of addiction to shape the action before, during, and after the time period that is presented on stage. The patterns that typify dependence function within the neoclassical framework to sculpt the drama. It is a secondary structure that shapes the behavior of the characters, whereas the dramatic unities shape only what the audience sees.

Within the individual scenes, O'Neill further accentuates the patterns of addiction. His characters undertake a cycle of recrimination and reconciliation that bears a resemblance to the insurmountable cycle of torment and relief that characterizes narcotic dependence. These recriminations appear in the repetitions that run throughout the play's dialogue. Early audiences of the work frequently complained of these redundancies, often failing to recognize the way in which they communicate the guilt, regret, and anger that has overwhelmed the Tyrones. Here, it is important that I engage with the excellent arguments made by Steven F. Bloom, who envisions alcoholism as the driving condition in the play, rather than Mary's relapse. Bloom's analysis coincides with mine in that he asserts, "the life of the alcoholic, after all, is very much defined by repetitious behavioral patterns, and it is in these patterns - in the symptoms and effects of alcoholism - that O'Neill finally discovered a realistic context in which to dramatize his vision of life."<sup>112</sup> Bloom additionally argues that, "the realities of alcoholism are vividly depicted in the behavioral patterns of

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<sup>112</sup> Bloom, 159.

the Tyrone family, collectively and individually.”<sup>113</sup> It is these same patterns that I aim to explore.

Though Bloom recognizes that Mary is the “central addictive personality,” he focuses on the drinking habits of the men, placing Mary’s morphine use as an equivalent addiction. However, as Forseth asserts, the whiskey bottle and the syringe are not the same.<sup>114</sup> One is set out in public and is, as Tyrone says, “a good man’s failing.”<sup>115</sup> The other is administered secretly in the guest room, where there is never a guest. Jamie and Tyrone, in their characteristically Irish capacity to charm a barroom and spin a yarn, are beautiful in their weakness. Similarly, Edmund’s invocation of Baudelaire’s maxim “Be always drunken” from the fourth act is a romanticized vision of intoxication, though he ironically pairs it with his recognition that drink does not provide relief from memory.<sup>116</sup> Mary is afforded none of this soft focus. Tyrone, Jamie, and even Edmund may be defined as alcoholics according to modern classifications (and O’Neill himself had to give up drinking late in life), but the play does not frame their carousing as addiction. The men drink in response to Mary’s relapse. All the characters seek oblivion in some form, but only Mary’s drug use is mechanized to the extent that it enables a kind of metaphysical transportation, which is explained in detail below. It is Mary’s failed escape via morphine that most profoundly manifests O’Neill’s late philosophical bent.

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Forseth, 9.

<sup>115</sup> O’Neill, 1171.

<sup>116</sup> In the tradition of the Decadent poets that he reads, Edmund’s true desire is to experience divine stupefaction through poetry. O’Neill explored a similar character trait in 1933 with Richard Miller in *Ah! Wilderness*. However, there, the deep existential struggle and propensity for self-destruction that prompt Edmund’s need for escape are diluted down to a drink at a roadhouse and the rebellion of teenage infatuation.

Symptomatic of this formation, Mary's dialogue contains most of the repetitions that early critics found so bothersome. They pervade her language to the point that they become almost incantatory. In them, Mary can be stinging critical, leaving the men in her family defenseless against her indictments. The targets of her jeremiads, including herself, can change suddenly in a torrent of words. For example:

I blame only myself. I swore after Eugene died I would never have another baby. I was to blame for his death. If I hadn't left him with my mother to join you on the road, *because you wrote telling me you missed me and were so lonely*, Jamie would never have been allowed, when he still had measles, to go into the baby's room. (*Her face hardening*) *I've always believed Jamie did it on purpose*. He was jealous of the baby. He hated him. (*As Tyrone starts to protest.*) Oh, I know Jamie was only seven, but he was never stupid. He'd been warned it might kill the baby. He knew. I've never been able to forgive him for that.<sup>117</sup>

And, two acts later,

It's hard to believe, seeing Jamie as he is now, that he was ever my baby. Do you remember what a healthy, happy baby he was, James? *The one-night stands and filthy trains and cheap hotels and bad food* never made him cross or sick. He was always smiling or laughing. He hardly ever cried. Eugene was the same, too, happy and healthy, *during the two years he lived before I let him die through my neglect*. [emphasis mine]<sup>118</sup>

Mary is in large part a victim, but she is in no way passive. Kenneth Tynan called her "an emotional vampire."<sup>119</sup> She lashes out at her family, including Edmund, blaming him for the rheumatism she suffered after his birth. O'Neill has essentially rendered the pulsating ache of her addiction in the form of dialogue. The pain of her past radiates through the language, and she demonstrates her inability to cap her sorrow, which spills out as rapid-fire chatter. The only way she can stifle the flow from her seething mind is through morphine.

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 1148. Emphasis mine.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 1159.

<sup>119</sup> Kenneth Tynan, "Message from Manhattan," *The Observer* (London), May 26, 1957.

Other characters display these same patterns in their dialogue, though in a less manic form. The argument between Jamie and Tyrone in the opening act of the play is a good example of the way in which the characters cycle through blame, guilt, and forgiveness. Though too long to quote here, the argument moves from Edmund's illness to the failings of Dr. Hardy to Tyrone's miserliness to Jamie's profligacy. As soon as the exchange seems to peter out with a truce, it turns back to Dr. Hardy, then to Tyrone's peasant superstitions, and again to Jamie's poor influence on his brother. With the rise and fall of their anger come moments of attempted tenderness immediately undermined by new accusations. Throughout the play, arguments are always cut short, typically by the entrance of a third character; otherwise, they would run on without end. Such is the case in the battle between Jamie and Tyrone. The final section comes after the two men seem to have found common ground in their worry over Mary. Jamie expresses that he is relieved that she may truly be on the road to recovery.

Tyrone: [*mollifying*] I'm sure you are, Jamie. [*A pause. His expression becomes somber. He speaks slowly with a superstitious dread.*] It would be like a curse she can't escape if worry over Edmund - It was in her long sickness after bringing him into the world that she first -

Jamie: She didn't have anything to do with it!

Tyrone: I'm not blaming her.

Jamie: [*bitingly*] Then who are you blaming? Edmund, for being born?

Tyrone: You damned fool! No one was to blame.

Jamie: The bastard doctor was! ... <sup>120</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> O'Neill, 1127.

And so on until Mary's entrance. The fact that the father and son revisit the same ground over and over again signals that the argument is not confined to a single day, but one that carries over from past days and will be continued into the future. Their missives of peace inevitably spark the next argument and their attempts to seek understanding reveal the futility of those very efforts.

Thus, O'Neill creates concentric circles with Mary's addiction at the center. Each rung manifests the cycle of pain, resistance, submission, and relief that characterizes drug dependence. In doing so, O'Neill's play dramatizes in form and content a dialectic regarding the human capacity to cause and combat sorrow. Through processes of guilt, blame, confession, and regret, his characters attempt to mitigate their grief. Consequently missing from this set of processes is absolution or transcendence. The cycle of addiction can only end in further torment; the highs are incapable of conquering the lows, as release or euphoria can only be fleeting. The characters inevitably fall back into the spiral that returns them to their pain and to one another. The Tyrone men find themselves facing not an incarnation of evil, but their own sense of guilt that negates the assignment of blame, strategically and explicitly rejecting the possibility of redemption.

O'Neill undertakes some important maneuvering in order to ensure that the drama of the piece is so unrelenting. Primarily, he must navigate the traditional dramatic representations that assign either suicide or madness as the end of addiction. He does so by having Mary fail at an earlier suicide attempt. Tyrone relates how, tortured with cravings, Mary ran down to the dock and tried to throw herself into the water. The inclusion of this suicide attempt leaves Mary without an exit. She is trapped in a state of tortured existence, and her only recourse is to recede to a past before the pain. It also leaves the Tyrone men to

live with the perpetual reminder of their shame and guilt; there is no end in sight.

According to the Catholic Church, Mary's suicide attempt is a mortal sin that leaves her alive, but beyond salvation. She is stranded in a living death in the eyes of God, to whom she claims she can no longer pray. She has lost control of her life, as she says, "one day long ago I found I could no longer call my soul my own."<sup>121</sup> Mary's lament embodies Clej's contention that the modern condition is one in which the individual both mourns the loss of self and confronts the inability to mourn for a "symbolic death, which has already taken place."<sup>122</sup>

Mary's relationship to narcotics further clarifies how O'Neill engages addiction as a metonymic device. As an addict-mother, Mary has dramatic antecedents. She is kindred to both Jacqueline from *Madame X* (1909) and Fanny from *Red Light Annie* (1923). These two characters manifest a longstanding concern over the capacity for fallen women to serve as mothers. However, O'Neill diverges significantly from these precursors. The near constant linkage of drug use to sexual prurience, as seen in both Jacqueline's infidelities and Fanny's time as a prostitute, is not a factor in O'Neill's drama. Nor is there a real concern over inheritance of moral dissipation. Though Mary is worried that her nervousness at the time of Edmund's birth has caused his weak constitution, the concerns in O'Neill over inheritance are more metaphysical than biological. The question of whether Mary could be a good mother as someone who uses drugs is not of specific interest. Edmund and Jamie are just as much influenced by their father's appetites as Mary's.

Also unlike Jacqueline and Fannie, Mary does not correspond to a specific drug surge or scare in the country. She is an addict from another age. With *Long Day's Journey*

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 1151.

<sup>122</sup> Clej, xiv.

set in 1912, Mary is a remnant of the nineteenth century - a woman of means, introduced to opiates through a poorly trained or careless physician. These iatrogenic addicts were often treated with opiates for “female troubles,” in Mary’s case, pain after childbirth. Though dominant in the nineteenth century, this type of addict rarely made the stage. As discussed in the introduction, in bourgeois and upper-class homes, these women were family secrets who typically maintained their addiction through local doctors, occasionally finding curative treatment. By employing this scenario, O’Neill creates a family that has to remain distanced from the world beyond their walls and guard against anything except for superficial relationships with outsiders. The Tyrones must stay isolated in part to conceal Mary’s condition. O’Neill reifies this psychological and emotional barricade with a physical one, the manicured hedge that Jamie and Tyrone work to maintain.

O’Neill’s portrayal is unique in the way he imagines that morphine effects the user. Mary’s drug use involves a kind of mental time travel. The more she takes, the farther back into her past she recedes. As she notes, her aim is to “go back until at last you are beyond [pain’s] reach. Only the past when you were happy is real.”<sup>123</sup> The sources of her pain include the concerns over Edmund’s health, the death of her son Eugene and her father, her rheumatic hands, and the pain and embarrassment she has suffered on the road with her carousing husband. She is deeply troubled by not only his drinking and philandering (he had a mistress prior to his marriage), but the social stigma of an actor’s life and the “one-night stands and filthy trains and cheap hotels and bad food.” Compounding this is Tyrone’s stinginess, which leaves them without a respectable home and driving around in a second-hand car. These experiences all contribute to what she perceives as her fall from purity and

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<sup>123</sup> O’Neill, 1156.

innocence. She maintains a glorified vision of her life under the rule of her father and during her adolescence in a convent where she dreamed of becoming a nun. As John Henry Raleigh puts it, "The morphine is a road back to that virginal childhood and her 'Long Day's Journey into Night' is a psychological regression into her convent days."<sup>124</sup> Whether her memories are true is not completely clear. Tyrone warns that they are romanticized dreams that must be taken with a grain of salt. What is certain is that the drug's mechanism is by no means dependable or linear. Mary's morphine use can just as easily bring painful memories to the fore, as smother them.

The provenance of the idea that narcotics could cause temporal transport is De Quincey's writings. Dominating his memoirs is his constant emotional and experiential return to moments of trauma through his drug use. In taking laudanum De Quincey could re-experience pivotal moments from his past. His hallucinations remolded and reshaped memories in terms of perspective, atmosphere, and detail. Central metaphors for De Quincey were the concept of the palimpsest and the capacity for hallucinations and dreams to write over personal history with new and evolving images and narratives. For instance, the tragedy of his sister's death melded with the death of Coleridge's daughter, for whom De Quincey cared deeply. The memory of her passing haunted De Quincey and it became the central narrative of his hallucinations. This occurs much the same way that Mary refashions her memories. The re-experiencing of these moments creates a pervasive state of alienation, enabling examination and revision.

This element in De Quincey's literary output is well recognized. George Poulet sees this obsession with time as a tenant of Romanticism. According to him, poets like Coleridge,

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<sup>124</sup> John Henry Raleigh, "O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* and New England Irish-Catholicism," *O'Neill: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. John Gassner (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1964): 132.

Byron, and Keats all maintained “the belief in the continued existence of the past, in the wonderful possibilities of its revival. Nothing is lost.”<sup>125</sup> Poulet goes on to distinguish De Quincey and Baudelaire as the authors who offer this Romantic experience of time “its most modern expression.”<sup>126</sup> Similarly, Virginia Woolf’s 1932 essay on De Quincey’s writing wonders that he is capable “of realizing how one moment may transcend in value fifty years.”<sup>127</sup> She too saw De Quincey as decidedly modern in his treatment of time, aligning him with twentieth century avant-garde in literature (a general assembly to which O’Neill, as an avowed foe to realism, would consider himself a member). De Quincey’s prose swell with memories to the point of bursting in the same way that Mary is inundated by her relentless compulsion to remember. Mediation for them both comes in the form of opium, which enables specified moments to be embodied and refracted. Mary’s dilemma is similar to that of Proust in his obsessive attempt to recapture the past. And, like these predecessors, Mary confronts the treacherous and untenable nature of memory.

These themes of time travel and the drive for alienation exist elsewhere in the play as well. The fog, which is key to the play’s *mise en scène*, is an extension of this motif. The fog represents the inevitable solitude of existence as well as the numbness of death. Speaking in terms that conflate her drug use and the fog, Mary notes, “It hides you from the world and the world from you. You feel that everything has changed, and nothing is what it seems to be. No one can find or touch you anymore.”<sup>128</sup> Edmund has a similar experience in

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<sup>125</sup> Georges Poulet, “Timelessness and Romanticism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 15, no. 1 (Jan., 1954), 11.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>127</sup> Virginia Woolf, “De Quincey’s Autobiography” (1932), *The Common Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Series (University of Adelaide, 2015). <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/w/woolf/virginia/w91c2/index.html> (Accessed Oct. 21, 2015).

the fog when he runs from the house in despair. “That’s what I wanted - to be alone with myself in another world where truth is untrue and life can hide from itself. . . . As if I had drowned long ago. As if I was a ghost belonging to the fog, and the fog was the ghost of the sea. It felt damned peaceful to be nothing more than a ghost within a ghost.”<sup>129</sup> Slowly wrapping the house in dull whiteness, the fog encroaches on the Tyrone family as they assemble for the final scene.

However, the promise of peaceful oblivion for any of the Tyrone family can never be fulfilled. The call of fate and memory inevitably triggers a return. O’Neill manifests this symbolically with the sounding of the foghorn, “moaning like a mournful whale in labor,” and the warning ringing of the bells on yachts at anchor.<sup>130</sup> These sound throughout the play at key moments. Mary complains to Cathleen, the maid, “It’s the foghorn I hate. It won’t let you alone. It keeps reminding you and warning you, and calling you back.”<sup>131</sup> At the end of the third act, when Edmund calls his mother a “dope fiend” in a moment of anger, the horn and bells are heard, immediately driving Mary to take more of the drug: “I must go upstairs. I haven’t taken enough.”<sup>132</sup> Whereas Quintero interpreted the foghorn as guiding Mary through her journey into the past, it is quite the opposite; the horn pulls her back to the present.<sup>133</sup> Edmund in his fog, Mary in her needle, and Jamie and Tyrone in their bottles cannot enact a full escape. And that is the point.

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<sup>128</sup> O’Neill, 1153.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 1169.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 1152.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 1153.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 1165.

<sup>133</sup> José Quintero, *If You Don’t Dance They Beat You* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988), 257.

In the final scene, when Mary appears to the three men, O'Neill's stage-directions describe her face as "uncanny" in that it appears so youthful, "experience seems ironed out of it. It is a marble mask of girlish innocence, the mouth caught in a shy smile."<sup>134</sup> As the men sit, mired in drink and sadness, Mary begins a monologue about the moment she felt the calling to become a nun. For her, it is a moment of perfection, prior to all of the disappointments and heartbreaks that she later experiences. It is a moment at which she still had faith in the Blessed Virgin, a faith that gave her true security, and a faith that she has since lost. This moment of anamnesis, however, does not last:

*(She pauses and a look of growing uneasiness comes over her face. She passes a hand over her forehead as if brushing cobwebs from her brain - vaguely) That was the winter of senior year. Then in the spring something happened to me. Yes, I remember. I fell in love with James Tyrone and was so happy for a time. (She stares before her in a sad dream. Tyrone stirs in his chair. Edmund and Jamie remain motionless.)*<sup>135</sup>

In this final moment of the play, O'Neill signals that Mary's return to the present and to her nagging pain is inevitable. This final line is, in fact, the start of her trip back. Tyrone stirs in his seat while the others remain motionless because, at this early moment in her trajectory, only he is implicated. He is the first break in the chain. But Edmund and Jamie are not exempted. The cyclical nature of addiction ensures that Mary will eventually get to their part in her deterioration as she moves away from her moment of immaculate innocence.

In directing this final moment in 1971 with Laurence Olivier and Constance

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<sup>134</sup> O'Neill, 1189.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 1192.

Cummings, Michael Blakemore dropped the curtain after her last line as “a cut not a fade . . . with an almost shocking abruptness to suggest that the story had not ended, simply that this moment was the moment at which the audience was obliged to take their leave of it, and that it would carry beyond the curtain until the lives of each member of the family they have been watching for over four hours has gone the way of the play.”<sup>136</sup> Blakemore’s staging asserts the inevitability of Mary’s return and the repetition of the dramatic action. As Tyrone says when he first realizes she has relapsed, “Every day from now on, there’ll be the same drifting away from us until by the end of each night.”<sup>137</sup>

The men too are robbed of oblivion. Mary begins her speech just as they move to have their final drink, the one that will grant them respite from this turmoil. But as she begins to speak, “they slowly lower their drinks to the table, forgetting them.”<sup>138</sup> O’Neill presents a family without the hope of release. All that awaits is the fog that will eventually leave them numb and isolated, but here and now, they cannot avoid the sounding of the horn that calls them back. It is their past that simultaneously binds them together and tears them apart. And so they are arrested in their suffering. As Mary says, “The past is the present, isn’t it? It’s the future, too.”<sup>139</sup>

O’Neill leaves his family in a state of living death in a deterministic world where moral definitives are impossible to demarcate. He uses addiction on multiple levels, as a pathological, emotional, and a metaphysical condition to communicate his view of modern

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<sup>136</sup> Michael Blakemore, *Stage Blood: Five Tempestuous Years in the Early Life of the National Theatre* (London: Faber and Faber, 2013), 93.

<sup>137</sup> O’Neill, 1144.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 1192.

<sup>139</sup> O’Neill, 1148.

life. An aching desire for peace is answered not with solace, but by the long, repetitive howl that this mournful drama represents. The absence of possible transcendence reflects O'Neill's embrace of a Nietzschean belief in God's absence. This works hand in hand with the malignant will that Schopenhauer, as O'Neill's other predominant influence, envisions as dominating human motivation.<sup>140</sup> Through these philosophies, O'Neill interprets the ontological disinheritance that comes with modern existence as a source for tragedy. Regarding O'Neill's adoption of classical unities, J. Chris Westgate asks, "Could the inherited paradigm of tragedy, which depended upon this closed form, sufficiently represent the profound sense of loss borne of modernism?"<sup>141</sup> Westgate finds the fulfillment of this potential in the unresolved ending of *Long Day's Journey*, in which the family survives maimed by the past yet "condemned to continue living."<sup>142</sup> It is a tragedy without the possibility of catharsis, which leaves its characters in a perpetual state of mourning. O'Neill's adoption of addiction as a dramatic motif, both in structure and theme, is at the heart of this play's ability to achieving its tragic end.

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<sup>140</sup> Discussed at length in Harold Bloom, "Introduction," *Eugene O'Neill: Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom, (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987).

<sup>141</sup> Westgate, 27.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

## CONCLUSION

### *The Bust and The Relapse*

Even before the Second World War reduced the addict population in the country by disrupting smuggling routes, the dope fiend had become a hackneyed figure on the U.S. stage. Similarly, the Production Code eliminated the addict as a potential character in film, declaring the figure dangerous to the country's moral well being. It was not until the 1950s that artists returned to the subject of addiction. Challenging the dominance of the Production Code, Otto Preminger's *The Man with the Golden Arm* received a national release without a Seal of Approval in 1956. A few years later, the Living Theatre challenged theatrical conventions of realism with their premiere of Jack Gelber's *The Connection* in 1959. Literary portrayals joined in this revival. William Burroughs published his semi-autobiographical *Junkie* in 1953, exploring drug culture in detail and serving as a precursor to the later writings of the Beats. As these works signal, drug use returned to the social consciousness and art makers again recognized the potential for poignant drama in narratives of addiction. From there, the addict again proliferated the stages and screens of the U.S. Interpretations of the character by Preminger and the Living Theatre were novel in some ways, but they were still in large part working from conventions established in the years before the war.

As this study has made clear, it was during this prewar period that the addict became an ideal figure for testing the limits of the nation's imagination regarding human degradation. The stage-addict enabled exploration of the social and spiritual notions of

forgiveness and salvation, as well as modern science's capacity to counteract human weakness. Testing these boundaries on stage had significant real life consequences. The performances discussed in this study and the reception of those performances helped lay the foundations upon which our modern drug policies and social understanding of drug addiction rest. The seeds sown in performances of opium-den plays, prohibition plays, and the acts of Junie McCree and Cab Calloway created an addict and a drug culture that necessitated reformation, regulation, and condemnation. This version of the addict helped drive the passing of the Harrison Act, establish the dominance of Harry Anslinger, and cement the growing medical diagnosis of addict psychosis. As these circumstances signal, criminalization remained the standard national policy; vitriol remained the dominant rhetoric; and President Nixon could declare his "war on drugs" in 1971 pushing through draconian "mandatory minimums" and "no-knock" warrants. The representational practices founded in the years covered in this research created the environment in which this status quo could take form.

Thus, the history of the representation of drug addiction is, at its heart, a social history; one in which the theatre serves as an institution of authority that creates perception on a national scale. The plays and performances involved in this history worked in concert with medical science, legislative policy, and diverse print forms in a process of cultural production. This process relies heavily on clear divisions of class, race, gender, and sexuality in order to cement into place larger divisions regarding the normal and abnormal, the natural and artificial, the virtuous and immoral. My hope is that this research has helped to clarify the social and cultural nexus that produces the epistemology of addiction.

## **DISCIPLINARY DEALING**

I believe this work has potential value for a number of academic disciplines. Foremost, it presents research and methods that will be of use to theatre scholars. Recent study of the Progressive Era theatre has established a pantheon of unsettling and disreputable figures that were essential in the formation of national identity and national values. The stage-addict must take a place alongside these characterizations of urban “others.” However, the addict requires special consideration and a set of analytical paradigms that differ from those required to understand the function of the stage-Jew, stage-Irishman, tramp, or nance. Though the addict aligns with these characters in some respects, the fact that anyone can be an addict and addiction is so ambiguous in its causes, makes for a special case. In addition, the addict represents existential concerns that require specific consideration. The diverse representations included in this study can serve as a field guide for an array of addict characters and their dramatic implications.

Not only the character of the addict, but the evolving narratives of addiction necessitate recognition. These narratives work alongside those of the fallen woman and temperance dramas. All of these narratives help to define and organize national mores by placing human weakness and desire within a system of poetic justice. These narratives work to re-craft socially complex problems of addiction into standard morality tales. Scholars may find that the specific narratives of addiction had influence in the emergence of other dramatic conventions. This influence goes beyond the in melodrama, but this work has demonstrated how narratives of addiction can embody modernist concerns regarding the human condition. The flexibility and ambiguity of addiction enables it to function as a metonym for a range of cultural and philosophical discourses. I have

attempted to show how the language of addiction can serve as an analytical lens for exploration. This idea, in particular, might serve other scholars as they investigate how the theatre portrayed the fragmentation and loss of self as a response to the overwhelming forces of modernity.

Studies of drug culture have long paid close attention to the evolution and dissemination of drug slang. Part of my effort here was to bring this line of inquiry to theatre studies. The theatre is an excellent location for the study of etymology as production histories can reveal the point of introduction for particular turns of phrase. More than simply fashionable argot, the adoption of slang effectively demonstrates the spread of the ideas attached to language; terminology manifests ideology. Compacting this, performance can further alter the meaning of language. This study has demonstrated the way in which a minority community can engage language for covert expression. For example, the scat singing of Cab Calloway employed drug culture as a way of communicating cultural critique. Only through a clear attention to the spread of drug culture can we recognize how slang takes on racially charged meaning that extends far beyond its most obvious implications. With the present interest in the capacity of minority cultures to subvert through performance, this research proposes that those frequent intersections between minority and drug cultures are potential points of entry for investigation. In many ways, this work extends the consideration recently asserted by scholars like Shane Vogel and James Wilson, but draws attention to drug culture and slang as a conduit for subversive ideologies.

Outside of theatre studies, this research is relevant to the discipline of American Studies in the way it envisions the theatre as a site of intersection between various cultural

forces. Consideration of print media, iconography, and other forms of cultural production related to drug addiction should engage with the history of the stage-addict. This dissertation has demonstrated how the gestural repertoire of performers connects to representational practices in literature and iconography. As noted of opium-den dramas, the stage enabled a form of slumming, while also bringing to life the erotically charged descriptions that appeared in various forms of reportage. Potential considerations for those in American Studies include: How might the syringe and the narcotic substance itself connect to studies of material culture? How do regionally specific practices concerning drug use spread nationally through covert channels? How might the movement of immigrant cultures, especially the Chinese, spread drug culture and shape drug policies further in the period? As American Studies takes a multi-disciplinary approach to some of these potential questions, scholars will find overlap with this research in both subject of study and critical approach.

Lastly, it is my hope that this study will be of use for scholars in the niche position of drug studies. Historians like Courtwright, Acker, and Kandall have produced excellent studies of addiction in the U.S. However, they almost entirely ignore the significant place that the theatre had in shaping national attitudes concerning addiction. This lacuna is not surprising as examining performance history requires a select set of skills and engages with a particular body of knowledge. Thus, this work will be of service to those attempting to examine the history of addiction, promoting recognition of influential forces outside of medical and legislative records.

## **OPPORTUNITIES AND EXPANSIONS**

I have attempted to avoid a survey in my organization and approach to this project. However, facing such a sizable time period and such a wealth of source material, elements of this study take on the semblance of an overview. A number of related histories fall into this trap, including Michael Starks's *Cocaine and Reefer Madness* (1982) and Gary Silver's *The Dope Chronicles* (1979). With such a large cache of plays that have yet to receive scholarly attention, a compendium may be of service to other scholars interested in pursuing research related to this subject and there may be a call for a general index of plays about drug use. However, as this work continues to evolve, what I believe is more appropriate is to intensify the focus of my exploration. For instance, the category of "prohibition play," as it stands is effective in some ways as it connects a broad set of plays. All of the works discussed in the second chapter were effective in shaping national behaviors regarding drug use. However, there might also be value in limiting the definition of the "prohibition play" to those that directly call for legislative reform and more patently take on the form of propaganda. Considering other possible organizational approaches, I believe that a separate section examining female addicts would be effective, as the narratives concerning the fallen women and the sanctity of motherhood are so discrete. It also might be beneficial to focus on the relationship between physicians and drug use in a dedicated chapter. Though I offer examination of plays like Davis's *Drugged* and Montague's *The Hop Head*, there are a number of plays concerning doctors that are not included in this study for the sake of space.

There are also opportunities to further the examination I set out in the introduction and elsewhere regarding the ways that historical figures interact with performance history. Consider my discussion of actors who inadvertently became "addicts on display" in a New

York opium den, or the widely reported death of Billie Carleton in the final chapter. Recent works that have effectively examined this kind of intersection include Katie Johnson's *Sister in Sin* and Amy Hughes's *Spectacles of Reform* in the way that the real life prostitutes and temperance lecturers shaped fictional representations. This study has closely monitored periodical reports of drug use in the general public, but there may be opportunities to examine particular figures for connections to representational practice. For instance, in relation to female addicts, it will be effective to examine the well-documented life of Rose Livingston, a former prostitute and drug addict turned reformer at the turn of the century. Her speeches regarding the dangers of addiction fed the "white slave panic" and may have directly influenced dramatic portrayals. Examining the performative aspects of her speeches, her ersatz public persona, and the reports of her escapades freeing girls from brothels may reveal a specific influence on plays of the period.

My work also offers insight into the transatlantic cultural exchange between the U.K. and the U.S. as it relates to social, cultural, and artistic practices. This study has made light of a number of connections between the nations, particularly in the final chapter. However, there are numerous plays and popular performances that travel in both directions between the two English-speaking countries with which this study does not engage. There is precedent for examining this cultural exchange as Susan Zieger's scholarship includes both countries in her examination of popular literature in the same period. In theatre studies, there are growing examples of scholars highlighting the cultural transactions that occur in the theatre on a global scale. Examples include Marlis Schweitzer's *Transatlantic Broadway* (2015) and works such as *The Cultural Revolution of the Nineteenth Century: Theatre, the Book-Trade and Reading in the Transatlantic World* (2015) by Abreu Marci and Ana Claudia

Suriani Da Silva. These works offer new paradigms for investigating cultural cross-pollination. My analysis of a transatlantic drug culture might serve as a springboard for a larger study of how underworlds collide.

In this same vein, the connection between the French and English Decadents and the theatre opens another potential avenue. This study examines this connection only in terms of works of theatrical realism (*John-a-Dreams, Sacred and Profane Love, The Vortex*). What will prove fertile is a study of how Decadent and Bohemian drug use influenced avant-garde theatre practices at the *fin de siècle*. The result of these influences will likely prove more indirect than in some of the plays studied in the fourth chapter of this work. However, examining the ways in which the Futurists, Expressionists, and members of the Dada movement engaged with traits of addiction and dependence might prove highly effective. There is mention of this kind of a connection in my examination of Pendleton King's *Cocaine*, which bears resemblance to the work of the European Naturalists and Symbolists. These European performances will then influence experimental work in the U.S. in identifiable ways.

As mentioned, histories of drug addiction in the country typically follow either medical or legislative lanes of inquiry. Elsewhere, literary scholars have looked at psychoanalytic and philosophic paradigms in analyzing addiction in the novel. I believe my examination of *Red Light Annie* brings to the fore another option that requires further investigation. By examining dramatic narrative and performance through the lens of sociological theories of deviance and sub-cultural formation, this study reveals some of the intricacies regarding addict subjectivity and identity. There are options to expand this investigation. Over the last century, sociologists have posed a range of theories concerning

deviance beyond those by Howard Becker. Émile Durkheim, Edwin Sutherland, Robert Merton, and Herbert Blumer are only a few of the thinkers that have posited theories of deviance and criminality over the last 150 years.<sup>1</sup> Some of them predate the work of Becker and appear at the same time as some of the plays in this study. There is likely merit in undertaking a review of these theories and using them to highlight elements of narrative and characterization in the plays over time. As I have sought to link the medical etiologies of the period to their contemporary theatrical representations, the evolving theories of deviance may have a similar correlation.

Lastly, and perhaps most obviously, this research opens the door for an examination of drug plays that come after the Second World War. This study has mentioned only a handful of plays and films from the second half of the twentieth century and there is a startling amount of material. However, a significant danger in such a study would be to ignore the continuity in representations that came with the earliest drug scares in the country.

## **PIPE DREAMS**

This research is timely, in part, because there have been recent changes in drug laws (the first reduction of their severity since the 1914 Harrison Act) and a new drive to alter the perception of drug users in the country. Just this summer, President Barak Obama called for a discontinuing of “mandatory minimums” in drug sentencing.<sup>2</sup> At the same time,

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<sup>1</sup> See Nancy Herman, *Deviance: A Symbolic Interactionist Approach* (New York: General Hall, 1995); Robert Franzese, *The Sociology of Deviance: Difference, Tradition, and Stigma* (Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, 2015); Walker DeKeseredy, Desmond Ellis and Shahid Alvi., *Deviance and Crime: Theory Research and Policy* (London: Routledge, 2005).

twenty states have decriminalized marijuana and others have moved to legalize it for medical and recreational uses.<sup>3</sup>

I bring this up because, at the heart of this work, is a desire to examine the reciprocal relationship between the theatre and politics. My hope is that this study can offer historical perspective on the formation of policy and help to guide the emergence of future conventions of representation. I believe this work legitimizes concerns regarding representational practices and urges a responsibility on the part of the theatre maker to recognize the impact of their portrayals. Determining who is an addict, who is worthy of treatment, and who is beyond salvation is a process that Nancy Campbell describes as “a social privilege inextricably bound to questions of social justice.”<sup>4</sup> Often, the resultant determinations lead to policies that unfairly punish certain sectors of our society. Dissecting and clarifying the history of addiction on stage exposes these biases in the making. More than one trillion dollars into Nixon’s failed “war on drugs” there is a moral imperative for contemplation and reinvention of the stories we tell and the addicts we invent.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ben Wolfgang, “Obama Calls for Overhaul of Prison System, End of Mandatory Minimum Sentences,” *Washington Post*, July 14, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> “States that have decriminalized,” *NORML*, n.d.  
<http://norml.org/aboutmarijuana/item/states-that-have-decriminalized> (Accessed February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016)

<sup>4</sup> Campbell, 1

<sup>5</sup> Richard Branson, “War on drugs a trillion-dollar failure,” *CNN*, Dec. 7, 2012.  
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