

'The Delightful Logic of Intoxication': Fictionalising Alcoholism

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Alcohol invariably connotes different, often conflicting, feelings. As Iain Gately rightly observes in *Drink: A Cultural History of Alcohol* (2009), it "has been credited with the powers of inspiration and destruction" (1). This reflection is as relevant to classical antiquity, when wine was savoured during the Greek symposia, as to the modern world, in which alcoholologists study the devastating effects of alcohol abuse. However, much as sociological, psychological, and medical research into alcoholism provide statistics, problem-analysis, and therapeutic approaches, literature offers representations of alcoholism which allow for a more profound insight into alcohol dependence and its many implications. This article focuses on how alcoholism is dissected and contextualised in literature, predominantly in contemporary English fiction.

Keywords: Alcohol, alcoholism, culture, literature, fiction

The fact that alcohol has been with us for millennia is easily verifiable. However, contrary to popular belief, it is not a phenomenon limited to Western civilisation, even though it has played an important part in its history. As alcohol is traceable to virtually every culture in different geographical locations, it is clear that a study of its manifold functions requires a varied approach. This is what the editor of the *International Handbook on Alcohol and Culture* (1995), Dwight Heath, partly achieves, inviting contributions which examine alcohol use from different perspectives. Heath's volume contains chapters discussing what might be labelled alco-geographies, that is, the ethnic and national customs in nearly thirty different countries, from France and Germany to locations far less obvious in the context of alcohol, such as Zambia or Malaysia. There are also brief references to literature and the way it makes alcohol its theme. One example provided by Heath is "the symbolism of toasting" (343), which can be found in literary texts of various types. In fact, many publications which are alcohol-, but not literature-oriented, such as Heath's volume, include frequent references to literary representations of alcohol. A good example is Neil Gunn's classic *Whisky and Scotland* (1935), which, unsurprisingly, contains passages on the famous Scottish bards and whisky aficionados Robert Burns and Hugh MacDiarmid (cf. 1998: 112-13).

While the two studies mentioned above deal with socio-cultural and, in the case of *Whisky and Scotland*, also technological matters, Donald Goodwin's *Alcoholism: The Facts* (1981) focuses on alcohol-related problems of a medical and psychological nature. Yet, like Heath and Gunn, Goodwin acknowledges the fact that literature offers compelling representations of alcohol(ism), and substantiates some of the points he makes with literary examples. These include, for instance, depictions of DTs in Malcolm Lowry's and Mark Twain's fiction (cf. 44-45). Goodwin also utilises Shakespeare's *Macbeth* to exemplify the influence of alcohol on sexual prowess, quoting the exchange between Macduff and the Porter, who talk about the way alcohol affects potency:

MACDUFF: What three things does drink especially provoke?

PORTER Lechery, sir, it provokes, and unprovokes; it provokes the desire, but it takes away the performance ... (ACT II, Scene III) (41)

Shakespeare's plays contain numerous such references, which inspired Buckner Trawick to examine in *Shakespeare and Alcohol* (1978) the way drink lubricates the plays, how it can "further the dramatic action", "contribute to character portrayal", and "participate in establishing the mood or tone" (8). Albert Tolman, another scholar interested in the way Shakespeare employs alcohol in his works, observes that "[t]he kindliness of Shakespeare toward his toppers is noteworthy" (1919: 82). Such a mode of representing drink and drunkenness in literature also applies to

Middle English literature, to mention Geoffrey Chaucer alone, as well as to many pre-nineteenth-century literary works. The joyous celebration of drink is a feature typical of traditional verse and folk-song¹. A good example of the festive and celebratory is the anonymous "A Jug of This", also known as "Ye Mariners All", inviting sailors to have a drink in an unspecified, tavern-like drinking place: "You tipplers all as you pass by, call in and drink if you be dry" (Gammon 2008: 168).

However, even if Tolman's remark reflects how drink is generally employed in Shakespeare's plays, one has to acknowledge that the great Stratfordian also signals the more murky aspects of alcohol consumption, as in the Clown's definition of a drunken man: "Like a drown'd man, a fool, and a madman: one draught above heat makes him a fool; the second mads him; and a third drowns him" (Twelfth Night, I, V). Similar sober judgement of drunkenness appears in pre-twentieth-century literary works, mostly in Victorian literature. Fatalistic visions of alcoholism leading to destitution or even insanity can be found, for instance, in Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854) and *The Drunkard's Death* (1836).² Still, as Edward Quinn rightly observes, "despite its long lineage, alcohol does not "come of age" until the 20th century" (2006:16). Consequently, a full-scale literary treatment of alcoholism is relatively rare until the twentieth century, when it comes to the fore in fiction most of all.

The literary focus on alcoholic protagonists coincides with the growth of interest in alcoholism as a socio-medical issue. The term as such, coined in 1849 by the Swedish professor of medicine, Magnus Huss, is discussed in his work titled *Alcoholismus Chronicus*, and subsequently becomes the focus of clinical research, burgeoning in the twentieth-century. One of the first studies to follow Huss's seminal contribution in the realm of alcoholology is George Cutten's *The Psychology of Alcoholism*, published in 1907. Cutten's work considers the problem from different vantage points, as do most such works which appeared in the decades to follow, often reiterating what had been said in preceding publications.

The twentieth-century preoccupation with alcoholism encompasses literary perspectives, either focusing on the interface between alcoholism and creativity, or on how alcohol dependence is represented in and is the theme of literary works.

1 See, for instance, Klepuszewski, Wojciech. "The Joyous Inebriation: Drinking and Conviviality in Poetry and Song." *Ethnic and Cultural Identity in Music and Song Lyric*. Eds. Victor Kennedy and Michelle Gadpaille. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars, 2017: 64-76. Print.

2 The nineteenth-century literary interest in alcoholism was arguably influenced by the then active temperance movement, which found many followers among men of letters, one such being the Scottish poet, Robert Tannahill, who expresses in the following words praise for sobriety in "Epistle to Alexander Borland" (composed in 1806): Hail, Temperance! thou'rt wisdom' first, best lore; The sage in every age does thee adore; (1877: 104). In America, a good example is William Smith's play *The Drunkard, or the Fallen Saved* (1844), considered by Jeffrey Richards as an example of a temperance play which "inaugurated a fashion for such plays" (1997: 244).

As far as the former is concerned, Donald Goodwin shows a particular leaning towards the writing fraternity rather than literature per se³, which is only natural for a clinician specialising in psychiatry. His research perfectly reflects scholarly interest in what might be called alco-biographies, which have proliferated in the last two decades. One of the latest is Aubrey Malone's *Writing Under the Influence: Alcohol and the Works of 13 American Authors* (2017). Its biographical nature is expounded at the very beginning of the book: "I've structured most of the profiles in a cradle-to-grave manner, focusing primarily, though not exclusively, on the drinking escapades that punctuated the lives in question" (2). Interestingly, most of the writer-oriented studies focus on American literature⁴, Malone's being just one example; another, also quite recent, is Brett Millier's *Flawed Light: American Women Poets and Alcohol* (2009). One can occasionally find publications which encompass a handful of British and European figures, but these are very rare. For instance, Kelly Boler's *A Drinking Companion: Alcohol & the Lives of Writers* (2004) includes references to Jean Rhys, Kingsley Amis, Malcolm Lowry and Marguerite Duras. However, what seems much more relevant in a literary context are studies focused specifically on alcohol as a theme in literature. Anya Taylor, for instance, examines in her *Bacchus in Romantic England* (1999) the manner in which the "Romantic writers describe the pleasures and pains of drinking" (5). In *The Pub in Literature* (2000), Steven Earnshaw's analyses the various functions of drinking places, devoting a whole chapter to Dickensian pubscapes, of which he provides forty examples (cf. 188).

While there are numerous publications in which the focus is alcohol as a literary theme, the same does not apply to studies on the portrayals of alcoholism in literature. As Thomas Gilmore explains, one of the reasons that there is little critical investigation of this particular area is because alcoholism is commonly considered an area of interests to physicians, sociologists or psychologists (cf. 1987: 7). One attempt to approach literary renditions of alcoholism is Jane Lilienfeld's *Reading Alcoholisms: Theorizing Character and Narrative in Selected Novels of Thomas Hardy, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf* (1999). The study cannot be denied its analytical value, but, as Lilienfeld emphasises, she decided to apply "a biopsychosocial model of alcoholism" (2), which in practice means that her study is heavily bent towards the sociology of addiction, literary texts being very much subordinated to this end. Another relevant work is *The Existential Drinker* (2018),

3 See, for example, *Alcohol and the Writer* (1988) or "The Alcoholism of F. Scott Fitzgerald" (1970).

4 Even more perplexing is the fact that the criticism coming from countries which can boast a great literary legacy does not seem interested in their own writers, and mainly discusses the American literary scene. A good example is Michael Krüger and Ekkehard Faude's *Literatur und Alkohol* (2004).

discussing selected writers whose protagonists are alcoholics. Earnshaw's choice is international, encompassing, for instance, the German writer Hans Fallada, and the Russian Venedikt Yerofeev. Obviously, apart from dedicated studies, there are numerous articles in which authors particularise literary representations of alcoholism. Here, one is particularly obliged to pay tribute to *Dionysos: The Literature and Intoxication Triquarterly*, a journal published between 1989 and 2001, comprising an amalgam of articles and reviews.

Criticism concerning literary dissections of alcoholism mostly pertains to fiction, but one has to acknowledge the fact that there is an abundance of source texts across genres. The most conspicuous presence of the theme is observable in alcohol/recovery memoirs, which are non-fictional records, often warning testimonies with a didactic tinge, or triumphant, if painful, accounts of being reclaimed to sobriety. Jack London's *John Barleycorn* (1913) is one of the first memoirs of the kind, but there are numerous others, such as William Seabrook's *Asylum* (1935), in which he gives a detailed account of spending almost half a year in an institution, getting his "alcohol-soaked tissues, nerves, organs and senses unpickled" (145). There has been a virtual shower of alcohol memoirs published in recent years, particularly those written by recovering women. In the case of female-authored memoirs, there is often a distinctly feminine aspect attached, such as motherhood and alcohol dependence, a problem examined, for instance, by Jowita Bydlowska in her *Drunk Mom: A Memoir* (2013).

The above-mentioned non-fictional examples provide interesting autobiographical insights into alcoholism and the struggles experienced first-hand by recovering alcoholics. This, of course, is not to say that other literary forms cannot draw on the alcoholic experience of the author. A good example is Kaveh Akbar, an American of Iranian descent, whose volume of poems, *Portrait of the Alcoholic* (2017), "orbits", as he puts it in an interview, around the theme of alcohol, and reflects his own history of recovery (cf. Schmank 2017). In their analysis of alcoholism-themed poetry, Sarah Gorham and Jeffrey Skinner reflect that it "provides a fresh and open-ended context within which to consider alcoholism" (1997: xix). In fact, much as poetry may seem a genre uninviting in the context of alcohol-dependence, there is a great body of twentieth-century poetry in which one can find disturbing images of alcoholism, such as Louis MacNeice's "The Drunkard", which begins with a set of hallucinatory imagery:

His last train home is Purgatory in reverse,
A spiral back into time and down towards Hell
Clutching a quizzical strap where wraiths of faces
Contract, expand, revolve, impinge; disperse
On a sickly wind which drives all wraiths pell-mell

Through tunnels to their appointed, separate places. (Digby and Digby 1988: 228-229)

Similarly in drama, there are compelling representations of alcoholism. Two good examples, though representing completely different settings, are Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* (1946) and Mike Leigh's *Ecstasy* (1979). An interesting discussion on the portrayal of alcoholism in dramatic works is undertaken by John DiGaetani in *Stages of Struggle: Modern Playwrights and Their Psychological Inspirations* (2008), in which, apart from discussing American and English playwrights, he devotes much space to Irish representatives, such as Brian Friel, substantiating the choice by the "legendary problem with drink" (83) in Ireland. Still, neither poetry nor drama for that matter, offer such a profusion of passages and references concerning alcoholism as fiction does, certainly not in twentieth-century literature and onwards. The abundance of fictional material is probably not so conspicuous at first sight, because fiction, owing to its volume, requires more time to research. It is also more difficult to anthologise, for an editor can only include passages from larger works, or a very limited number of short stories, as Miriam Dow and Jennifer Regan do in *The Invisible Enemy: Alcoholism and the Modern Short Story* (1989).

Arguably, the most obvious points of departure in any discussion on how alcoholism is represented in fiction are two classics of the genre, Charles Jackson's *The Lost Weekend* (1944), and Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* (1947). Both novels seem inevitable literary encounters for anyone interested in the fictional representation of alcohol-dependence, partly owing to their film versions⁵, but also because they have been extensively discussed in criticism, unlike, it has to be emphasised, many other fictional representations of alcoholism. The two novels, even though both feature dysfunctional alcoholics, and both are harrowing visions of a descent into an alcoholic abyss, offer completely different portrayals and narratives. *The Lost Weekend*, apart from providing a psychological portrait of an alcoholic, is more focused on the dissection of what might be labelled alcoholic logistics; *Under the Volcano*, on the other hand, is far more elusive, metaphorical, even mystical.

Obviously, apart from Jackson's and Lowry's canonical renditions, there is a whole palette of fictional portrayals of alcoholism. Admittedly mostly in novels which are not entirely focused on the issue, they either contain an alcoholism sub-plot, or one of the characters is severely addicted. The protagonist of Graham Greene's *The Honorary Consul* (1973), Charles Fortnum, for instance, is described in a rather clichéd manner as one whose "veins run with alcohol" (2000: 44).

5 Respectively, 1945, directed by Billy Wilder, and 1984, directed by John Huston.

However, besides a stock pattern of fictionalising alcoholism, there are also more idiosyncratic examples, such as Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited* (1945). The drinking repertoire of its principal alcoholic character, Sebastian Flyte, is mainly based on vintage wines and a fusion of tastes, such as “strawberries and a bottle of Château Peyraguey” (2008: 18), all perfectly matching his aristocratic background. Unlike most characters in fictional representations of alcoholism, Sebastian can ceaselessly feed his addiction on rare vintages, stocked in wine cellars which hold supplies large enough to last for at least a decade (cf. 75). Nonetheless, the pervading sensuousness of Sebastian’s drinking is soon dispelled when he is formally diagnosed as an alcoholic (cf. 200). Another good example, this time ‘positively charged’, as it were, is *Whisky Galore* (1947) by Compton Mackenzie. The novel is a light comedy, almost a paean to the Scottish ‘water of life’, but it does include a few characters who are definitely on the addicted side, though their portrayals are sympathetically excusable rather than accusatory.

Leaving aside various exceptions⁶, and regardless of the degree to which a given novel is suffused with alcoholism, it is possible to distinguish a number of recurring, if not dominant, narrative and character templates. One is the standard portrait of a self-pitying, self-loathing, and self-destructive alcoholic who sentimentalises about his or her predicament and the wasted chances, often in a rather platitudinous manner. A point in case here is Harlan Ware’s *Come, Fill the Cup* (1952). Ware’s protagonist, Lew Marsh, is a newspaper reporter who has been on the wagon for some time, but the memories of his alcoholic past are still vivid: “In other days he would have taken the stairs and the alley short cut to Abe Rouch’s bar, to slouch with one foot on the rail, erasing the day. A good, stiff, biting slug of rye. Make it a double, Abe, I’m tired tonight” (1952: 3). In other passages of the novel, one will find ‘diagnostic’ reflections, which are, in fact, copious in many fictional accounts of the kind: “A drunk – when he’s happy – drinks to celebrate his happiness. When sad, to drown his sorrow. When tired, to pick himself up. When excited, to quiet down. When ill, for his health. When healthy, because it can’t hurt him. Drunks shouldn’t drink” (64).

Another type of fictionalising alcoholism is characterised by a didactic tenor, which, as the above quote shows, is not at all alien to Ware’s novel. A full-blooded example is *The Truth About Leo* (2010), whose author, David Yelland, draws heavily on his own alcoholic past. The protagonist is ten-year-old Leo, whose mother has died of cancer and who now lives with his father, Tom Rake, a local GP who is a less and less functioning alcoholic. Framing an alcohol-dependent character

6 A particularly good example would be Jonathan Ames and Dean Haspiel’s *The Alcoholic* (2008). However, as it is essentially a graphic novel, it is not discussed in this article. Another interesting instance of pictorial representation of alcoholism is George Cruikshank’s *The Bottle and The Drunkard’s Children* (1847/8), a set of plates with comments.

in the context of parenthood is tempting, but can be a challenge, the more so if the target audience is both adults and (pre-)teens. In his review of the novel, Mal Peet, himself an author of young adult fiction, is quite merciless, claiming that Yelland's depiction "is so earnest that it drives out plausibility", and that the children's conversations about alcoholism "mimic unconvincingly the dialogue of an AA meeting" (2010). Indeed, the novel's "unrelenting emotiveness", as Peet calls it, may seem somewhat overwhelming; but there are, if only a few, passages which clearly show that there is great potential in utilising the parent-child background for fictionalising alcoholism. This is particularly conspicuous in a classroom scene where Leo drops his schoolbag, from which a bottle of vodka, hidden there by his father in an alcoholic haze, rolls on the floor, much to Leo's embarrassment and humiliation (cf. 83-85).

Whereas novels such as *Come, Fill the Cup* and *The Truth About Leo* pay little attention to the graphic depiction of alcoholism, and are laden instead with sermonising reflections, if not cheap didacticism, there is a category which verges on the scatological, a feature mostly prevalent in novels written in the past three decades or so. The protagonists are hard-core alcoholics, desperately refuelling at the local shops or petrol stations as soon as their stock of spirits is depleted. The choice of drink is determined purely by the alcohol proof needed to, as Ames puts it, "recapture intoxication" (2004: 154). The narratives revolve around all that helps to "banish the self" (Gorham and Skinner 1997: xi): the actual act of drinking, getting drunk, and suffering the consequences of the latter. Here, alcoholism is generally viewed through the prism of physiology, rendered with repulsive details. An example which probably surpasses any other in such novels is James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* (2003), where vomitorial depiction is stretched to extremes:

I follow my usual routine. Crawl to the Bathroom. Vomit. Lie on the floor. Vomit. Lie on the floor. Vomit. Lie on the floor. Some of the vomit gets stuck in my new teeth and it hurts cleaning it out. After the cleaning, I vomit again and I clean again and I crawl back to bed. (69)

I vomit twice and I have to clean my own vomit as well as the spit and the piss and the bloody tissue and the shit. (72)

Apart from the fact that the characters of such novels are forever submerged in "the perpetual cloud of alcohol" (1990: 92), to use a phrase from John O'Brien's *Leaving Las Vegas* (1990), the background is often shady, criminal, or debauched, if not utterly perverted. In O'Brien's case it is prostitution; in Alasdair Gray's *1982 Janine*, (1984) the fetishistic and *sadomasochistic fantasies of its alcoholic protagonist*; and in Gordon Williams's *Big Morning Blues* (1974) the setting consists

of sex-shops and strip clubs, complementing and reinforcing, as it were, the alcohol-induced moral decay.

Degeneration, either born out of or combined with alcohol-abuse, is to be found primarily in fiction where the protagonists are mentally unbalanced, alcoholic sociopaths. In its lighter version, the fiction in question includes such novels as *The Woman in the Window* by A. J. Finn (2018): the main character, Ann Fox, is a phobic, steadily sipping wine daily. Even more so this applies to crime fiction, in which alcohol abuse is ubiquitous, particularly since alcohol and crime are often interrelated. A classic here is Patricia Highsmith’s *Strangers on a Train* (1950), where the protagonist, Charles Bruno, is a psychopath and an alcoholic, masterminding a murder exchange. Finally, there is Patrick Hamilton’s *Hangover Square* (1941), with its monomaniac protagonist, George Harvey Bone, who suffers from what seems a dissociative identity disorder, and, constantly fuelled by alcohol, ends up a murderer.

There are, however, novels which ignore the visually repugnant facets of alcoholism, and instead of focusing on mere depiction of physical and mental degradation, contextualise alcohol abuse in a specific, socio-cultural frame. Although the primary focus here is Anglo-American fiction, it seems that the discussion on embedding literary representations of alcoholism in a specific context should not entirely exclude a broader perspective, if only in passing. After all, fictionalising alcohol(ism) is to be found in different literatures, from Joseph Roth’s allegorical *The Legend of the Holy Drinker* (1939) to Antoine De Saint-Exupéry’s *The Little Prince* (1943), in which a tippler drinks to forget that he is ashamed of drinking (cf. 1974: 43). Donald Newlove boasts in *Those Drinking Days: Myself and Other Writers* that he has a “thick notebook of excerpts from world literature” (1981: 151), all, of course, literary representations of alcoholism. However, the factor which seems particularly important here is not just the number of fictionalisations, but the availability of convenient contexts in which to frame a literary representation of alcohol abuse. A good example is Hans Fallada’s largely autobiographical *The Drinker* (written in 1944, and first published in 1955), which features Erwin Sommer, a local entrepreneur whose business suffers numerous setbacks resulting in his final, alcohol-induced downfall. What is more interesting about the novel is the fact that the story is set in Nazi Germany. Admittedly, Fallada does not explicitly refer to the political and military background, but there is a pervading sense of the aura of authority and discipline: the institution to which Sommer is sent in the final stages of his alcoholism employs compulsory and punitive, rather than therapeutic, methods, with a heavy emphasis on hard physical labour and rigid rules, rather like a labour camp (cf. Eghigian 2011). As one of the doctors working there explains euphemistically, “[a] little discipline is good for everybody, isn’t it?” (219).

Similarly fertile context-wise are East European literatures, which contextualise alcoholism utilising cultural, political, and historical specificity. A good example is the literature written by East German writers. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, many of them continued setting their fiction in the political aura of the GDR period.⁷ Likewise, Polish literature offers a whole body of alcoholism fiction framed within the communist context. Agnieszka Osiecka's novella, *White Blouse* (1988), is set in the early 1980s, following the introduction of martial law. In the bleak Warsaw landscape, Osiecka's alcoholic protagonist, Elżbieta, virtually sails between restaurants whose names stand in absurd contrast to the isolated world behind the Iron Curtain. This alcoholic topography, as it were, encompasses places with names such as "Metropol", "Grand", or "Oaza" (cf. 44, 45, 70), which connote all but the quality of life during the communist era. Quite a different fictionalisation of alcoholism is offered in Soviet/Russian literature, where heavy drinking is an inherent element of the mental landscape, referred to by Bakhtin in quite an exculpatory manner as "the mystical and metaphysical atmosphere of Russian alcoholism" (quoted in Shnitman-McMillin 1998: 284). This is well illustrated in Vladimir Kantor's *Crocodile* (1990)⁸, where alcohol abuse of epic proportions has a tinge of national heroism, most conspicuously during a drinking spree when the participants boast that the size of their vodka glasses renders those used by foreigners for double whisky and soda simply laughable (cf. 86-87).

Finally, one cannot omit here the uniquely idiosyncratic literary treatment of alcohol (ab)use by the Czech writer Bohumil Hrabal. His characters, however, even if some of them are heavy drinkers, are euphemistically introduced in *The Gentle Barbarian* (1973) as "beer enthusiasts" (cf. 1997: 20)⁹, suffering from what might be labelled beerholism. The rendition is spiced with the inimitable Czech brand of humour, particularly when the time frame is the communist background (cf. Škvorecký 1993: ix-xviii). In *Too Loud a Solitude* (1977), its protagonist, Hanta, who has spent thirty-odd years operating a press compressing waste paper, openly admits to the habitual drinking of "beer after beer" (2010: 6), particularly at work (cf. 36). It seems, in fact, that Hanta's job is almost integrated with his drinking routine: "In an average month I compact two tons of books, but to muster the strength for my godly labours I've drunk so much beer over the past thirty-five years that it could fill an Olympic pool, an entire fish hatchery" (2). Similarly, *The Little Town Where Time Stood Still* is flooded with beer, some characters

7 See, for instance, **Wolfgang Hilbig's** *Das Provisorium* (2000), a novel featuring an alcoholic writer whose identity is torn between East and West Berlin. Hilbig lived most of his life in the GDR, politically involved as a member of the socialist party, and after reunification he continued setting his novels in the East German reality.

8 No English translation available.

9 No English translation available; my translation from the Polish version.

customarily drinking it “first thing in the morning” (2017: 92). Beer symbolism is overwhelmingly ever-present, as in, for instance, female breasts being likened to “two half-kegs of beer” (52).

Literary portrayals of alcoholics in British and American fiction are generally short of such indigenous contexts providing additional ‘colour’ to the treatment of the theme. However, one can find novels in which alcoholism functions as an important element of the narrative, rather than its sole focus, reinforcing a particular context, as in the following ‘spiritual’ settings. In Graham Greene’s *The Power and the Glory* (1940) the protagonist is, as Greene calls him, a “whisky priest” (79). The coinage immediately signals two conflicting areas, most straightforwardly explained in the priest’s confession: “I have been drunk – I don’t know how many times; there isn’t a duty I haven’t neglected” (1967: 208). Nick Ripatrazzone’s conclusion that the priest’s earlier religious aspirations have been “replaced with a constant desire to drink” (2016) can easily be extended to another novel, Edwin O’Connor’s *The Edge of Sadness* (1961), whose protagonist, Father Hugh Kennedy, also exemplifies failing vocation. Father Kennedy, afflicted with “unaccountable sadness” and “emptiness where fullness should be” (1962: 115, 120) fills this emotional void with alcohol. The Bishop redirects him to Father Luke Leary, a doctor working with Alcoholics Anonymous, but when Kennedy fails to mend his ways he is relocated. Although the protagonist is a priest, alcoholism in O’Connor’s novel is not merely a problem set against a backdrop of faith, but is a tool to probe human nature. This is most evident in Kennedy’s ruminations on his addiction: “It’s the familiar story of the trap: does it become much different because the narrator is a priest?” (107). By the same token, the Bishop’s commentary on Kennedy’s alcoholism is not laden with preaching, but reveals a genuine understanding, as in his reply to Kennedy’s expiation: “sorrow in itself doesn’t really help much. It’s too easily neutralized. It doesn’t last long” (116).

Embedding alcoholism in a context has a far greater potential than merely depicting patterns of dependence, an approach which, after all, has limited application. The former seems particularly popular with Irish and Scottish writers, who employ alcoholism in varied settings. The range of contexts includes, for instance, the familial backdrops in Roddy Doyle’s *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* (1996) or in Agnes Owens’s novella *A Working Mother* (1994). The list of novels is indeed quite long here, but there are two which seem worth particular attention. The novels in question are Brian Moore’s *Judith Hearne* (1955), subsequently republished as *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* (1956), and George Friel’s *Mr Alfred M.A.* (1972). Both of them offer a perspective which reflects the complexity of alcohol dependence, refuting the simplistic view often taken in alcohol-centred debates on whether “alcohol leads to anomie” or, quite the reverse, “anomie leads to alcoholism” (cf. Douglas 2003: 3). What is more, they not only use alcoholism

in a particular context, but do so with what might be called minimalist finesse in the fictionalisation of alcohol dependence. In neither of them does the alcoholic theme appear immediately and obviously, nor does it obscure the focal point of the novel.

In *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* the first signal that Judith Hearne might be more than familiar with immoderate drinking appears quite late in the novel¹⁰, but such hints grow in intensity, as in her visit to the O'Neills', where she is customarily offered a glass of sherry: "The first sip was delicious, steady, making you want a big swallow" (1962: 85). Moore introduces such seemingly trifling drinking vignettes until the narrative takes a rapid turn and Judith's drinking problem becomes apparent. The following passage, in which she discontinues a spell of abstinence, reveals much about her dependence. This is conspicuous first of all in the haste and impetuosity with which she attacks her drink: "she scrambled off the bed, shaking, took a glass from the trunk and scabbled with her long fingers at the seal, breaking a fingernail, pulling nervously until the seal crumbled on the floor and the cork lay upended on top of the bedside table" (111). More importantly still, the habitual nature of her drunkenness becomes evident in her alcoholic tactics – before plunging into drinking she rapidly replaces her clothes with a nightdress, fully aware that once under the influence she might not be in full control; as she puts it, she is "wise in the habits of it, because sometimes you forgot, later" (111). Only having thus prepared for the inevitable aftermath of excessive alcohol intake, can she blissfully enjoy the drink:

The yellow liquid rolled slowly in the glass, opulently, oily, the key to contentment. She swallowed it, feeling it warm the pit of her stomach, slowly spreading through her body, steadying her hands, filling her with its secret power. Warmed, relaxed, her own and only mistress, she reached for and poured a tumbler full of drink (111).

This point in the novel is Judith's 'coming out': from now on her dependence is no longer implied, but comes in full-scale, culminating in her drunken assault on the communion altar and the tabernacle in Chapter Eighteen (238-241).

However, such "dead time of drinking" (131) does not dominate the narrative. Rather, alcohol reflects the various aspects of Judith's 'lonely passion'. It connotes cosy snugness ("the sherry, golden, the colour of warmth", 85), and, in Judith's strong conviction, it is her most dependable comforter. As we learn, this has been

10 Steven Earnshaw claims (cf. 2018: 148) that this does not become manifest until Judith's customary Sunday visit to the O'Neills', which takes place in Chapter Five, but in fact one can trace, or sense it much earlier, at the beginning of Chapter Four, when it appears quite inconspicuously in the following comment: "When Mr Madden came down to breakfast, she saw that he looked ill, or (because she knew the dreadful signs of it) as if he had been drinking" (Moore 1962: 58).

so ever since her youth, when her friend, Edie Marrinan, who herself ends up an alcoholic, convinced her that it possesses curative properties: "the next time she had trouble with her bronchitis, she bought a big bottle of the tonic, drank it alone, and felt wonderfully on it" (127). In fact, Judith eagerly extends her appreciation of the medicinal value of drink, finding it a perfect antidote to just about anything: "It warmed her, it made sad things funny, and if you were feeling down at the mouth, or a little lonely, there was nothing like it for cheering you up" (127). As Judith's life proves to be a string of continuous disappointments, she soon finds a source of permanent solace in the bottle, a remedy for coping with non-physical afflictions and existential confusion: "A drink would put things right. Drink was not to help forget, but to help remember, to clarify and arrange untidy and unpleasant facts into a perfect pattern of reasonableness and beauty" (119).

In retrospect, Judith thinks of her life through the prism of the choices that were not hers but her elderly aunt's, whom Judith had to nurse for many years until her own prime became a thing of the past. Judith dwells on such melancholic as well as resentful recollections of the events that have led to her present state, a life deprived of what could have, but never has taken shape. Again, alcohol has a soothing and consolatory function here:

all the things Miss Hearne used to dream about in those lonely years with her poor dear aunt: Mr Right, a Paris honeymoon, things better not thought of now, all these things were slipping farther away each year a girl was single. So she cheered herself up as best she could and if she overdid it, it was a private matter between her and her confessor, old Father Farrelly, and he was understanding, he liked a drink himself, right up to the end, in 1952, when he had a stroke one Friday night before devotions. (128)

As can be inferred from this passage, what Judith particularly broods over is her lost womanhood. Being tied to her aunt rendered it impossible to follow her own choices, her passions remained unfulfilled, and her femininity non-existent, as it were. This is painfully pinpointed in the way Bernie Rice, the son of her landlady, perceives her: "He stared at Miss Hearne with bloodshot eyes, rejecting her as all males had before him" (8). Her last hope is one of the lodgers, James Madden, an impostor pretending to be a self-made hotel entrepreneur, but in reality merely a hotel doorman in New York. In what is no more than a case of mistaken intentions, Judith's infatuation for Madden turns out to be one-sided. She is abruptly and painfully made aware of this: once again, alcohol proves to be of help, if illusionary only, in coping with and coming to terms with her lonely and loveless fate. In its extreme version, particularly in the more advanced stages of inebriation, alcohol becomes "the stimulant of unreason"(119), whose properties

are almost magical: “Smile,’ she commanded. ‘Just this once: smile.’ And the photograph, converted by the delightful logic of intoxication, smiled. Miss Hearne smiled back, and poured herself another drink” (129).

Although alcohol in the novel plays a key role in many respects, Moore’s novel is not merely a fictional study of alcoholism. Drink is used here as a signifier, not only of Judith’s emotional and mental frame of mind, but several other things, such as, for instance, her social status. Alcohol has an important function here, both narration-wise and in designing Judith’s character. Judith’s permanent financial dire straits are perfectly conveyed through her ‘drink affordability’, an issue well-expounded during her visits to the O’Neills’, particularly in the comments on the amount of sherry offered by Moira O’Neill – “it had to last” (85). During one of her visits, Judith applies a special strategy to benefit as much as possible from the amount of alcohol which Moira quite generously provides: “One more drink would bring the good feeling. But meantime she must wait; she must let it do its work. She refused sandwiches and biscuits; they would spoil the effect of it” (165). Paradoxically, Judith’s economic hardship has a silver lining, because her lack of funds is a factor which, temporarily at least, prevents her from constant intoxication: “Truth to tell, she used to say to herself, I cannot afford even one bottle a month now, with things going as badly as they are and so little money about. The economies will help me struggle through” (128).

However, it is not only the shortage of funds that prevents Judith from drinking as much and often as she did in the not distant past. Alcoholic indulgence is curbed by spiritual principles: “drunkenness was a mortal sin” (151). However, as long as the aforementioned Father Farrelly, himself a heavy drinker, was alive and was lenient with her drinking, he absolved her from this particular sin. Unfortunately, after his death he was replaced by “harsh young confessors, young men who didn’t really understand the circumstances” (128), and instead of at least compassion, Judith had to accept uncompromising condemnation of her weakness. The everyday reminder, as it were, is the picture of the Sacred Heart “the coloured oleograph of the Sacred Heart”, which, along with the “silver-framed photograph of her aunt” always has its prominent place on “the mantelpiece of whatever bed-sitting-room Miss Hearne happened to be living in” (5). The picture of the Sacred Heart is a symbolic guardian of temperance, so in an act of alcoholic despair, Judith first tries to negotiate with it (“I must. Just a little one, it won’t be more, I promise Thee, O Sacred Heart”; 110), and finally resorts to turning the picture to the wall so that it does not witness her drink-thirsty attack on the bottle: “she turned the Sacred heart to the wall, scarcely hearing the terrible warning He gave her” (111). This is just a naive game of make-believe, but elsewhere in the novel Judith keeps up appearances by sending signals of the “[t]wo is my absolute limit” (86) type. She has been

preoccupied with the way she is perceived ever since her drunkenness seriously jeopardised her professional position:

Miss Hearne made a novena, after she lost three of her pupils because that Mrs Strain said she smelled of it one day when she met her in the street. She stopped drinking then, didn't touch a drop. She bought two bottles and kept them in a trunk, a temptation which nightly it gave her comfort to resist. (128)

The two bottles of whisky she keeps in her trunk are actually the ones which she finally fails to resist, but even after her integrity begins to fall apart, she still, almost obsessively, observes the social code. This is particularly the case during her visits to the O'Neills': "She looked down at the pale sherry in the glass and saw that it shook like a tiny sea. She tightened her grip, pressing her fingers against the rim of the glass. But her hand still trembled" (165). However, it is once more the O'Neills' house where Judith's stealth finally fails her, and she becomes fully exposed: "Mrs O'Neill saw the neck of the gin bottle sticking out of the bag. Somehow, it was like seeing Miss Hearne with her clothes undone" (224).

This exposure is the ultimate form of what Judith labels as "the awful hours of conscience" (131), not just in terms of sobering up as such, but the full realisation of the finality of the situation which she both creates and by which she is created:

What is to become of me, O Lord, alone in this city, with only drink, hateful drink that dulls me, disgraces me, lonely drink that leaves me more lonely, more despised? Why this cross? Give me another, great pain, great illness, anything, but let there be someone, someone to share it. (238-239)

Such self-awareness of Judith's plight is particularly well-expounded in the way Moore juggles with the semantics of alcohol, nowhere as meaningful in the novel as in the scene of Judith's vehement argument with Bernie, during which her whisky bottle ends up on the floor (cf. 180). When Judith regains consciousness, she searches for it, but finds it empty: "It was lying by the grate. Spilled. All spilled" (184). The phrasal and proverbial connotations of 'spill' very much exemplify Judith's wasted life, one which cannot be undone; worse still, not even acknowledged by anyone except herself: "Drunk? And why not, nobody's to mind, nobody minds if I'm anything. Nobody, not a single soul" (211).

Similar life-long solitude and, except when drink is concerned ("happy only with a glass in his hand"; 1987: 5), passionless existence lived in permanent stasis is experienced by the protagonist of George Friel's *Mr Alfred M.A.* In fact, the two novels have much in common, both in terms of the thematic contextualisation of alcoholism, and the way Friel and Moore depict their alcoholic protagonists. In both of them, too, alcoholism is a by-focus, rather than a primary

concern. Friel's eponymous Mr Alfred, a teacher, just like Judith Hearne is a solitary figure, utterly deprived of the emotional, let alone sexual, delights offered by relationships, of which he has experienced none: "always on the fringe of company, smiling into the middle distance ... a wallflower since puberty" (5). It seems that all the attributes of adolescence were utterly alien to him, a complete terra incognita of which he was not even fully aware: "He had never been at parties when he was a boy. He had never played at kissing-games. He had only heard of them" (71). Now, well-advanced in years, Mr Alfred has reached the point of surrender, unconditionally accepting his present status: "every door seemed locked, and without a key he was afraid to knock" (5). Mr Alfred is thus a bachelor, whose only remaining family link is an elderly aunt, but unlike Judith's still alive. The soothing agent, as it were, is drink, substituting Mr Alfred's missed opportunities, those concerning potential relationships in particular. Alcohol becomes a substitute, compensating for, or even, seemingly, surpassing the original loss: "I'm happier away from women' ... 'The happiest hours that e'er I spent were spent among the glasses-O!'" (16).

Mr Alfred's professional position is much more stable than that of Judith's in that he has for long had a steady job which allows him to drink regularly, a comfort quite alien to Judith Hearne. Much as in Moore's novel, in Friel's drinking does not come to the fore immediately, apart from the hints which can be found in occasional references, such as hailing Mr Alfred as "a veteran pubcrawler" (1987: 5). Gradually, however, his addicted nature comes to light with more and more references betraying dependence rather than mere drink appreciation: "He wished he had taken just one more whisky at the bar before it closed, or bought a half-bottle to carry out so that he could have another drink before he went to bed" (43). In the tragic finale of the novel, when Mr Alfred ends up in an institution – again, just as Judith Hearne does – he is questioned by Mr Knight, a psychiatrist, and reveals that his casual intake goes far beyond what could be considered as standard for a typical pub visitor: "seven or eight pints and seven or eight whiskies. Maybe more. But then I'm used to it" (174).

When Judith broods over her past, her focus encompasses the unfulfilled potentials, professional and creative ones. Much in the same vein, Mr Alfred 'revisits' his student years, particularly the volume of poems which remained unpublished. This (under)achievement of his is repeatedly recollected throughout the novel, a fond remembrance of the past which stands in sharp conflict with the present resignation: "in the poems of his youth he had tried to negotiate with reality. But in his middle-age reality was no longer open to negotiations" (106). One could venture to say that whereas Judith is devoted to the spiritual realm, a feature instilled in her during upbringing, and resulting from convent school education, Mr Alfred is devoted to literature. In fact, alcohol and literature are his two passions,

the former decidedly dominating, but otherwise quite intertwined. He is submerged in his solitary world of drinking and reading, inspirational, if this is the word, both ways: "he had a habit of thinking in quotations when he had a drink on him" (7). Even when Mr Alfred refers to the Deputy Head Master of his school, the criteria he applies to denigrate him are based on his being a "teetotaller who read nothing" (9), that is, someone who fails to recognise and appreciate fundamental pleasures of life. These pleasures are the two remaining lifelines, as Mr Alfred is convinced that his life has nothing more on offer, perfectly encapsulated in the following passage:

He felt his world was like a crowded bus speeding past the stop. It had left him behind. The daily frustrations of public transport analogised his fate. He didn't get on. Even if the bus did stop and some of the queue was allowed on board he was the one that was put off. He was always the extra passenger the conductor wouldn't take. He was without a home, wife or child, without father, mother, sister, brother or wellwisher. He hadn't even a car. He was unnecessary in the world, superfluous, supernumerary, not wanted. Nobody would miss him. He was an exile in his native land. (58-59)

However, just as Mr Madden appears like a late-flowering and short-lived hope in Judith Hearne's life, Mr Alfred's loneliness is unexpectedly disturbed by an emotional flash in the pan which temporarily fills his emotional void: "Tired of living unloved unloving Mr Alfred fell in love" (61). 'Falling in love' is probably a misnomer here, for Mr Alfred falls victim of a peculiar form of infatuation; much as Judith's is a misplaced case, his is hopelessly inappropriate, because he places his affections in one of his teenage pupils, Rose Weipers, his "ray" (63), found among a new class of girls he is to teach:

They were all agiggle, untidy and sweating after forty minutes in the gym, waddling, mincing, slouching, shuffling, hen-toed, splay-footed, unkempt, unclean, blacknailed, piano-legged, pin-legged, long and short, round and square, fat and thin, bananas and pears, big-breasted and flat-chested, chimps and apes, weeds and flowers, a dazzling tide of miscellaneous mesdemoiselles (63)

Mr Alfred's "autumnal love" (94), though platonic in its nature, is obviously impossible, but at the same time it is his fleeting moment of recognising what he missed in his youth. Mr Alfred is much aware that his emotional entanglement is probably influenced by what he defines as the "alcoholic confusion of his skull" (94). But even though he does not cross the thin line, at times even acting in a fatherly manner (another missing element in his life) his fondness for Rose does not go unnoticed and he is relocated to another school. Unsurprisingly, this

further affects his sense of being a social outcast, which plunges him into bouts of drinking far surpassing his former routines: "He took more and more to drink in the evening. He found he had to drink more to get the right effect of not worrying about anything" (120).

The final passages of the novel, encompassing the rather drastic scenes of Mr Alfred's drunken pub tour, his encounters with the police and subsequent detention, show a man who is madly lost, but not just because of his inebriety. Friel, like Moore, shows that the protagonist's alcoholism can be framed within a broader context. Mr Alfred and Judith Hearne are both alcoholics, but this is a device which helps in depicting their characters. Judith, entangled in her loneliness and religious as well as social restrictions, eventually breaks up. So does Mr Alfred, who is finally diagnosed by Mr Knight as a phobic who suffers from all possible variants; a man who, though a teacher, feels intimidated by pupils, is afraid to cross the street, hates cats, spiders and bees, and displays a number of other fears (cf. 176). Mr Knight gives his final pronouncement in strictly medical terms, defining his patient as a hopeless case:

The man's got pedophobia, homichlophobia, dromophobia, xenophobia, ochlophobia, haphophobia, planomania, kleptophobia, thanatophobia, he's an onychophagist, he's got gerontophobia, but notice he has no dysphagia, he's got zoophobia, gataphobia, arachnophobia, kainophobia, climacophobia, acrophobia, hodophobia, he suffers from intermittent tachylogia, he's got agoraphobia and kenophobia, thermophobia and melissophobia. (177)

CONCLUSION

Even a quick survey of alcoholism literature will inevitably reveal that, as Newlove remarks, "[g]reat writing about alcohol is an ocean without shoreline" (1981: 151). In fact, one could venture to agree with the Polish writer Ferdynand Goetel, who, quoted in 1932, reflected that so much had been written about "this wretched alcohol" that one feels virtually sick whenever another attempt is made to render it in literature (cf. Witkiewicz 1993: 47). Whether Goetel would stand by his comment had he lived to make a judgement from the present perspective remains open, but it certainly reflects the scope of literary interest in alcohol and its abuse. The most convincing proof is not only the fact that there is a multitude of literary representations of alcoholism, but, more importantly, that the available renditions reflect what Louis MacNeice poetically calls "drunkenness of things being various" (1990: 23). Indeed, literature encapsulates varied facets and shades of alcoholism, allowing much room for

diverse perspectives, perceptions and assumptions. Fictional accounts of alcohol abuse range from narratives of moral and physical decline, the “slippery slope to alcoholism” (1994: 163) as Janice Galloway calls it, or, on the other side of the continuum, returns to sobriety thanks to various schemes of the Alcoholics Anonymous type.

However, this is not to say that the theme has been thoroughly exploited, and that every new attempt to represent it in literature is bound to be a mere reproduction. The problem lies in the means of achieving an end. Nicholas Warner claims that “literature is better than science at conveying what drunkenness or alcoholism feels like – its terror, its pitiableness, its degradation, its ludicrousness, occasionally even its glory” (2013: 11). This is indeed hard to challenge, provided that the ‘conveying’ in question is not just a verbatim representation, but one which situates the topic within a framework allowing one to penetrate the alcoholic mind, simply because, as Roger Forseth rightly reflects, that is where an alcoholic is (cf. 1991: 12).

Quite in the same vein, Jack London defines alcoholic craving as “*quite peculiarly mental in its origin*” (1913: 339). Yet, much of the available alcoholism literature ignores its complexity, often presenting stock types, rather than individuated figures, offering repetitive and predictable depictions of continuous benders, with all their ensuing physicalities; to many readers, this may ring the been-there-and-seen-it bell, but little more. The same applies to the language which, if formulaic and not reaching beyond the cliché-ridden repertoire of lexis depicting various (post)stages of intoxication, will not leave a lasting impression on the reader. Herman Melville’s marine setting of *White-Jacket* (1850) is a good example of how employing more figurative diction can stir the imagination: “if he only followed the wise example set by those ships of the desert, the camels; and while in port, drank for the thirst past, the thirst present, and the thirst to come – so that he might cross the ocean sober” (53).

As mentioned earlier, novels such as *Under the Volcano*, or *The Lost Weekend* remain classics of the genre, each a tour de force of fictionalising alcoholism, often used as benchmarks in critical studies. However, apart from Lowry’s and Jackson’s masterpieces, there is a vast body of novels whose authors have attempted to either dissect alcohol dependency, or have incorporated alcoholic characters and themes in their works; yet, many of them have not received much critical attention as far as fictionalising alcoholism is concerned. Admittedly, in some cases, this does not come as much of a surprise. It seems that one of the reasons, as this article argues, is that a compelling treatment of the theme requires much more than focusing on the obvious, and that framing alcoholism within a specific context is more effectual in terms of its fictionalisation than a mere true-to-life portrayal. *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* and *Mr Alfred M.A.* are good examples of the

potential that lies in contextualisation rather than merely dissecting various facets of alcoholism in its fictional representation.

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'The delightful logic of intoxication': Fictionalising Alcoholism

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'Čudovita logika opijanjanja': fikcionalizacija alkoholizma

Alkohol vselej izzove različne, često konfliktne občutke. Književnost nam ponuja reprezentacije alkoholizma, ki omogočajo globlji uvid v alkoholno odvisnost in njene številne implikacije. Članek se osredinja na podobo alkoholizma v književnosti, predvsem v sodobni angleški prozi.

Ključne besede: alkohol, alkoholizem, kultura, književnost, proza