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Early American Addiction Biography and Film

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NOTE: The original 1,000+ page manuscript for *Slaying the Dragon: The History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America* had to be cut by more than half before its first publication in 1998. This is an edited excerpt that was deleted from the original manuscript.

One of the ways in which America came to recognize the existence of a “drug problem” was through the autobiographical accounts of addicts. Even before the Civil War, several accounts of drug use were published, including These included William Blair's 1829-30 *An Opium-Eater in America: The Fratricide's Death*, H.D. Bulkey's self-portrait of opium addiction published in the *New York Medical Times*, and accounts of hashish use published in popular magazines by Bayard Taylor and Fitz Hugh Ludlow. In later years, more widely read confessionals included F.B. Morris's *The Panorama of a Life and Experience in Associating and Battling with Opium and Alcoholic Stimulants* (1878), H.G. Cole's *Confessions of an American Opium Eater, From Bondage to Freedom* (1895), W.R. Cobbe's *Doctor Judas, A Portrayal of the Opium Habit* (1895), and R.B. Eubank's *Twenty Years in Hell or the Life, Experience, Trials and Tribulations of a Morphine Fiend* (1903). (Frisch, 1977, 199-207) Many of these books mixed accounts of the pain of

addiction with lurid stories of drug intoxication—told in full “euphoric recall” of their exaggerated pleasures—and tributes to the power of various drugs.

Drug themes were also prominent in America's new film industry. Within 20 years of Thomas Edison's 1891 application for a patent on a motion picture camera, American filmmakers had discovered the public's appetite for drug-themed morality tales that mixed exotically portrayed episodes of drug use with anti-drug messages. Early drug themes films included *Chinese Opium Den* (1894) and *Rube in an Opium Joint* (1908), the latter produced by Thomas Edison's American Mutoscope and Biograph Company. These were quickly followed by America's first openly anti-drug film, D.W. Griffith's *For His Son* (1912). In this story, a father develops a cocaine-laced soft drink, Dopokoke, to raise money for his son's wedding. The product makes a fortune, but the son—no longer satisfied with the weak cocaine in his father's product—begins to inject cocaine. The film shows the son

aging, then dying within a few months of his first cocaine injection. Such falls from grace through drug use was the most common theme in early American drug movies.

Other early films that reflected the dramatic changes occurring in American drug laws included *The Opium Smuggler* (1912), *The Opium Smoker* (1913), *The Opium Smugglers* (1913), *Slaves of Morphine* (1913), *Dr. Killlem's Dope* (1914), *Cocaine Traffic* (1914), *Morphia—The Death Drug* (1914), *The Drug Traffic* (1914), *The Drug Terror* (1914), *The Narcotic Spectre* (1914), *The Derelict* (1914), *The Accursed Drug* (1915), *The Secret Sin* (1915), *The Devil's Profession* (1915) *The Devil's Needle* (1916), *The Girl Who Didn't Care* (1916), *The Devil's Assistant* (1917), *Broken Blossoms* (1919), *The Yellow Claw* (1921), *The Drug Monster* (1923), and *Human Wreckage* (1923).

Two themes in America's early drug films endured throughout the twentieth century. The first was the theme of drug-induced sexual corruption. Films like *The Inside of the White Slave Traffic* (1913) graphically linked prostitution with drug use. *Morphia—The Death Drug* (1914) showed a lecherous doctor forcing morphine on his naive secretary. And *The Little Girl Next Door* (1923) told the familiar story of innocent youth caught up in a criminal opium ring. The second enduring theme was the portrayed link between drugs and foreign criminal conspirators. The villain roles in drug movies often symbolized the perceived foreign threat. Lon Chaney showed the transforming power of make-up by playing opium-smoking Chinese in such films as *Bits of Life* (1921), *Outside the Law* (1921) and *Shadows* (1922). In most of these early films, dope rings run by foreigners forced their evil product on innocent and vulnerable Americans.

Early American films also captured America's fascination with mythical drugs that could transform and enhance performance. Films portrayed drugs that gave strength (*Elixir of Life*, 1909), courage (*Elixir of Bravery*, 1910), happiness (*Instantaneous Nerve Powder*, 1909), and energy (*The Rapid Powder*, 1910). The

movies even showed drugs that could make people dance (*The Dancing Powder*, 1910). Particularly popular were films about drugs that heightened energy. Movies such as *Wonderful Pills* (1909), *Oh, That Tonic* (1910), *The Wonder Powders* (1912), and *The Two Powders* (1912) all portrayed drugs that gave people unquenchable energy. While the powers of America's newly emerging drugs were fictionally portrayed in these movies, there was also the underlying theme of danger and hidden evil. For example, the possibility that one might be drugged without knowing it with dire consequences was played out in movies like *The Doctored Beer* (1910), *Outwitted by a Child* (1910), and *Grandma's Sleeping Draught* (1912).

Media themes in the first two decades of the 20th century also demonized drugs in indirect ways. This was most evident in the two campaigns known as the "social hygiene movement" and the "social purity movement." The former sought to educate the public about venereal disease, and the latter aroused audiences with stories of young virgins who were seduced or kidnaped, then forced into prostitution through alcohol, drugs, or blackmail. These themes filled the newspapers and were dramatized in such stage plays as the 1913 *Damaged Goods* and in such early films as *Traffic in Souls* (1913), *White Slave Traffic* (1913), *The Great White Trail* (1913), *The Little Girl Next Door* (1916), and *Is Any Girl Safe?* (1916). In 1910, the social purity campaign led to the passage of the Mann Act, a federal law that forbade the transport of women into the country or across state lines for immoral purposes.

As America entered World War I (in 1917) and approached the beginning of alcohol prohibition (1919), the campaign in the media against other drugs intensified. Anything that threatened America's war effort—including drug addiction—was portrayed as unpatriotic. Through the constant linking of drugs with internal and external enemies, drugs were defined as un-American. In 1918 a number of articles in the *New York Times* charged German agents with smuggling drugs to American

army bases and public schools. The following excerpt from the December 18 issue is typical of the tone:

Into well-known German brands of toothpaste and patent medicines. . . .naturally for export only. . .habit forming drugs were to be introduced; at first a little, then more, as the habit grew on the non-German victim and his system craved ever increasing quantities. . . .in a few years Germany would have fallen upon a world which cried for its German toothpaste and soothing syrup. . .a world of "cokeys" and "hop fiends" which would have been absolutely helpless when a German embargo shut off the supply of its pet poison (quoted in King, 1972, p. 26).

Newspapers also made frequent and vague references to plots by Bolsheviks and anarchists to weaken America with drugs. The view that drugs were unpatriotic as well as illegal created a climate for the passage of tough municipal, state, and federal anti-drug laws—and aggressive enforcement of these laws.

The emergence of drug themes and portrayals of drug users and drug use in film raised concerns early in the century. In 1915, Pennsylvania became the first state to pass a statute to discourage the distribution of anti-drug films—a statute sparked by concern that the explicit drug themes and scenes of drug use might increase rather than decrease drug use. (Such concerns will resurface in the 1960s and 1970s.) Virginia required licensing of films and Maryland prohibited scenes that might show viewers how to use drugs. As portrayals of drug use and drug users evolved over time, so did the standards of censorship.

The National Association of the Motion Picture Industry made the first pronouncement on this issue in 1921, when it condemned films that made drunkenness attractive or portrayed scenes of drug use. Industry groups in the 1920s and 1930s went farther by recommending that no film portray illegal drug trafficking.

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