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## **The White Logic: Alcoholism and Gender in American Modernist Fiction (review)**

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REVIEW

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

**Reviewed by:**

*Reviewed by*

*Tim Rivinus (bio)*

Humans have used psychoactive chemicals to alter and facilitate consciousness throughout history, but at no time has this phenomenon been more stridently, self-consciously, revealingly, and widely the subject of personal and scientific analysis, experiment, and debate as in the twentieth century. Some of our most interesting explorers of addictive behavior have proved not to be scientists but writers of fiction, drama, and poetry. John W. Crowley, professor of English at Syracuse University in New York State freshly explores this phenomenon for us in his authoritative new study, *The White Logic: Alcoholism and Gender in American Modernist Fiction*.

*The White Logic* is a series of historically and thematically connected essays. The chronology begins with an examination of the fiction of William Dean Howells, an author whom Crowley describes as, “the chief American proponent of literary realism. . . . [whose life] spanned **[End Page 263]** the heyday of temperance” (p. 5), and ends with an examination of Charles Jackson’s *The Lost Weekend*, which was subsequently popularized by a movie of the same name. Between these two stand well-wrought examinations of Jack London’s *John Barleycorn: The Memoirs of an Alcoholic* (arguably London’s best book-length work), Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *Tender Is the Night*, John O’Hara’s *Appointment in Samara*, and Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood*.

Crowley gives inspired readings of the texts in light of their authors’ lives, attitudes, and experiences with alcohol use and abuse, and analyzes them through the lens of their particular sociopolitical scenes. The result helps us better to know how Americans, and especially white male Americans, see themselves and why we continue to reference, define, and glorify our relationship to the experiences of intoxication and addiction.

Thought of in his time as a “dean” of American Letters, Howells’s life

was riven by self-doubt, personal tragedy, and an abiding sense of exile. Born in rural Ohio, he moved to the urban Northeast and recorded intellectual life there. Howells, born a year after the American Temperance Society was founded (1837), saw alcohol and alcoholism as a piece of the human condition throughout the Temperance era. In his first study, Crowley convincingly demonstrates that Howells saw the topic of alcohol and alcoholism as also having a rightful place in fiction, most particularly in *The Lady of the Aroostook* (1879) and *The Landlord at Lion's Head* (1897). By showing that American society was “an emergent culture of conspicuous consumption [where] addiction . . . would become, in effect, the sign of modernity itself” (p. 18), Howells did for American readers what his American contemporaries Mark Twain and Steven Crane did, and what his predecessors and counterparts (George Eliot, Gustave Flaubert, and Thomas Hardy) had done and were doing on the continent.

True to the mind and soul of the addicted alienist, London, the subject of Crowley's second critical essay, strove to study the psychological effects of alcohol in detail in his own being—during intoxication, obsession, and addiction, although, as Crowley correctly points out, London could not finally accept that he was an alcoholic. At first ironic blush, London's *John Barleycorn* is merely a temperance tract—one of many. It then emerges as a stream-of-consciousness monologue, a memoir, and psychological thriller that gives a human face to alcoholism. This early, eloquent, human-confessional voice later became the stock-in-trade of the Alcoholics Anonymous writings of Bill W[ilson] and his successors. **[End Page 264]**

With Crowley's essay as a preface, *John Barleycorn* becomes an excellent introduction to the moral and existential fervor that led to the idealistic, but already quite corrupted, yearning of Americans to create a “new social order”—a yearning that led voters to approve the Volstead Act of 1919, which became the Eighteenth Amendment to the American Constitution in January 1920 and dictated the prohibition of the sale and use of alcohol for the next thirteen years. In the context of prohibition, it is abundantly clear that...



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