



The Drunkard as a Drama of the Temperance Movement

Julia Stenzinger

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The Drunkard by William Henry Smith was first staged at the Boston Museum in 1844 and shown 144 times within one year. Being a mass media, the theater reached a large audience and the drama was a great success. At the time the drama was staged, the temperance movement was at the peak of its popularity and success. Today the Boston Museum is regarded as the birthplace of American temperance drama. In 1850, when the play had already achieved national recognition, B. T. Barnum staged The Drunkard at the famous American Museum on lower Broadway. On October 7th 1850 the audience was able to watch the 100th consecutive performance of the play. "Barnum's production of The Drunkard heralded the entry of temperance narratives into mainstream theatre and immediately became the standard against which all other temperance dramas were measured" (Frick 113).

In this paper I will first present a short historical survey of the temperance movement. At a time when drinking alcohol was part of every day life and the negative consequences that resulted from alcohol abuse were severe and obvious, the goal of the temperance movement was to achieve a social reform in the long term. The aim was to put an end to moral decline, crime, poverty and diseases. Alcohol addicts should be persuaded to stop drinking and supported in their effort. They should sign the pledge and abstain from alcohol.

The melodrama The Drunkard or The Fallen Saved is an excellent example of the way the theater was used as a means to present the social, moral and personal consequences of intemperance to the audience. The main focus of this paper will be on the criticism of alcohol abuse in The Drunkard. By close reading I will analyze how Edward Middleton's and his family's life changes due to the fact that Edward starts drinking too much alcohol and becomes an addict. But, as the title suggests, the drama also shows that alcohol addicts can be saved and rebuild their lives if they are strong enough and stop drinking. Thus, The Drunkard is a perfect example of the theatricalization of temperance propaganda. The theater was the ideal means to communicate the temperance message of abstinence, and the audience was entertained and received a moral lesson at the same time. The Drunkard was "by far the most prominent and influential [...], a play destined to become one of the most popular and best-known temperance dramas of all time" (Frick 113).

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