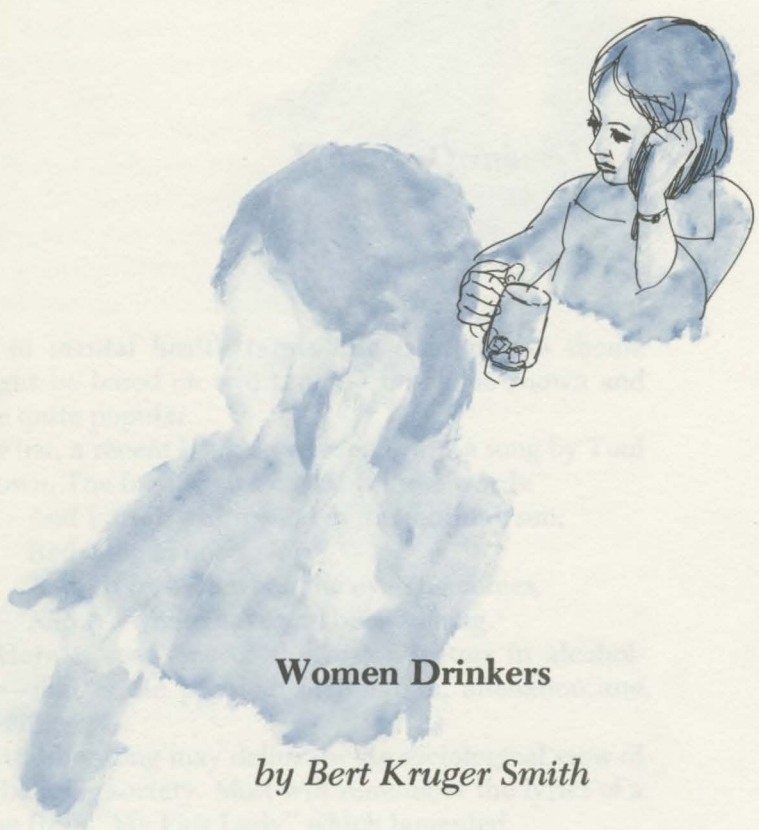




**Women Drinkers**



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## Women Drinkers\*

If, in mental health terms, life is a song, a theme might be based on two tunes — one little-known and one quite popular.

First, a recent book on women prints a song by Toni Brown. The final stanza contains these words:

And I drink white wine in the morning sun,  
Red wine at noon,  
And I'll be here when the evening comes,  
And it's where have you been so long.<sup>1</sup>

Here is seen one of the major factors in alcoholism—that is the problem of isolation, alienation and loneliness.

Another song may delineate the sociological view of a changing society. Most will remember the lyrics of a song from "My Fair Lady" which lamented,

"Why can't a woman be like a man?"

The news is that women can be — and often are — moving into increasingly equal roles in society.

\* Originally presented as a talk at a seminar on Women and Alcohol, May 25, 1976, sponsored by the Austin (Texas) Commission on the Status of Women.

<sup>1</sup> Toni Brown, "Red Wine at Noon," *What, Woman, and Who, Myself I Am* (Sonoma, California: Wooden Shoe, 1974), p. 51.



## In Antiquity

However, before launching into present-day culture, let's go back in time a bit . . .

In early Rome stringent prohibitions were placed on women's drinking on the premise that drinking leads to sex irregularities. Valerius Maximus said in accounting for the restriction, "lest thereby they slip into some disgrace." In a recent article in *Redbook* Dr. Margaret Mead says, "The crowning possibility of utter degradation — to find oneself pregnant and to have no memory of how it happened — is the kind of extreme circumstance that makes women fear their drinking even as they drink, and makes men shudder at the task of protecting an alcoholic wife or mother or daughter."<sup>2</sup> A law of Romulus provides the death penalty for women who drink as well as for those caught in adultery — two penalties found in the same sentence.

A note from Polybius says, "It is almost impossible for women to drink wine without being found out. For the woman does not have charge of the wine; moreover, she is bound to kiss all of her male relatives and those of her husband down to her second cousins every day on seeing them for the first time . . ." And the Roman Empire did not enjoy the blessings of breath spray!

One Egnatius Mecenius beat his wife to death with a stick because she had drunk from the wine vat. He was absolved by Romulus. The same fate befell Fauna, wife of the mythical king of early Italy, Faunus. She drank a whole jar of wine. Faunus beat her to death with myrtle switches. After she was gone, he missed her greatly and by way of atonement decreed divine honors for her.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Mead, "How Women Can Help Other Women Who Drink," *Redbook*, February 1975, pp. 49-52.

In later Rome when the plain-living Romans had been inoculated with the sophistication of older societies, Roman women would be as free as their brothers. Even highborn Roman ladies stooped to reveling. A daughter of Augustus reveled and caroused in scandalous fashion and went into exile with the added penalty of having to give up the use of wine. The mother of Nero was gluttoned with strong drink at the time of her shipwreck.

Nurses in ancient times were reputed to be tipplers. In the prologue to the *Poenulus* of Plautus, the speaker tells nurses to stay at home lest they become thirsty.

Christian writers from St. Paul to the later Fathers evidenced that women of the empire drank enough to cause the church authorities much worry. Pope Clement criticized women for reveling in luxurious riot. The author of the Constitution of the Holy Apostles urges widows to be sober. St. Basil pictures tipsy girls performing wanton dances in a church.<sup>3</sup>

In summary, this survey shows that if it is the fashion to be abstemious, women will live simply; when social ways loosen up and condone alcoholic titillation, the women will follow suit.



### Today's Picture

Who is the alcoholic woman?

She may be the slender red-head at the check-out counter of the supermarket.

<sup>3</sup> From "The Roman Attitude Toward Women's Drinking," *Drinking and Intoxication* by Arthur P. McKinlay, (New Haven, Conn.: College and University Press, 1959), p. 58.

Or the research scientist at the nearby university.  
The old woman alone in her tiny apartment,  
uncared for and uncaring—

Or the hairdresser—

A member of any ethnic group or religion—

A school teacher

The cleaning woman with the six children — who  
finds comfort and security only in the cheap wine she  
buys instead of food—

Francine, George's wife who usually has to be  
helped to the car after a party—

Or the next door neighbor—

Or

She may be you!

Where does one find her? In any part of town—

Holding an executive position in an office—

Existing in a slum house where nothing is beautiful  
except the feeling which she gets from the warmth of  
alcohol—

She may be in an ambulance, its siren screeching as  
she is rushed to the hospital after an automobile  
accident—

Or, conversely, she may not be found at all as she  
stays in darkened bedroom drinking and giving exam-  
ple to Thoreau's words that many of us live lives of  
quiet desperation.

She may live in a modest home, always busy with  
the children, waiting with impatience until they go to  
play or take a nap when she can seek her respite in a  
bottle.

Perhaps she is in an air-conditioned, centrally  
heated, 4 bedroom, 3 bath, 2 fireplace, 1 swimming  
pool home.

Or, maybe she is in the obstetrical ward of a local  
hospital, having given birth to a defective child.  
Research now lends substance to what has long been  
suspected, that "fetal alcohol syndrome" does exist in  
many children born to alcoholic mothers. A National



Foundation-March of Dimes study completed at the University of Washington School of Medicine shows that some 20 percent of children born to alcoholic mothers may have joint distortions, facial abnormalities, heart defects. All of the children showed typical growth deficiency.<sup>4</sup>



### Why Does She Drink?

Let's let the alcoholic woman tell you the causes in her own words. She has a thousand excuses:

"I drink because my husband is bossy." or

"My job has too many pressures." or

"My children get on my nerves." or

"My mother-in-law is critical."

A woman with a drinking problem often develops an extraordinary ability to rationalize. She needs a drink because she is tense, and then she needs another to perk her up. She drinks because her husband is away on a business trip, and she drinks to celebrate his return home.

Authorities state that great self delusion goes on in the woman alcoholic. This self delusion stems perhaps from loneliness, depression, immaturity, poor family relationships, or even a desire for femininity.

Will all of these factors change as women go increasingly into the work force? Dr. Margaret Mead does not think so. She claims that women's problems

<sup>4</sup>Kenneth L. Jones, et al., "Pattern of Malformation in Offspring of Chronic Alcoholic Mothers," *The Lancet*, June 1973, pp. 1267-1271.

are different from those of men and that the situations and frustrations they face are unlike also. Young women in their twenties, says Dr. Mead, often begin to drink heavily — women who are looking for satisfying life-styles or who are frustrated in their efforts to find themselves. Dr. Mead claims also that having a job is less protective for a drinking woman than for a drinking man because drinking men are more “shielded” by society until their drinking is totally disabling.<sup>5</sup>

The noted anthropologist also feels that single women are in greater danger of falling into the drinking pattern than are men. Much drinking may begin to occur out of boredom or fatigue when there is no one to interrupt these people. She says that this danger affects almost equally the young housewife and the single girl who is left alone. The most difficult situation of all, according to Dr. Mead, is the young widow, divorcee, or wife separated from a husband but still charged with the responsibility of caring for a home and children and earning a living. For her drinking is a means of escape, and the secret drinking often increases her possibility of becoming a victim of alcoholism.<sup>6</sup>

Women drink for various reasons, but how many have succumbed to this disease? Because of the secrecy with which women drink, the degree of alcoholism among the female population cannot be documented. Alcoholics Anonymous estimates that one quarter of its membership are women. Other similar studies seem to indicate that as many as nine out of ten drinking women are undetected. Many authorities are convinced that there are as many alcoholic women as alcoholic men.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Mead, “How Women Can Help,” p. 50.

<sup>6</sup> Mead, “How Women Can Help,” p. 50.

<sup>7</sup> Judy Fraser, “The Female Alcoholic,” *Addictions*, 20(3) 1973, pp. 64-80.



The protective devices which society has built up for the alcoholic woman may also mean that she can drink longer without being forced to seek help. Physicians, it has been said, often will prescribe drugs for an alcoholic wife and thus lead her to cross-addiction rather than to seeking help for her drinking problem. A statement from the acting director of a detoxification unit in Toronto states that many of the younger policemen are more tolerant of female drunks than they are of male counterparts. Thus, the conviction rate of men — 89 percent — exceeds the percentage of the alcoholic population that is male, but the conviction rate of women — 11 percent — falls considerably short of the same figure for women.<sup>8</sup>

Why does she drink? For multiple and complex reasons. Many authorities seem to feel that female drinkers differ from male drinkers and require a specialized kind of counseling. In present day society, women have been led to believe that many achievements are possible for them, and they may turn to drinking when they discover that life is boring or lonely or unfulfilling.<sup>9</sup> Dr. Mead states that women live under conditions that differ from those of men in our modern world and suffer from different frustrations while they face different situations.<sup>10</sup> The unattached middle-aged working woman seems to be a particularly vulnerable person, alcohol experts feel. Women, as a rule, encounter their drinking difficulties later in life than men, but the facts show that they catch up quickly. For men, as a rule, the illness may progress for a period of up to 15 years or more, but women do a fast "catch up" in only a few years.

Women also begin their drinking most often in response to some specific situation which is full of stress for them. The situation may be the breakup of

<sup>8</sup> Fraser, "Female Alcoholic," pp. 64-80.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Mead, "How Women Can Help," p. 49

marriage, which is extremely difficult for young women and particularly young mothers. Thus it is seen that women drink for a variety of reasons, but most of all, a woman drinks because she has developed inadequate coping devices to meet the stresses which life deals to her.

It was noted earlier that women drink to feel feminine. This seems bizarre to anyone who has seen a drunk woman and knows how unfeminine she is. However, one authority, Sharon Wilsnack, says that the potential female alcoholic experiences chronic doubts about her adequacy as a woman. She is doubly doubtful when there are threats to her sense of feminine adequacy which may come from marital problems or difficulties with children.<sup>11</sup>



### **What Can Be Done on Behalf of the Woman Alcoholic?**

In mental health there is great concern about three levels of programming — prevention, intervention, and cure. Most attention is given to aspects of cure — if there were such for the alcoholic.

Let us go back to intervention. The best treatment which can be devised for many alcoholic women is a life of involvement and mature concern for others. But women need to be helped to see themselves as worthwhile creatures. Many of them need to be

<sup>11</sup> Sharon C. Wilsnack, "Femininity by the Bottle," *Psychology Today*, April 1973, p. 40.



helped to develop coping mechanisms. Most of all, they need to feel that they are not alone. Many alcoholics can be diverted if there is help to shore up their feelings of worth and stimulate healthy concepts of self. Each person can aid on a one-to-one basis by recognizing the alcoholic woman whose life touches his or hers and making available to that woman the concern and the knowledge that resources are at hand.

The resources are such that they do not need to be delineated here. There are all of the organizational structures, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Allanon family groups, and the various agencies.

In addition, halfway houses in which women can recover from illness and begin to find themselves are increasingly appearing on the horizon. Concerned persons can work toward the establishment of such homes. A California organization dedicated to helping alcoholic women uses weekend counseling sessions in a country retreat. The Women's Rehabilitation Association of San Mateo County operates this retreat in the hills, and women are grouped four to a room — three relatively new to sobriety and one "den mother" with a great deal of logged "dry time" to serve as a model for the others.

In addition to showing concern for community agencies, people can be helpful as party hosts by recognizing that overloading potential problem drinkers with too much alcohol too fast and with too little food is not "hospitality." Support is needed for educational programs and at the earliest level for young people in schools to let them know the truth about alcohol addiction.

Consciousness can be raised. Groups and individuals can work for information in communities and help to change the life script of people like the woman who was written up in the *Austin American Statesman* in June of 1975.<sup>12</sup> A letter to the editor states that

<sup>12</sup> *Austin American Statesman*, Letters to the Editor, June 9, 1975.



although a column had listed this woman's death as due to "natural causes," she was killed by community neglect, ignorance, barbaric laws, and most of all by the willingness of the "good citizens" of the city to ignore special problems that didn't affect them personally.

Real citizen concern will be evidenced in the setting up of support systems for the single woman, in the availability of good day care centers and other agencies for the person coping alone with problems. People can be helped to learn alternative means of coping.

Each individual can be of service in preventive efforts in communities to improve schools, to diminish discrimination, to work against poverty, and to help give the coming generations of women and men a more solid world in which to grow strong.



## Epilogue

One family's children growing up in England often watched sparrows build a nest outside the window of their home. When a baby sparrow fell from the nest, the children's mother would not permit them to pick up the infant fledgling because the mother bird, smelling the taint of human flesh, would reject the baby and leave it to starve. Instead, the children were taught to use a silver spoon to lift the little bird back into the nest.

Perhaps people who care can remove the taint of evil from alcoholism and take the silver spoon of concern to put the drinking woman back into the nest of the family and community and thus help to heal the person who is suffering from the loneliest sickness of them all.

