Hogarth’s ‘Gin Lane’ and ‘Beer Street’

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Abstract The original intention of this paper was to draw on the link between art and medicine through the appreciation of a pair of prints created by Hogarth in 1750. This was done firstly, by viewing them as a direct health promotional campaign to curb alcoholism, and secondly, by studying Hogarth’s use of the depiction of disease as a means to achieve this. However, in analysing his motivation another more permanent link, still resonant in today’s society, was revealed—that between health and social structure.

Introduction

Even in his time, William Hogarth was much loved for his satirical, ‘conversation’ paintings. He was a man with strong social views and despite their light-hearted façade, most of his works exhibit a firm, political message. Many references also suggest that his character tended towards egotism and self-importance.¹ It is this personality mix that would have prompted him to make an open attempt to influence the general public through a pair of prints he created in 1750, ‘Gin Lane’ and ‘Beer Street’. Here, Hogarth contrasts two societies; honest beer drinkers and idle gin boozers, good versus evil.

‘Beer Street’ portrays an image of an ideal and quintessentially British society fuelled by patronage and England’s own produce. In contrast, the citizens of ‘Gin Lane’, are shown guzzling vast quantities of gin.² Hogarth depicts ordinary people caught up in a dysfunctional community who are seemingly unable to help themselves from reaching a chaotic state of self-destruction. In demoting gin drinking and portraying its associated problems in an exaggerated reality, Hogarth gives us a unique insight into the physical and mental illnesses of the mid-18th century.

A public health warning?

At face value these pictures seem to be a direct, public health promotional campaign to curb gin drinking and the complications of alcoholism, but
does Hogarth also reveals a more subtle, deeper message about society as a whole?

Hogarth expressed empathy for the lower classes which was no doubt in part due to his background being the son of a poor coffee house owner in Smithfield and having been confined to Fleet prison for debtors between the ages of ten and fifteen. He was on their side and very much a campaigner for the good of the working class people. 'Beer Street' depicts all that is English and good about British values where the heroes of the scene are common, honest professionals; a butcher, blacksmith, paver and sign painter (who in Hogarth’s own words was “the only true English artist’’). In 'Gin Lane', this empathy with the lower classes reveals something more. One’s first reaction is that the graphic illustrations of disease and decline in infrastructure are as a result of public gin drinking. However, seen from this new angle, we realise that gin drinking is not the honest working man’s fault, but instead the result of social and moral decline.

Hogarth mixed with all the political commentators of his day, not least his good friend Henry Fielding. Fielding was a great informer and much influenced Hogarth’s social views. In fact, it was due to Fielding and his pamphlet; ‘An Enquiry into the Causes of the late increase of Robbers’, that Hogarth was probably spurred to produce ‘Gin Lane’ and ‘Beer Street’. In the pamphlet Fielding identified gin drinking as a major problem in London, commenting; “There is great reason to think that gin is the principal Sustenance (if it may be so called) of more than a hundred thousand People in this Metropolis. A New Kind of Drunkenness... which, if not put a stop to, will infallibly destroy a great Part of the inferior People”.

### Depiction of health and disease

There is no doubt that alcoholism is the main cause of ‘disease’ seen in ‘Gin Lane’. Whilst there are some details to suggest the environment would have contributed to bad health (for example, the snail which might indicate the presence of open sewers and the crumbling buildings which offer no shelter), Hogarth actually states gin as the root cause of disease in his sub-script to the picture; "Gin cursed fiend, with fury fraught, Makes human race a prey; It enters by a deadly draught, and steals our life away... That liquid fire contains Which madness to the heart conveys, And rolls it thro' the veins’’.

Today, the medical profession recognises an accepted set of complications attributed to alcoholism and a great majority of these can be identified in ‘Gin Lane’. High in a ramshackled building above a gin shop hangs a body, illustrating suicide as one such complication which today is regarded as a very genuine risk associated with the severe depression caused by alcoholism. Another character in 'Gin Lane', placed under a hanging coffin, holds a set of bellows on his head with one hand and an impaled infant on a spike in the other. A state of madness springs to mind when viewing his face which is filled with deranged laughter — a condition that might in today’s society be diagnosed as some form of schizophrenia.

It is interesting to see how Hogarth depicts infants in 'Gin Lane'. A baby being force fed gin, a child sharing a bone with a dog and in the background, an orphan watching as his dead mother is buried. Excessive gin drinking is presented as a long term problem, affecting many generations. We see an infant plunging, to what must be its death, from the arms of a distinctly unconcerned mother. Her breasts are exposed and she is pre-occupied in the act of taking snuff, a detail which could imply that she is trying to emulate the upper class, but to the cost of her baby!

Furthermore, on the central mother character are large, irregular, black ulcers that cover her upper lower leg and also her forehead. Hogarth is
evidently trying to imply a particular condition—
but what? On close inspection the ulcers can be
seen to be weeping and have an indented look.
Due to their appearance and location it may be
inferred that they are in fact Gummatous ulcers
resulting from tertiary syphilis.

On examination of the full sized prints one can
see that Hogarth has used a stippling effect on the
copper plate to create a deliberate pattern on the
mother’s chest. Could it be a rash? If so it would
confirm the possibility of syphilis, which in its
secondary state is often accompanied by a rash.

Syphilis, a sexually transmitted bacterial infection
caused by Treponema pallidum, was rife in the 18th
century and although not directly related to alco-
holism would undoubtedly have been more prevalent
as a result of the careless and irresponsible attitudes
induced by drink and depression. Perhaps, even in
a state of drink-induced poverty, women were forced
to earn a living through prostitution, but either way it
is a symbol of a corrupt society in decline.

In 'Beer Street', Hogarth promotes beer con-
sumption as a solution to the gin problem. The
reasoning being that not only is beer a safer
alternative, with its much lower alcohol content,
but that it also has health giving qualities.5 In his
under script to the picture he laments; "'We quaff
Thy balmy Juice with Glee and Water we leave to
France. Genius of Health... warms each English
generous Breast with Liberty and Love'.6

Although Hogarth’s solution seems outlandish,
we should remember that water was heavily
polluted at this time with many cities being subject
to numerous epidemics of water-borne disease. Far
safer was a weak beer which, having gone through
the fermentation process, would contain fewer
micro-pathogens.

Conclusion

Hogarth’s 'Gin Lane' and 'Beer Street' are didactic
public health icons. He uses the depiction of physical
ill health as a tool to drive his message home. Everyone can identify with disease which touches all, no matter what class. Hogarth implies a state of
good health is a consequence of good character.

His diagnosis of an underlying problem of social
inequality is still valid today. Recent epidemiolog-
ical studies continue to show a recurrent and
startling fact that people of lower class suffer
significantly more from ill health and are more
likely to die earlier than those of higher social
circumstance. Wealthier people tend to be better
educated and lead healthier lifestyles. Perhaps
this is because they can afford a healthy diet with
vitamin supplements and better health care? On
the other hand diseases amongst the lower classes,
such as smoking induced lung cancer, are becom-
ing more prevalent. Another example is the wide-
spread problem of obesity and all its associated
diseases. These are serious health problems which
are beginning to become endemic.

Excessive drinking is, as ever, still very much
a present day problem. This has been particularly
evident in the press lately where new government
policies have been discussed in response to the
Home Secretary’s research on alcohol related
street violence.7 Will these policies, however,
really be the answer to our alcoholic culture? They
all seem to be targeting the availability of alcohol,
clamping down on cheap drink promotions which
attack the symptoms of public disorder and exces-
sive drinking but do not address the underlying
cause. Surely, what is needed is an initiative to
grasp public opinion, for after all, is it not the man
on the street who will decide on the real changes
that will take place? Many have attempted a vari-
ety of different methods to achieve this, for
example, Thomas Cook’s prohibition temperance
movement of the 1840s. More recently the media
have tried to imitate Hogarth style shock tactics,
as in current drink driving adverts, but again with
far less impact. Perhaps it is subversive satire
and freedom of interaction allowing for individual
insight that these contemporary attempts lack.
What we need is a modern day Hogarth.
Acknowledgements

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References

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