

The Antebellum Temperance Movement

Opening Narration

“America in the Age of Jackson had a serious drinking problem. Americans drank in the morning. They drank at night. They drank on the job. They drank to relax. They drank to celebrate. They drank when they were sad. In the 1820s an American population of 3 million men drank 60 million gallons of spirits annually. Every man, woman, and child lived with the consequences...”

Significance

The narration quickly defines the problem of alcoholism in Jacksonian America by offering statistics on the pervasiveness of drinking as well as a brief indication of how they could drink so much: they drank all the time. The narration does not say “alcohol”; instead it says “drink,” “drinking,” or “spirits.” Doing so finesses the somewhat adult theme of alcoholism and its harmful effects. It’s clear for adults what’s going on, but may be a bit mysterious for children.

Visual Sequence

The visual sequence opens with the sound of a piano playing an upbeat tune along with the clamor of indistinct male voices. Then the painting fades in showing a raucous bar scene. The audience sees men drinking heartily. Some are toasting, others are gambling, others stand around the piano and sing. The camera then pans across the bar to show some less jovial drinkers: one man is passed out face down on a table, his hand still clutching a bottle; two men quarrel, with a knife discretely visible in the waistband of one of the men; another man sits alone in a dark corner, slumped over but awake, tears streaming down his face. The camera then reaches the door, where a drunk is stumbling out the door supported by an eight-year-old girl, the only female in the scene.

A new painting fades in to follow the man and girl outside. They are struggling through a dark, snowy street. Up ahead, their destination is a somewhat dilapidated house. A woman stands on the porch, bundled up against the cold, but visibly pregnant. She holds a candle and the light reveals an exhausted, careworn face. Gradually through the scene the sound changes from upbeat piano music and off key singing to a poignant violin playing a forlorn song.

The visual then fades to a third painting that shows the same street and house but now on a bright spring day. The house looks brand new, and the same man and woman stand on the porch, looking young, fresh, and innocent. They are neat and well dressed. There are no children and she is not pregnant. We have moved back in time to happier days. The couple is joined on the porch by a second man who is looking a bit disheveled and kind of sly. “Come on, Tom! Just one drink...I’ll have you back to your lovely new wife before dinnertime. The boys haven’t seen you in ages. Ever since you started working at your father-in-law’s factory you’re too good for us. Mary, you don’t want Tom to abandon his old friends, do you?” The music is at first light and hopeful but turns tense once the tempting friend starts to speak.

The picture fades to a fourth image. Tom, gross from vomiting on himself, lies in bed snoring loudly. The little girl lies next to him shivering from a cold. Mary stands at the door, looking defeated. “Oh, Tom, what have you done to Suzy?” The painting fades to black. Melancholy music accompanies the scene.

Significance

The visual sequences tell the story of how alcohol devastates a family, which sets up the animatronic sequence to tell the story of how a family is rescued from alcohol. Overall, the vignette mirrors a trope common in temperance literature.

The first visual sets up the allure of drinking: it often accompanies a good time. There's upbeat music and images of men having fun. It's significant that everyone is a man, because taverns were overwhelming male places and although women also drank, men were much more likely to have problems—and in this era, a man's problems were inevitably visited on his wife and children. The image then turns to show some of the problems associated with heavy drinking: violence (the true extent of which is only hinted at with the fleeting image of a weapon); blacking out; and the misery of loneliness.

We then reach the main character of the story, Tom, who is helped out of the bar by his young daughter, Suzy. Temperance literature often portrayed women and girls as the saviors of their men, so it's significant that the only female seen is a little girl.

The second painting shows us what Tom's drinking has done to his family. This clearly isn't the first time he's been out late drinking while his family worries at home. The condition of the house implies poverty, brought about by Tom spending his money on booze. The pregnant wife, Mary, is a bit over the top. Yet, it shows her awful dilemma. She can't just leave her drunken husband without endangering her children.

The third image reveals how far the family has sunk and what first brought Tom to drink. The bright light and springtime (in contrast to the prior dark winter setting) mirrors the hope of a young couple in love with their happiest days before them. The fact that they look younger, neater, and there are not children helps signal that we've moved back in time, rather than forward. The scene of temptation then plays out. The old friend manipulates Tom into going for a drink. The dialogue also reinforces the theme of promise disrupted as it's implied Tom was moving up in the world financially as well as personally.

The fourth image brings things back to the present in the story. Tom is a drunk. His daughter is sick. Mary can hardly bear any more. Mary's words hint that Suzy's illness may be deadly, as any kind of sickness could be in this era. The disturbing possibility is oblique, however.

Throughout the sequence the music sets the mood, signals turning points in the story, and helps build the emotional reaction of the audience.

Overall, the story is inspired by several pieces of temperance literature. A famous temperance novel, *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room and What I Saw There*, features the story of a young girl who retrieves her drunken father from the bar each night is killed by a thrown glass. The before and after scenes are inspired by temperance prints such these:

Transition Narration

“Some Americans dreamed of a better future, a future without alcohol. They joined temperance societies. Driven by an evangelical zeal, they told stories of they fall and salvation by taking a solemn vow.”

Significance

The transition uses a common tactic in communicating history to a public audience: presenting a problem alongside optimism about the future. It’s a bit misleading, because the future isn’t inevitably better than the past. Still, the narration indicates something of the temperance movement’s tactics (persuading people to swear off drinking through public speeches) and the movement’s religious basis. The temperance movement was thoroughly religious and to ignore its religious character would be misleading. However, Disney would prefer not to court criticism by discussing a particular religion. As a result, the language used is broadly religious without directly endorsing a specific, sectarian doctrine. The term evangelical is used in the generic sense of spreading a message rather than to indicate the evangelical strain of Christianity. But the implied connection is clear. The language of “fall,” “salvation,” and “vow” also have a religious connotation but can be used in a secular sense as well.

Animatronic Sequence

The light comes back up to reveal a robot version of Tom, now older, clean, and well dressed. He stands on a platform. Behind him are an older Mary, a ten-year-old boy, and a young couple (Suzy and her husband). Tom is giving an impassioned temperance speech, ending with “Now, gentlemen, who will swear never again to touch a drop of the man-destroyer alcohol?”

Animatronic Benjamin Franklin enters.

BF: “Pardon me, fine sir, what is the purpose of your speaking?”

Tom: “Why, my good man, I am here to warn one and all against that evil in a bottle called alcohol! I pray the world is soon free from its devilish grasp!”

BF: “Devilish, you say? Why I’ve always enjoyed a glass of wine with a meal.”

Tom: “Ah, yes, sir. But does it stop with only a glass? Are you not likely to take three or four glasses? When I was a drinking man I could hardly stop at one *bottle*! And it all started with one drink with a friend. What could be the harm? Soon I’d have a drink to keep out the cold. A drink to keep up my health. A drink to be jolly. But, oh, was the descent quick and painful. I lost my job. I impoverished my family. No one would call me friend. I stole just to have a drop of rum. I ruined my family, and forced my little girl to retrieve me from that sinful place each night! Oh, the savior of her own father!”

(While Tom speaks, up above are projected images inspired by the Currier and Ives print “The Drunkard’s Progress” with Tom as the main character.)

BF: “You seem to prosper now. What changed your fate, good sir?”

Tom: "I took the pledge! A temperance meeting came to town. My wife forced me to go. I was converted and turned away from sin."

BF: "Well, I suppose there's merit in what you say. Temperance *is* a virtue..."

Significance

The animatronic sequence reveals what became of the family. We can see time has passed because Tom and Mary are older, the unborn baby is now a boy, and Suzy is married. It's important to have Suzy shown so people know she did not die, after all. Tom, now prosperous, has become a temperance speaker and it is suggested that drunks will be coming forward to sign the pledge, which was a common strategy of reformers. No one is shown listening to Tom, however, so that he to address the visitors in the audience (which is a common Disney technique to immerse people in an attraction).

The dialogue with Franklin (the animatronic co-host of the show) hits on numerous tropes of the temperance movement: alcohol as evil, enslaving, a threat to families, a danger to body and soul. Again, the characters use broadly religious language without specifying any particular theology as a way to show the movement's religious roots but avoid accusations of proselytizing. Franklin plays the role of skeptic. In reality, Franklin viewed alcohol as something to enjoy, but he also criticized drunkenness, especially in his *Autobiography*, in which he talks about working with men who spent all their wages on drinking instead of saving their money wisely. The dialogue emphasizes the no-compromise approach the temperance movement developed as time went on.

Tom's extended story about how one drink doomed him borrows from a genre of temperance prints that might be called "The Drunkard's Progress." There were different versions, but they all told the story of how the only safe amount of alcohol was no alcohol. Images from one famous print are adapted to use Tom as the central character as he speaks.

Tom concludes with the temperance answer for how alcoholics could change: with the help of a savior woman he came to stop drinking once and for all.

Closing Narration

"The temperance movement achieved mixed results. Drinking declined but alcohol remained widely enjoyed. When a later generation confronted the problem of alcohol, they would turn to a new strategy: legal prohibition."

Significance

The closing narration wraps up the story by addressing a question audiences might wonder about: what about prohibition and bootleggers and Al Capone? The narration indicates that alcoholism continued to be a problem into the future and that prohibition—which people are much more likely to have heard of than the antebellum temperance movement—happened at a later date.