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“THEY ALL KNOW WHAT I AM”: LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN AND ALCOHOL

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Alcohol as a literary theme conveniently falls under the category of drinking studies, a recently burgeoning interdisciplinary field which is a composite of several areas, including, for instance, public health, crime studies, economics, and even politics. In *Biographies of Drink* (2015), a volume of essays pertaining to numerous alcohol-related subjects, its editors, Mark Hailwood and Deborah Toner, emphasise the significance of the socio-cultural dimension of drinking studies, which encompass such aspects as class, gender, or ethnicity, all considered in the “geographical and chronological contexts” [2015: 1]. This culture-oriented focal point generally analyses how drink has functioned in different communities. In this particular province, literary works provide excellent study material, offering numerous narratives and portrayals of drink, both literal and metaphorical.

A closer analysis will immediately demonstrate that drink-themed literature is an area decidedly dominated by male writers and male protagonists. The proof can be found in the abundance of literary renditions as well as critical studies. This applies both to the pre-twentieth-century examples, even such early ones as Old English poetry or Shakespearean plays, and to contemporary representations of alcoholic inferno. Shakespeare’s plays, for instance, offer an abundance of drink scenes involving male characters (see Buckner Trawick’s 1978 *Shakespeare and Alcohol*). In their company, Lady Macbeth, boosting up her courage before the murder scheme takes place (“That which hath made them drunk hath made me bold; what hath quenched them hath given me fire”; Act II, Scene I), is quite a singular case. Much the same applies to the core

texts of the alcoholic genre, Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* (1947) and Charles Jackson's *The Lost Weekend* (1944), in both of which the dipsomaniac protagonists are men. The imbalance between the literary depictions of drinking men and women is especially conspicuous in anthologies, a good example being David Daiches's compilation, *A Wee Dram: Drinking Scenes from Scottish Literature* (1990), which contains only one excerpt written by a female writer, reflecting Daiches's introductory remark that whisky in Scotland has customarily been "a male drink" [1990, 9]. This one exception included by Daiches is an excerpt from *Memoirs of a Highland Lady* by Elizabeth Grant of Rothiemurchus, first published in 1911, in which she sketches the Scottish reality of her time, also referring to the 'whisky landscape':

Whisky-drinking was and is the bane of that country; from early morning till late at night it went on. Decent gentlewomen began the day with a dram. In our house the bottle of whisky, with its accompaniment of a silver salver full of small glasses, was placed on the side-table with cold meat every morning. In the pantry a bottle of whisky was the allowance per day, with bread and cheese in any required quantity, for such messengers or visitors whose errands sent them in that direction [quoted in Daiches, 23; originally in Grant 1911, 199].

The male dominance is observable not only in drink literature but also in the alcoholic propensity of the writers. So much so that in his review of John Booth's anthology, *Creative Spirits: A Toast to Literary Drinkers* (1997), David Lister comments that the anthology "covers many of the best known writers in English literature – though not a single one of them is female" (1997), blatantly overlooking the fact that Booth includes passages referring to three women, Simone de Beauvoir, Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette, as well as one representative of Anglophone literature in the figure of Jean Rhys, the author of drink-soaked fiction and a heavy drinker herself.

As to critical studies, these tend to concentrate on alcoholic writers much more than on alcohol as a literary theme. This, however, is predominantly the case with the criticism concerning American literature. Here, one-gender dominance is most conspicuous, though admittedly at least two women writers are usually included. One is Carson McCullers, of whom her biographer, Virginia Carr, writes that she "nursed sherry through most of the day while she worked, for she needed a certain amount of alcohol in her system to function creatively" [2003, 143]. The other female writer who looms large in critical studies is Dorothy Parker, particularly her oft-quoted short story "Big Blonde" (1929). Parker, in fact, occupies much space in *Flawed Light: American Women Poets and Alcohol* (2009), one publication which stands out in the context, because it is entirely devoted to women's literature. The author, Bret Millier, begins her study with a list of alcoholic male writers [2009, 2-3], only to conclude that women "might begin the alternative list" (4), one which in her study is dominated by Dorothy Parker, whom Millier hails "the most

famous female drinker of her day” (17), a prime example of a female alcoholic writer to whom she devotes, unsurprisingly, a chapter called “Dorothy Parker as Archetype” (17-33).

However, Millier’s study is a rare case of critical interest in the drinking women of letters, both in the biographical and literary dimensions. More to the point, as has already been stated, such interest is practically limited to the American literary scene. Thus, when Dimitra Gefou-Madianou, the editor of a more general critical work titled *Alcohol, Gender and Culture* (1992), complains that there is a shortage of “studies which examine alcohol consumption, production, and distribution from a woman’s point of view” [1992, 8], it is even more relevant as far as the literature of the British Isles is concerned. This is indeed an area which remains largely neglected, reflecting a socio-cultural paradigm, still a common perception that alcohol is largely a signifier of masculinity, and women are best left to waving flags of temperance. The predominant aim of this article is to take a closer look at the way the drink theme is rendered by English, Scottish and Irish women writers, with a particular emphasis on Jean Rhys and A.L. Kennedy.

There are at least three possible angles to approach the literary theme of women and alcohol, and all of them can be focalised in separate critical volumes. The first vantage point is the way women are portrayed in the fiction written by male writers. Here, by and large, women are usually featured in familial settings, or entangled in difficult (non)relationships, in which alcohol turns out to be an escape route, as in John Braine’s novel *Room at the Top* (1957), whose main character, Joe Lampton, deserts his lover, Alice Aisgill, in order to marry the girl he impregnates, a daughter of wealthy parents. Alice dies tragically in a car she drives drunken after parting with Joe. His afterthoughts on learning about the accident perfectly underscore the drink-induced finale of their relationship: “I could imagine everything that happened to Alice after I’d left her. She’d stayed in the flat the duration of two more double-gins” [1961, 238]. Another good example is Brian Moore’s *Judith Hearne* (1955), subsequently republished as *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* in 1956. Here, the protagonist is a disillusioned, ageing spinster, whose desperate as well as futile attempts to find love in the person of James Madden, a fellow boarding house resident, end up in finding consolation in whisky, apparently used to this end many times before.

As to the recurring theme of dysfunctional alcoholic families, good examples are provided, for instance, in Warwick Deeping’s fiction. Deeping, an extremely prolific, though a rather sentimental writer, was particularly popular in the interwar period. One of the many themes informing his fiction is alcohol and its devastating effects on the family bonds. In *The White Gate* (1913), Deeping’s female protagonist is haunted by the tyrannical shadow of her alcoholic mother. Similarly, in *A Woman’s War* (1907) a young doctor, James Murchison, whose “father had died of drink, and his grandfather before him”

(5), now continues the family tradition of male alcoholism, much to his wife's despair. This alcohol-family junction finds its continuation in Deeping's later novels, *The Woman at the Door*, 1937; and *The Dark House*, 1941. Similar, though contemporary, settings can be found in two novels by the Irish writer, Roddy Doyle, *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (1996) and its sequel, *Paula Spencer* (2006), the eponymous Paula struggling with her own alcoholism as well as her violent husband's, and finally facing her daughter's plunge into what might be the case of inherited drinking.

The second area to be considered is the question of alcohol dependent literary ladies and/or the way they fictionalise drink in their writings. This is a province which is mostly of interest to biographers and those critics who, much as Bret Millier, dissect traces of writers' experience in what is often called life writing. There are also autobiographical accounts, usually left by women who live by the pen, writers or journalists, accounts recorded in the form of alcoholic memoirs, also referred to as recovery memoirs. Admittedly, this is not a strictly female domain, to mention, for instance, John Gardner, the English author of spy fiction. Gardner, best known for his continuation of the James Bond series, began his writing career with the publication of his autobiography, *Spin the Bottle* (1964), a chronicle of Gardner's battle with alcohol dependence. A much more recent example is A.A. Gill's *Pour Me: A Life* (2015), though his concern is the nature of alcohol addiction rather than a memoir recording the process of reaching sobriety. However, confessional alcoholic writings seem to be particularly popular with female authors, predominantly in America, Caroline Knapp's bestseller *Drinking: A Love Story* (1996) and Mary Karr's *Lit: A Memoir* (2009) being just two representatives of a whole range of memoirs. In Britain, there are fewer such autobiographical testimonies, but much as the ones on the other side of the Atlantic, they generally focus on recovery methodologies. In *A Nice Girl Like Me* (1984), for instance, Rosie Boycott, a journalist, devotes much space to the psychological background, quoting Carl Jung's letter to Bill Wilson, the co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, in which Jung emphasises the non-physical aspects of the therapeutic formula ("spiritus contra spiritum"; qtd. 271). Another good, and more recent, example is Tania Glyde's *Cleaning Up: How I Gave Up Drinking and Lived* (2009). Glyde, a journalist and novelist, opens her memoir with a post-alcoholic conclusion, an excellent motto for her memoir: "To understand living sober you need to understand living drunk" [2009, xiii]. Here, too, the recovery concentrates on an in-depth exploration of one's inner self. A deviation from the above and a refreshing change, as it were, is Amy Liptrot's *The Outrun* (2016). Liptrot, Orkadian by birth, returns to the Orkney Islands after a decade in London, a period of heavy drinking followed by alcohol rehabilitation. On the remote island of Papa Westray, she contemplates the mechanics of reaching sobriety, the wilderness of the Orkney Islands being the key factor in the healing process.

What is of most interest in this article, however, are the fictional works written by women writers, which partly or exclusively thematise drinking women and women caught in alcoholic backdrops. In general, such examples are to be found in twentieth-century literature, though a few can be singled out in Victorian fiction. One such instance is Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848), in which a peripheral character, Esther, in the aftermath of her elopement, turns to prostitution and subsequently to alcohol, her tranquilliser: “I must have drink. Such as live like me could not bear life if they did not drink. It's the only thing to keep us from suicide. If we did not drink we could not stand the memory of what we have been, and the thought of what we are, for a day” [2009, 316]. In another Victorian novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) by Anne Brontë, Helen, Arthur Huntingdon's wife, is a good example of portraying women downtrodden by their alcoholic husbands. An interesting case to analyse is George Eliot, some of whose characters, as Kathleen McCormack observes, “stagger through the novels with their perceptions blurred and reasons distorted by unwise consumption of brandy, wine, beer, ale...” [2000, 2]. However, the most relevant for the context discussed here seems Eliot's *Janet's Repentance*, not only because Janet's husband, Robert Dempster, is a drunkard [“he can drink a bottle of brandy at a sittin’; 1906, 262], a fact which predictably affects his wife, but more importantly because Janet herself finds escape in the bottle as a result of her predicament. In fact, as Logan rightly observes, “Eliot's focus is on Janet's “fall” and redemption, not on Dempster's alcoholism and abuse” [1998, 138].

Victorian fiction offers fairly standard literary representation of alcohol. Much the same motifs can be found in twentieth-century literature and onwards, the recurring alcoholic landscapes being disturbed relationships, most often, as has already been said, the familial ones. For instance, the Irish author of popular fiction, Marian Keyes, devotes much of her otherwise light-hearted novel, *Lucy Sullivan is Getting Married* (1996), to the heroine's father, who, abandoned by his wife, becomes heavily-dependent on his daughter, the eponymous Lucy, who fiercely defends him whenever his being a chronic alcoholic is implied, until his worsening condition finally opens her eyes: “He no longer seemed loveable and cute and cuddly and great fun. But drunk and lopsided and slurred and incapable and selfish” [1999, 619]. Quite conspicuous is the female contribution to the vast body of alcohol-pervaded Scottish fiction written by male novelists, such as Gordon Williams, Alasdair Gray or James Kelman. Agnes Owens, for instance, who employs heavy drinking as a theme in her short stories, or the representative of Scottish crime fiction (*Tartan Noir*), Denise Mina, and her *Garnethill Trilogy* (*Garnethill*, 1998; *Exile*, 2000; *Resolution*, 2001). The protagonist of Mina's three novels, Maureen O'Donnell, has a family background of alcoholic parents, and she herself is far from being alien to alcohol. Such portrayals need not necessarily be limited to fiction only, a perfect example being the kitchen sink drama, Shelagh Delaney's play *A Taste of Honey*,

first staged in 1958, and adapted for the screen in 1961 by Tony Richardson. The main protagonist, Jo, lives a dreary life with her mother, whose existence Jo summarises in the repetitive: “Drink, drink, drink” [1974, 8].

In most literary works written by female authors, the portrayals of women whose lives are intertwined with and determined by their alcoholic partners or family members either spotlight the passive witnesses, or, at worst, the victims of alcoholic settings. The texts which focalise drinking women are few and far between, and are most often limited to marginal subplots. An example of alcoholism fiction proper, as it were, is *Come Fill the Cup* (1955), a rather obscure novel by Rosalind Wade (not to be confused with Harlan Ware’s *Come, Fill the Cup* [1952]). Wade’s novel is a story of Hester Revell, whose recovery from the grip of alcohol dependence is the result of applying the N.M.B. scheme (an abbreviation for No More Booze), a fictional equivalent for the American concept of Alcoholics Anonymous: “There were thousands of people in England and other countries who owed their recovery from alcoholism to the group aid of N.M.B.” [1956, 287]. To a much more limited extent the alcoholic theme can be traced, for instance, in the crime/psychological thriller *The Girl on the Train* (2015) by Paula Hawkins. For the novel’s female protagonist, Rachel, whose life is very much conditioned by drink, the title ‘train’ is an important part of what might be called alcoholic topography, as this is where she drinks the “pre-mixed gin and tonic” [2016, 17], hidden in substitute, inconspicuous plastic bottles, and performs little acts of clandestine drinking: “I open one of the little bottles of Chenin Blanc I purchased from the Whistlestop at Euston. It’s not cold, but it’ll do. I pour some into a plastic cup, screw the top back on and slip the bottle into my handbag” (20). However, as far as fictionalisation of women and alcohol is concerned, there are two British writers who stand out, namely Jean Rhys and A.L. Kennedy. This is so because they both offer stylistics quite different from most fiction spotlighting women affected by alcoholic environments, or focalising those who are actual alcoholics.

Unlike Kennedy, Jean Rhys writes from her own experience, as her life was virtually drenched in alcohol. Rhys’s “legendary fondness for drink” [Kennedy 2000, viii] has been emphasised in biographical accounts. Lilian Pizzichini, for instance, notes that even when Rhys was approaching seventy, she could drink a bottle of whisky per day [cf. 2009, 289]. The extent to which Rhys’s daily routine was propelled by alcohol is overtly confirmed by herself in a letter dated 10 January 1959: “One day drunk, two days hangover, regular as clockwork” [qtd. Wyndham and Melly 1984, 159]. Rhys’s alcoholism was actually one of the reasons why her literary success came so late, and why for years she remained an obscure figure:

She gradually became a serious alcoholic and in middle age was arrested for disturbing the peace and was briefly confined in a woman’s prison for psychiatric evaluation. Many assumed she had died when she disappeared from public view for decades, so when she reappeared, there was talk of a “reincarnation” [Savory 2009, ix].

Rhys’s fiction owes much to her turbulent life, which is perfectly reflected in her novels because, as George Wedge notes, she “had a gift for turning personal disasters into compelling stories” [1998, 30]. A good example here is alcohol, which plays an important role in the lives of Rhys’s female characters, particularly in *Postures* (1928), republished as *Quartet* a year later, *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (1930), and *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939). In fact, the women protagonists have so much in common that the three novels can quite conveniently be discussed somewhat *en bloc*.

The setting linking these novels is predominantly Parisian, but much less glamorous than such a background would naturally connote. The world of Rhys’s females is one of cheap, shabby hotels, in which they languish, utterly dependent on allowances from men with whom they are or have been in whatever relationships. When Marya Zelli in *Quartet* concludes that “[a]ll these hotels are the same” [1981, 100], it is not only a reflection on the dreadful accommodation, but on the general futility of her life. Rhys underscores this sense of pervading ennui by structuring her novels on what hardly resembles a plot, for, in fact, not much develops here in terms of a coherent story. Rhys’s protagonists move from one hotel to another, frequent cafés and restaurants, but even though they are in a constant flow, there is something depressively stagnant about their existence. They are not migrant birds of passage, but seem to be stuck in the urban landscape, insecure and haunted by their past failures, as Julia Martin in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, tearfully looking back on her life as “a long succession of humiliations and mistakes and pains and ridiculous efforts” [1982, 94]. *In this mood of pervading hopelessness*, Rhys’s heroines turn to drink to brighten their bleak outlook on the surrounding reality and to assuage their sorrows, past and present ones alike. A good example here is the view of the river from Julia’s hotel room window, which makes her feel the coldness of the room even more penetrating. At night, however, fortified with drink, her perception gains a new dimension: “When you were drunk you could imagine that it was the sea” [1982, 12].

The blunting power of alcohol is almost the trademark of the three novels. As Julia explains: “When I’m drunk it’s all right. (...) It all falls into place” [1982, 38]. Drunkenness, however, is not necessarily a *sine qua non* of dispelling the anxiety experienced by Rhys’s heroines. For Marya, for instance, even a single drink provides an immediate foretaste of alcohol’s capacity to numb the sense of desolation [“the merciful stuff clouded her brain”; 1981, 95]. Similarly, Julia feels “[g]aiety spread through her” [1982, 82] when she has a glass of whisky, the feeling being a *déjà vu* of the many times before when alcohol kindled temporary enthusiasm. Similarly, for Sophia Jansen in *Good Morning, Midnight* a half glass of her favourite Pernod results in fleeting aggrandizement [“I feel like a goddess”; 2000, 73], and after a succession of Pernods she achieves a blissful state to which she refers as “fire and wings” (73). However, this almost archetypal function of drink as a consolatory agent

alternates with depressive spells. Here, Rhys employs alcohol in a morbid, pathological dimension, there being something compulsory in, for instance, Marya's drive to become drunk: "I must get drunk tonight. I must get so drunk that I can't walk, so drunk that I can't see" [1981, 124]. For Sophia, this drive becomes persistent, almost deterministic: "Drink, drink, drink ... As soon as I sober up I start again" [2000, 37]. In fact, Sophia's obsession reflects a self-destructive frame of mind, her ultimate aspiration being, as she explains, "[t]rying to drink myself to death" (30).

As far as Rhys's fictionalisation of women's drinking is concerned, what seems to be particularly relevant is the focus on the socio-cultural perception, which is hardly ever touched in literary renditions, and is certainly rare in British literature. The image of an alcoholic man can be found in countless fictional works, but women's portrayals are usually limited to the victims of male alcoholics. This obviously mirrors a tendency to perceive men's drunkenness as socially and culturally problematic, yet somewhat justifiable in various contexts; women's drinking, on the other hand, is unusual, unwelcome, and unacceptable, almost 'un-all' by definition. This is perfectly exemplified in Kingsley Amis's novel, *The Folks That Live on the Hill* (1990), in which a minicab-driver, invited by the alcoholic Fiona to have sex with her, takes advantage, not caring much that behind this seemingly debauched promiscuity there is a vulnerable and maladjusted woman. His final comment is cynical as well as hypocritical: "A drunken man's pitiful. A drunken woman's contemptible" [1991, 224]. The awareness of such a perception is apparent in all of Rhys's novels in question. As Kennedy observes in her introductory notes to *Good Morning, Midnight*, the novel's protagonist, Sophia, "is not just a drunk, but a drunk woman" [2000, x]. The same distinction is implied, for instance, in Julia's problems with her landlady, who vehemently disapproves of her having a drink on the premises, being "accompanied by a bottle", as she puts it, explaining further: "[a] man, yes; a bottle, no" [1982, 9]. Another telltale sign is the manner in which Mr Horsefield, Julia's lover, reacts to having smelt that she had been drinking ["He drew away"; 1982, 67]. However, most of all, the gender stigmatisation of drinking is reflected in Julia's self-consciousness, in her being fully aware of the way she and her likes are perceived: "They all know what I am. I'm a woman come in here to get drunk" [2000, 89]. This is something which the French writer, Marguerite Duras, a literary drinker herself, expounds in *Practicalities* (1990), a very personal account, in which, in the chapter titled "Alcohol" [1990, 15-19], Duras writes about her own drinking, but also about the social perception of women and alcohol: "When a woman drinks it's as if an animal were drinking, or a child. Alcoholism is scandalous in a woman (...). It's a slur on the divine in our nature" (17). This double predicament pinpointed by Duras, of being an alcoholic and a woman, is exactly what Rhys signals in her novels.

Much as Jean Rhys, the Scottish novelist A.L. Kennedy fictionalises women’s drinking in her *Paradise* (2004), a novel which offers, as Kaye Mitchell defines it, “first-person alcoholism/addiction narratives” [2008, xii], and is generally focused on what the protagonist, Hannah Luckraft, labels as the “liquid selves” [Kennedy 2005, 36]. Hannah’s own ‘liquid self’ is what she anatomises in numerous monologic passages, defining herself through the prism of alcohol. Hers is not the intermittent-bouts type of drinking, but the incessant one, almost as if she were sustained on a drip, with a slow yet steady inflow, which fits her own reflection on the nature of alcohol addiction, and on drinkers as being “permeable, absorbent” (211). In fact, Hannah meets this quality in a most diligent manner: “Being me is a job [...]. That’s a full-time occupation: that’s like being a miner, or a nurse” (84). When Hannah refers to herself as ‘being me’, she identifies with and discloses her dominant alcoholic nature – there is no ‘other’ Hannah but the drinking one, in which she remains perpetually self-absorbed, an example being her musings on the origin of the bottle she has just emptied: “And was this a present that someone else gave me, or was it a gift I intended to give? Or did I just buy this for me? Sometimes I am generous with me” (25). However, what is fairly unusual about Hannah’s alcoholism, at least in contrast to the literary examples quoted earlier, which offer images of women whose drinking is determined by a variety of social and familial factors, her addiction does not seem to have been triggered by anything manifestly traumatic. She seems to be an existential type of drinker, and this ordinariness, even banality behind her dependence is evident in her monologues: “I am delicate and the world is impossibly wrong, is unthinkable and I am not forewarned, forearmed, equipped. I cannot manage. If there was something useful I could do, I would – but there isn’t. So I drink.” (240).

In the various literary examples quoted earlier, alcohol functions as an eroding force, destructive to families and relationships, but in Kennedy’s novel it is an agent which, quite the contrary, substitutes the familial and intimate bonds, connoting cosiness, security, and emotionality. This is perfectly transparent in the non-verbal signals revealing Hannah’s communion with alcohol (“winking my goodbye to the trustworthy bottle”; 25), and even more in the way she refers to a bottle of Paddy as “the lovable-ugly orphan of Irish whiskeys”, which inspires her concluding remark on the sense of kinship it evokes: “who needs a mother and father when you’re that” (113). Throughout the novel there are numerous examples illustrating the substitutive function of alcohol: “another whisky and then one of its relatives, and then one of its friends (...) in my house with the whole whisky family, all of us curled up tight around our fine, warm, cask-matured, internal fire” (54). Hannah’s world is secure as long as its inhabitants, particularly her favourite brands, are safely stored and awaiting her: “My Cointreau, my bison-grass vodka, my absinthe, my little ceramic leprechaun full of whisky: I mean, each of my friends and acquaintances, the ones that should welcome me home” (142). Hannah both

familiarises and emotionalises alcohol, at times turning her addiction into a form of reverence, almost worship, conveyed by a variety of means such as, for instance, her admiration for the shape of a whisky bottle, depicted in the following way: “the rounded corners and the dapper weight and the elegant cut of the label: the black with the white and the gold, all shaped around each other to mark out an arch: a long, slim doorway to somewhere else” (17). The same applies to her numerous passionate comments on the many drink qualities she appreciates: “the beauty of swallowing, the loveliness, the sharp breath from the bottle’s neck and the handsomeness of that first taste, it shouts out, shudders the walls” (163).

Hannah’s attachment to alcohol, apart from being affectionate, can also take a more matter-of-fact form, most conspicuous in her preoccupation with the technicalities of drink. A good example is the way she perceives and acknowledges its value, not in the qualitative, through-the-palate manner, but quantitatively, in what might be called the optic-measure approach: the volume and proof (“Bushmill’s County Antrim, 700 millimetres, 40 per cent”, 17); the effect (“700 millimetres is so much more roomy and cheerier than a pint”, 17); or the final effect (“After 100 I get the good sweat”, 18). This mechanical approach to drink is also a self-defence technique aimed at what she calls the “unfulfilling tease” (35), that is the amounts which seem well-boding, yet fail to meet her standard of alcoholic satiation. Much in the same pragmatic manner, Hannah is preoccupied with her drinksapes, somehow following Julia Martin’s concluding remark in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* that “no place is a place to be sober in” [Rhys 1982, 37]. Hannah performs her drinking stunts in various geographical settings, but whether it is Dublin, Budapest, or Canada, her topography always revolves around drink, any place being potentially appropriate: “The toilet is more civilised and smaller, no one here, and that cool, true friend is yours now” [2005, 163].

Hannah’s alcoholic logistics are not limited to managing the quantity and quality, and selecting drinking venues. In a more feminine dimension, her drinking is very much controlled in terms of her image, to which Hannah seems to pay much attention. She does not in any way resemble what Agnes Owens defines as “a boozy hag” [2008, 157]. Quite the contrary, hers is the showpiece drinking, as it were, for she ensures that she does not appear the drowning type, falling into the abyss of alcoholism. Hannah does it on two levels, the first of which is an overt one, aimed at securing her public image: “What you want for a quality outing is a good sense of composition: when to take on convincing proof, when to level off with, say, a Merlot and when to risk the exotic: a Gammel Dansk, a Karpi” (Kennedy 2005:256). The second level is upholding her self-perception by convincing herself that her drinking is fully civilised and controlled: “The point is that I stay civilised, no matter

what. The most reliable measure of a person lies in what they do when they're alone, when they have no need to pretend – are they firm when solitary, or do they slide?” (18).

Paradise offers a dissection of alcoholism as seen through the prism of a woman's experience, even though to a great extent it fits the mechanisms of alcoholic *modus operandi* in general, not necessarily limited to a female perspective. However, Kennedy 'feminises' drink in her novel in one more, quite idiosyncratic manner, for she is doubly entwined, with drink and with her partner, a hard-drinking dentist. Their relationship is defined by alcohol, turning it into a peculiar *ménage à trios*: “An untouched bottle and the man who loves me, the man I love” (265). For Hannah, the bond between the two is based on the drink-induced intimacy, which very much determines and conditions their liaison: “If you and I were *to be drunk together*, then osmosis would give way to metamorphosis, to more and more permanent change. If you and I were *drunk together often* we might occasionally seem indistinguishable, two liquids blended in one” (213). In fact, intoxication seems a necessary prerequisite for their attachment, while sobriety appears a ruinous agent. This is most apparent in their alternate, short periods of temperance, whose 'termination' is invariably much-awaited: “I watched the whisky ignite, sharpen his eyes, take him back to the good, high, familiar place that waited for him during all his abstinence” (127) / “He kisses my forehead. ‘You'll be ready for it now. All set. I knew you could manage stopping.’ (...) ‘And I knew you could manage starting again.’ (...) ‘Welcome back’ (247).

Conclusion

Literary representations of women and alcohol are relatively rare in comparison with the portrayals of drinking men. A few exceptions can be found in Victorian fiction, and, to a far greater extent, in twentieth-century literature and onwards, but they usually focalise characters in works written by male writers, and mostly present victims of alcoholic environments, rather than alcoholics themselves. Here, both Jean Rhys and A.L. Kennedy stand out as almost singular examples of female writers fictionalising women's alcoholism.

By the same token, critical attempts to survey and anatomise this particular issue are few and far between, particularly in the case of English and Scottish literature. Discussing the role of alcohol in Jean Rhys's fiction, Jane Nardin reflects that it “rarely receives more than a passing mention” [2006, 47] from the numerous scholars who have undertaken a closer analysis of Rhys's work. In this context, Nardin's own critical contribution is a prominent exception, though her interest is primarily founded on “the gendering of alcoholism” (47). Such an approach, contributive as it is, inevitably narrows the analytical

scope to perceiving fictional representations of women's drinking through the prism of what Nardin labels as "patriarchal oppression" (46) and "female disempowerment" (71), thus creating an imbalance between gender-orientated issues and a literary portrait of alcoholism. As far as fictionalising alcohol is concerned, Kennedy has been much luckier with the critics, but this can be accounted for by the fact that whereas in Rhys's fiction women's drinking is only partly thematised, in Kennedy's *Paradise* it is the central theme of the novel. Consequently, the critical focus naturally shifts towards this particular aspect.

Rhys and Kennedy undoubtedly offer intricate and compelling portrayals of women whose lives are largely determined by drink. Rhys's protagonists are vulnerable, existing on the edge rather than in the centre, submerged in the reminiscences of their past relationships, either neurotic or contemplating suicide, retreating to their shabby hotel rooms, but above all, finding consolation in drink, which is a means of detaching oneself from reality. While in Rhys's fiction alcohol is an element of a much broader psychological portrayal, in *Paradise* it is the novel's focal point. Kennedy's protagonist is forever preoccupied with drink and all its aspects, which is most apparent in her reflection on being "distilled" [2005, 19]. Hannah Luckraft is a full-blooded alcoholic, cunning in her methodological approach to drink. Kennedy, quite understandably if one considers the historical/cultural/sociological differences between the two time frames represented by the novelists, provides a completely different type of a drink-dependent woman, a much updated, or emancipated, as it were, version of Rhys's heroines.

Despite there being differences between the two novelists, their fictionalisations of women's drinking have much in common. In the introductory notes to *Good Morning, Midnight*, Kennedy emphasises the frequent use of "alcohol-induced commentary" [2000, x] in Jean Rhys's fiction. This is exactly what Kennedy employs in her novel, quite possibly inspired by Rhys. In *Paradise*, such commentary is not only engendered by alcohol, but in great part actually concentrates on it. Writing about Jean Rhys's fiction, George Wedges emphasises the pervading obsession with drink [cf. 1998, 27]. Much the same, even to a greater degree, can be said of *Paradise*. It comes as no surprise that such similarities in the treatment of the alcohol theme have led Katie Owen to hail Kennedy "a modern-day Rhys" (2004).

There are obviously more works, not considered here, in which one can find female characters functioning in alcoholic settings. However, as far as literature of the British Isles is concerned, both Rhys and Kennedy, as has been argued, offer a perspective which is very much unparalleled, if only because they actually focalise 'drunk women', providing ample material both for analytical and comparative study of literary representations of women and alcohol.

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Summary

"THEY ALL KNOW WHAT I AM": LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN AND ALCOHOL

Drink literature is something which has been drawing critical attention for a few decades. This is most transparent in the number of studies concerning various attempts to literarise alcohol, in whatever form or genre. What is immediately striking, though, is that most literary works fitting this thematic context are written by male writers, to mention Malcolm Lowry or Charles Jackson, and they usually feature male protagonists. Women seem to be inconspicuous here, both as authors and as literary characters, the latter usually limited to marginal figures who are victims of male drunkenness. This article targets the 'neglected' gender in the fictional representations of alcohol by briefly surveying the motif in the literature written on the British Isles and then focusing on two women writers, Jean Rhys and A.L. Kennedy.

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