

## Tropes of Temperance, Specters of Naturalism: Amelia E. Johnson's *Clarence and Corinne*

ANNA POCHMARA

University of Warsaw

a.pochmara@uw.edu.pl

The article investigates the intersection of temperance discourse and emergent naturalist aesthetics in Amelia E. Johnson's *Clarence and Corinne* (1890). Just as many novels published in the Black Woman's Era at the turn of the twentieth century, it parallels the tradition of white woman's fiction as defined by Nina Baym and the sentimental tradition as discussed by Jane Tompkins. In my analysis, I will show how Johnson's imagery resonates with both the drunkard narrative and seminal works of American naturalism, such as Stephen Crane's *Maggie* (1893) and Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900), and how *Clarence and Corinne* exemplifies salient—though rarely examined—interconnections between temperance discourse and naturalist aesthetics. Her appropriation and revision of hegemonic ideologies and fiction formats enables her to not only to engage in a critical dialogue with Victorian gender politics and the capitalist economy but also to relate to issues of specific relevance for the contemporary African American community, such as the rise of the retrogressionist discourse of black bestiality, post-Reconstruction failure of a free labor economy, and interracial patronage politics.

Keywords: temperance; reform movements; Amelia E. Johnson; Black Woman's Era; American naturalism

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## Tropología de la abstinencia y fantasmas del naturalismo en *Clarence and Corinne* de Amelia E. Johnson

En este trabajo se estudia la intersección entre el discurso de la abstinencia alcohólica y la incipiente estética naturalista en la novela de Amelia E. Johnson *Clarence and Corinne* (1890). Como otras novelas de la Black Woman's Era, en la transición del siglo XIX al XX, ésta establece un paralelismo con la ficción de mujeres blancas, definida por Nina Baym,

y con la tradición sentimental estudiada por Jane Tompkins. Mi análisis explora el modo en que las imágenes empleadas por Johnson contienen ecos tanto de narraciones sobre el alcoholismo de la época, como de obras seminales del naturalismo norteamericano, como *Maggie* de Stepehn Crane (1893) y *Sister Carrie* de Theodore Dreiser (1900), hasta el punto de que *Clarence and Corinne* podría ejemplificar algunas conexiones (poco estudiadas por la crítica) entre el discurso de la abstinencia y la estética naturalista. La apropiación y revision de algunas ideologías hegemónicas y de formatos ficcionales contemporáneos favorece el diálogo crítico de Johnson con la política de género victoriana y con la economía capitalista, así como con aspectos relevantes para la comunidad afroamericana, como el surgimiento del discurso regresivo del bestialismo negro, el fracaso de la economía libre del trabajo posterior a la Reconstrucción y la política del patronazgo interracial.

Palabras clave: abstinencia alcohólica; reformismo; Amelia E. Johnson; Black Woman's Era; naturalismo americano

How could she live, battered and beaten, and starved as she was, and by our father too; the one who could have made us all comfortable and happy. But instead of that made us miserable—no, it wasn't him either; it was that dreadful, dreadful stuff, whisky. Yes, drink ruined our father, and now it's killed our mother; and nobody cares for us because we're the children of a drunkard.

Clarence in *Clarence and Corinne* (Johnson [1890] 1988, 19)

Building on studies of women's literature in the nineteenth century, nineteenth-century reform movements, American naturalist tradition and African American nineteenth-century fiction, I will investigate the uses of temperance in Amelia E. Johnson's *Clarence and Corinne* (1890). This relatively little known novel is an evangelical conversion narrative published by the American Baptist Publishing society. Since it features racially indeterminate characters and hence does not meet the expectations of authenticity set for African American literature, it did not attract much scholarly attention until the 1990s. Just as many novels published in the Black Woman's Era at the turn of the twentieth century, it begins with a disintegration of family, climaxes with a moment of *anagnorisis* and ends with an extended family reunion. As many critics have argued, to a large extent, *Clarence and Corinne* parallels the tradition of white woman's fiction as defined by Nina Baym (1978) and the sentimental tradition as discussed by Jane Tompkins (1986)—see also Spillers (1988, xxvii), Tate (1992, 5-6) and duCille (1993, 4, 17)—and it uses reform discourse aimed at the expansion of the private sphere (Tate 1992, 14; Foreman 2009, 3-4).<sup>1</sup> Following the gender critique embedded in the hegemonic tradition, Johnson's text analogously challenges unchecked patriarchal authority and women's financial dependence on men, rather than it simply "reiterate[ing] the conservative female gender prescriptions of white culture" as critics highlighting its conservative gender representations have argued (Tate 1992, 98-99).<sup>2</sup> In my analysis, I will show how Johnson's appropriation and revision of hegemonic ideologies and fiction formats may be read as meaningful and usable for the African American community at the turn of the twentieth century. Her text voices a trenchant if implicit critique not only of gender politics, but also of post-Reconstruction free labor, the capitalist market place and patronage politics. I will argue that the text's narrative parallels with the mulatta melodrama make it possible to read these challenges as specifically targeted against white privilege.

<sup>1</sup> See also McDowell (1995, 29), Carby (1987), Epstein (1986), Dorsey (2006) and Parsons (2010).

<sup>2</sup> Tate also argues that despite the text's sympathy for the underprivileged, "there is virtually no interventionary discourse of direct feminine agency or female self-improvement" (1992, 98). Analogously, contrasting it with Pauline Hopkins and Frances Harper, M. Giulia Fabi argues that "Johnson does not overtly address the power disparity between the sexes and therefore effectively effaces any demands for the societal [...] empowerment of women" (1995, 240).

In the following analysis, I will specifically focus on Johnson's appropriation of temperance rhetoric and its gender politics. The presence of temperance tropes in African American literature dates back to the days of the abolitionist movement and could be easily explained as a residual trace of the close rhetorical and historical ties between different nineteenth-century reform movements. The frequency with which the theme recurs in the Black Woman's Era suggests, however, that it gained some additional usefulness for African American women activists and their literature at the turn of the century.<sup>3</sup> In general, tropes of temperance, in which reformers voiced their anxieties related to volition, compulsion and contentment (Parsons 2010, 9-17), enabled black writers to express the tension between structural determinism and symbolic self-determination which were central for the newly emancipated community, whose post-Emancipation optimism clashed with the social realities of Jim Crow segregation, disfranchisement, share-cropping and lynching violence. More specifically, P. Gabrielle Foreman convincingly shows that it is possible to read Johnson's temperance rhetoric, and images of white intemperance in particular, as a response to contemporary retrogressionist discourse of black bestiality and more specifically to Southern temperance discourse, in which activists such as Rebecca Latimer Felton warned against "liquor and lust-filled Black threats to the nation" (Foreman 2009, 166). Building on Foreman's insights, I will argue that Johnson's challenge to the racial and gender politics of white masculine authority, and her critique of the limitations of hegemonic femininity, stem not from her appropriation of woman's fiction and the rhetoric of the temperance movement alone. Her use of the additional force of the drunkard motif in the novel can be attributed to the rise of naturalist literature which coincided with the Black Woman's Era. The naturalist brute and the plot of decline closely related with it, as June Howard has convincingly argued in her seminal study *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism* (1985), express and manage the turn-of-the-century anxieties of proletarianization. The naturalist brute draws on the former myths of savages and wild men, yet the figure is "imagined as living not outside the bounds of human society, not in the wilderness [...] but within the very walls of the civilized city" (Howard 1985, 80). These specters of atavism are primarily projected on the persona of the immigrant worker, who in the bourgeois imagination "easily succumbed to alcohol, sex, crime, and violence" (Dubofsky 1989, 24, quoted in Howard 1985, 80). Thus, naturalism internalizes representations of brutality and positions it on American territory, in American cities, or even within American bodies. Consequently, the brute becomes more immediately threatening than the distanced exotic otherness. On the other hand, naturalist discourse manages the anxieties of proletarianization: it ethnicizes the working class and contrasts it with the passive observer, a position that the text frequently encourages the reader to identify with (Howard 1985, 70-103).

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<sup>3</sup> For an analysis of temperance as used by Frances Harper, see Stancliff (2010).

The contrast between the brute and the observer is analogous to the tension between determinism and reformism, which is at the center of *Clarence and Corinne*.

Even though Johnson's novel was published before the American naturalist classics, Howard traces the origins of naturalist discourse in the United States back to 1877, the year of the first national strike (1985, 75). Such a reading adds additional support to Giulia Fabi's claim that *Clarence and Corinne*'s preoccupation with "the impact of the environment on the individual" and the representation of "urban outcasts ostracized by their poverty" can be referred to as "protonaturalist" (Fabi 2007, 14) and in this sense the book foreshadows canonical works of American naturalism. Additionally, Johnson's novel aptly illustrates how American naturalism emerges out of a dialogue with temperance discourse and its twin techniques of sentimental compassion and melodramatic excess. One of the most vivid examples of this intersection is found in the early presence of European naturalism in the US. Naturalism's entry into American cultural discourse predates the release of the first, pirated, translations of Émile Zola in the early 1880s and can be traced back to theatre adaptations of his 1877 novel *L'Assommoir*, a study of a family's decline due to alcoholism. Only two years after its publication in France, at least three different directors had adapted it for the American stage, and at the same time Charles Reade was successfully touring the United States with his British adaptation of the novel, *Drink* (Frick 2003, 169-170).<sup>4</sup> Although all productions highlighted melodramatic elements of Zola's text and significantly altered the narrative to make it more compatible with reform optimism, the works were received as "an example of Zola's sordid realism, rather than a resurrection of mid-century temperance melodrama" (Cummins 2008, 161). Reade managed to combine "the then-popular melodramatic mode with Zola's original naturalistic mode," which is considered to be central to the success of his production (Frick 2003, 174-175). Thus the introduction of Zola into the US illustrates the significance of temperance discourse for the emergence of American naturalism. This intersection, as I will demonstrate, is equally fundamental for Johnson's story. *Clarence and Corinne*, just like the theatre adaptations of Zola showcases the crucial interconnectedness of naturalism, sentimentalism and melodrama at the turn of the century.

*Clarence and Corinne* begins with images that prefigure the introductory chapters of Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893), frequently listed as the earliest work in the American naturalist canon (Holton 1972, 37). In both cases, young children, a brother and a sister, are positioned at the threshold of the unfriendly and unsafe private sphere of the drunkard's home. Crane's novel opens with the protagonists, Maggie and Jimmie, in a Bowery street ([1893] 2003, 135-138). The significance of this image is highlighted in the depiction of their tenement, in which "a dozen gruesome doorways gave up loads of babies to the street and the gutter [...] In the street infants played or

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<sup>4</sup> Frick lists David Belasco, Augustine Daly and Dion Boucicault as the three producers; however, he points out that Reade's venture was by far the most popular and influential (2003, 169-170).

fought with other infants or sat stupidly in the way of vehicles" (139). The building is represented as a woman in labor whose grotesque body, riddled with a "dozen gruesome doorways" and "an hundred windows," merges with the external world (139). Although the house rented by the Burton family in Johnson's novel is a cottage, not a tenement, the boundaries of its private sphere are equally volatile. "The rough door hangs on a single hinge" and is "half open"; the palings are broken and the gate is never closed (Johnson [1890] 1988, 5-6). The threatening character of the cottage (and its environs) is also conspicuously visible in the first illustration to the novel, which precedes the text. It shows that apart from the broken door many other elements of the house, such as shutters and drain pipes, need repairing. Clarence, the eponymous brother, standing on the threshold, about to enter the house, seems to hesitate, suggesting his sense of insecurity. Moreover, even though at other times he acknowledges the rules of etiquette (10), in the picture he is not opening the door for his sister Corinne to enter ahead of him. She is stopped one step behind him, which further indicates that the space they are about to enter is far from being secure.<sup>5</sup> The interior of the house is described as being even more dismal than when viewed from the outside. The narrator conscientiously lists a dirty, uncarpeted, broken floor, dusty and broken windows and rough and rickety items of furniture (Johnson [1890] 1988, 6), which foreshadow "the broken furniture, grimey walls, and general disorder and dirt" in *Maggie* (Crane [1893] 2003, 154). Both Johnson's and Crane's novels problematize the ideology of separate spheres and its easy equation of the safe idyll with domesticity and danger with the public realm. They also resonate with images from temperance discourse, which used analogous depictions of domestic ruin as a reformist argument.

Yet, whereas in popular temperance rhetoric the condition of the drunkard's home was reductively explained with statements such as "all the difference was made by [...] the bottle" (Newton 1861, 78), in Johnson's text, the condition of the house is not wholly attributed to "the Giant Intemperance" (Newton 1861, 38) and its effects on the tenants. Even though Mr. Burton's intemperance is clearly the key factor that contributes to the family's decline, the dilapidation of "the wretched cottage" can be additionally explained with the parsimony of the landlady. As the narrator points out, the owner, Rachel Penrose, is primarily driven by pecuniary greed and as a result deprives herself, and "others, of the actual necessities of life, in order to lay away money for the sake of simply *possessing*" (Johnson [1890] 1988, 42; italics in original). Since her financial self-discipline is so obsessive, it actually turns into a voracious financial appetite, which is paralleled by Mr. Burton's insatiable appetite for alcohol. Thus the novel interestingly juxtaposes her stern respectability and his intemperance as the two factors that make the cottage "a blot upon a beautiful picture" (5). The polar contrast between the two characters and their villainy are

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<sup>5</sup> Men opening a door for a woman to pass through first was mentioned in etiquette manuals as a taken-for-granted common courtesy for which women sometimes even forgot to thank them (Moore [1878] 2008, 240).

melodramatic elements of the text, which simultaneously serve to express naturalist determinism as they point to systemic roots of the family's tragedy: alcoholism and economic exploitation by the owning class.

Even though the Burtons' home is far from the domestic ideal, Mrs. Burton can be read as a hyperbolic image of domestic femininity. Analogously to the "perverse patriarchs" in Gothic fiction analyzed by Kari Winter, she "fill[s] [her] role so exactly that [her] behavior calls attention to the injustice embedded in patriarchal ideology" (Winter 2010, 22). Radically relegated to the private realm, as Hortense Spillers has pointed out, Mrs. Burton "never leaves her chair" (1988, xxxi), where she is found dead in the second chapter by her daughter.<sup>6</sup> Almost all she does before her death is sit in the rocking chair, apathetic and listless. The continuous monotony of rocking is reinforced by Mrs. Burton's never-ending darning: she "draw[s] the needle and thread slowly back and forth" (Johnson [1890] 1988, 8). Even though the narrative does use the sentimental metaphor of the "last sleep," it devotes more space to depicting more naturalist details of her dead body: Mrs. Burton's "wide-open" "dull eyes" stare from her "stony face." Her son Clarence moves towards her "motionless figure" and lifts "one of the nerveless hands" (17-19). Limited to the non-progressive rocking indoors and the motionlessness of death, the drunkard's wife in Johnson's text emblemizes interiority, passivity, submission and non-productivity. Her exaggerated performance of Victorian hegemonic femininity highlights its tragic limitations.

The relationship of Mrs. Burton's representation to the discourses of nineteenth-century femininity can be further illuminated with an intertextual reading since her chair resonates with two influential literary representations of women rocking. On the one hand, it forms a dramatic contrast with the celebration of maternity expressed in a squeaking rocking chair in Beecher Stowe *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). "For twenty years or more, nothing but loving words, and gentle moralities, and motherly loving kindness" have come from the chair of an elderly Quaker mother, Rachel Halliday (Stowe 1852, 138). As Jane Tompkins claims, Rachel Halliday "rules the world from her rocking chair," which is the center of utopian matriarchal order rooted in motherhood (1986, 142).<sup>7</sup> Her domestic confinement is represented as a source of power in the form of moral suasion rather than an instrument of her oppression or symbol of domestic entrapment. Although Mrs. Burton is also represented as a mother in a rocking chair,

<sup>6</sup> This contention, repeated later by Foreman, is actually not entirely correct. She does leave the chair to give bread to her children.

<sup>7</sup> More recently, Elisabeth Wesseling refers to the image as a "rhapsody on the maternal rocking chair" (2012, 211), whereas Bärbel Tischleder claims that it is "the epitome of the ideal home" (2005, 98). For a reading that focuses on the similarity between the rocking chairs in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Sister Carrie* see Kaplan (1992, 144). The power of Stowe's image stems from the contrast between the repetitive unpleasant sound the chair makes—"creechy crawchy," that would have been intolerable in any other chair—and the limitless maternal kindness of the woman in it (1852, 138). It has been insightfully read as central to Stowe's sentimental politics and acquired, rather than inborn, ethics and aesthetics by Gregg Camfield in "The Moral Aesthetics of Sentimentality: A Missing Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin" (1988, 319-345).



her figure stands in polar opposition to boundless maternal nurturance, care and moral influence. Her rocking chair is silent and not squeaky, but “her voice [rings] out sharp and harsh” (8). In the light of this reversal, Mrs. Burton’s representation can be read as a critical rewriting of Stowe’s utopian loving matriarchy. Rather than comfort or cure “head-aches and heart-aches,” her inaction and endless rocking seem to be an expression of the death drive. As Freud has famously argued, the instincts “impelling towards death” are of a “regressive [...] character corresponding to a repetition-compulsion,” and “their aim [is] the reinstatement of lifelessness” (1922, 54). Mrs. Burton’s apathetic repetitive movement presages her imminent death.

Rather than follow Stowe’s sentimentalist politics, Johnson’s image prefigures naturalist imagery. The rocking chair, as numerous scholars of naturalist fiction have argued, at the turn of the century becomes a fundamental image of static, illusory motion.<sup>8</sup> Since its most famous rendering is the dreaming and longing of Theodore Dreiser’s *Carrie Meeber*, the rocking chair image in critical discourse is closely linked to femininity. As Jennifer Fleissner argues, it exemplifies the key naturalist plot centered on “the modern young woman,” which is characterized by “ongoing, nonlinear, repetitive motion [...] that has the distinctive effect of seeming also like a stuckness in place” (2004, 9). Despite the conspicuous difference in their conditions, both Mrs. Burton and Carrie embody a lack of contentment. In Carrie’s case, such continual lack of satisfaction motivates and leads to her social advancement from a poor second-generation German immigrant to a famous New York actress. For Mrs. Burton the final outcome is dramatically different. In light of the scant information that Johnson’s narrative offers to the reader about Clarence and Corinne’s mother—according to which she “[was] a giddy, thoughtless girl” and married James Burton against the advice of friendly people (Johnson [1890] 1988, 43)—we may assume that she falls into the category of the “speculative,” “discontented” wife of a drunkard, who chooses “a ‘flashy’ and ‘fast’ young man for a husband” in hope of quick social advancement (Parsons 2010, 88–90). In contrast to Carrie’s daring moves, Mrs. Burton’s speculations are punished in the moral politics of Johnson’s novel.

Dreiser’s novel, however, features another character who frequently sits in the rocking chair, and who represents a plot of decline analogous to Mrs. Burton’s. After Carrie leaves him when he is not able to maintain the lifestyle she has got used to, her lover George Hurstwood “[sinks] down in his chair” with “bereaved affection and self-pity.” In the text, just as in Johnson’s novel, his inertia is emphasized: “At midnight he [is] still rocking, staring at the floor” (Dreiser [1900] 2000, 436–437). The trajectory of Mrs. Burton resembles his plot of decline more closely than Carrie’s rise to fame.

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<sup>8</sup> Very many studies devoted to naturalism or *Sister Carrie* make a reference to the significance of the rocking chair. It has been formalistically read as a fractal metaphor of cyclic, unprogressive narratives dominating the naturalist aesthetic (Pizer 1984, 21). When read as immobility from the Marxist and new historicist perspective, it has been linked to ceaselessly deferred satisfaction of consumerism (Fleissner 2004, 188) and paralysis (Howard 1985, 43, 99–102). See also Fisher (1985, 154–156).



More specifically, the last words of Hurstwood before he commits suicide by gassing himself with methane and the last words in the original version of the text—"What's the use?" (Dreiser [1900] 2000, 498)—strongly resonate with some of Mrs. Burton's scarce utterances. She repeats that "There's no use talking, and there's no use trying to be decent," and asks rhetorically, "What's the good of wishing for what cannot be?" (Johnson [1890] 1988, 7-8). Moreover, both characters' deaths are characterized by inertia rather than drama. Both die in the darkness of their rented rooms: Hurstwood stretched for "rest" in bed (Dreiser [1900] 2000, 498), and Mrs. Burton in her chair, though assumed by Corinne to be asleep (Johnson [1890] 1988, 17). These parallels encourage us to read the figure of Mrs. Burton through the prism of Hurstwood's suicide as an expression of the death instinct, a conjunction of repetition and regression. Instead of providing maternal care for her children and making the rocking chair an extension of her womb like Rachel Halliday did, she desires to return herself to "an earlier condition," to the womb (Freud 1922, 54). Her rocking towards death simultaneously foreshadows Carrie's lack of contentment and Hurstwood's final resignation.<sup>9</sup>

What further highlights Johnson's departure from the Quaker settlement of Rachel Halliday, which represents the Jeffersonian ideal of the self-sufficient homestead (Fisher 1985, 114), and underlines the similarity between Mrs. Burton and both Carrie and Hurstwood is the positioning of their chairs in a rented, rather than privately owned, space. As Amy Kaplan argues in her seminal study of the period, representations of rented spaces are central for late-nineteenth-century realism and naturalism since they epitomize "the threatening repository of the unreal" (1992, 12), which stems from the coexistence of "seemingly mutually exclusive realities" in the wake of late-nineteenth-century urban-industrial transformations (8-11). Rented spaces trigger bourgeois anxieties since they constitute the threatening realm of 'the other half.'<sup>10</sup> In the light of Kaplan's claim about the connotations evoked by representations of rented spaces, the positioning of Mrs. Burton's chair in a rented cottage further highlights the specter of the menace and anxiety of proletarianization in the text. In the novel, the continuity and changelessness of the rocking motion do not provide maternal comfort in those times of dramatic social changes, but are represented as a fatal paralysis, which prefigures naturalism's circular images of rise and fall.

The seemingly paralyzed Mrs. Burton, however, is not a sentimentalized victim and does not evoke the reader's compassion in the text. As the intrusive narrator critically comments, "[Mrs. Burton] had lost all energy and ambition, doing hardly anything save

<sup>9</sup> The image of a rocking woman is also evoked for a brief moment in *Maggie*. Mary Johnson, drunk and vulgar, rocks "to and fro upon a chair, shedding tears and crooning miserably to the two children about their 'poor mother' and 'yer fader, damn 'is soul'" (Crane [1893] 2003, 142). Since here the mother is the drunkard and an emblem of hypocrisy, it may be read as a parody of Mrs. Burton's condition.

<sup>10</sup> The process of imagining and managing the reality of the urban poor and their rented spaces was most vividly represented in the photographic practice of Jacob Riis, who portrayed the tenements of New York's Lower East Side and used selected pictures in his *How The Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* (1890), coincidentally published in the same year as *Clarence and Corinne*.

to sit and brood bitterly” (Johnson [1890] 1988, 42-43). This judgment is repeated more explicitly in the words of Miss Rachel Penrose, the owner of the cottage, and it is further reinforced on the narrative level through the story of children left unprotected. As Foreman states, “Mrs. Burton is situated as a poor victim and passive victimizer at best. At worst she is a bad mother complicit in her children’s ruin” (2009, 161). Her failure is even more conspicuous as the novel contrasts her home with the ideal household of Helen and Mary Gray, two orphaned sisters, who eventually take over the responsibility for Clarence and Corinne. Their “picturesque white cottage” with a blooming garden is kept “neat, cool, cozy,” even though the younger sister, Mary, who is the main housekeeper, is a “frail and sickly” invalid (Johnson [1890] 1988, 29). She is introduced, like Mrs. Burton, “sitting” in a chair, though she is placed “by the open window” and productively engaged in sewing (30). Likewise, her older sister, Helen, sits in a rocking chair after a day’s work as a teacher (30). “Strangely”—as the text points out—the invalid “[i]nstead of giving way under the strain of nursing the sick child every day [...] seemed to gain strength” (83). In contrast to Mrs. Burton’s self-absorption and her ultimate confinement to the home, the sisters are actively and generously engaged in the life of their community, and as Fabi argues, their household represents “a viable non-capitalistic relational economy” (2007, 18). Significantly, the model household of the two sisters foreshadows the novel’s happy ending, which is also based on the relationships between two pairs of siblings. Thus the novel, although conservative in its representations of femininity, emphasizes the significance of woman’s work and demonstrates the dangers of female passivity, dependence and the loss of ambition.

On the narrative level, *Clarence and Corinne* incorporates the drunkard narrative as defined by Elaine Frantz Parsons in *Manhood Lost: Fallen Drunkards and Redeeming Women in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (2003). In this formulaic story, a father’s drinking problem as is typical, leads to the disintegration of the family (Parsons 2003, 11). In Johnson’s novel, as a result of the father’s intemperance, the mother dies and the children are left homeless and are separated. In his deathbed confession, reported in a newspaper, the father admits that “he had deserted [his children] at the death of their mother because he did not wish to be burdened with them” (Johnson [1890] 1988, 177). Whereas Mrs. Burton represents a hyperbolic embodiment of domestic femininity, her husband is a hyperbolic failure of male authority. As Parsons demonstrates, the effectiveness of the drunkard narrative was inherently connected with the anxieties about masculinity it triggered: the influence of alcohol became inextricable from the loss of masculine mastery, and such a correlation was recognized both by temperance activists and their opponents: “The drunkard [...] was not a true man because he was unable to exert his will over his body and interests” (Parsons 2003, 55).<sup>11</sup> Drunkard

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<sup>11</sup> Parsons argues that temperance rhetoric markedly differed from the critical representations of patriarchy in texts by Charlotte Perkins Gillman (1860-1935) or Kate Chopin (1850-1904), yet she admits that temperance activists, “who aimed ambiguously at the drunken husband, may well have done more to advance women’s rights than those who set their sights, through the sober patriarch, on patriarchy itself” (2003, 172).

narratives evidence time and again that any man can become addicted to alcohol. “In a tavern [...] an angel could scarcely remain without corruption,” to quote from the one of the most popular temperance texts, T. S. Arthur *Ten Nights in a Barroom* ([1854] 2000, 208). Accordingly, in *Clarence and Corinne* it is also emphasized that it is “that dreadful stuff, whisky” that leads to the tragedy at the beginning of the novel rather than any innate weakness of Mr. Burton (Johnson [1890] 1988, 19). Nevertheless, as historians have argued, the significance of the bottle metaphor and other tropes of temperance express anxieties that are not limited to intemperance (Epstein 1981, 100-103). In temperance discourse, men’s addiction is exposed as one of the systemic weak links positioned at the juncture of patriarchal culture and capitalism, rather than treated as an individual and isolated phenomenon. Furthermore, although temperance literature highlights the problem of the “bottle,” it needs to be seen in the wider context of nineteenth-century reform rhetoric of self-discipline, which metonymically links alcohol with other stimulants of appetites—from meat to modern urban lifestyle—and inebriety with other weaknesses, forces and desires—from sensual passion to pecuniary greed (Epstein 1981, 125-127; Dorsey 2002, 116-120; Parsons 2003, 78-81). When read as an element of such extended disciplinary discourse, Johnson’s representations of intemperance automatically evoke a whole family of ideas, many of which rhetorically target two interconnected loci of power: masculinity with its passions and capitalism with its speculative marketplace. Their interconnectedness explains also why the text assigns the roles of villains to such polarized figures as intemperate Mr. Burton and accumulating Miss Penrose. As I will argue in the last part of the paper, these can be additionally linked with the racial privilege of whiteness in the novel.

In temperance narratives, masculine authority is further challenged as the fallen drunkard’s complement is a “redeeming woman,” who through her temperance work can gain access to the public sphere and control of the lower-class neighborhoods (Parsons 2003, 51-52). Accordingly, in *Clarence and Corinne*, the neighboring women take over the control of the Burtons’ house and children. As many texts representing “woman’s fiction,” the novel juxtaposes good and bad guardians (Baym 1978, 37). Miss Penrose, the antagonist in the novel is represented by a middle-class, financially secure woman, whereas the good guardians, the earlier mentioned Gray sisters, are extremely poor. Such juxtaposition can be read as an expression of anxiety over the bourgeois control of lower-class neighborhoods guaranteed by the former’s economic privilege. The novel exposes the limits of compassion of privileged reform activists by representing a respectable woman with a complete lack of empathy for her disadvantaged protégée, whose condition clearly alludes to slavery. After Mrs. Burton’s death, Miss Penrose takes Corinne to her house and trains her as a domestic. The girl is “overworked and underfed,” while the guardian “pays her no wages” (Johnson [1890] 1988, 47) and forbids her to leave the house. Even though the novel represents a reformist strand of literature, Johnson is wary that reformist protection might easily turn to economic exploitation. What further intensifies the antagonist’s exploitative

attitude is the fact that she owns the house in which the children live, and that the rent is not commensurate with the dilapidated conditions of the cottage. The Burtons “paid but little, but more than the place was worth” since it “was only fit to be torn down” (44). After the mother’s death and father’s abandonment, the children are told “it would be no longer their home,” even though the cottage is closed up rather than rented to someone else (40). Such positioning of the capitalist landlord and reformer in the same person foreshadows the depiction of the Dalton family in *Native Son*, Richard Wright’s naturalist classic published in 1940, exactly fifty years after Johnson’s novel.

Apart from its parallels with the sentimental drunkard narrative, the depiction of Mr. Burton also resonates with the discourse of the brute as analyzed by Howard. “Drink-maddened,” he “knocks and beats about” his wife, who as a result has a swollen eye and other signs of “ill-usage” (7-8). After he falls asleep, he becomes a dehumanized object, a “figure,” a “form of a man” (15-16). In the narrative, he is just as immobilized as his wife. In the evening, the children find him lying upon the bed unconscious. In the morning, he is in the same position: “on the bed, across which he had thrown himself, hat, boots, and all” (17). He does not utter a single comprehensible sentence, which is in contrast both to the well-developed grammatical statements that come from his children and to the general eloquence of the drunkard in temperance literature, where he frequently becomes the chief speaker against alcohol (Parsons 2003, 23-24). After the children ask him about the reasons for their mother’s death, Mr. Burton mutters a brief “I dunno” and leaves the room not to be mentioned until the end of the novel (Johnson [1890] 1988, 18). This ideally fits Howard’s characterization of the naturalist brute as “necessarily inarticulate,” “the animal who does not use language and is named but never names” (1985, 81). Mr. Burton’s representation thus evokes analogous hegemonic anxieties to those triggered by the brute: the specters of proletarianization and masculine insecurities that vexed the American imagination at the turn of the century. These fears, however, are not mediated by any othering devices that characterize naturalism. Mr. Burton is not ethnically marked; he is not an inhabitant of the slums. He is a nondescript all-American male like characters in the drunkard narrative.

Another element which emphasizes the novel’s affinity with naturalist images of drinking and signals a departure from the drunkard narrative is its lack of sympathy for the husband, which is central for the drunkard narrative (Parsons 2003, 21). In temperance literature, the white and middle-class identity of the protagonist encouraged the target reader’s identification with the inebriate. Additionally, the reader’s sympathy was evoked by the narrative’s focus on the moment of the fall of the “finest young man in our neighborhood,” to quote again from *Ten Nights in a Barroom* (Arthur [1854] 2000, 11). In contrast, as Foreman has pointed out, “Johnson offers no backstory to affirm Mr. Burton’s essential goodness” (2009, 168). Moreover, whereas the typical drunkard narrative focuses on the causes, *Clarence and Corinne* represents only the results. Since, as Philip Fisher claims in his analysis of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, “To give the narration a

past is to recognize and implicitly adopt the point of view of the oppressor," the shift from causes to results sharpens Johnson's challenge to masculine authority (1985, 116). Mr. Burton is represented only at the beginning of the narrative and he is only barely conscious, hence the narrative represents a much less sympathetic and more critical image of the patriarch than the typical drunkard's story. In temperance discourse, the seductiveness of alcohol was frequently gendered feminine (Parsons 2003, 110) and positioned in the multiethnic metropolis, where the young man arrived from an innocent village (Dorsey 2002, 91-92). The rhetoric capitalized on the long-standing dichotomy between the innocent country and corrupt city and conflated it with residual representations of the temptress (Parsons 2003, 86, 100-125). Mr. Burton, however, is not tempted to take his proverbial first sip in a town saloon by a scheming foreigner or a prostitute. Even though, as Fabi points out, the family's deterioration follows its urban migration (2007, 14), Mr. Burton is already "given to hard drinking" before his marriage (Johnson [1890] 1988, 43). Thus Johnson's novel complicates the standard rural-urban dichotomy. The origins of patriarchal intemperance are located in the country, and it is only transferred to town by the forces of urbanization.

Johnson's text, therefore, draws on the drunkard narrative, which is primarily visible in Mr. Burton's lack of ethnic markedness and the narrative logic, in which intemperance leads to family disintegration. The novel, nevertheless, incorporates the emergent naturalist discourse of the brute, which is evidenced by Mr. Burton's violence, inarticulacy and immobility as well as the narrative's lack of compassion for his fate. Due to such a combination, Johnson's text evokes the contemporary anxieties of proletarianization without projecting them onto ethnic minorities, problematizes middle-class reform activism, and rejects urbanization and European migration as the primary origins of intemperance. Also, gender criticism of the novel draws much of its significance from such recasting of temperance rhetoric and its blending with the emergent naturalist aesthetics. Johnson uses the image of the fallen drunkard to challenge patriarchal order and represents exaggerated hegemonic femininity to highlight its absurd limitations.

Since the gender and class politics in American culture is always necessarily entangled with race politics, an analysis of Johnson's tropes of temperance also requires the scrutiny of this intersection in the novel. As different readings of her output demonstrate, the use of racial indeterminacy by a black author may paradoxically serve as a factor that highlights the raced character of whiteness and strips it of its invisibility. Although Hortense Spillers argues that race is not a key intratextual factor in Johnson's text and the novel does not respond to any "putative urgencies of coeval black life in the United States" (1988, xvii), many later critics see racial neutrality as an efficient political weapon for the black woman author at the turn of the century (Christian 1988, xxvii; Tate 1992, 12; duCille 1993, 62). As Fabi argues, it allows Johnson to deal with the issues of urban poverty and discrimination, and at the same time, does not perpetuate specific racial stereotypes of black vice and squalor (2007, 14). Racial indeterminacy in

the novel, she points out, is radical and subverts the automatic assumption about the whiteness of the portrayed community: “if nothing indicates the character’s blackness, nothing indicates their whiteness either” (Fabi 1995, 239). She also emphasizes the potentiality of blackness of Johnson’s indeterminate characters. Specifically, Johnson’s focus on the characters’ dark eyes encourages black readers to identify with them (Fabi 2007, 10). Tate accordingly includes Johnson’s female characters as examples of what she labels “the black heroine’s text” of self-determination and fulfillment (1992, 4). Foreman, although she posits that racial indeterminacy is an example of “simultextuality,” claims that the narrative gains more political power and gives more narrative pleasure for black readers when its milieu is read as specifically white (2009, 162).<sup>12</sup> She argues that Johnson’s depiction of a dysfunctional white family challenges contemporary southern temperance rhetoric, which racialized drink and positioned “the drunk black man” as the threat to the white household, especially to the mythical purity of white womanhood (164-168). It might be added that Johnson is able to engage in a dialogue with the black brute rhetoric more effectively because her narrative combines the sentimental drunkard’s story with naturalist imagery of the brute. If the father, positioned as a menace rather than a victim or the object of reformers’ sympathy in the novel, is read as white, he constitutes a more pinpointed response to the black brute rhetoric than a typical protagonist of the drunkard narrative.

The failure of the white father, which leads to family disintegration, also intricately resonates with the popular abolitionist narrative of the separation of slave families. In the 1890s, the motif was revived in Black Woman’s Era fiction, mostly in the mulatta melodrama, where the termination of the white father’s control results in a reversal of the daughter’s fortune. This *peripeteia* can be summarized as “To-Day a Mistress, To-Morrow a Slave,” a chapter title from William Wells Brown’s *Clotel; Or, The President’s Daughter* (1853, 143). In a few versions of the plot, when patriarchal control is terminated the daughter learns that she is black and not white, and in some cases the narrative moves from a degenerate Anglo-Saxon setting to an African American community to showcase black self-determined identity and self-reliance. Mr. Burton’s failure to protect his family analogously forces his daughter into slavery-like servitude. This narrative parallel may help further complicate the claims about racial indeterminacy in the novel. If Johnson’s text is read in conjunction with the changes in racial identities of characters in novels such as Julia C. Collins’s *The Curse of Caste: Or, The Slave Bride* (1865), Frances Harper’s *Minnie’s Sacrifice* (1868-1888) and *Iola Leroy* (1892), or Pauline Hopkins’s *Hagar’s Daughter* (1901-1903), the race of the original milieu can be read as connotative of whiteness and the final destination of characters’ narrative trajectories as connotative of blackness. Such an experimental intertextual reading would diachronically reconcile divergent synchronic readings of racial indeterminacy

<sup>12</sup>Simultextuality is an interpretive mode Foreman uses to stress the multivalent meanings in African American women’s writings (2009, 6).



in Johnson's novel. The text would then potentially criticize white patriarchy, and the limitations of hegemonic feminine domesticity at the beginning and end would envision a happy, extended, horizontal black community, made of brothers and sisters.

Before the community is built, however, the eponymous brother and sister need to face many oppressive experiences. Corinne's life after her mother's death and her father's abandonment of the family brings clear associations with slavery. As I have mentioned before, she is heavily exploited by stern Miss Penrose, who does not pay her and forbids her to leave the house. The child is constantly hungry, and there is not "a moment of the day which she [can] call her own" (Johnson [1890] 1988, 47). Furthermore, Corinne's guardian, although a member of the church herself, does not allow the girl to attend, which showcases not only her religious bigotry but also her inability to see in Corinne a fellow human being, possibly due to the race difference. Characteristically, Miss Penrose is the only character in the novel whose eyes are described as gray rather than dark or unspecified, and thus she might be positioned as white (50) in contrast to black-eyed Corinne (9; see Fabi 2007, 10). Hence Johnson's novel evokes the specters of slavery and uses them primarily to comment on the conditions of contemporary domestic service and child labor. If we read the race of the children as black, the text more specifically comments on the post-Reconstruction failure of free labor ideology (Foner 1988) and other elements of the emergent Jim Crow system, which W. E. B. Du Bois referred to as "a second slavery" ([1903] 1990, 7).

These associations with slavery are less visible in Clarence's plotline, which parallels the mulatta melodrama's focus on female characters. Yet Clarence's declaration of his desire to "run away" (Johnson [1890] 1988, 9) in a dialogue with his sister does recall black male's dilemmas in slave narratives.<sup>13</sup> Both exemplify the conflict between a wish for escape and devotion to female relatives. Most of Clarence's images of oppression highlight powerlessness stemming from his class and age, but also his heredity. He claims that "people don't even want to give" to "old drunken Burton's boy" because of his parentage (19-20). Later, after he experiences the competition and corruption of the capitalist marketplace and finds himself homeless and penniless, he is afraid that a naturalist plot of decline necessarily awaits him: "I was born to be down-trodden—crushed!" (116). In Clarence's plotline, intemperance and capitalism are juxtaposed as two obstacles to the boy's self-determined success, which reflects the positioning of his father and Miss Penrose as villains in the novel. Ultimately, just as Reade in his adaptation of Zola lets the female protagonist live and ends the play in a triumph of reform optimism, Johnson's protagonists overcome the limitations of heredity, and the novel ends in the founding of an extended household of Clarence and Corinne and their spouses, who also happen to be siblings. The brotherly and sisterly bonds guarantee greater gender equality than the traditional heterosexual romance. Additionally the four brothers and sisters represent the favorite professions of woman's reform literature: a minister, a teacher and a doctor.

<sup>13</sup> See for example Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slavegirl* ([1861] 2010, 19).



In contrast to the turn-of-the-century black male text, which as Tate argues, dramatizes “the frustrated moral claim of black patriarchal desire” (1992, 67), black women’s novels repeatedly represent white patriarchal failure. This is also exemplified by Johnson’s novel if we read the opening milieu as connotative of whiteness. Her rhetorical strategy to draw on temperance discourse and recast it so it foreshadows the emergent naturalist aesthetics enables her to challenge white masculine authority and expose its lack of mastery. Her assaults on masculinity play into a wide range of interrelated turn-of-the-century anxieties of the dominant classes: proletarianization, the sense of crisis of hegemonic masculinity and Southern fears of black supremacy. Johnson rewrites temperance scripts to voice anxiety about the reformers’ patronage politics and the abusive aspect of economic privilege. What she represents as a foundation of the happy ending in the corrective vision of her novel, is in fact a horizontal cohesive community of brothers and sisters, which emerges as a response to the vertical power structures of capitalism and patronage.

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Received 23 October 2015

Accepted 13 April 2016

Anna Pochmara is Assistant Professor at the Institute of English Studies, the University of Warsaw. Since 2013, Pochmara has been a co-editor of *Acta Philologica*, the journal of the Faculty of Modern Languages, University of Warsaw. She is the author of over twenty articles and reviews in the field of American studies and *The Making of the New Negro: Black Authorship, Masculinity, and Sexuality* (2011), for which she received the Polish Minister of Science and Higher Education Award. Her current research project concerns the uses of temperance and intemperance in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century African American literature.

Address: Institute of English Studies. University of Warsaw. Hoża, 69. 00-681, Warsaw, Poland.  
Tel.: +48 225531424.