Demon Rum and Fallen Drunkards: The Displacement of Blame in Nineteenth Century American Temperance Fiction

Abstract

Temperance novels are a lesser studied facet of the Temperance Movement’s massive social – and eventually political – reform. They are a type of popular literary propaganda circulated through the public alongside short stories, poetry, and pamphlets. Didactic and sensationalistic, these novels dramatized alcohol addiction in order to advance the agenda of the Temperance Movement. Temperance novels cast the habitual drunkard as the victim of a larger societal ill instead of as an active agent capable of controlling his own fate. External agents of influence such as tavern-keepers, the drunkard’s peer group, and alcohol itself are blamed for the drunkard’s spiral to a life of violence, poverty, and abuse. Because of this, I argue that the displacement of blame from the drunkard to external agents was a propagandist technique that furthered the Temperance Movement’s agenda to eradicate the sale, production, and use of alcohol in America.