Married to the Bottle: An Analysis of Alcoholism and Gender in Elizabeth Thompson’s Advice Column in the *Globe and Mail* in the Late-1950s

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The 1950s saw the emergence of the medicalization of alcoholism as a disease. Society became more accepting of the casual drink and alcohol moved into the home. As husbands imbibed, wives became irritated and concerned with this change in behaviour. Wives often turned outside of the home for help. One outlet for these concerns was the “Mrs. Thompson Advises” column in the *Globe and Mail*. The author, Elizabeth Thompson, provided multifaceted advice to women who were challenged with a drunken husband and a broken home. The advice that came from this column is critical to analyze because it was not the response that most wives were expecting. “First, admit that in some ways you have not been a good wife,” Mrs. Thompson responded in one of her columns.[[1]](#footnote-1) Not only did she receive requests for help, she also received letters from wives who were provoked by her previous advice. Yet, Mrs. Thompson made it clear that these letters were just as important to publish to show how confident she was in the advice that she was providing[[2]](#footnote-2)

Mrs. Thompson’s advice challenged the wives who were writing letters to refrain from solely complaining about their husbands. The advice sought to highlight the relationship between husband, wife, and alcohol. This paper explores the disease of alcoholism and its connection to home life in advice literature. It examines the gender diversification of alcohol as seen in the “Mrs. Thompson Advises” column which was present in the *Globe and Mail* in the 1950s. This paper will draw upon the work of Ann Walton who has examined Thompson and other advice literature in relation to other social problems. It will also apply the work of Mona Gleason, a social historian who has done extensive research on family life in postwar Canada, and Deborah McPhail, a social historian who analyzed the gendered advice given to families surrounding the consumption of food in the same time period of study.

Gleason explores the ideal of a ‘normal’ family. When men returned form the Second World War, anxieties emerged as to how life would go back to ‘normal’ and questioned what ‘normal’ was. Gleason argues that the 1950s were not the ‘golden era’ they are represented as.[[3]](#footnote-3) The 1950s were a time of hardship for many and there was benefit to the promotion of the white, middle-class families as ‘normal’.[[4]](#footnote-4) The responsibility to bolster this normalcy fell on the women. In McPhail’s research, she concludes that the removal of fat from the white, middle-class, male body would re-establish the male breadwinner and the female homemaker.[[5]](#footnote-5) This division of labour is what acclaimed white, middle-class, nuclear families as the norm.[[6]](#footnote-6) In McPhail’s research, it is obesity that challenges this normalcy. This paper looks at how this normalcy was challenged in the advice literature by the consumption of alcohol.

Mrs. Thompson’s advice was more receptive than other columns of the 1950s as she provided advice on a wide range of lifestyle topics that affected the state of the active middle-class family.[[7]](#footnote-7) Although her advice was transparent, Mrs. Thompson herself was not. Elizabeth Thompson was the alias for the Manitou-born writer Isabel Turnbull Dingman.[[8]](#footnote-8) Her advice column “Personal Problems” that was a regular in the Winnipeg Free Press in the 1930s, was picked up by other newspapers under the column “Mrs. Thompson Advises.”[[9]](#footnote-9) This paper focuses solely on the “Mrs. Thompson Advises” column that ran in the *Globe and Mail* in the latter half of the 1950s. It uses excerpts from published letters of readers, and Thompson’s replies regarding issues with alcohol, to explore the role that advice literature played in the construction of gender roles. This theme will be seen repeatedly through an analysis of the demographic of readers who wrote in as well as the targeted audience of Thompson’s column.

Alcohol was one of the many challenges that the postwar, middle-class family faced. The use of alcohol as a way for the husband to adapt to changes within society was a part of the postwar anxieties Gleason discusses. The family struggle came with the influence alcohol had on the function of the ‘normal’ family. In the introduction to one letter, Thompson wrote, “sometimes when a wife works, it hurts her husband’s pride and destroys his self respect.”[[10]](#footnote-10) When confronted with consequences of overindulgence, such as the absence of sufficient income, wives would cross gender boundaries and obtain a job supplying the primary income for the household. This blurring of gender roles was thought to have contributed to the continued problem of alcohol misuse.

In the letter the woman wrote, “since we have been married, I have worked too, but my money was never spent on myself, but for food and clothes for the children.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Reading into this letter from a contemporary standpoint, one might praise the woman for supplementing her husband’s income and supplying income for the betterment of the family. However, when put into context of the late 1950s society, this woman was crossing gender boundaries resulting in an imbalance of the natural order of the household. “You should have taken special pains to make him feel you were proud of him,” replied Mrs. Thompson. “When a man feels a failure and thinks his wife despises him, he sometimes loses heart, taking refuge in alcohol.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Walton notes that, within her responses, Thompson writes with a sort of paternalistic attitude.[[13]](#footnote-13) Yet, the advice that Thompson returns emphasizes the importance of gender roles in the function of the mid-twentieth century household. Gleason asserts that the normal family of the 1950s reproduced white, middle-class, patriarchal, and heterosexual values.[[14]](#footnote-14) Thompson tried to deter wives from taking in income because it challenged the ideal of the patriarchal family. She suggests that the wife is at part to blame for her husband’s drinking because he felt invaluable and unable to fulfill his role as the breadwinner.

However, wives still had a role in preserving the image of the ‘normal’ family. McPhail talks about how the literature around the “tubby hubby” was directed towards females.[[15]](#footnote-15) This was because it was the wife’s responsibility to make sure her family was the epitome of health and happiness. This included the food and beverages that he consumed.One woman wrote with a problem that Thompson regarded as “all too common.”[[16]](#footnote-16) “We have terrible quarrels over money,” wrote the woman. “Every cent I make goes to help keep the family, but my husband is never without drink and cigarettes.”[[17]](#footnote-17) This issue stretches further than just the health of the husband. As Thompson expressed, it is of greater concern to the wife to protect the reputation of the family. In this case, Thompson responded with motivation for the wife to act in solving the problem. “No longer need wives wait for the victim to admit his own need,” she wrote. “Use any means you can to get him in contact with professional help.”[[18]](#footnote-18) As McPhail conveys, although the direct issue lied with the husband, consequences affected the family as a whole.[[19]](#footnote-19) Thus, the wife had a responsibility to play in its resolution.

One important aspect of Thompson’s replies is the language she used while writing about a man who drinks. In one letter, Thompson referred to the husband as a ‘victim’.[[20]](#footnote-20) In another she discussed alcoholism as a ‘plague’.[[21]](#footnote-21) In a third case, she said the man was sick or had a disease.[[22]](#footnote-22) This language is telling because it removes the responsibility of recovery from the individual. It also contrasts with the notions of normalcy that are outlined in Gleason’s work. The language coincides with the treatment of alcoholism as a medical disease. Alcoholics Anonymous, an organization founded in 1935 to help alcoholics recover, viewed disease as “any departure from normal health.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Although Thompson was not a doctor, she suggested some form of Alcoholics Anonymous in almost every column. However, it was known that Alcoholics Anonymous provided treatment with its own mix of religion and medicine.[[24]](#footnote-24) Thus, Thompson’s promotion of Alcoholics Anonymous for the treatment of alcoholics gave the reader a sense of her position in society.

In one response Thompson thanked a writer for her added support of Alcoholics Anonymous. “I have often recommended Al-Anon to wives of alcoholics,” Thompson wrote, “but they will be even more impressed by your tribute to what the group can do.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Thompson provided advice based on her background as a journalist and social activist. While Alcoholics Anonymous was the scientific based recovery process for alcoholics, as an advice columnist, Thompson provided an outlet for readers to inquire and receive information. Her role as a journalist was to make this information accessible. Thompson also held a great degree of credibility within months of her debut in the *Globe and Mail.[[26]](#footnote-26)* This meant that Thompson had an influence over her readers. “You would find it useful besides to get in touch with the Family Groups of Alcoholics Anonymous who would help you get to understand your husband and yourself better,” she said in response to a letter from a woman who wanted a separation from her drinking husband.[[27]](#footnote-27) Mrs. Thompson’s credibility, mixed with her own female gender, meant she was a reputable source of advice for women in the 1950s.

While Thompson provided strong advice to her readers, she recognized that she did not know everything. One young woman wrote a letter to Mrs. Thompson and asked what might happen between her and her alcoholic beau. To this Thompson responded, “I’m afraid you’ll just have to let time provide the answers, and if you are smart you won’t do anymore pushing.”[[28]](#footnote-28) The Canadian family in the post-war era was portrayed in the media as psychologically problematic and well suited for psychological care.[[29]](#footnote-29) Through Thompson’s advice, she strove to provide sound guidance for the betterment of the family.

In December of 1959, Thompson published a letter in the *Globe and Mail* from a young man about his alcoholic fiancée. Thompson suggested that both the man and his fiancée attend Alcoholics Anonymous. She said, “this would make you more useful to your fiancée; you might even learn that something about your attitude had discouraged her.”[[30]](#footnote-30) It was mentioned earlier that Thompson wrote with a paternalistic attitude and emphasized normal gender roles.[[31]](#footnote-31) However, as evident in this column, Thompson’s advice to the young male did not differ greatly from the advice she provided to women. The gender and family relations at the time held powerful potential in discourse on family crises that could shape the definition of family.[[32]](#footnote-32) Thompson’s lack of differentiation between the type of advice she provided to the young man and the many letters she received from women, showed that she too believed that the issue of alcoholism was not individualistic, but a family matter.

Thompson’s advice column was more of an open discussion rather than an ‘ask the expert’ type. A letter was printed in one column from a man who himself was part of Alcoholics Anonymous. He signed off his letter writing, “I have never before written a letter to a newspaper, but through gratitude to the AA program I am vitally concerned over alcoholic problems.”[[33]](#footnote-33) This letter showed that the “Mrs. Thompson Advises” column served as a forum for discussion and social education. Walton refers to Thompson’s column as a sort of Facebook or Twitter of its day that allowed for expert opinions from a variety of individuals.[[34]](#footnote-34) However, a gender dynamic can still be drawn from this letter. The letter is written by a man who is talking about his experiences with Alcoholics Anonymous. Mrs. Thompson said the majority of her letters about alcohol were written by women.[[35]](#footnote-35) These women were writing about their husbands use of alcohol. In this abnormal case, a man wrote in regarding himself.

Thompson was just as willing to print reader comments that refuted her advice as she was praise. In one letter, a reader wrote in and said, “I don’t understand why columnists and social workers seem to think every man is entitled to drink, so it becomes a necessary evil.”[[36]](#footnote-36) The woman who wrote this letter was questioning Thompson’s contemporary ideals and paternalistic advice. As Walton argues, the woman was contributing to her own diagnosis of an issue.[[37]](#footnote-37) Yet, Thompson had no trouble with responding to the letter. She wrote, “I never said alcohol was necessary, but tried to make the woman see why her husband drank. And I still think it was cruel to turn him out in the middle of it all when he was a sick man.”[[38]](#footnote-38) Regardless of what was inquired of Mrs. Thompson, her responses enforced the idea that drunkenness was a family issue. It would fall under the family crises that Gleason argues shaped the family discourse.[[39]](#footnote-39) Thompson referred to the woman as cruel because she was responsible for the upkeep of the family image.[[40]](#footnote-40) As seen in McPhail, this is the reason many advice columns of the postwar era were targeted at women. The women of bourgeois nuclear families were expected to promote health and hygiene and were villainized for working outside of the home.[[41]](#footnote-41) These are the values that Thompson promoted within her advice. She continuously suggested that women refrain from working if possible and that they made sure their husbands were happy and healthy.

What is important to recognize is that the “Mrs. Thompson Advises” column was not devoted specifically to issues of alcoholism. Thompson dealt with a wide array of topics. However, her advice tended to gravitate towards lifestyle and home-life issues.[[42]](#footnote-42) Alcoholism is one issue that is rampant in her column because it was part of the post war anxieties of the 1950s. Recognizing the issues that were repeated in Thompson’s column, gives insight into how she chose what to emphasize and publish.[[43]](#footnote-43) Thompson introduced one letter by writing, “men wouldn’t be so anxious to ‘get away from it all’ if their homes were attractive, one woman points out.”[[44]](#footnote-44) This letter written by a woman who had previously written a letter asking Mrs. Thompson for advice. Thompson may have chosen to publish from such a writer multiple times because the letters shared the same point of view as she did. “If we had had a better start in our marriage, three of four rooms to call our own, we could entertain company and lead normal lives,”[[45]](#footnote-45) the letter continued. The writer expressed the same idea that the disruption of normalcy that Gleason analyzes is a cause of her husband’s drunkenness.

Thompson used her discretion to publish some letters that enforced her own ideas of home life. However, Thompson balanced her column by also publishing letters that argued her advice. One letter read, “your reply to an alcoholic’s wife was one the cruellest I have ever read. It seems incredible that you are so unenlightened, with so much being written on the problem recently.”[[46]](#footnote-46) Thompson’s advice column, like Josephine Lowman’s “Tubby Hubby Diet” that McPhail analyzes, spoke of men, but spoke to women.[[47]](#footnote-47) By publishing opposing viewpoints, Thompson allowed her readers to see that other opinions existed. However, it also gave her a forum to make a stronger argument in support of the ‘normal’ nuclear family ideal. Thompson replied, “I have read a lot on the subject of alcoholism; have seen its ravages in people near and dear to me; have talked to social workers, psychiatrists, members of Alcoholics Anonymous.”[[48]](#footnote-48) In this response Thompson asserted her credibility as an advice columnist. Thompson allowed for the publication of contrasting opinions because it gave her a platform to assert that the consumption of alcohol did, in fact, challenge the normalcy of the nuclear family.

This paper uses the “Mrs. Thompson Advises” column in the *Globe and Mail* to analyze the gender dynamic of alcohol consumption in advice literature of the 1950s. Akin to the column of the “Tubby Hubby Diet” that McPhail examined, these advice columns were directed towards women. Women had a responsibility to protect the image of the family and to promote the normal nuclear family that arose in the postwar era. Thompson’s column is an important piece of written history because while it reinforced the nuclear family ideal, it brought women to the forefront of problem solving. “I have every sympathy with the wife of any alcoholic, including you, but think there is nothing cruel in urging her to get expert help,”[[49]](#footnote-49) Thompson wrote in one response to a woman who challenged her opinion. The changing treatment of alcoholism in society as being more widespread and discussed in medical terms did not diminish the severity of the problem. It did however create open forums for discussion on how to tackle the societal issue. Mrs. Thompson’s advice column became one of these forums. While her column had a significant historical presence in resolving the relationship between gender and alcohol, it also begs to ask what sort of advice was given to men at the time. Thompson’s advice was targeted towards women, but alcoholism was a social ill that affected the whole family. In order to establish a more in-depth relationship between gender and alcohol in advice literature, it would be necessary to analyze the presence, or lack of, advice directed towards men.

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