Walking down Tottenham Court Road, just north of Central London, the street is bustling full of people. Business powerbrokers appear to be on a mission as they hustle past on the sidewalk all decked out in their European style power suits. Pubs seem to be on nearly every corner and franchised fast-food restaurants are everywhere. The ubiquitous Starbucks have sprouted everywhere and this city actually appears to be surging along in a caffeinated frenzy. These streets have at least once before been enveloped in a drug induced euphoria. The drug that ensnared late 17th and early 18th century Londoners was gin. Today it is hard to imagine the trail of social chaos and utter human misery this drink of the juniper berry left in its wake. This paper is the intertwined story of London’s native son, the visual storyteller William Hogarth, the streets of his neighborhood of Saint Giles Parrish and the people who lived there along Tottenham Court Road and the effects of the gin on their lives.

What if you could walk down that same street and cross over to the early 18th Century? We are going to travel back to a London that stands in stark contrast to the bustling London of today. The scenes captured for all time by William Hogarth will convey us back to those bustling London streets of 250 to 300 years ago. The essence of the street life and its peculiar flavor are virtually intact in his drawings. His London is a vibrant cacophony of sights and sounds that exudes the life of the lower classes. One is gut wrenching the other captures the drama and life of the street with a vivid eye for detail. First, we will meet the man who captured the moment on canvas. Then we will look at the time period. What do historians have to say? Were these really mean and dangerous streets engulfed in poverty and deprivation or is that a maudlin view from the modern world? Let’s set the stage for our walk through Gin Lane and down Beer Street.
William Hogarth, *Gin Lane* (1851)

William Hogarth who lived from 1697 until 1764, was without a doubt the premier English artist of the 17th century. England hadn’t had an artist that could artistically stand alongside the continental masters until Hogarth. He was born in Bartholomew Court, near the heart of the city of London, into a family that was constantly struggling to survive. His father was a teacher by profession but it was a failed business venture that proved to be his undoing. He opened a “Latin only” Coffee House and the idea did not catch on sending the Hogarth household into bankruptcy.
The resultant debts landed the elder Hogarth in a debtor prison for 5 years and apparently broke his spirit as well. William was not yet 10 when the calamity befell the family. Apparently the impact of his father’s imprisonment broke Richard Hogarth’s health and he died a young man in 1718. William was immeasurably impacted by the trauma surrounding his father’s imprisonment and untimely death. Throughout Hogarth’s career a sense of crossed purposes can be detected. He wanted to make money and yet he always retained sympathy for the less fortunate. He also
carried a grudge against the aristocracy. His life work is full of vivid portraits of the lower classes. The streets where London’s poor live are accurately and unflinchingly portrayed with the multitudes that live in filth and squalor. That these streets are dens of iniquity spewing decadence is quite obvious. It is a modern day opportunity to view the warrens and byways through the eyes of a contemporary. It is a unique and hopefully interesting way to study history.

Hogarth never forgot his roots. He always managed to strike a balance with the common people inhabiting his everyday scenes of London. Whenever it is possible they possess a gentle dignity and are portrayed with touch of sympathy. As commentator on his times, Hogarth was brutally honest. Few could view the horrific scenes of Gin Lane without feeling sadness for the people in the picture. You can also feel the unadulterated evil unleashed by a drug that had stolen all dignity and humanity from the street. It reminds me of the proverbial story at the dusty crossroads in the Mississippi Delta. At the crossroads and in Hogarth’s Gin Lane the devil had purchased individuals souls. You can see the evil Hogarth shows it in all of it tragic pathos. It could be any “meth” house in Eastern Jackson County where my school is located. My students are well acquainted with people addicted to methamphetamines and can see the destroyed lives all around them in their community. Even today in the middle of one of the most affluent nations on earth we have emaciated drug addicts, living in a world with striking similarities to London circa 1751. Hogarth is nothing if not brutally honest, showing much of the world in caricature and with a slight exaggeration. He possesses a wicked sense of humor and uses it to devastating effect. It is somewhat like perusing a modern day comic strip such as Doonesbury. Hogarth is making a similar statement about the screwed up world in which he lived. His London was a city unable to care equally for all of its residents.

London in 1751 was on the verge of the Industrial Revolution. The “revolution” in Industrial Revolution is somewhat misleading, the word denotes an abrupt cataclysmic change and though it was fundamentally cataclysmic, it was a gradual change over a century that cannot be neatly packaged as a revolution. What was the historical setting? Much of the transformation taking place in Britain was increasingly taking place in the growing urban areas. London which was the largest had a population of over 50,000 people by 1750. Smoke hung over the growing industrial cities and filth impregnated them, elementary public services such as water
supply, basic sanitation, and street cleaning were not in existence. Open spaces were nowhere to be found and the new arrivals continued to crowd into the cities in search of work. The two great urban killers of the 18th and 19th centuries resulted in the aftermath of the overcrowding, respiratory illness and intestinal disease from air and water pollution respectively. These newcomers most fresh from the countryside were pressed into overcrowded and bleak slums, whose very sight froze the heart of the observer. “Civilization works its miracles,” wrote the great French liberal de Tocqueville of Manchester, “and civilized man is turned into a savage…: the city destroyed society.” (Hobsbawm, 64-65). The moral foundations of society were cast adrift as monumental changes took place in English society. Traditional societal rules and mores were weakened. The world changed.

Hobsbawm goes on to ask if the results of the so called Industrial Revolution make people better or worse off and if so, by how much? His answer is that we cannot measure human happiness by tallying their possessions. “…happiness was the best of policy. Every man’s pleasure could be expressed (at least in theory) as a quantity and so could his pain. Deduct the pain from the pleasure and the net result would be his happiness. Add the happiness of all men and deduct the unhappiness…However, we will miss the point if we forget that it is not merely a process of addition and subtraction, but a fundamental social change. It transformed the lives of men beyond recognition. Or, to be more exact, in its initial stages it destroyed their old ways of living.” (Hobsbawm, 57-58).

The idea of earning wages was new to many of these people and society was adjusting to the idea of money in the hands of all classes of people. That in effect was a crucial element to the Industrial Revolution and to an emerging consumer society. Yet, how does this work when those wages only allows for a subsistence living? The working poor literally live on starvation’s door. How does society cope? Or do they even try?

“…when applied to a population almost thirty per cent of whom at the end of the 19th century were so malnourished that they could not do a proper day’s work (in the earlier century, there is every reason to believe that the conditions were worse, an even larger portion of the population lived below the subsistence level). Another forty per cent lived so close to the margin of subsistence that they could easily be forced below it.” (Hobsbawm. page 72).
Let’s look at the lives of the laboring poor, those who would be a cross section in those London street scenes. Start with what Wrightson offers on the subject of the elderly, “Advanced age did mean retirement, save among those completely incapacitated and reduced to dependence on parish relief. But, it brought a marked deterioration in employment opportunities. Faced with that situation people did what work they could. He gives the following example of a woman working in a coal mine operation, ”Phyllis Denham was still sorting coal at a Tyneside pithead at age 80.” (Wrightson, Page 311). “In general the 17th and 18th centuries were better for laboring people than previous centuries had been…Certainly they could eat better, even if their diet was somewhat monotonous. They were better clothed in all likelihood…Patterns of consumption also changed to include such items as sugar, treacle, tobacco, tea, petty items of personal adornment like ribbon, lace and buttons and a range of modest goods.” (Wrightson, Page 317). Defoe distinguished three levels of wage earning men “…the highest mechanics or craftsman, next were workman or handicrafts and the lowest level are all the drudges who labor at any task requiring muscle power”. (Wrightson, Page 309) If we carefully examine the people populating Hogarth’s scenes we do see all sorts of people from every level of society, but with an eye for the lowest common denominator.

Let’s travel to Gin Lane and take a look at the St. Giles Parish in the year 1751. In order to understand the meaning of the drawing we need to know a little about the context of this new drink that was intoxicating London. It had quite literally permeated the lower levels of society since it had been brought back by soldiers campaigning in the Dutch Republic. Gin is distilled from grains and the berries of the jumper are usually added to give its flavor. I have an idea the closest thing that I can personally compare it to, is grain alcohol, with which my undergraduate days occasionally brought me into contact. A gallon of grain into a trash buckets with about 10 gallons of fruit juices, grape juice in our case, and a “Spolioli” party ensued. My memory diminishes after the mixing process because the senses were soon overwhelmed by near lethal doses of rotgut that made people stupid very quickly. If that analogy doesn’t work then think moonshine or bathtub gin or maybe even crack cocaine. Gin Lane wasn’t filled with social drinkers, it was brimming to the top with drinkers on a mission. The mission was to make their horribly difficult lives disappear into a gin (drug) induced stupor. These were not social drinkers; these were people
who wanted to get drunk fast to escape the pain. Alcoholism was better than life and all human morality and dignity were soon gone along with the pain.

Of course the story is never that simple. Much money was to be made producing and selling the gin. English agriculture provided the grain with the landed gentry profiting. Then there were the middlemen who provided the grain and the juniper berries to the distillers. The distillers had to supply ever expanding numbers of “gin houses” proliferating all over London. In the city, one in ten houses were gin establishments but in St. Giles, where Hogarth’s scene is depicted, one in four sold liquid named for “Geneva”. I couldn’t trace the connection between the name and the city. However, when gin was first introduced in Holland it was sold for medicinal purposes only. It was used to treat stomach ailments. Like so many other drugs, it was the self-medication that led to addiction.

The negative effects became so glaring. One example stated: 4 of 5 babies born to the lower classes did not live to see their fifth birthday. That and the impact upon the workers finally caused Parliament to pass the Gin Act of 1735, which required retailers to obtain a license costing Fifty Pound Sterling. The result was predictable in light of what American’s learned from Prohibition. Numerous nefarious avenues were found to supply the market while avoiding the government interference through taxation. This was when illegal, often lethal, cheap gin hit the slums streets. The slang terms for the gin included “Ladies Delight”, “Cuckolds Comfort” “King Theodore of Corsica” and “Strip-me Naked” (Gordan I.R.F., Literary Encyclopedia). Just like “bath tub gin”, “moonshine” or “white lightening” became common slang terms for illegal booze in America. The public outcry mostly in the form of riots in the slums caused lawmakers to repeal the Gin Act in 1743. Gin related problems continued to be a problem and follow up legislation was passed in 1750. Hogarth’s Gin Lane was part of the campaign to support that legislation. Hogarth also a master engraver mass produced the print and it went on sale for 5 pence each. It became a best seller.

Just what do we see in the in the picture? We see a picture of mankind without a moral compass. Central to the picture is the half naked woman sitting on the steps, nonchalantly pinching some snuff. It looks as if she is dropping her partially clad child onto its head into some unforeseen depth. The implication by Hogarth is that the child is being dropped to its death by its drunk and morally bankrupt mother. A woman who has probably prostituted herself, in fact that is likely a given. The woman is apparently nursing the child at her breast. Wet nursing or nursing for hire was quite
common and fashionable. Therefore it is possible that the child might not have been hers, we do not know. Although, it stands to reason that the child has come from the lower classes and could very well be her own. Whatever the parentage, it’s obvious the child’s life has been a living hell. Upon closer examination of the child it looks to be an aged face. It has large round eyes, a sore on its cheek, small chin and cheek bones, an undersized head, and the looks of stunted growth. “wearing the visible marks of its mother’s folly”. (Coffey, T.G. QJ Studies of Alcohol). Today it is obvious that the child suffered from fetal alcohol syndrome. In addition, the “mother” is dressed in rags and has the open sores on her legs of advanced syphilis. There was a basis for reality in the scene. The story was of a gin crazed Judith Dufour who had retrieved her 2 year old from a workhouse. She proceeded to strangle the child and left the body in a roadside ditch. Then she sold the clothes. (Wikipedia, Gin Lane). Apparently the money went to buy gin. The lady was convicted and London was outraged.

A half dressed, skeletal ballad singer sits below the woman. He sold gin on the streets and seems to have drunk himself to death. Like the addict who sells to supply his own habit. The dog who accompanies the singer by comparison to his master seems healthy and appears to be looking at the empty glass with an inquisitive stare. The baby to the right, behind the brick wall is being fed gin. There is a baby in the center, right background impaled on a stake. Apparently death by neglect or “non-accidental injury” of people under the influence was quite common. This would be the 17th century’s, modern day equivalent to a “drunk driving” accident. A recent suicide is hanging in the building on the upper right. A person shares a bone with what looks to be a dog behind the brick wall on the left. Next to him is a woman leaning back, mouth agape in a drunken stupor. A snail is crawling alongside indicating the lengthy passage of time. The inscription on the passage way on the bottom left reads: Drunk for a Penny/Dead Drunk for Two Pence/Clean Straw for Nothing. A drunkard is being pushed across the street in a wheelbarrow while a woman pours a libation into his mouth. Charity girls or orphans in the right center wear the initials of SG for St. Giles Parrish on their sleeves. The implication is that there is no supervision here and that those who imbibe are very young.

Finally, the only business seems to be a pawn shop. A man and woman are pawning their possessions. He is selling his carpentry tools and she her cooking pots. Each of them are giving up their needed possessions for enough money to get another
“hit” of gin. Houses topple from disrepair and no body is paying any attention. In the far background we see the church and it’s stately steeple. The point is that the rest of London is not doing anything. The Church is not doing anything and is remaining aloof. Hogarth’s message is clear. The abysmal scene of moral depravity that is Gin Lane is swallowing the dregs of society into the earthly bowels of hell. Polite society of London really doesn’t seem to care. The situation epitomized in the drawing is a wake up to society.

The second drawing I’m choosing to examine is the companion to Gin Lane and it is called Beer Street. This is also a street scene. However, this street is seemingly benign in comparison to the previously mentioned street. In fact, Hogarth is showing the virtues of a good beer drinking community. Obviously, in America we must show this picture using a certain amount of common sense. We are obviously, not promoting the use of alcohol, per se. We are promoting the good use of a legal product in moderation by those of legal drinking age as opposed to what we witness in Gin Lane. All things in moderation is what the scene seems to be promoting. In fact it could well be an advertisement for the brewers of London, especially with foaming heads on the tankards of ale!

On Beer Street the people are happy and hard working and flirting with one another. We see a hearty scene where there is plenty to eat as the heaping baskets of fish indicate. The bustling scene is alive with productivity. The barrel is being hoisted up and repairs being made to the roof while scaffolding indicates more work is going to take place. The church steeple is closer as if it is watching over this much normal and moral city. The Pawn Shop is boarded up and the people aren’t selling their last possessions for a fix. A teacher maybe could draw a parallel with pawn shops or payday loans establishments and the impact they have on a community. Actually, it seems that industry and the good life fueled by beer go hand in hand. In fact, Beer Street is just as much a propaganda piece as Gin Street. Each is selling a point of view.

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