

## DRINKING IN THE “THIN MAN” FILMS, 1934-1947

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One way to explore the changing meaning and psychology of American drinking habits during the course of the twentieth century is to examine how Hollywood has portrayed alcohol in its movies. It is especially useful to do so when drinking forms a major theme in a single series of films. Drinking is portrayed in a robust but changing way in the six “Thin Man” detective movies made between 1934 and 1947. The first film in the series, simply titled *The Thin Man* (1934), was a box-office hit. W. S. Van Dyke directed the film, which was adapted from a detective novel by Dashiell Hammett. William Powell and Myrna Loy, a powerful comedy team, starred in compelling roles as the private eye Nick Charles and his wealthy socialite wife Nora. Ironically, the “Thin Man” of the title referred not to Nick Charles but to one of the story’s shadowy, sinister characters. However, the title was riveting, and it was easy for viewers to misremember the name as referring to the anything but thin William Powell. As a result, the five sequels all used the phrase “Thin Man” in their titles, even though they lacked the original character that bore that name.<sup>1</sup>

*The Thin Man* takes place in New York. Former residents Nick and Nora Charles, now living in San Francisco, are in New York on a brief vacation. Although Nick is retired as a detective, murders always seem to follow him whenever he travels around the country. Near the beginning of the film, Nick and Nora are in a fancy New York nightclub that has an orchestra and dancing. Nick demonstrates that a waltz is best for the slow shaking required to mix a dry martini, while a foxtrot works better for a manhattan.

One advantage of demonstrating mixing techniques in a bar is that Nick is able to sample his own wares. He polishes off the martini instantly. While talking with a friend at the bar, he pours himself another martini. These are only the first of many, many drinks in the film. In fact, Nick, like the real life Hammett of the thirties, can barely function without a drink. After World War II, Hammett turned sober. A political leftist, he defied a McCarthy-era congressional inquiry in 1951 and went to jail with a clear conscience and a refreshed liver.<sup>2</sup>

One of the most beloved characters throughout the “Thin Man” films is the dog Asta, a Scottish terrier. While Nick was drinking at the nightclub, Nora was out walking the dog. Nora observes that Asta insisted on stopping at every gin mill on the block. Nick explains this behavior. It seems that earlier in the day Nick had also taken Asta for a walk, and so they had visited every bar en route. After Nora joins Nick at the club, they sit at a table and drink two cocktails, which Nick orders. When Nick confesses to Nora that he’s already had five martinis before this one, Nora, being a modern woman devoted to equality between the sexes, decides to get even. She tells the waiter to bring her six martinis, which he does. The next morning Nora has a terrible hangover, while Nick is just fine. Perhaps this episode was a comment about Nick’s manly ability to handle vast quantities of liquor due to greater experience. Nora may want to be Nick’s equal, but in 1934 female equality had its limits—and capacity for alcohol was just one measure of male/female difference. Many members of the audience in the thirties would have been amused at Nora trying to keep up with her hard-drinking, worldly husband, and some would have admired Nora for trying to do so.<sup>3</sup>

The next morning, just after Nick and Nora arise in their posh New York hotel, a visitor arrives. Nick naturally offers the man a drink. The stranger declines, and Nick pours himself what appears to be a whiskey. That evening there is a Christmas Eve party in Nick and Nora’s hotel suite with about a dozen old New York friends in attendance. The hosts spend much of their time

in the suite's kitchen mixing drinks, which they carry throughout the apartment to guests on trays. Each tray holds about a dozen glasses. Most of the drinks are martinis, but a few manhattans or highballs are placed on each tray. All of the drinks are collectively referred to as cocktails, which from the 1850s to the 1930s was the generic term in America for any mixed drink made with hard liquor. In the kitchen, Nick ponders a special drink made for Nora with rye whiskey, but he drinks it instead of giving it to her. The "Yuletide revelers," as Nick calls them, become visibly tipsy. One drunken guest calls his mother long distance in San Francisco. In 1934, such a phone call was very expensive. Using someone else's hotel telephone in this fashion might be seen as a kind of joke, easily forgivable if the caller was under the influence. When the guests sing "Tannenbaum," almost all of them are slurring their speech. As the party ends, and the guests stagger away, Nick and Nora kiss.<sup>4</sup>

This high-society party, in a fancy hotel, offered instruction to the post-Prohibition audience about how to drink and behave at a glamorous party where legal alcohol was served. (The film was set in 1902, before Prohibition, and it was made in 1934, just afterward.) Amid the Great Depression, it was perfectly acceptable to drown one's cares in alcohol. The proof that one was having a good time was shown by slurred speech, by falling down, by wild dancing, by loud talking and laughing, and by singing off-key. Americans, perhaps, yearned to throw off Victorian propriety as well as the restrictive burdens of Prohibition. Nick and Nora were showing them how to do it.

The film ends with Nick setting a trap for the murderer at a formal dinner party for all the suspects. The "guests" are all suspects whom the police have rounded up and brought to the party. They wear tuxedos, as do the police, who act as waiters and kitchen staff. The waiters pass around the trays of cocktails and compel the guests to take drinks. The irony of having police, only recently associated with enforcing Prohibition, serving liquor forcibly would have struck audiences in the thirties as

extremely funny. Indeed, it is still funny. As the guests are seated at the dining table, Nick proposes a toast, "Eat, drink, and be merry. Tomorrow we will die." Both the toast and the lavish table groaning with food offer a contrast with the stark realities that many members of the audience would have faced in the grim depression year of 1934. As the fish course is served, Nick spins out his theory about the murder, while he slowly sips wine. The longer he spends telling the story, the greater the opportunity for Nick to consume the wine. Nick never misses a chance to take a drink or two or three. The murderer reveals himself and is caught. Later, Nick and Nora, accompanied by friends, take the train back to California. Deciding to celebrate on the train, the two couples have drinks. After the couples go to their respective compartments, Nick lifts Asta into the upper berth and crawls into the lower berth with Nora.

The second film in the series, *After the Thin Man* (1936), was also based on Hammett's work and again directed by Van Dyke. It is set in San Francisco, where Nick and Nora live. In this movie, the Charleses have just returned home from a train trip. When they arrive at their house on Telegraph Hill, they open the door and discover friends who welcome them home with a "surprise party." There is a great deal of singing, dancing, eating, and drinking. The kitchen table holds a large number of liquor bottles. Nick and Nora have to leave the party to go to Nora's aunt's house for dinner. When Nora learns that her cousin Selma is in some kind of trouble, Nora says, "Pour me one, too." In the world of Nick and Nora, alcohol is frequently shown to be a good way to cope with trouble. Perhaps this was an effective sales pitch in the early post-Prohibition era, when Americans, especially those of a new generation that had never before tasted legal alcohol, have to be coaxed into drinking. Per capita consumption of alcohol remained below pre-Prohibition levels throughout the thirties. Aunt Katherine, being of an older generation, does not approve of Nora's drinking, but then she is a somewhat stodgy Victorian, not a modern woman. After dinner, Nick remains in the dining room

brooding on Selma's problem with her husband Robert, who has disappeared, either because of another woman or because he is afraid of someone. As Nick broods, he drinks brandy. Sometimes, Nick's behavior suggests, the best way for a detective to have a clear head to think about a case is to drink. The film presented alcohol positively in stark contrast to the views, even among those who drank, that prevailed in the United States before 1933, when alcohol was associated with saloon-based male recreation, including conviviality, boisterousness, prostitution, and violence.<sup>5</sup>

It just happens to be New Year's Eve, and eventually Nick and Nora go out to a Chinese nightclub. In the club, Nick lifts two drinks off the tray of a passing waiter, who does not notice. This sort of boorish behavior is portrayed as clever, especially if the person being taken advantage of happens to be nonwhite. When the club's co-owner tells Nick that everything is on the house for the famous detective Charles, Nick replies, "That's mighty white of you." While Nick and Nora are at the club celebrating, Robert is murdered. A police detective comes to the club and tries to question Nick about the murder, but Nick is drunk and becomes belligerent. Eventually, there is a massive brawl at the club, and everyone except Nick is arrested. The famous detective is so drunk, however, that he inadvertently allows the cops to put Nora in jail. Nick finally sobers up enough to get her out. Later, Nick and Nora are at home. Nora persuades Nick to scramble eggs in the middle of the night. The comical attempt at cooking, which offers an excellent introduction to a typical kitchen of the thirties, fails, and the two are next seen eating breakfast at a hotel at 6:30 p.m. A convoluted bit of detective work follows, and when it ends, Nick is hungry for dinner. He tells Nora, "Let's get something to eat. I'm thirsty." At this point the director's imagination fails, and the story ends with Nick explaining Robert's murder in front of all the suspects at one of the character's apartments. After Nick solves the crime, Nick and Nora take a train across the United States en route to Europe. Aboard the train, they share a nightcap. The

family that drinks together stays together. Family values. In the last scene, Nora is knitting baby socks.

The third film in the series, *Another Thin Man* (1939), takes place on a Long Island estate. While W. S. Van Dyke continued as the director, the tone is different. This particular screenplay seems burdened with complexity but without the Hammett panache. Missing from this movie is Hammett's class-oriented sneer toward wealthy Victorians as cruel and decadent but dry and spiritless (literally) snobs. By 1939 Americans had gotten used to drinking again, and the sort of light-hearted celebration of alcohol that shocked and fascinated in the first film and which reappeared more briefly in the second no longer seemed appropriate. Alcohol is downplayed. The film opens with Nick and Nora arriving in a stylish New York hotel on a visit from their home in California. Clearly, times are more prosperous, since the Charleses' hotel seems more extravagant than the hotel where they stayed in 1934. Or maybe the studio opted for a more expensive set. In any case, as soon as the bellhop delivers the suitcases to Nick and Nora's suite, room service, well acquainted with their guests' desires, arrives with drinks on a tray. Nick asks that the drinks be set in front of him. On the telephone, Nora tells a friend, "Oh we had a lovely trip. Nick was sober in Kansas City."

The Charleses are invited to visit the wealthy Colonel MacFay at his Long Island estate. They drive out to Long Island, and as they approach the estate, Nick notices a body in the road. However, when Nick turns the car around to go back and take a closer look, he is startled to find that the body has disappeared. Nick, much rattled, tells Nora that he needs a drink at a bar. The idea that drinking is a good way to gain courage is a common one at the time. Nora notes that there are no bars in the woods and suggests that MacFay's house would be the closest place to get a drink. After Nick and Nora arrive, however, the domineering MacFay has his own ideas. He will allow neither Nick nor Nora to drink at dinner. He declares that he knows from Nora's very proper relatives that Nora is a teetotaler, and he demands that

Nick stay sober so the two men can discuss business after dinner. Members of the audience could have been expected to ponder on the inappropriateness of a host who presumes to dictate to guests in this fashion. Clearly, MacFay is not only rude but also self-centered and selfish. Nick and Nora look distressed, but Nora rescues them. While the colonel isn't looking, Nora steals the key to the liquor cabinet. We then learn that MacFay was a crooked businessman who had once been the partner of Nora's father. A clod and a crook, MacFay lacks sympathy from the audience at this point. That night, while the Charleses are asleep in the guest room, MacFay is murdered in bed. Police arrive to question MacFay's daughter about the murder. Her fiancé, disliked by MacFay, is also found murdered. While the questioning is going on, Nick drinks. This is Nick's favorite way of solving difficult problems. One might say that he enjoys putting his nightcap on, even in the daytime. Nora says that she got rid of the reporters by telling them that Nick was out of scotch.

Later, Nick visits a cruddy apartment, where he encounters a man and a woman fighting. They nearly topple a table with a liquor carafe on it. Nick rescues the carafe and drinks from a glass while he watches the fight continue. He makes no effort to intervene. Afterward, at Nick and Nora's hotel, there is another fight. When Nora urges Nick to do something about it, he takes a drink. Nick's reluctance to get involved in other people's fights resembles the American isolationist attitude toward World War II in 1939. However, twice in this film Nick uses a hard punch in the face to settle a dispute. Nick avoids violence when he can, but he moves effectively when necessary. His approach expresses American attitudes about war in 1939 quite well. The shift from the more carefree Nick of 1934 to the more determined Nick of 1939 reflects a changing national mood. In both cases, however, liquor is kept handy. Throughout the thirties alcohol consumption, while low by historical standards, rose in America. It had a special appeal to a new generation of first-time adult legal drinkers.<sup>6</sup>

Two years later, on the eve of America's entry into World War II, Nick and Nora are living in San Francisco in *Shadow of the Thin Man* (1941). In this fourth film in the series, Van Dyke returns to direct for the last time. The screenwriters were new, and the connection to Hammett, except for the characters, is gone. As the story opens, it is morning, and Nick takes his young son Nicky, dressed in a military uniform, for a walk in the park. The dog Asta accompanies them. Given the atmosphere in 1941, it is not surprising that Nicky is in uniform. When Nora tells the black maid that the son was more like his father every day, the maid confirms the point by replying that Nicky had been playing with a corkscrew earlier that morning. As Nora begins to shake a cocktail shaker for Nick's martini, Nick suddenly starts walking briskly for the apartment. It is as if he could hear the sound on the other side of the park. Perhaps this coincidence could be understood as a symbol for the fact that Nick and Nora have now been married for so long that they know, without conscious effort, each other's habits. Of Nick and a cocktail, Nora declares, "They'll get together." Nick arrives and downs a martini. Then Nick and Nora adjourn to their bedroom and drink two cocktails. Just as both realize that they are out of liquor, the experienced and efficient maid enters the bedroom carrying a martini pitcher, so Nick and Nora can continue drinking.

At this point Nick and Nora leave the apartment, and a well-soused Nick drives around San Francisco drunkenly weaving, speeding, and singing. Drunk driving is portrayed as a sign of carefree lightheartedness and personal liberty rather than as a menace. In 1941 many members of the audience would have thought a scene about a drunk driver to be very funny; today, it is appalling. Nora warns Nick to slow down, but he fails to heed her good advice. Although Nora often plays a subordinate role to Nick in their marriage, and he rarely listens to her, she never lets up on the modern woman's determination to improve her husband and break his worst habits. A policeman stops them and writes a ticket but also recognizes the legendary detective Nick Charles

and gives them a complimentary siren-laden police escort across the Bay Bridge to a racetrack. After Nick and Nora arrive at the track, they find that a crooked jockey has been murdered. Later, back home in San Francisco, Nick has a cocktail with dinner, but Nicky won't drink his milk unless his father also drinks milk. Nora teases, "Drunk, dear?" Nick replies, "I keep seeing purple cows." Nick leaves the table, carrying the cocktail glass with him, and complains about his son putting him on the "milk wagon." Later in the film Nick and Nora dine in an Italian restaurant with another couple. Nick drinks a martini at the table, and then he sees a shadowy acquaintance at the bar. Asta chases the sinister character out of the restaurant. A waiter, distracted by Asta, drops a tray of drinks on several customers and starts a brawl. In the final confrontation scene with various suspects, the murderer turns out to be a crooked state investigator.

Richard Thorpe directed the fifth film in the series, *The Thin Man Goes Home* (1944). In this movie Nick and Nora Charles escape from wartime New York to visit Nick's parents in a small town upstate called Sycamore Springs. The shift of the scene to a small town played upon the same wartime nostalgia for America's family ties and small-town past that made "White Christmas" into the theme song for World War II. The pace is slower, and the people are generally friendlier in Nick's hometown than in big cities like New York or San Francisco. Even Sycamore Springs, however, has its share of eccentrics, unsavory characters, and criminals, including a wartime spy ring. The story opens with the dog Asta chasing another dog in romantic pursuit in a very crowded train station in New York. When Nick is tripped catching his dog, a policeman whom he happens to know suggests that Nick actually fell because he is drunk. Nick protests that he has taken nothing more potent than mildly alcoholic hard cider. He carries the cider with him in a flask on the very crowded train. Nick tells Nora that he is on "a reform movement," which means that during this visit home he has replaced his usual martinis with cider. Given wartime shortages of hard liquor, perhaps the

audience would have sympathized with Nick's finding a substitute and moderating his alcohol consumption as a wartime sacrifice. Sobriety is a sign of seriousness, too. Because Nick and Nora are not allowed to keep Asta in the passenger compartment, they retreat with the dog to a baggage car loaded with noisy dogs and geese. Nick has not seen his very respectable middle-class parents for many years in part because his heavy drinking always embarrassed them. Proper people in small towns drink little if at all. About his estranged father, who is a doctor, Nick says, "He thinks I play too hard . . . and drink too hard." Nora adds, "I wonder what ever gave him that impression."

Soon after Nick and Nora arrive at Nick's parents' house, Nick tries to fix a table in the living room, but the table top slips while he is under the table and knocks Nick out. Nick's father walks into the room and concludes that his son is drunk. Past behavior creates reputation, which forms the basis for judgment about a person in the present. Character matters. During World War II being able to count on others is a very important value. This moral point is a far cry from the giddy drunkenness in the first two films in the series. Wartime seriousness of purpose is asserting itself, as is the principle that actions both matter and have consequences. Nick and Nora eventually persuade the father that Nick's flask contains only mild cider, which the father approvingly samples. There is a hint here about rural hypocrisy among cider-drinking prohibitionists. Later, Nick lounges on a hammock in the yard while Asta drinks cider from a jug. By then the whole town knows that Nick has arrived and assumes that the famous detective is in Sycamore Springs to solve a case. The town hosts a gang of wartime spies, who worry that Nick is after them. Nora hints to the local press that Nick really is working on a case. This only raises the media's curiosity, and when Nick, irritated that his peaceful vacation has been disrupted, learns that Nora has baited the press, he is furious. So he spansks her with the local newspaper, much to

the amusement of Nick's father. Modern women need to know their place and be kept in it.

When neighbors arrive in the evening to meet Nick, the famous detective ducks out of the house through the kitchen in order to investigate a murder: a strange man was shot on the doorstep of Nick's father's house. When Nick's father notices that Nick has left the house, he tells the guests that his son probably has gone off someplace to get drunk. Actually, Nick went to the motel where the dead stranger had been staying. While investigating there, he was knocked out with a blow to the head. As a result, Nick returns home to his parents' house with an ice pack on his head. Both Nora and Nick's father assume that he has been drinking. Again, reputation is shown to be crucial for how people are evaluated. In pursuit of solving the murder, Nick visits a sleazy bar, where there is a wild brawl. Later, Nick takes Nora to a dance at the local hotel, where more intrigue occurs. After Nick solves all the crimes, the admiring doctor says, "That was wonderful, Nick." Having gained his father's approval, Nick swells with pride and literally pops several buttons in an artful, contrived, and upbeat Hollywood ending. One can already see the beginnings of postwar veterans' politics with this ending. Nick and men of Nick's generation, having won the war, will be honored by the older generation for their ingenuity, cunning, prowess, and success. Street savvy and sophisticated city ways will replace small-town narrowness. In the postwar world Nick will not be a teetotaler, but he will try to reduce his drinking to more moderate amounts.

The last film in the series, *Song of the Thin Man* (1947), is in some ways the most curious. Directed by Edward Buzzell, it features a considerable amount of tasty postwar jazz. The theme music was reprised in the *Peter Gunn* television series years later. The punch of the earlier movies is lost, however, as it becomes clear that the series, rooted in ideas and customs prevalent during the Great Depression and World War II, cannot build a bridge to the postwar world. This film proved to be the series' final

entry. The movie opens with a scene aboard an Atlantic coast offshore casino ship, the "SS Fortune," where the wealthy crowd, celebrating postwar prosperity, is dressed in tuxedos. In addition to gaming, the ship has a big band, dancing, dining, and a blonde female singer singing a jazz song, "You're Not So Easy to Forget." The wealthy crowd is aboard the ship because the evening event is a charity benefit. Nick and Nora are present because some sleazy friends of Nick's operate the vessel. Far from indulging in excess drinking, Nick expresses the desire to go home to a pipe and slippers. The solo jazz clarinet player, who is white like the rest of the orchestra, is "whacked up" on alcohol, but there is little sign of heavy drinking. Sexual infidelity, intrigue, and crime, however, abound among those who work on the ship. Nick Charles will have to solve a few more murders.<sup>7</sup>

The next morning Nick and Nora are back at their apartment in New York seated at the breakfast table; there is no alcohol. The son Nicky tries to sneak away from his required piano practice to play softball. Nora is furious, because Nicky has tried this trick before, and although Nora is a modern woman, she insists that Nick give Nicky a spanking. Nick dislikes this idea intensely. He understands only too well why his son prefers softball to piano, and Nicky, much to Nora's annoyance at the self-indulgent father, is about to get off with a verbal reprimand when Nick suddenly remembers a time when Nicky made fun of him. So Nick spansks Nicky fifteen times with a rolled-up newspaper. Despite Dr. Spock's recommendations, this sort of discipline was considered responsible parenting in the postwar years, when somewhat rigid childrearing practices prevailed.<sup>8</sup>

Later in the morning, Phil Brant and his new wife Janet arrive and tell the Charleses that they are eloping. Nora declares, "This calls for a celebration. Mr. Charles has been saving his last bottle of scotch for just such an occasion. Nicky, where is that bottle?" Nick answers, "Oh, it's in my red pajamas, dear. In the left leg." Even though the war was over, scotch was still in short supply.

She tells the guests, "I hope you don't mind drinking this early." Without any prompting the maid brings a tray with four tall soda glasses filled with ice and soda, plus two beers for chasers for the men. Phil says, "I could use a drink, though I suppose I'll just be celebrating being elected public enemy number one." About the scotch, Nora says to Nick, "Oh, you found it." He replies, "It was in the right leg." The foursome, however, do not drink, because the Brants reveal that the morning newspaper has named Phil as a murder suspect. Nick worries that if he talks with Phil without calling the police that he might be charged as an accessory. Nick is a family man now and craves respectability. Nick says, "I'm sorry we couldn't have a drink. Perhaps some other time. I don't want to appear inhospitable. Here, take the bottle with you." Nick hands Phil Brant the bottle of scotch to take along on the Brants' honeymoon. Nick's gesture literally shows that a rejection of alcohol is a necessary part of acting responsibly.

Just as Phil takes the scotch, someone outside shoots at Phil. However, the bullet only manages to hit the scotch. Nick laments, "A fine way to kill a bottle." A neighbor hears the noise and asks, "Was anyone hurt?" Nick replies, "Yes, an old friend of mine went completely to pieces." The police arrive, and one policeman spots the wet floor. He asks, "What's that, blood?" Nora replies, "I wish it were." Nick tells the police that Phil arranged for the shot to be fired. Nick does not believe this story, but he uses it so Phil will be safely housed in jail. Nor is Nick entirely certain that Phil is innocent. Meanwhile, the dog Asta licks the scotch off the floor and burps a satisfied "agh." At the time, many in the audience would have found the idea of a drinking and drunken dog hilarious, perhaps funnier than drunken people. Later, Nick and Nora visit a number of after-hours New York jazz events all held in apartments in search of the clarinetist who had played on board the casino ship. At one of these parties Nick and Nora find the ship band singer, and they drink bourbon together. To find more information, Nick and Nora visit Phil's wife at 4 a.m. She is

awake, and they all drink brandy. Eventually, the sleuthing couple finds the clarinetist in a rest home for alcoholics in Poughkeepsie. It is unclear if he is a killer or just crazy. The movie ends with a convoluted finale on board the ship.

Although there are plenty of scenes with alcohol in this last film in the series, the drinking is usually incidental to other activity. Bars and casinos are natural places for drinks. The tense segment where the Brants visit the Charleses shows alcohol being used as a relaxant, and while the confusion over which leg of the pajamas the precious bottle of scotch is in could be read as an indication that a drunken Nick had forgotten where he had put the bottle, the fact is that both Nick and Nora are sober, and neither has any liquor handy at the breakfast table when the Brants arrive. The Charleses both feel that the celebration of the Brants' marriage requires a drink, even if it breaks their abstinent postwar morning routine. However, as soon as Nick learns that the police want to question Phil, Nick is no longer interested in drinking. The younger, more carefree, and less responsible Nick of the mid-1930s, as conceived by Dashiell Hammett, would probably have poured the scotch while contemplating what strategy to follow. The older, more cautious Nick of 1947 does not want to make trouble for himself. He fits better into a postwar world in which "organization men" were to dominate the economy, politics, and culture. There were no more Victorian bluenoses to mock, no more prohibitionists to ridicule, and precious few stuffed shirts of the type found in the 1934 film. Nick now lives in a world that is much more of his own making, a world in which moderate pleasure-seeking is mixed with family responsibilities. One can argue that this ethos became the postwar middle-class American norm. It was the basis for the development of Disneyland, Las Vegas, and Atlantic City.<sup>9</sup>

Nora is still the modern woman, but rather than trying to keep up with Nick's coarser habits, she tries to discourage them. She is even more determined that Nicky will not repeat his father's

wildness, which she sees as rooted in the bad relationship between Nick and Nick's father. It is important to remember that Freudianism and neo-Freudianism enjoyed great influence in the forties. Nick's father, a narrow-minded doctor with small town values, tried to prevent his son from living a normal life, and the result, in the thirties, was Nick's embracement of wildness, even to the point of being mixed up in illegality. In the early films in this series, the tension between Nora's civilizing respectability, which is never in doubt, and Nick's wilder side both generates intrinsic fascination and suggests social importance. In the hard years of the Great Depression young people had rejected the older generation's rigid, prudish values, but how society was to be transformed without the triumph of thugs posed a provocative problem. To audiences struggling with this dilemma, Nick's good heart and Nora's wisdom would have helped point the way. Nick, after all, is a detective who catches murderers, even if he does hang around with unsavory characters and drinks too much. There is moral clarity in distinguishing between the real evil of vicious crime and the relative harmlessness of alcohol. In rejecting conservative values, Nick and Nora are not intrinsically immoral, as prohibitionists would contend. These thirties scripts, however, can be read more than one way, which is why these films still tantalize. Not only do the Charleses hover on the edge of an underworld that Hollywood explored in more frightening ways in films such as Mervyn LeRoy's *Little Caesar* (1930). William Wellman's *The Public Enemy* (1931), and Howard Hawks's *Scarface* (1932), but the "experiment" of Prohibition had made outlaws of millions and had given prominence to many shadowy figures who continued to hold a certain amount of sway throughout the thirties. If the choice was between the blind priggishness of Nick's father's generation and the low-life scum of the thirties, Nick chose the latter because it more closely fitted the real human condition without hypocrisy. Hammett, like

most radicals, hated hypocrisy, and it might even be argued that hypocrisy often drove people to radicalism in the first place.<sup>10</sup>

The audiences of the thirties could ponder that dilemma, even as they enjoyed these comedies. The war, however, had made Americans more serious, a tone change first evident in the series' 1941 entry, and even though alcohol consumption rose during the war, its use was approached more soberly. The concept of "responsible drinking" arrived along with repeal in 1933, and as soon as it became clear that Prohibition would not return, many elements in society, including portions of the liquor industry, moved to promote a much more restrained style of drinking. Throughout the period of these films, 1934-1947, that new drinking style was gradually gaining the edge. It is inconceivable that a film in 1947 would show a drunk driving scene as a moment of light-hearted comedy. Falling-down drunkenness was out, even if cocktails, nightclubs, and casinos were in. However, the *Song of the Thin Man* also seemed dated, in part because Americans, turning to the growing baby boom and family values, no longer cared so much for nightclubs, which had a wartime flavor. In 1947 casinos were still unsavory to many people. To some extent, this last film was both behind and ahead of its time. The fact that the theme music could be recycled for a television show a decade later is revealing. When the "Thin Man" series began in 1934, it expressed a desire on the part of millions of Americans who were then too poor to aspire to much success of their own to experience vicariously through the lives of Nick and Nora the ways of expensive sophistication. Myrna Loy's brilliant portrayal of Nora as a modern woman also offered a model that reinforced public interest. By 1947 many American women had lived out their own personal wartime version of the "modern woman" and scarcely needed Nora to inspire them. Then, too, in the postwar years prosperity enabled moviegoers both to envision and to realize small suburban ranch house dreams in which the kind of sophisticated life projected by the Charleses seemed too remote to be contemplated.

The comedy *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* (1948), which starred Myrna Loy and Cary Grant, offered a more useful instruction to the postwar generation. Nesting did not mean abstinence from alcohol, but after World War II alcohol lost the edge that it had held for a century as the dominant issue in American culture, mores, and politics.<sup>11</sup>

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#### NOTES

1. Dashiell Hammett, *The Thin Man* (New York, 1934). The six films are *The Thin Man* (1934); *After the Thin Man* (1936); *Another Thin Man* (1939); *Shadow of the Thin Man* (1941); *The Thin Man Goes Home* (1944); *Song of the Thin Man* (1947). Ratings are from *Leonard Maltin's Movie & Video Guide* (New York, 1998). In 1988 MGM/UA Home Video reissued all six films. Hammett had a hand with the scripts for the first three films. William Marling, *Dashiell Hammett* (Boston, 1983), 113-114. There was also a somewhat tepid and dry television series, *The Thin Man* (1957-1959), starring Peter Lawford. Vincent Terrace, *Encyclopedia of Television* (New York, 1985), 1:431.
2. On Hammett's drinking see Richard Layman, *Shadow Man* (New York, 1981), esp. 204-205, 215, 222-223; William F. Nolan, *Hammett* (New York, 1983), esp. 199-201, 205-206, 211.
3. Christine A. Lunardini, *From Equal Suffrage to Equal Rights* (New York, 1986).
4. Lowell Edmunds, *The Silver Bullet* (Westport, 1981); Joseph Lanza, *The Cocktail* (New York, 1995).
5. For a classic statement see George Ade, *The Old-Time Saloon* (New York, 1931).
6. On consumption data see U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, *Apparent Per Capita Alcohol Consumption: National, State, and Regional Trends, 1977-98* (Washington, 2002), 15-16, available at [www.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/Cons98.pdf](http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/Cons98.pdf) (cited Nov. 21, 2002).

7. *Peter Gunn* (1958-1961) is in Terrace, *Encyclopedia of Television* 1:348. Henry Mancini composed the music, including the theme song. On jazz see Lewis A. Erenberg, *Swingin' the Dream* (Chicago, 1998); Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz* (New York, 1997).
8. Benjamin Spock, *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* (New York, 1946); George H. Gallup, *The Gallup Poll* (New York, 1972), 3:1587.
9. On "Organization Men" see William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man* (New York, 1956); Sloan Wilson, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (New York, 1955). In 1956 the latter book became a popular movie, starring Gregory Peck. On postwar entertainment, including Disneyland, see John M. Findlay, *Magic Lands* (Berkeley, 1992); Kirse G. May, *Golden State, Golden Youth* (Chapel Hill, 2002).
10. On forties Freudianism see James H. Jones, *Alfred C. Kinsey* (New York, 1997).
11. On the shift to regulation see Harry G. Levine and Craig Reinerman, "From Prohibition to Regulation: Lessons from Alcohol Policy for Drug Policy," *Milbank Quarterly* 69:3 (1991): 461-494; Penny B. Page, "E. M. Jellinek and the Evolution of Alcohol Studies: A Critical Essay," *Addiction* 92:12 (December 1997): 1619-1637. On cultural context as the basis for 'responsible drinking' see Robin Room and Klaus Mäkelä, "Typologies of the Cultural Position of Drinking," *Journal of Studies on Alcohol* 61:3 (May 2000): 475-483.