

# 'I'll Have Another Piece of Beer!'

## Irene Dunne, Alcohol, and *Joy of Living* (1938)

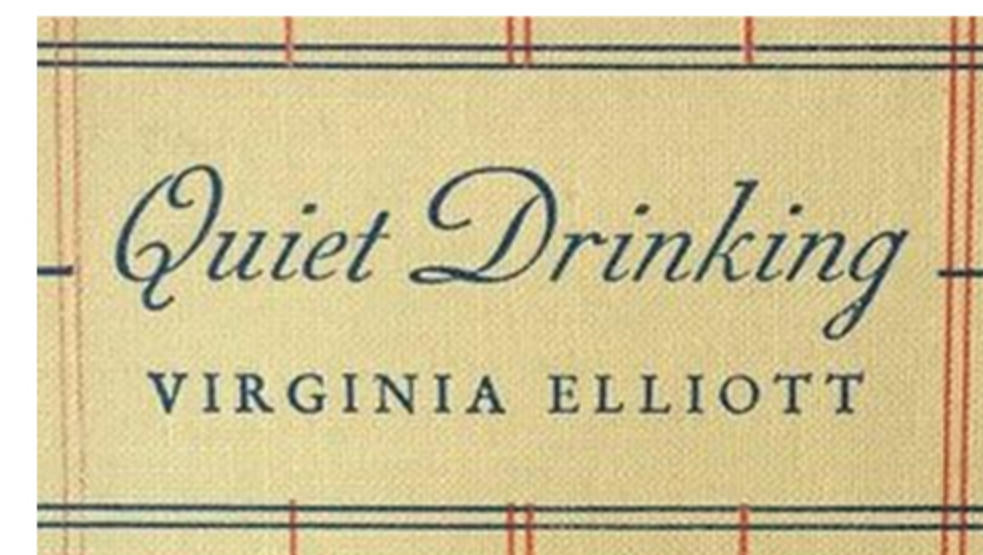
What was the cultural context for Irene Dunne's drunkenness in screwball films?

How were these scenes received by audiences/ critics/ censors?

How was her stardom affected?

We can answer these questions by combining scene analysis with use of Marjorie Hillis' self-help book *Live Alone and Like It* (1936), archival newspapers, magazines, and censorship records.

### Women and Alcohol in 1930s America



Post-prohibition, books advised women on which/how much alcohol to drink.

The title of Virginia Elliott's *Quiet Drinking* (above) implied that women should drink inconspicuously.<sup>1</sup>

A 1938 poll claimed 'a majority of the women of America' would teach daughters 'never' to drink, and opposed 'having women drink in public'.<sup>2</sup>

### 'The New Irene Dunne'



By the mid-1930s Irene Dunne was known for historical films and melodramas.

The 1936 screwball comedy *Theodora Goes Wild* rejuvenated her career, modernising her stardom.<sup>3</sup>

In both *Theodora Goes Wild* and *The Awful Truth*, Dunne performed public drunk scenes.<sup>4</sup>

From 1936-1942, 50% of Dunne's films were screwballs, including *Joy of Living*.<sup>5</sup>

### *Joy of Living* (1938)



Maggie (Dunne) is a successful actress with a parasitic family.

She meets Dan (Douglas Fairbanks Jr.), a wealthy socialite who deems her too serious and career-focussed.

Annoyed by Dan, a sober Maggie (above) joins him for a night out at a beer hall.



Maggie enjoys the beer; she finds everything hilarious, gets chronic hiccups, and spouts nonsense speech like, 'I'll have another piece of beer!'

Eventually, she gets too rowdy, making a public spectacle of herself, and they are thrown out.

### Marjorie Hillis and feminine drinking

Maggie's behaviour in *Joy of Living* linked Dunne to the influential ideas expressed by contemporary self-help author Marjorie Hillis on female drinking (right) in her best-seller *Live Alone and Like It* (1936).

Hillis explained, 'even a perfect lady is occasionally somewhere between [drunk and sober...] Sensations that you keep to yourself are all very well, [...] obvious results of a lack of discretion are, frankly, disgusting'.<sup>6</sup>

Hillis would have condemned Maggie's 'obvious' behaviour, but Dunne's performance suggested public drunkenness was enjoyable for women.

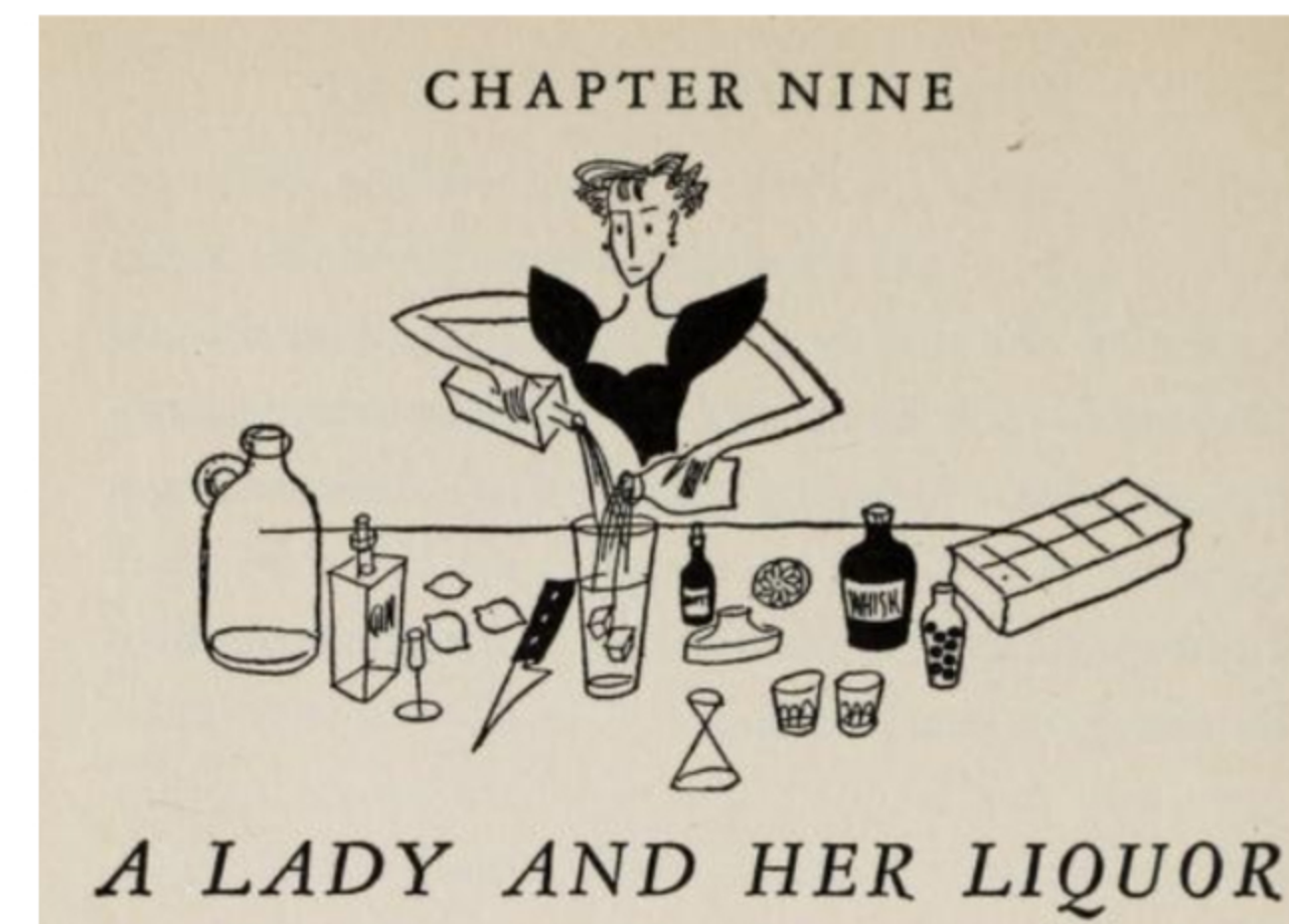


Illustration from Marjorie Hillis' *Live Alone and Like It*.<sup>7</sup>



At a Hawaiian bar, the couple continue drinking, and Maggie plays a game where she slaps Dan repeatedly.

Her dishevelled appearance (above) contrasts strongly with the start of the night.

This night out leads to Maggie's independence from her family.



They go to a roller rink, where Maggie joins in a 'men only' game, causes chaos, and lands on Dan (above).

Her lack of co-ordination reinforces her (public) drunkenness.

### Conclusions



By engaging with public female intoxication, Irene Dunne continued the screwball modernisation of her screen persona, flouting her 'ladylike' reputation.

Censors, reviewers, and fans evidently found Dunne's drunk scenes controversial.

However, *Joy of Living* clearly linked feminine independence to alcohol, implicitly arguing for women to break free of constrictive social mores.

### Censorship and Criticism

may raise censorial objections.<sup>8</sup>

Censors classed the film as an 'adult picture' due to 'excessive drinking', barring children.<sup>9</sup>

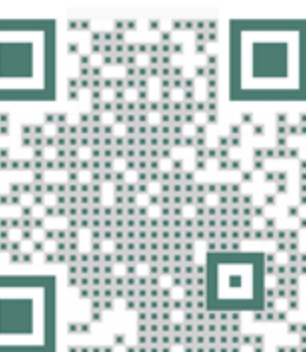
*Variety* called the drunk scenes an 'inebriate orgy'.<sup>10</sup>

Exhibitors claimed audiences disapproved: 'nothing humorous about a woman slightly intoxicated'.<sup>11</sup>

A *Picturegoer* reader noted, 'Dunne very nearly sacrificed her reputation for dignity and graciousness' in 'being drunk and disorderly'.<sup>12</sup>

### *Joy of Living* clips:

<https://vimeo.com/522492266>



### References

1. Elliott, Virginia. *Quiet Drinking*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1933.
2. Pringle, Henry F.. 'What Do the Women of America Think About Drinking.' *Ladies' Home Journal*, August 1938, 14.
3. *Theodora Goes Wild* (Richard Boleslawski, 1936).
4. *The Awful Truth* (Leo McCarey, 1937).
5. *Joy of Living* (Tay Garnett, 1938).
6. Hillis, Marjorie. *Live Alone and Like It*. New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1936. (p.108)
7. *Ibid.*, 100.
8. 'Joy of Living' Heavy on Slapstick, But Full of Fun.' *The Hollywood Reporter*, 18<sup>th</sup> March 1938, 3.
9. Letter Accompanying Certificate of Approval, sent to Leo Spitz (RKO) by Joseph I. Breen. Dated 17<sup>th</sup> February 1938. 'Joy of Living, 1938' Folder. Production Code Administration Records, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library.
10. 'Film Preview: Joy of Living.' 18<sup>th</sup> March 1938.
11. 'What The Picture Did For Me.' *Motion Picture Herald*, 4<sup>th</sup> June 1938, 81.
12. 'WHAT DO YOU THINK? Letters from our Readers.' 13<sup>th</sup> May 1939, 34.

Ciara McKay

Research funded by

THE UNIVERSITY  
of EDINBURGH

[Ciara.McKay@ed.ac.uk](mailto:Ciara.McKay@ed.ac.uk)