Episode 1: Booze

The Children's Literature Podcast is brought to you by breakfast cereal. Breakfast cereal – fine, just eat that. I'm too tired to fight with you about eating the sensible meal I've prepared.

Welcome to the Children's Literature Podcast. I'm your host, TQ Townsend. This episode is called "Alcohol in Children's Literature."

This is the first of three episodes about three tricky topics in Children's Literature – alcohol, disease, and death. I'm not doing this to be edgy – I feel that these are important subjects and parents and teachers need a plan for when they come up. And they do, especially in books from more than fifty years ago.

I could spend the whole episode just listing examples of children's books that portray the use of harmful substances. Smoking is pretty common. In *The Hobbit*, all of the main characters are smokers. Huckleberry Finn and his buddy Tom Sawyer both puffed away on corn cob pipes. The poem *The Night Before Christmas* describes Santa Claus as a smoker. Curious George was seen not just smoking a pipe but, uh, huffing ether. Tobacco is somewhat straightforward to discuss, though. Kids can easily understand that today we know smoking kills, but before about sixty years ago, plenty of people had no idea that it was bad for you.

Alcohol can be trickier to discuss, because it's the most socially accepted drug today and was often used as medicine in the past. Depictions of alcohol have been in literature since the very beginning. The oldest recorded story in the world is *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, and it references getting drunk on beer. There also weren't laws setting a drinking age until about 100 years ago, so sometimes kids imbibe in classic literature. We definitely don't want kids doing that today, but does this mean we need to throw these books out, or have them edited to purge them of anything offensive to modern standards? No. That's silly and puritanical and robs kids of a chance to learn about history. There's a famous quote from L.P. Hartley that goes "The past is a foreign country – they do things differently there." Anyone who claims that if *they* lived in an earlier time, they would *never* have done such-and-such awful thing. And that's just not true. Anyone making that argument is either overly idealistic or understandably feels discomfort over the idea that they would have done something that today we recognize is bad. What people from the past thought was normal can seem bizarre or even offensive to us. But try to remember that these people were, for the most part, behaving rationally. They made the best choices they could with the tools and circumstances that were available to them. Books from the past contain tricky moments, so the right thing to do is acknowledge them and respond appropriately.

As a parent or teacher, you have to decide whether or not your kids are able to handle a bit of nuance. If not, then maybe hold off on a particular story, or do your best to gloss over the tricky parts until they can handle a heavier discussion. Let's take a look at a two examples of underage literary drinking from *Little Women* and *Anne of Green Gables* and find a way for students to learn about history and discuss how they will handle the issue of alcohol.

First up is the use of wine in *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott. The author revealed her own opinion in Chapter Twenty-five. During Meg's wedding, Mr. March puts away some bottles of wine that had been offered for the festivities. Jo explains:

"Father put away a little for Beth, and dispatched the rest to the Soldier's Home. You know he thinks that wine should be used only in illness, and Mother says that neither she nor her daughters will ever offer it to any young man under her roof."

This was a fairly mainstream view in the nineteenth century – alcohol would have been the best possible option to help numb the pain of illness or injury, but people also weren't naive about its dangerous effects, so abuse of alcohol would have been frowned on by respectable people.

Human beings will always try to solve problems with the best tools they have available to them. Before people knew about viruses and bacteria and the science behind hygiene, they did the best they could to figure out what caused illness and how to fight it. Louis Pasteur made the groundbreaking connection between microbes and disease between the years 1860 and 1864. (Little Women was published in 1868, so the idea of germs was cutting edge science at the time.) Asprin, the first generally safe pain reliever and fever reducer, was only invented in 1897. Antibiotics were discovered in 1928. Before that, humans had discovered through painful trial and error that some things, such as rosemary, garlic, honey, and alcohol, seemed to keep food from spoiling and kept people from getting ill when they were added to food. Today we know that these things do kill bacteria and viruses to varying degrees, so we can understand why our ancestors used alcohol during times of sickness, while also understanding that as soon as better medicines were available, people switched to them.

So when you reach scenes in *Little Women*, such as in Chapter fifteen when Marmeee sends Beth to get wine to help treat Mr. March when he is ill, or in Chapter eighteen when Laurie pours a glass of wine for Jo, who is worn down with stress and lack of sleep when Beth is deathly ill, you can explain to your kids that in the 1860's, people like the March Family, would have thought of alcohol in the same way as prescription medicine – used only when necessary and in carefully measured doses. That's why it was sometimes ok to give to children.

If anything, the Marches had a rather strict view of alcohol that shows the influence of the temperance movement. In Chapter nine, sixteen-year-old Meg attends a party thrown by some wealthy friends. She gets caught up in the excitement of the evening and allows herself to be dressed up in a fancy and revealing gown. She also enjoys a few glasses of champagne. The boy next door, Laurie, is also in attendance and tries to warn her that she's doing something silly.

CUE MUSIC

He did not speak to her again till suppertime, when he saw her drinking champagne with Ned and his friend Fisher, who were behaving 'like a pair of fools', as Laurie said to himself, for he

felt a brotherly sort of right to watch over the Marches and fight their battles whenever a defender was needed.

“You’ll have a splitting headache tomorrow, if you drink much of that. I wouldn’t, Meg, your mother doesn’t like it, you know,” he whispered, leaning over her chair, as Ned turned to refill her glass and Fisher stooped to pick up her fan.

END MUSIC

This is exactly the kind of situation a teenager could end up in today. Kids are at a party, and there’s booze there. A girl has decided to drink, without the experience or understanding to know when she has had too much. A friend is there, and he or she can stand by or choose to say something. This scene should not be treated as a scandalous incident to be censored, but the chance to have a serious conversation about teenage drinking and the responsibility friends owe to one another when they make bad decisions. Modern laws setting a drinking age have only existed since the 1920’s and 1930’s, but teens underestimating personal risk is timeless.

Another example comes from Chapter 16 of *Anne of Green Gables*, in which poor Anne gets permission to invite her best friend Diana to tea . . . and the results are disastrous. Her foster mother Marilla has to be out for the afternoon, so Anne is given instructions about what she can offer to her guest. Except Marilla makes a mistake, and Anne innocently offers a bottle of wine to Diana instead of raspberry cordial, a drink made from raspberries, lemon, and sugar. While Anne gathers the rest of the snacks for the tea party, Diana drinks three big glasses and gets completely sloshed.

A scene like this would *never* be published in a children’s novel today. But there are things that make the situation different from modern times. This scene also presents a good opportunity to talk to children about how to double check for safety when beginning to do things independently. First, *Anne of Green Gables* depicts a time and place where almost everything would have been made by hand at home. Marilla’s homemade wine, which she only kept for medicinal purposes, would not have been labeled, so Anne can’t be faulted for thinking it was non-alcoholic raspberry cordial when she found it in the place where the cordial was supposed to be. When Anne unknowingly puts out the bottle of wine for Diana, she chugs three big glasses of it before Anne can even finish bringing out the rest of the tea things. Diana quickly becomes very drunk and then stumbles home. Diana’s mother is understandably furious, but she wrongly jumps to the conclusion that Anne did this intentionally. Though if we’re being honest – a couple of pre-teens breaking into the grownups’ liquor cabinet isn’t that far-fetched of a premise. Marilla is more level-headed, though, taking the time to interview Anne about what happened:

CUE MUSIC

“Anne, you certainly have a genius for getting into trouble. You went and gave Diana currant wine instead of raspberry cordial. Didn’t you know the difference yourself?”

“I never tasted it,” said Anne. “I thought it was the cordial. I meant to be so—so—hospitable. Diana got awfully sick and had to go home. Mrs. Barry told Mrs. Lynde she was simply dead drunk. She just laughed silly-like when her mother asked her what was the matter and went to sleep and slept for hours. Her mother smelled her breath and knew she was drunk. She had a fearful headache all day yesterday. Mrs. Barry is so indignant. She will never believe but what I did it on purpose.”

“I should think she would better punish Diana for being so greedy as to drink three glassfuls of anything,” said Marilla shortly. “Why, three of those big glasses would have made her sick even if it had only been cordial.”

END MUSIC

Plates and cups are bigger today than they used to be, but even back then a tumbler would have held eight to twelve ounces of liquid. That means Diana easily could have had three to six servings of wine, and she was chugging it fast. Marilla’s right – it was pretty greedy to drink that much that quickly, even if she thought it was only juice. There are about twenty-three grams of sugar in a cup of fruit juice, and cordial has extra sugar added. Diana could have put down anywhere from twenty-five to forty sugar cubes worth of sugar from drinking that much. That would harm a full-grown adult, let alone an eleven-year-old.

This scene would never make it into a modern book, but I’m actually very glad it’s in *Anne of Green Gables*. Because your kids will eventually be in a situation with intentional or unintentional underage drinking. Chapter 26 here presents the chance to talk about it in a way that doesn’t feel threatening, because it’s about fictional characters. But the issues Anne, Diana, Mrs. Barry, and Marilla all face are exactly the same as today.

First let’s talk about how Anne handled it. For starters, she did nothing wrong. She had no idea there was wine in the house, and from her descriptions of living with a violent alcoholic foster father, she knows the dangers of alcohol abuse. Anne deserves no punishment. In fact, she deserves credit for doing the right thing once Diana made it clear she was ill. At first, Anne asks her to eat something or lie down. She then asks a perfect question: “where do you feel bad?” Once Diana states her wish to go home, Anne isn’t happy about it, but she gets Diana’s hat and walks her home. Yes. That’s what you do when you’re at a party and a friend is unwell. It could be the flu or a horrible teenage misjudgment involving tequila slammers, but you get your friend home safely right away. Anne was very disappointed that her tea party was ruined, and she had a good cry about it. But she did the right thing by taking care of Diana first.

Diana also mainly did nothing wrong. She had no idea she was drinking wine, clearly didn’t know how to recognize it, and never would have thought there would be something wrong about food or drink served to her by her best friend, who was a good, conscientious girl. What happened was horrible and I feel bad that she got so sick and ended up with a hangover. There’s a little bit of truth to what Marilla said. Diana certainly would not have had quite so bad a time from overdosing on raspberry cordial, but a good guest shouldn’t drink the house dry,

whatever it is that's being poured out. Still, let's give Diana a break. What happened to her was way more horrible than what she would have deserved for hogging too much fruit juice at a friend's house.

Marilla handles the incident perfectly. She carefully interviews Anne, does some fact checking, and realizes that she had mistakenly stored the raspberry cordial in the cellar. Anne searched for the cordial in the pantry, and not finding it, accidentally brought out a bottle from the very back which resembled the cordial but was in fact wine reserved for times of sickness. She listens to Anne and reserves judgment until she's discovered the truth. Marilla tells Anne, "There, there, child, don't cry. I can't see as you were to blame although I'm sorry it happened so." That's good parenting.

Mrs. Barry has a less level-headed reaction, although I'm slightly sympathetic as any good mother will be outraged when her child is harmed. At first, Diana's mother believes that Anne got her daughter drunk on purpose, goes gossiping about it to the neighborhood, and declares that Anne can never play with Diana again. Even after Marilla goes to to set the record straight, Mrs. Barry refuses to believe the truth. Anne goes and begs with clasped hands for Mrs. Barry to believe that it was all an accident, and that Diana is a beloved friend whom she would miss dreadfully. It's no use. Diana is ordered to have no contact with Anne, and while the girls do write each other some notes, they are not permitted to play together again for some time. However, after Anne stays up all night giving life-saving first aid to Diana's baby sister while the parents are away, Mrs. Barry reverses her opinion completely. Diana's mother seems to parent in absolutes. When her child was harmed by Anne, even though it was unintentionally, she was completely unforgiving. But when another of her children is saved by Anne, she is is absolute in her gratitude. The day after Anne's heroism, she has a much-needed nap and when she wakes up Marilla reports the change in circumstances:

CUE MUSIC

"Mrs. Barry was here this afternoon, Anne. She wanted to see you, but I wouldn't wake you up. She says you saved Minnie May's life, and she is very sorry she acted as she did in that affair of the currant wine. She says she knows now you didn't mean to set Diana drunk, and she hopes you'll forgive her and be good friends with Diana again. You're to go over this evening if you like for Diana can't stir outside the door on account of a bad cold she caught last night. Now, Anne Shirley, for pity's sake don't fly up into the air."

END MUSIC

As parents and teachers, it's natural for us to get upset at a kid who does harm. But we really do have to remember that we are the adults. We have to try to put our emotions in the proper perspective and try to understand, the way Marilla did, what amount of outrage is actually warranted by an incident. Kids are going to make unwitting mistakes and do dumb things. Sometimes on purpose, sometimes not. It doesn't do any good to treat every mistake as a capital crime. If a decent, nice kid messes up, figure out the appropriate level of correction that

needs to happen and then show some forgiveness. Don't make some poor child literally have to save someone's life in order to gain redemption after an understandable mix-up.

Incidents involving dangerous substances in children's literature shouldn't be censored out or brushed aside as incomprehensible artifacts from the past. They are really relevant today. The scenes where alcohol is used as a medicine can be used to begin discussions about the safe use and storage of medication and why these powerful substances should only be used in the correct amounts when they are really necessary. Incidents like Tom Sawyer smoking tobacco to prove he's cool or Meg March drinking champagne to prove she's cool are good ways to broach the subject of engaging in risky behavior to fit in. And the unfortunate incident with Anne, Diana, and the accidental bottle of wine can be used to talk about the right and wrong things to do when a child becomes unwell after drinking.

This last incident is the inspiration for this episode's learning activity, which is to ask students to judge what they think of how Anne, Diana, Marilla, and Mrs. Barry handled the situation described in Chapter 26 of *Anne of Green Gables*. I've made a worksheet that you and your students can use to think about what these characters did well, what they could have done better, and how we might behave in a similar situation. You can find the questions in the show notes for this episode at childrensliteraturepodcast.com. Please use them as they are, or modify them to best match the needs of the children you'll be talking to.

Alcohol is a tricky topic to discuss with children, and it can come up when we least expect it – like in the pages of a beloved novel that is from an older time when things were done differently. But the issues around alcohol and other drugs haven't actually changed much. It's important not to shy away from thoughtful discussion with your kids about the need to avoid abusing themselves or others with harmful substances. It's critical to talk about how to get a child to safety if, by accident or on purpose, he or she overdoses on alcohol or another drug. And it's up to us as parents to have balanced, reasonable responses to the mistakes kids inevitably make.

You've been listening to the Children's Literature Podcast. Subscribe to the show and give it a rating. I'm your host, TQ Townsend. Thanks for listening.

Name:_____ **Class:**_____

Discussion questions for Chapter 26 of *Anne of Green Gables*
"Diana is Invited to Tea with Tragic Results"

1. Is there anything Marilla could have done to prevent Anne from finding and mistakenly serving the wine instead of the non-alcoholic raspberry cordial?

2. What did Anne do correctly after Diana said she didn't feel well?

3. Was Marilla too critical of Diana for drinking three glasses so quickly? Why or why not?

4. What do you think about Marilla's reaction to the incident?

5. What do you think about Mrs. Barry's reaction to the incident?

6. What would you do if one of your friends became intoxicated from alcohol, began to feel unwell, and no adults were around? Would you worry about how your parents or your friend's parents would react?

EPISODE TWO - DISEASE

This episode of the Children's Literature Podcast is brought to you by

Just in the books I've already covered in episodes of this podcast, there are a lot of diseases mentioned. *Little Lord Fauntleroy* describes the debilitating effects of rheumatic fever, which keep a good father from being able to work, leaving his wife distraught over their children going hungry.

An important preface to a conversation about disease and its treatment in books written before our own times is that readers will be encountering outdated information. People from the past were just as clever as we are and did the best they could, but they had less information and fewer tools than we do. Diseases were also a lot more common and a lot more deadly before modern medicine. So while plot threads involving illness can make for gripping reading, children should be reminded that anything they read doesn't represent how diseases are treated today.

Depictions of disease in children's stories can be useful in a lot of other ways. Disease can suddenly put a protagonist on a new life path, as happens to Mary Lennox when her parents are killed by cholera in *The Secret Garden*. Disease can deplete scarce resources, forcing characters to make tough decisions. In *Little Women*, Mr. March becomes dangerously ill while serving far from home in the Union Army during the Civil War. The March family has to scrape together whatever money they can in order to send Marmee to nurse her husband back to health. But then they have to do it all over again. Before Mr. March is well, little sister Beth falls dangerously ill with scarlet fever and Marmee has to rush back home to tend her

Illness also often serves as a sort of purifying experience for characters who are immature or rebellious. Nothing makes you confront your priorities more realizing that life is short. In *Sense and Sensibility* by Jane Austen,

Cholera in *The Secret Garden*
Cholera kills at least half of the people who are infected.

This opening can seem so graphic and bleak, but it needs to be there to stand in contrast to the lush, happy, healthy ending, where a family is healed and together. Still, it's so stark and depressing that on my first attempt to read *The Secret Garden* to my oldest daughter, she tapped out in chapter one and couldn't be persuaded to give it another try for about a year. It was just too depressing for her.

Aspirin to treat fever in *The Mouse and the Motorcycle*

Scarlet Fever in *Little Women*

Ipecac to treat Croup in *Anne of Green Gables*

EPISODE THREE - DEATH

These days it’s rare and shocking when a child loses a parent to death.