



Junky a Short Diagnosis: An Essay Examining the Underworld of Drug Abuse in William S. Burroughs' Novel Junky (1953)

M. J. Poynter

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Junky, a Short Diagnosis, is an analytical essay (2,000 words) examining themes of drug abuse and urban decay in William S. Burroughs' novel Junky (1953). As a cult novel Junky provides a pathological attack on the decaying social and moral values of post-war America. This semi-autobiographical memoir provides an unflinching exposé of drug addiction in the early 1950's. By using drug addiction as a means of observing a state of physical deterioration in the self the individual is able to recognise a similar state of deterioration within society. Burroughs' novel effectively illustrates how society has succumb to the external forces of corporatism, bureaucracy and extended forms of government control. In reacting against the stifling effects of a consumer society Junky is not merely a gratuitous examination of drug abuse but a social critique exposing the debilitating effects of post-war containment.

Short Extract

Is Junky (1953) simply a story about the urban underworld of drug abuse or can it be read as an attack on the decaying social and moral values of post-war America? On the surface Burroughs novel graphically portrays the criminal underworld of a drug dealer, but underneath, it becomes a pathological attack on the decaying social and moral values of post-war America. After the Second World War, "America became a land of unprecedented affluence," states Bradbury, in which, "real incomes doubled and the United State became the exemplary consumer economy" (1983: 26). At a superficial level this created an inner sense of cohesion which many intellectuals thought would result in an age of conformity. But as America struggled to maintain a new global balance of power, this period became outwardly marked by the stress and disorders of the modern world, which later manifested themselves into the paranoia of the Cold War (Ibid, 26-27).

By examining the physical effects of drug addition, whereby the individual's body is subdued by the effects of a foreign agent, Burroughs effectively illustrates how society can succumb to the influence of destructive external powers, such as, corporatism, monopolizing bureaucracy and the increasing powers of the secret service (Donald, 1978: 115). These new post-war developments can be seen as foreign bodies of mass power, seeking to create a world of consensus and conformity. But in destroying individual expression they also destroy the existing social and moral values that society has traditionally relied upon. Junky is not merely a gratuitous examination of drug abuse but a social critique exposing the debilitating effects of the post-war consensus. "Burroughs is greatly concerned with the fear of a system taking over from our system," explains Donald, "drugs are, as it were, an alien occupying force, an evil external power which, once internalised into the human system, transforms and destroys it" (1978: 113-5).

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