“Cruelty and Humor” may be the subtitle of the Hogarth exhibition on display at the Morgan Library through September 22, but “Beer and Gin” would be more fitting. In the early eighteenth century, the British government (amid heightened tensions with France) instituted a policy to promote gin, a traditionally British drink, at the expense of French brandy. The policy proved too effective: by 1743, the average Brit was—in an intoxicated and nationalist frenzy—drinking 2.2 gallons each year. A satirist, agitator, and, in the words of David Bindman, “self-consciously English artist,” William Hogarth (1697–1764) employed his work in the hopes of chilling the “Gin Craze” of the 1750s.

Hard alcohol has, for many centuries, limited forbearance. The crusade against spirits probably began with Pittacus, an ancient Greek historian, who believed that “[a blow given by a drunken man] should have been] more feverishly punished than if it had been given by one that was sober.” His idea set a precedent that extended well into William Hogarth’s era. For instance, Henry Fielding, the eighteenth-century British writer and Hogarth’s close friend, wrote that gin—“poison,” he called it—was “the greatest evil of all.” In fact, he viewed gin as the primary reason to rouse “[government] power from its presently lethargic state” and ultimately to crack down on excessive drinking—even at the expense of civil liberties.

While Hogarth sought to address the problem by advocating for legislation, he also viewed the “Gin Craze” as the symptom of a larger issue: a moral degradation that was evident in eighteenth-century working-class London. This one-room exhibition, assembled by Jennifer Tonkovich, the Eugene and Clare Thaw Curator, logically reveals Hogarth’s journey—from recognizing the issue to exploring its underlying causes.
The prints *Beer Street* and *Gin Lane* (both 1751) that open the exhibition were, according to Hogarth, “calculated to reform some reigning vices peculiar to the lower class of people.” In the background of *Beer Street*, construction workers atop a steeple raise a glass of local beer to their king. In the foreground, a young woman buys back many of the goods she pawned as fishwives and laborers enjoy a beer outside a tavern. Hogarth touches on piety and nationalist loyalty, along with the blossoming economy, to paint the picture of a locally brewed utopia.
Then, Hogarth welcomes us to *Gin Lane*, which reeks of blood, drugs, and disease. People pawn clothes and cooking instruments to buy more gin, drunks fight with dogs over bones, and brawls erupt outside of the appropriately named Killman Distillery. Most disturbing of all, however, is the mother at the forefront of the painting. She appears to be an anti-Madonna: rather than holding and nurturing her child, she drops him, reaching for her snuff instead.

Shortly after sketching *Gin Lane*, Hogarth etched the scene into a copper plate. This mold, which facilitated mass reproduction of the art, allowed Hogarth to widen the audience of his social criticism. Hoping to galvanize them, Hogarth addressed this work to “hard hearts... giving this effect through a quick touch, rather than by rendering them languid and feeble through the fine strokes of soft engraving.”

**Analyzing the people on the fringe can provide for the most incisive criticism of the society within; Hogarth, for one, embraced this perspective.**
As we continue clockwise around the room, Hogarth introduces us to the fictional Tom Nero. Appropriately named after the ruthless Roman emperor, Nero—in the series *The Stages of Cruelty* (1750-51)—typifies a four-part development of the immoral Londoner. In *The First Stage of Cruelty*, he sodomizes a dog with a wooden stick. Nero moves onto larger prey in *The Second Stage of Cruelty*, in which he beats a horse. These scenes are definitely a sign of burgeoning criminal behavior, but are they the end of the world? Hardly. But, after Nero kills a woman in *The Third Stage of Cruelty*, we are not only convinced of his immorality, but we also grow keenly aware of the moral (and religious) deterioration that surrounds him. For example, *The Fourth Stage of Cruelty* depicts a startling reversal of religion: just as with the “anti-Madonna” in *Gin Lane*, we now see a reverse transubstantiation, as clergymen dissect Tom Nero—pulling out his heart and intestines.
and steaming his bones. (The previously sodomized dog licks Nero’s heart in blistering revenge.) The Reverend James Townley cheerily describes the scene in an epigraph at the bottom of the picture:

Torn from the Root, that nicked Tongue,
Which daily snore and curst!
Those Eyeballs, from their Sockets hung,
That glori’d with lawless lust!

In fact, this anti-ecclesiastical scene is not an isolated instance in Hogarth’s *Stages of Cruelty*. The *Third Stage* places both a crime scene and a congregation of pitchfork-wielding, devilish-looking men *within* a church courtyard. Hogarth, a critic of the religious establishment, most likely believed that the moral destruction of Londoners was at least in part due to a church he viewed as corrupt and delusory.

Analyzing the people on the fringe can provide for the most incisive criticism of the society within; Hogarth, for one, embraced this perspective. By observing Tom Nero, a monster who, according to the scholar James Steintrager, neither belongs in our “value system” nor “shares the same affective structure as [true] human beings,” we can more clearly define our own moral code. In the end, Hogarth provides the viewer with an option: he can either abide by our system of values or exile himself beyond the walls of society.

Hogarth eventually galvanized enough support to get the 1751 Gin Act instated. But did he ever fix the underlying problem—the moral decline of London—that he believed to be the cause of the “Gin Craze”? Hogarth didn’t seem to think so himself: six months before his death, he sketched the bleak *Bathos* (1764), which features a crumpled Father Time smoking his last pipe with a broken palette resting before him. Hogarth had reason to be upset: as a satirist and cartoonist, he was overshadowed by more traditional artists and didn’t get the serious attention he believed he deserved.

Those interested in learning more should attend the lecture by Meredith Gamer, an Assistant Professor of Art History at Columbia University, who will discuss *The Four Stages of Cruelty* in more detail. It takes place on September 12, 6:30 p.m. Tickets are fifteen dollars.

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