

# Exploring Teenagers' Drug Use by the Critical Analysis of "Traffic"

Qin Wei

Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada

**Abstract:- This paper explores the teenagers' drug use by critically analyzing the film "Traffic" which demonstrates the illegal drug trade in the United States of America. It discusses the impact of drug use on the family of the main characters, examines the possible factors that contribute to the teenagers' addiction, and illustrates some elements that are key in addiction treatment.**

**Keywords:- Teenagers' Drug Use, the American War on Drugs, Critical Analysis, Traffic.**

## I. INTRODUCTION

The film "Traffic" portrays the illegal drug trade in the United States of America. A wide variety of characters are depicted including users, enforcers, politicians, and traffickers and their stories are intertwined to reveal the complex reality of addiction in all its aspects. One of the main characters, Caroline Wakefield, a young drug user, is the focus of this paper and explores critically through her experience related to drug use, the theme of addiction and the American war on drugs. It discusses possible factors leading to Caroline's addiction, examines the impact of addiction on Caroline's life, and considers key factors during addiction treatment. The analysis extends to general teenage drug use represented by this character.

## II. WHY HAS CAROLINE TURNED TO ADDICTION?

Caroline Wakefield, a sixteen year's old girl, has become addicted to drugs. Robert, her father, is a judge who is about to take over the Office of the National Drug Control Policy. What has led Caroline on the road to addiction? Caroline explains the reasons during her first addiction treatment "I guess I am angry. I mean, I think I'm really angry about a lot of stuff" (Zwick, Herskovitz, & Bickford, 2000, 01:24:50). However, she has no clear idea about what this stuff is. She says "I'm just... not sure what..." (Zwick et al., 2000, 01:24:56). So what stuff does she mean here? Some scenes do hint to the source of her anger and the issues behind her substance abuse.

Society is one of these issues. During the party scene, Caroline and her friends complain and condemn the distorted society around them. "I am an addict. I'm not stupid" (Herie & Skinner, 2014, p. 32). These teenagers decry the coldness, hypocrisy, and selfishness of society. In one instance, Caroline declares: "It never seems like anyone

ever says anything that matters to us" (Zwick et al., 2000, 00:33:52). She despises "these responses that we've been trained to make, not real response" (Zwick et al., 2000, 00:34:00). She also feels uncomfortable and afraid with social conventions such as "phony, fake smiles" (Zwick et al., 2000, 00:34:08). Moreover, Caroline agrees with her friends' opinions and regards them as well as herself as "a random collection of self-interests" (Zwick et al., 2000, 00:34:50). She and her friends think that society equals sarcasm and they are worried that "if you admit that, people will think you are weak" (Zwick et al., 2000, 00:35:19). They believe they have been "fucked up" by current social patterns.

Caroline and her friends are eager to make them different and "change this thing, this social pattern" (Zwick et al., 2000, 00:35:52). Drugs might be a weapon Caroline and her friends use to express their rebellion towards society. According to Hoffmann (1993), peers have a strong effect on adolescent drug use. Caroline follows her friends into addiction. Even when Spence, a friend of Caroline's, suddenly overdoses and loses consciousness, it does not prevent her from indulging in drugs and the same risky behaviours. Teenagers are not the only ones to feel dissatisfaction with society, adults do as well. Robert admits he "would be dying of boredom" without drinking (Zwick et al., 2000, 01:15:28). In fact, if we look back at the history of the modern war on drugs, we find that, in the 1960's, drugs had become a symbol of youthful rebellion, social upheaval and political dissent.

Secondly, Caroline's anger might come from her family. Hoffmann (1993) states that parent-child involvement has a direct influence on adolescent drug use. Caroline's parents fail to supervise the behaviour of their kid. Robert prioritizes work over family and spends little time with Caroline. Caroline's parents have a quarrelsome relationship and Barbara, Caroline's mother, blames Robert for needing to "have three scotches just to walk in the house and say hello" (Zwick et al., 2000, 01:15:20). Robert claims his drinking is "to take the edge off" (Zwick et al., 2000, 00:35:54). Although Barbara has known about Caroline's drug use for six months and realizes that "Caroline has clearly used very bad judgement" (Zwick et al., 2000, 00:44:31), she does not seem alarmed and says of herself "I tried every drug" (Zwick et al., 2000, 00:44:42). She also insists that Caroline "needs to find out for herself, on her own" (Zwick et al., 2000, 00:44:55). Robert's tight schedule and Barbara's laissez-faire attitude deprive Caroline from the care and guidance of an attentive family.

Robert's response adds to Caroline's anger towards her family. When Robert finds out that Caroline is addicted to drugs, he feels angry and shameful. As a leader in the war on drugs, it is unacceptable for Robert to have a daughter who is an addict. He does not respect or understand Caroline, and doesn't seek the reasons for his daughter's addiction. He simply imposes his brutal blame on Caroline. When he finds drug paraphernalia in the bathroom of his home, he bitterly quarrels with Caroline and forcibly sends her to a rehabilitation centre. Although he realizes the severity of Caroline's addiction, Robert refuses to recognize the part his communication and education mistakes have played in the situation until Caroline escapes to another city. When young drug users do not get adequate and timely guidance from parents and do not feel understanding from their family, they might sink deeper in addictive behaviour for comfort and escape. Caroline needs her family to "display humanity with empathy, communication and understanding" (Herie & Skinner, 2019, p. 36). Had Robert and Barbara identified problems earlier and helped Caroline properly, she might not have gone to the extreme of selling her body for drugs.

Thirdly, the inefficiency of the drug control policy and the war on drugs actually promotes the development of addiction. The policy exacerbates problems and contributes to an environment where drug use and illegal drug activities flourish. (Buchanan & Young, 2000). Politicians have low expectations when it comes to the success of the war on drugs. "Everybody says we want to declare war on drugs, but if 25% of high school seniors are using drugs, if you reduce that to 1%, that's a great improvement" (Zwick et al., 2000, 00:22:44). The film refers to the relationship between addiction and the war on drugs with the line "all this law enforcement has really achieved is that kids get stuff cheaper" (Zwick et al., 2000, 00:23:05). The film also discloses a shocking lack of sincere care about drug users in the war on drugs. "Education, rehabilitation, prevention, that's not significant to these reporters. They want to see people in prison. They want to see the gory aspect of the drug problem" (Zwick et al., 2000, 00:23:12)." Moreover, the policy is exposed for all the corruption it involves. For example, General Salazar, Robert's partner, "has been working for Portirio Madrigal and the Juarez cartel the entire time" (Zwick et al., 2000, 01:56:31). Caroline lives at a time when "it's a lot easier to get drugs than it is to get alcohol" (Zwick et al., 2000, 1:24:29). "The price of coke and heroin has dropped but purity has increased" (Zwick et al., 2000, 00:23:01). This provides convenience for drug use and paves the way to Caroline's addiction.

### III. HOW DOES DRUG USE IMPACT CAROLINE'S LIFE?

The drug use dramatically changes Caroline's life and leads her away from the orbit of her family. Firstly, addiction worsens the relationship between Caroline and her parents. When Caroline comes back from the police station, her parents have a talk with her. When asked "how well did you know this boy that overdosed?" (Zwick et al., 2000, 00:42:23), she tries to cover the truth and says that she was not part of the group. She also does not admit that Seth was

her boyfriend. In fact, Seth is the person who encouraged her to use drugs. Although she insists "it wasn't my pot" (Zwick et al., 2000, 00:43:59), her parents know she's lying. Her behaviour deepens the mistrust between her and her parents. The words "leave me alone, Give me some money" (Zwick et al., 2000, 01:15:04) become the only dialogue between Caroline and her parents, the relationship is obviously strained. When Robert finds the paraphernalia, Caroline becomes aggressive towards her father because she is facing the full exposure of her addiction. She even shouts obscenities at him. Addiction severely damages her relationship to her family.

Secondly, addiction deprives Caroline of her dignity. To make money to buy drugs, Caroline steals from Barbara and Robert. When money is gone, she becomes a prostitute. A person's teenage years are supposed to be the most beautiful phase of life. However, addiction leads Caroline to become a thief and a prostitute in order to buy drugs and destroys her life. Caroline is tragically selling her young body to a stranger in a cheap inn when Robert finds her. There is no brightness or hope left in her eyes and addiction has robbed her of her youth.

Thirdly, addiction has distracted Caroline's attention and energy from her school work and side tracked a promising future. Caroline had performed well in school and had been a warm hearted volunteer who regularly read to the blind. A straight A student, she had been a national Merit Finalist. She had been on the Hi-Q team, the Math team and the volleyball team. She had been in the Spanish club. She had been a thespian. She had been vice president of her class. She had been energetic and smart. Addiction, however, diverts the direction of her life. Drugs take over her heart and she falls into despair and helplessness.

It is notable that the stigma of being a drug user brings harm to Caroline as well. When she is questioned at the police station, the tone of the woman who interviews her is full of discrimination and prejudice. These questions expose the stigma which substance abuse survivors often face. For example, the line "parents still together?" supposes that survivors have grown up in a single parent family. "In school?" supposes that survivors often drop out of school. "Private?" supposes that survivors come from a poor family. "How are your grades?" supposes that survivors might fail in school. When Caroline answers "I get A's, all A's.", the lady shows doubt with "You do?" (Zwick et al., 2000, 00:42:19). The war on drugs becomes a war on drug users and this subjects drug users to a process of stigmatization, marginalization and social exclusion (Buchanan & Young, 2000).

### IV. WHAT HELPS CAROLINE MOST DURING HER ADDICTION TREATMENT

At the end of the film, Caroline gives a speech, an account of her experience with addiction. People listen attentively including Robert and Barbara. In fact, Caroline experiences addiction treatment twice. A first time after Robert finds the paraphernalia and the second after her

father saves her at the inn. Though the first treatment fails with Caroline's escape, the second attempt is successful. Caroline's first addiction treatment is imposed by her parents and the temptation of drugs is still too great for her. "Being dependent on substances is scary. The idea of living without these substances is scarier" (Herie & Skinner, 2019, p. 33). However, the second treatment is different. Although the film does not present details on why Caroline changes her mind and how her parents persuade her, it still offers an exemplary result: Together, Caroline and her parents fight against addiction.

Love and understanding from a family plays an important role in the treatment of addiction. When Caroline's father kneels beside Caroline's bed, gently touches her hair and left arm, kisses her face, and weeps in regret at the inn, Caroline finally realizes that she can get care and support from her family. She smiles at Robert and says "Hi, Daddy" and Robert responds with "Hi, sweetheart" (Zwick et al., 2000, 02:03:57). The simple greetings show that mutual respect and understanding between parents and child has been attained. Robert begins to accept the truth of Caroline's addiction and is ready to change with her. Caroline begins to accept help from family and is ready to open the door of her heart. Both of them are eager to fight against addiction and change the current situation. This builds a foundation for an effective and timely addiction treatment.

Robert finally resigns his position. He says "I can't do it" because "if there is a war on drugs, then many of our family members are the enemy. And I don't know how you wage war on your own family" (Zwick et al., 2000, 02:13:09). One of the drug war's negative consequences is that often people forget that drug abuse survivors need to be treated as patients and not enemies. To some extent, addiction is an illness and the drug abuse survivors need care and love. "People with addictive behaviours who can access social support have much better chances of a sustained recovery" (Herie & Skinner, 2019, p. 23). Robert's decision warms Caroline's heart and gives her the strength to accept treatment. Caroline also gets help and a new social outlook from her time in treatment. She begins to find hope for the future. "I thank the people I've met in these rooms. I am very sure I can make it" (Zwick et al., 2000, 02:18:39).

## V. CONCLUSION

The film "Traffic" is successful in portraying its characters' complex fates in relation to the war on drugs. Caroline's own story depicts the realities of addiction on young users. Though she is unlucky to have fallen into addiction, she is lucky to have gotten family and social support and a successful treatment. Although "no one is a textbook case" (Herie & Skinner, 2019, p. 30), parents do play a pivotal role in their teenagers' attitudes and behaviours towards drugs - by listening, understanding and acting in a timely manner, they can effectively prevent teenage addiction and be a powerful source of social support. Though the war on drugs has had disappointing results, hope is still possible.

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