

Drugs

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THE term “drugs” is, as observed by David T. Courtwright, a notoriously “problematic” one to define.¹ In modern scholarship it is often used as a convenient shorthand for a range of psychoactive substances encompassing not only drugs of addiction—such as opium, alcohol, and cocaine—but also more conventionally licit consumables like caffeine and nicotine. Drugs, broadly construed, can be natural, synthetic, or semisynthetic and can be employed as medical remedies, pleasurable recreations, or as enhancements for specific mental and physical functions. Since the early twentieth century, drugs have been stratified into distinct legal and illegal categories, conceptually and judicially separating “dangerous drugs” from permissible indulgences. In Britain, wartime concern over the misuse of cocaine and morphine led in 1916 to the introduction of section 40b of the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA), whose provisions were later adapted into the Dangerous Drugs Act of 1920.²

Victorian drug discourses predate these twentieth-century presumptions about how different substances should be classified and understood, which drugs and which uses should be regarded as legitimate or forbidden. Victorian commentators were keenly aware of the transformative potential of modern psychopharmacology. Thus, Count Fosco, the refined, flamboyant, and remorseless villain of Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1860), observes: “Chemistry has always had irresistible attractions for me from the enormous, the illimitable power which the knowledge of it confers. . . . Mind, they say, rules the world. But what rules the mind? The body (follow me closely here) lies at the mercy of the most omnipotent of all potentates—the Chemist.”³ Fosco’s designation of the chemist as the omnipotent master of the human mind reflects a broader sense of both the increasing technological elaboration of Victorian drug use and the increasing omnipresence of drugs in Victorian daily life. The same year that Collins’s novel appeared in print, the German chemist Albert Niemann successfully isolated pure

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cocaine from the leaves of the coca plant. In 1867 the *Ladies' Treasury* wrote excitedly about the possibility for importing coca leaves from South America and the new stimulant's potential to create a world of "Life and Labour Without Fatigue, Without Food."⁴ Before going to bed, Dr Jack Seward, one of the heroes of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), thinks to himself: "If I don't sleep at once, chloral, the modern Morpheus—C₂ HCl₃ O. H₂O!"⁵ From the midcentury, it became increasingly apparent to some observers that the demands of modern life were inherently connected to chemically augmented forms of relaxation and activity.

Christian Müller and Gunter Schumann have suggested that certain types of habitual drug use are a near-essential "functional adaptation to modern environments." They write: "Modern societies not only request constant high cognitive and physical performance, but they also allow decreasingly little time for the individual to recover from periods of intense or high workload. . . . The goal is then to [frequently] change the mental state from 'tired and stressed' to 'fresh and relaxed' in a short period of time." Substance use "accelerate[s] recovery" from modern life, by artificially accelerating and decelerating our bodies to match the rhythms of industrial modernity.⁶ The classic literary example of this phenomenon is to be found in H. G. Wells's "The New Accelerator" (1901), wherein Professor Gibberne discovers "an all-round nervous stimulant" that speeds up the functioning of "heart, lungs, muscles, brain—everything" by "several thousand times" until the world around him and the narrator seems to be standing still.⁷ The story ends with Gibberne seeking a drug with an equally powerful decelerating effect—"a Retarder" to complement the Accelerator: "While this Accelerator will enable us to concentrate ourselves with tremendous impact upon any moment or occasion that demands our utmost sense and vigour, the Retarder will enable us to pass in passive tranquillity through infinite hardship and tedium."⁸ Wells's story frames the Accelerator as an essential solution to the problems of the modern working environment. As the narrator remarks: "The convenience of securing a long, uninterrupted spell of work in the midst of a day full of engagements cannot be exaggerated." The narrator's final thoughts dwell on how profitable the Accelerator is sure to be: "It will be obtainable of all chemists and druggists . . . at a high but, considering its extraordinary qualities, by no means excessive price."⁹ "The New Accelerator" captures the sometimes fraught connections between capitalist modernity and drug use. The demands of concentrated work, lengthy travel, regimented periods of activity, and

unpredictable periods of rest require that the body be abruptly accelerated or slowed down as circumstances demand.

Nineteenth-century advances in commerce and science created conditions in which more varieties of substances might be used to augment individual work and performance. However, they also allowed for increasingly elaborated and connoisseurial patterns of enjoyment. In 1898 a journalist for *The Outlook* recounted how “a lady at a fashionable ‘at-home’ was [recently] heard to offer a friend a tabloid from a small silver box—just as one might offer a cigarette to another—with the words, ‘Do have one, dear—they’re only cocaine.’”¹⁰ Recent analyses of substance use (particularly in the field of chemsex studies) have moved away from exclusively “foregrounding [narratives of] stigma, trauma, and abuse” and toward interrogating the ways in which drugs constitute “site[s] of joy and pleasure” for their users.¹¹ Victorian accounts of drug pleasure are often overshadowed by emerging formulations of addiction, but it is also worth considering the ways in which the “illimitable power” of chemistry might be used by Victorian subjects to not only augment their capacity for work but also to unlock new thresholds of delight.

NOTES

1. See David T. Courtwright, *Forces of Habit: Drugs and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 2.
2. See P. E. Caquet, “France, Germany, and the Origins of Drug Prohibition,” *International History Review* 42, no. 4 (2020): 1–3; Virginia Berridge, “War Conditions and Narcotics Control: The Passing of Defence of the Realm Act Regulation 40B,” *Journal of Social Policy* 7, no. 3 (1978): 285–99; and Marek Kohn, *Dope Girls: The Birth of the British Drug Underground* (London: Granta Books, 2001), 28–44.
3. Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (London: Sampson Low, Son, 1860), 3:324–25.
4. “Life & Labour Without Fatigue, Without Food,” *The Ladies’ Treasury: An Illustrated Magazine of Entertaining Literature*, August 1, 1867, 355.
5. Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, edited by Maurice Hindle (1897; London: Penguin, 2003), 112.
6. Christian P. Müller and Gunter Schumann, “Drugs as Instruments: A New Framework for Non-Addictive Psychoactive Drug Use,” *Behavioural and Brain Sciences* 34, no. 6 (2011): 293–300.

7. H. G. Wells, "The New Accelerator," *Strand Magazine* 22 (July–December 1901): 622, 625.
8. Wells, "The New Accelerator," 630.
9. Wells, "The New Accelerator," 630.
10. Jocelynn Joye, "A Woman's Week," *The Outlook* 2, no. 38 (October 22, 1898): 380.
11. Kristian Møller and Jamie Hakim, "Critical Chemsex Studies: Interrogating Cultures of Sexualised Drug Use beyond the Risk Paradigm," *Sexualities* (2021), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/13634607211026223>.

