George Eliot and Victorian Intoxication

The whole life of Society must now be carried on by drugs: doctor after doctor appears with his nostrum, of co-operative Societies, Universal Suffrage, Cottage-and-Cow systems, Repression of Population, Vote by Ballot. To such height has the dyspepsia of Society reached; as indeed the constant grinding internal pain, or from time to time the mad spasmodic throes, of all Society do otherwise too mournfully indicate.

Thomas Carlyle
Characteristics 1831

Among nineteenth-century authors, the Romantics, whether British or American, receive most credit or blame for demonstrating two connections between intoxicating substances and literature: their roles as stimuli to artistic creativity and their roles as metaphors for intense and dangerous love. Not only does much Romantic poetry and prose suggest a belief in a causal relationship between drugs and creativity, but it also often assigns a metaphorically poisonous potential to passionate love or lovers, in particular women lovers. Confessions of an English Opium Eater, ‘Kubla Khan,’ ‘Lamia,’ ‘Ligea,’ and ‘Rappaccini’s Daughter’ provide some of the most obvious examples of these two drug-related aspects of Romanticism.

As Romanticism gives way to Victorianism, however, the later nineteenth-century British culture both discards and carries forth earlier attitudes toward intoxication. Temporally sandwiched according to the traditional periodicity of British literature studies between their Romantic predecessors on the one hand and the
Modernists (who also frequently associate intoxication and artistic creativity) on the other, Victorians seldom speak of drugs as a stimulus whether or not they maintained habits. At the same time, many Victorian authors sustain the Romantic association between intoxication and love. Consequently (as with a number of aspects of Romanticism), attitudes toward drinking and drugs both change and remain the same as Victorians largely abandon expressing the notion that chemical escape can provide artistic inspiration but retain a tendency to figure dangerous, intense, possibly illicit passion and its objects, especially women, as poisonous.

Indeed, the common Victorian figure of society as a human body results in a dramatic increase in opportunities for literary references to intoxication in the writing of mid-nineteenth-century British authors. Traditionally viewed as didactic, community-oriented, and earnestly responsible in the face of the effects of rapid social, technological, and political change, Victorian literature often represents society not only as a human body but, more specifically, as an ailing human body. Because of the medicinal functions of alcohol and opium, they often serve as metaphors for proposed remedies for the ailing social body. The realist aesthetic of the period also contributes to the popularity of references to drinking and drug taking. Novelists such as Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Kingsley, all three Brontë sisters, and George Eliot often include such activities in their plots out of an obligation not to prettify the behavior of their characters, whether clergymen, laborers, mothers, or fast young men.

Despite George Eliot’s reputation for earnestness, responsibility, and even ponderousness, a remarkable number of her characters stagger through the novels with their perceptions blurred and reason distorted by unwise consumption of brandy, wine, beer, ale, patent medicines, and opium. In ‘Mr Gilfil’s Love Story,’ the lovable clergyman resorts to daily gin to ease his grief over Caterina. In ‘Janet’s Repentance,’ Janet and Robert Dempster drink themselves oblivious every night. In Silas Marner, Squire Cass and his sons regularly begin drinking first thing in the morning. George