Poison, Myth and Fear:  
The Dark Side of Chloroform in Victorian Britain

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Abstract

Of all the drugs on the Victorian market, chloroform was, perhaps, most distinguished by its Jekyll and Hyde nature. On one hand, it humanised the experience of surgery for patients and surgeons, on the other, it became a highly-effective tool of criminals and abusers. Its association with abductions, murders and rape cases, as well as its well-known propensity to kill without warning those who inhaled it during a surgical operation, meant that chloroform’s darker powers were lodged in the Victorian imagination for the duration of the nineteenth century. This paper looks at the way in which social attitudes to chloroform were influenced by wider concerns regarding poisons like arsenic and strychnine; explores myths of chloroform in popular journals and fiction; and accounts for the public fear of ‘going under’, a concern which persists in contemporary anaesthesia.1

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