

**Thomas De Quincey's
'Confessions' 200 years on:
what relevance to our
understanding of the drug
problem today?**



John Strang

“I do by no means deny that some truths have been delivered to the world in regard to opium:

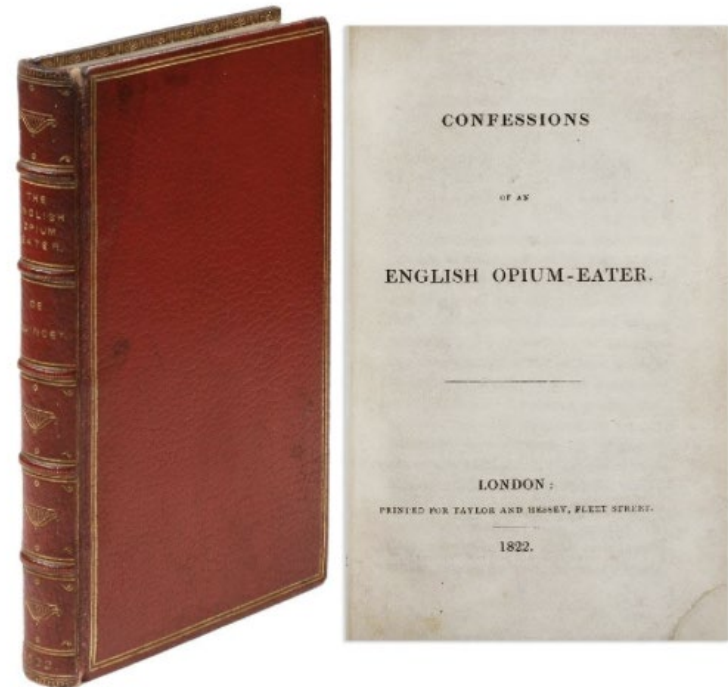
But in these three theorems, I believe we have exhausted the stock of knowledge as yet accumulated by man on the subject of opium.

And therefore, worthy doctors, as there seems to be room for further discoveries, stand aside and allow me to come forward and lecture on this matter”.

Declaration of Interests

This is the greatest book in the world ever written about addiction. However I do not have equipoise ...

... as I am the proud owner of a first edition of de Quincey's 'Confessions'!



Lessons from an English Opium Eater: Thomas De Quincey Reconsidered

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Abstract

Thomas De Quincey published his autobiographical *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* in 1821. The publication both fascinated and outraged its 19th-century readers. Heated debate followed on such topics as:

Opium in the UK

- n.b. opium a commercial product, over-the-counter
- Laudanum;
- British opium trade; East India company; Opium wars
- pre-needle & syringe; pre-Pharmacy Act

The questions explored

- *"How came any reasonable being to subject himself to such a yoke of misery, voluntarily to incur a captivity so servile and knowingly to fetter himself with such a seven-fold chain?"*

Let's explore

- Childhood and developmental years
- Initiation; initial therapeutic exposure
- Transition into hedonistic use
- Arrival of dependence; and tolerance developed
- 'Treatment' and control of use
- Unintended harms - overdose
- Availability; blame; glorification
- Drug use and old age

Thomas de Quincey: personal history (1)

- Born 1785, Moss Side, near Manchester
- Prosperous merchant family
- Two sisters die, father dies, mother re-locates to Bath

Thomas de Quincey: personal history (2)

- Highly praised student at school
- Runs away from school and wanders through Wales and then to London (1799); befriends child prostitute Anne
- Returns to home, to school and then to university (Oxford).

Thomas de Quincey: personal history (3)

- Comes to London, second time, 1803
- 1804, takes opium – the story begins
- Within the aspiring literary circle

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Thomas de Quincey: initiation

- It was the "extremity of pain from rheumatic toothache ...not any search after pleasure ...that first drove me into the use of opium"
- “most painful affliction of the stomach” and “depression of spirits”
- De Q took opium as a universal panacea and tranquillizer – the ‘universal anodyne’ – including through his final exams at Oxford (which he failed)

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Transition into Hedonistic Use (1)

- *“The druggist, unconscious minister of celestial pleasures. . . has ever since existed in my mind as the beatific vision of an immortal druggist, sent down to earth on a pleasure mission to myself”.*
- *“baptismal initiation into the use of that mighty drug”.*

Transition into Hedonistic Use (2)

“Upon what slender accidents hang oftentimes solemn lifelong results”.

“Here was the secret of happiness, about which philosophers had disputed for so many ages, at once discovered; happiness might now be bought for a penny, and carried in the waistcoat pocket; portable ecstasies might be had corked up in a pint bottle; and peace of mind could be sent down in gallons by the mail coach”.

“here was a panacaea for all human woes”.

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The Arrival of Dependence

"Nobody will laugh long who deals much with opium".

"The chain of abject slavery is first detected when it has inextricably wound itself around the constitutional system".

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The death of young Kate Wordsworth (3) in 1812

"In frenzied grief, threw himself, night after night, upon the child's grave".

Tolerance

- Intermittent use up until 1812
- Escalating dose – increase to 320 grains of opium (approx 32 grains of morphine) (approx 5000mg morphine) by 1816
- *"Making allowance for constitutional differences, I should say that in less than 120 days no habit of opium eating could be formed strong enough to call for any extraordinary self-conquest in renouncing it, and even suddenly renouncing it".*

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'Treatment' (1)

Dose reductions: *“Down to a certain point, it can be reduced with ease and even pleasure, but after that point, further reduction causes intense suffering”*.

Comparison with alcohol: *“Upon the warrant of my enlightened and deliberate judgment, as being of two evils by very much the least”*.

Relief from the taedium vitae: *“Its deep tranquilising powers to the mitigation of evils, bequeathed by my London hardships ...”*.

'Treatment' - Control of Use

Low-dose maintenance: *"At present and for some years, I have been habitually content with 5 or 6 grains daily, instead of 320 to 400 grains".*

Dose manipulation: *"effectively protected from all material bad consequences, by the necessity of interposing long intervals between the several acts of indulgence, in order to renew the pleasurable sensations".*

'Treatment' – forced restraint

Heated arguments with Coleridge about relationship with opium: Coleridge attempts self-imposed restraint.

“He went so far as to hire men-porters, hackney-coachmen and others-to oppose by force his entrance into any druggist's shop. But as the authority for stopping him was derived simply from himself, naturally these poor men found themselves in a metaphysical fix ... ”.

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Hazards of Drug Use

- Inadvertent opium overdose, slipping into unconsciousness, takes emetic in time.

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Impact of Availability

Consider overlap with our understandings from alcohol and tobacco:

“On a Saturday afternoon, the counters of the druggists were strewed with pills of one, two and three grains, in preparation for the known demand of the evening. The immediate occasion of this practice was the lowness of the wages which at that time would not allow them to indulge in ales or spirits”.

“[With] wages rising, it may be thought that this practice would cease: but, as I do not readily believe that any man having once tasted the divine luxuries of opium will afterwards descend to the gross and mortal enjoyments of alcohol, I take it for granted: that those eat now, who never ate before; and those who always ate, now eat the more”.

relief from “taedium vitae”. The “universal anodyne”.

Responsibility and Blame

- Bitter arguments with Coleridge
- Initial therapeutic exposure (both)
- De Quincey acknowledges pleasure
- Accused of stimulating the interest of others

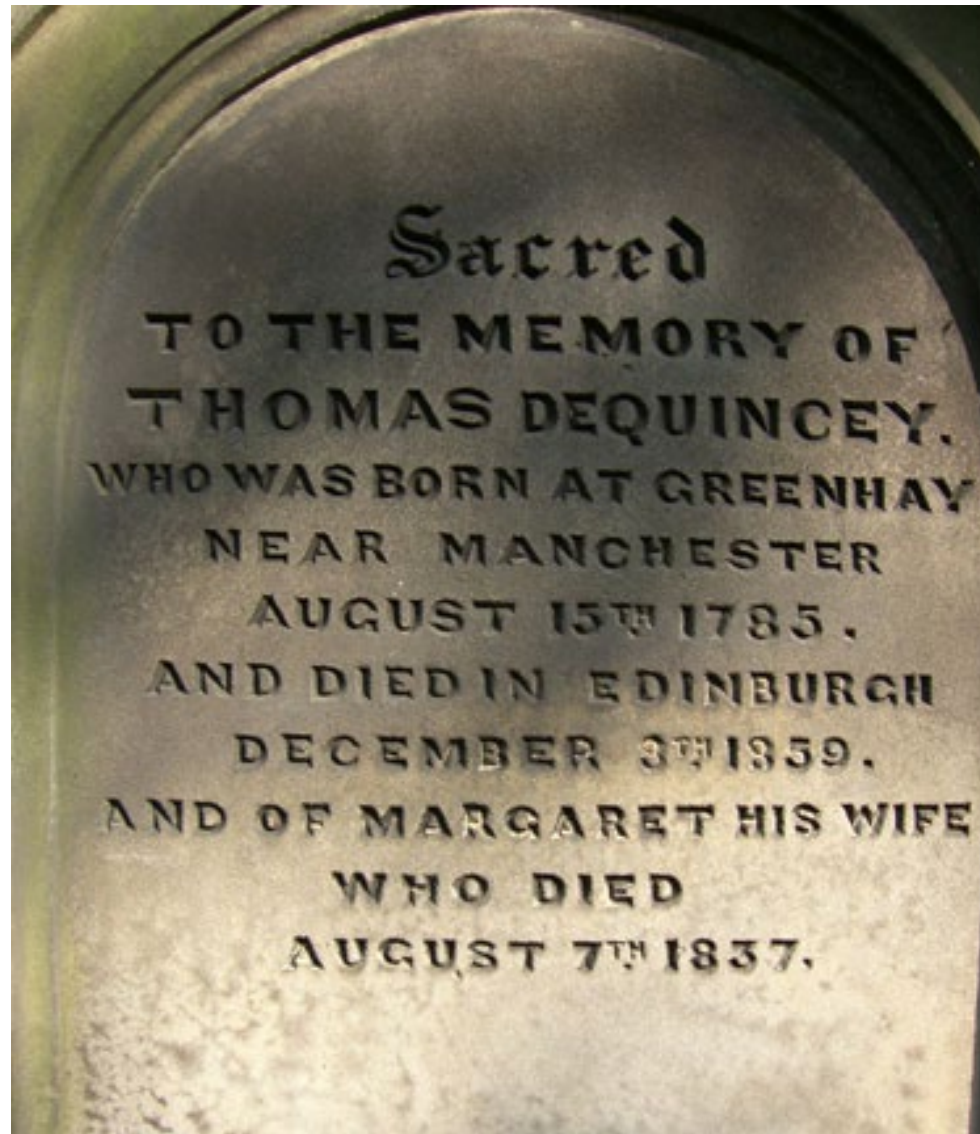
Advertising and the Glorification of Drug Use

- Enduring argument between Coleridge and de Quincey
- Generated de Quincey followers who sought the dreams – true authors and others
- Many deaths of young men from opium overdose blamed on de Quincey.

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Died 1859, Edinburgh, aged 74,
buried St Cuthbert's Church, Lothian Rd



Sacred
TO THE MEMORY OF
THOMAS DEQUINCEY.
WHO WAS BORN AT GREENHAY
NEAR MANCHESTER
AUGUST 15TH 1785.
AND DIED IN EDINBURGH
DECEMBER 3RD 1859.
AND OF MARGARET HIS WIFE
WHO DIED
AUGUST 7TH 1837.

Thank you