

High Times: Depictions of the Opium Den in Charles Dickens' *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* and Blanchard Jerrold and Gustave Doré's *London: A Pilgrimage*

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*Abstract: The opium den inhabits a unique place in the Victorian imagination. Equal parts abode of pleasure and signifier of moral decay, the opium dens that lay at the edges of London society captured the attention of writers, artists and poets not least of all because of the vast array of contradictions it offered. In a lot of ways opium itself embodied the many faces of Victorian society. It was evidence of the cultural importation which came with the ever-expanding British empire, it challenged the values of an increasingly rigid society, opened the door to spiritual and self-exploration and also exposed the gritty underbelly of a society facing unprecedented growth and change. Many well-known literary works of the time incorporated these imaginations of the opium den experience into their narrative, none quite as detailed or extensively as in Charles Dickens' unfinished novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Thus, to better understand the place and influence of the much-mythologized opium den I will be looking at this novel in combination with Gustave Doré's woodcut illustration, *Opium Smoking-The Lascar's Room in Edwin Drood*, from his and Blanchard Jerrold's seminal account of life in Victorian London, *London: A Pilgrimage*.*

Dickens opens *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* with a finely detailed scene set in an opium den in the small cathedral town of Cloisterham. The reader finds John Jasper, Dickens' anti-hero in 'the meanest and closest of small rooms' lying across a 'large unseemly bed' surrounded by 'a Chinaman, a Lascar and a haggard woman',¹ setting the stage for a dark study on the human psyche. This scene was greatly informed by Dickens' own forays into a London opium den which he conveyed in his 1866 article, *Lazarus, Lotus-Eating*. Dickens was intrigued by opium, making two such trips to the

¹ Charles Dickens, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 7.

opium den for his research as well as confessing to taking some himself for an illness and finding it pleasant.² For Dickens, the opium den became the ideal backdrop for a mystery in which opium smoking helps to reveal the inner workings of a quietly violent man and who, like the dreamscapes one has on opium, cannot easily distinguish between fantasy and reality. Dickens continues by describing the opium den in *Edwin Drood* as ‘squalid’ and ‘miserable’, its occupiers rendered sleepy and befuddled by the smoke.³ This imagery is mirrored in Gustave Doré’s woodcut, *Opium Smoking-The Lascar’s Room in Edwin Drood* found in his and journalist Blanchard Jerrold’s collaborative work, *London: A Pilgrimage* (Figure 1). Like Dickens, Doré and Jerrold spent a great deal of time exploring London’s labyrinthine streets for their book, frequenting some of its more disreputable sectors to better familiarise themselves with the city and its people. Although the image was never intended to be an illustration for Dickens’ fictionalised take, it is said to have been based on the same celebrated den he frequented in his research and therefore presents an interesting point of comparison. In the image, one sees a small, confined room overtaken by a large, low-set bed on which a woman with Asiatic features sits dreamily holding onto an opium pipe. Her surroundings are grim and gloomy, creating a marked contrast to what seems like her own serene manner. Rags hang from rafters and the room is bathed in shadows with the only illumination coming from the centrally placed lantern necessary for the heating of opium, drawing focus to the ethereal figure. Although the woman smiles dreamily, both Dickens’ and Doré’s imagery emphasise the darkness and deprivation of such a place, creating the feeling of a potentially threatening environment.

² Robert Tracy, ‘Opium Is the True Hero of The Tale’: De Quincey, Dickens, and *the Mystery of Edwin Drood*, *Dickens Studies Annual: Essays on Victorian Fiction*, 40 (2009), 199-213 (p. 204).

³ Dickens, p. 8.

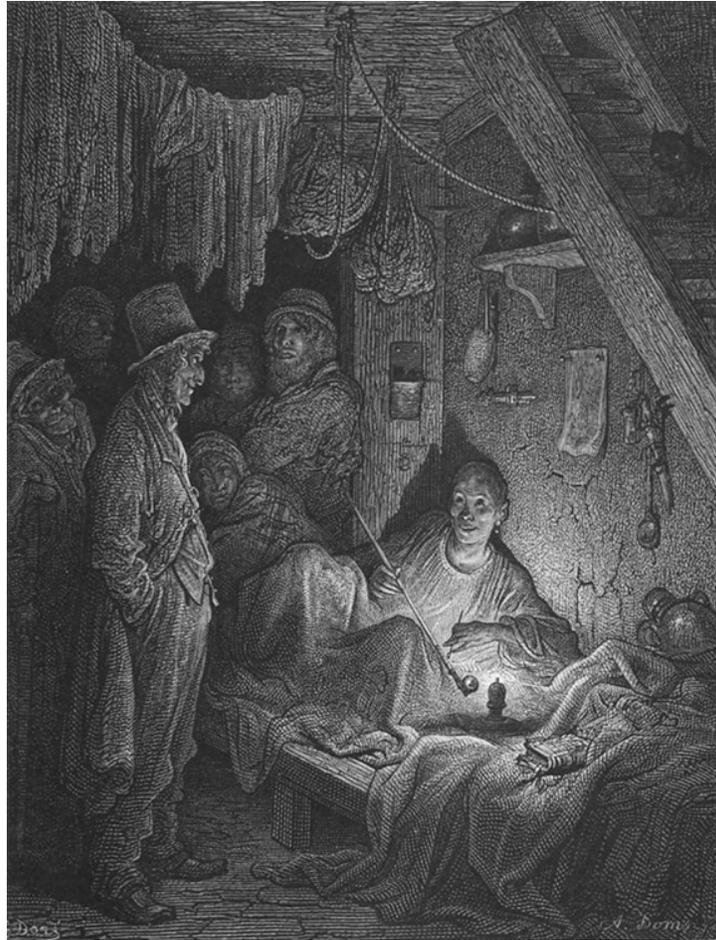


Figure 1. Gustave Doré, *Opium Smoking-The Lascar's Room in Edwin Drood*, London: A Pilgrimage 1872.

In nineteenth-century Britain, opium was as ubiquitous as a bottle of paracetamol in the modern medicine cabinet. Given to infants in the form of elixirs and syrups to soothe or freely distributed in pubs to hurry along the sobering up process, opium was widely prescribed and used for a vast array of maladies and perceived maladies.⁴ Opium preparations could be purchased at the 'barbers, confectioners, ironmongers, stationers, tobacconists, wine merchants' and transcended both social and economic class.⁵ Very little was thought of the addictive properties of the drug although by the mid-nineteenth-century worrying trends in overconsumption of opium as well as deaths attributed

⁴ Rowdy Yates, 'A Brief History of British Drug Policy: 1850-1950', *Therapeutic Communities: The International Journal of Therapeutic Communities*, 41 (2020), 57-66 (p. 58).

⁵ Mike Jay, *Emperors of Dreams: Drugs in the Nineteenth Century*, rev. edn. (Cambridgeshire: Dedalus, 2011), p. 61.

to opium overdose signalled a growing public health crisis.⁶ Various groups such as the Quaker-led Society for the Suppression of Opium were instrumental in lobbying for better control of the drug and as a consequence more attention was shed on the dangers of opium addiction and opium poisoning. Nevertheless, usage of opium grew until the end of the nineteenth-century when legislation such as the Pharmacy Act of 1868 finally put a curb on the uncontrolled sale of the drug.⁷ Inasmuch as opium was commonplace during this time, to eat opium or to smoke it for pleasure was still highly contentious. Opium preparations and dilutions were considered medicinal and although large sections of society became hooked on opium through these mediums, the smoking of opium was not a household activity. Pure opium needed to be prepared and administered in a very specific way to ensure the greatest effect on the faculties with none of the problematic side effects. Unless an individual had the means for a personal assistant to properly prepare and administer the opium for consumption, these activities could only be found in a dedicated establishment, the opium den.

Early depictions of opium consumption found in the works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Thomas De Quincey's groundbreaking *Confessions of an Opium Eater* offered, along with some light caution against the addictive properties of opium, the image of sensory delights that one could only experience on the drug. 'The celestial drug' as De Quincey termed it found fast footing in nineteenth-century imagination although by mid-century, some of these romanticised representations of the drug had faded. The Opium Wars, the increasing foreign-born population and the growing concern over the welfare of the 'poorer classes' and their morality began to shape the way in which opium usage was seen. This change, although informed by a newfound understanding of the adverse effects of opium, was tinged by prevailing class consciousness and racial prejudice. This viewpoint would be mirrored in its literary representation. Both intoxicating and forbidden, opium offered a great deal in terms of literary symbolism and a diverse set of authors and poets made use of it in their works, including the great chronicler of London life, Charles Dickens. But it

⁶ Virginia Berridge, 'Victorian Opium Eating: Responses to Opiate Use in Nineteenth-Century England', *Victorian Studies*, 21 (1978), 437-461 (p. 445).

⁷ Yates, p. 59.

wasn't just opium usage that made for intrigue, it was opium consumed in the opium den that held irresistible mystique. Whilst other institutions that catered to vice such as brothels and gambling houses were highly frequented and well-chronicled, opium dens were less accessible and therefore suffused with greater danger and mystery.

Dickens and Doré's works would not be the only ones to reinforce this idea that the opium den was a deeply foreboding place, an image which writers and artists of varying degrees of firsthand knowledge exploited in their own works. The contradictory nature of opium smoking in a den—both fit for gentlemanly curiosity but also depraved—was too rich to be left alone and these themes were ample fodder for the sensationalist journalism and literature of the time. These depictions remained mostly unchallenged since they existed outside of most of Victorian society's sight and knowledge and had the effect of strengthening already erroneous ideas about opium dens and its clientele. One contemporary of Dickens accused him and others of having very little insight into the reality of the opium den which 'the popular novelist, it is true, is aware of its value as furnishing local colour for its shilling shockers'.⁸ Journalists and illustrators assumed to be more objective in their respective crafts were not exempt from the sensationalism that crept into their works and were just as responsible for creating idealised versions of the truth. Although Blanchard Jerrold and Gustave Doré's collaboration was meant to shed an unwaveringly honest light on London's lower classes along the lines of Engels' *The Conditions of the Working Class in London*, it nevertheless dipped into the poetic. Early reception of the book was incredibly mixed, some condemning it for its extreme and unkind portrayal of London whilst others took to marketing it as a nice gift-book to give to one's kin.⁹ The reviews mirrored the dissonance within the book between Jerrold's writing and Doré's illustrations. Whereas Jerrold's observations downplayed the misery of the classes he observed, valorising their plight, Doré's starkly rendered illustrations were uncomfortable viewing for many.

⁸ James Platt, 'Chinese London and its Opium Dens', *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 279 (1895), 272-282 (p. 272).

⁹ Tanushree Ghosh, 'Gifting Pain: The Pleasures of Liberal Guilt in London, A Pilgrimage and Street Life in London', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 41 (2013), 91-123 (p. 91).

The repetitive details, the teeming masses of undefined and expressionless crowds rendered in dramatic chiaroscuro highlighted the degradation of the working class. Victorian art and literature, especially from the mid-nineteenth-century onward, concerned itself immensely with highly topical issues, making thinly veiled commentary on the author's own opinions on matters. Therefore, for authors, the use of opium, especially opium addiction was just as much a vehicle for a character's loss or anguish as it was a statement about the drug's everyday impact on British society.¹⁰ This was exceedingly true for Dickens and for Doré, who used their work to bring attention to social issues and exemplified the idea that upon closer examination, beneath the melodrama of many of these works lay a great deal of realism and humanity.

We see this reflected in Dickens' characterisation of Jasper whose addiction is graphically presented to the reader and for whom opium allows him to fantasise of a life without his nephew Edwin standing in the way of his pursuit of Rosa, Edwin's fiancée. Eventually these hallucinations lead Jasper to tap into a barely contained violence.¹¹ Dickens writes of Jasper:

As he watches the spasmodic shoots and darts that break out of her face and limbs, like fitful lightening out of the dark sky, some contagion in them sizes upon him... Then he comes back, pounces on the Chinaman, and, seizing him with both hands by the throat turns him violently on the bed... with an attentive frown, he turns to the Lascar and fairly drags him forth upon the floor. As he falls, the Lascar starts into a half-risen attitude, glares with his eyes, lashes about him fiercely with his arms and draws a phantom knife.¹²

¹⁰ Louise Foxcroft, *The Making of Addiction: The 'Use and Abuse' of Opium in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (United Kingdom: Ashgate, 2007), p. 17.

¹¹ Joachim Stanley, 'Opium and Edwin Drood: Fantasy, Reality and what the Doctors Ordered' *Dickens Quarterly*, 21 (2004), 12-27 (p. 22).

¹² Dickens, p. 10.

Jasper's addiction, hallucination and subsequent deplorable acts reflect Dickens' own curious but cautious take on the drug.¹³ This sense of opium feeding into a latent violence reflected the common attitude that had taken hold at the time, especially in relation to the working class. Although opium was widely ingested regardless of class, it was the thought of it 'stimulating' the lower classes towards violence that mounted a social campaign to control opium sale and use. Rapid growth and industrialisation had created communities rife with violence, crime and poverty which fed into myths about working-class habits, especially in relation to opium. There was truth that opium use amongst the working-class during this period was at an all-time high. Much of this was due to poor living conditions and inability to afford a doctor, therefore a reliance on self-medicating. But there was little actual truth in the idea that opium was a drug that stimulated or energised one towards violence or that opium dens were breeding grounds for this kind of aberrant behaviour.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the connection was made between the two and accepted as fact. Dickens' Jasper, although partaking in the same act, communicates derision for the likes of the lower-class in his reflections of the haggard woman he wakes up beside in his drug-induced stupor, asking,

"What visions can she have?" ... 'Visions of many butchers' shops, and public-houses, and much credit? Of an increase of hideous customers and this horrible bedstead set upright again, and, this horrible courts swept clean? What can she rise to, under any quantity of opium, higher than that!--Eh?'"¹⁵

Dickens makes use of the stereotype but also upsets expectations. It is Jasper, from a higher class who is the perpetrator of violent acts that are only portended to him under the influence of opium whereas the Princess Puffer, as she is referred to, the impoverished and degraded opium addict who demonstrates the greatest degree of conscience, attempting to caution Jasper and others of his dangerous unrealized intentions. Although this violence is less realised in Doré's illustration,

¹³ Stanley, p. 23.

¹⁴ Berridge, p. 446.

¹⁵ Dickens, p. 8.

it shares with Dickens' work an amplification of the underlying misery of the poor which Doré illustrates with great expressiveness. Except for the centrally placed female, the other beings in the opium den are less individuals than a shadowy, undefined mound. This fits with the pattern of Doré's illustrations within the book which seems to paint London in perpetual twilight, the hopelessness and inward conflict of the working class made more obvious by the crepuscular light.¹⁶ One of the prevailing ideas about opium dens was the sense of exoticism that came with it. Much of this was rooted in the Orientalist visions that arrived with British expansion in the East. Artists and writers were key purveyors of fantastical ideas of hedonistic delights that awaited those who embraced the Orient. Opium opened the door to the Orient. In both Coleridge and De Quincey's works, the Orient seeps into their opium-tinged dreams bringing about visions of 'stately pleasure domes' and 'cities and temples beyond the art of Phidias and Praxiteles—beyond the splendour of Babylon and Hekatómpylos...'.¹⁷ In Dickens, the Orient also manifests itself in Jasper's opium dreams:

What is the spike that intervenes, and who has set it up? Maybe, it is set up by the Sultan's orders for the impaling of a horde of Turkish robbers, one by one. It is so, for the cymbals clash, and the Sultan goes by his palace in a long procession. Ten thousand scimitars flash in the sunlight, and thrice ten-thousand dancing girls screw flowers. Then, follow white elephants caparisoned in countless gorgeous colors, and infinite number and attendants.¹⁸

But the Orient imagined was very different from the Orient realised. Although the writings made the opium den out to be places of arresting dreamscapes, in reality, deep prejudice shaped the way Londoners regarded them. Even De Quincey, who took great pleasure from ingesting opium was decidedly prejudiced and superior in tone towards Asiatic people noting that 'I question whether any Turk, of all that have entered the paradise of opium-eaters can have had half the pleasure I had. But

¹⁶Simon Cooke, *Gustave Doré, The Graphic, and Social Realism of the Seventies and Eighties, The Victorian Web* <<https://victorianweb.org/art/illustration/socialrealism/5.html>> [accessed 14 February 2022].

¹⁷ Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 74.

¹⁸ Dickens, p. 7.

indeed, I honour the Barbarians too much by supposing them capable of any pleasures approaching to the intellectual ones of an Englishman'.¹⁹ To read about opium dens in the works of the late Victorian writers, one might come away with the impression that opium dens were omnipresent in London. The reality was far removed from their literary and artistic representations. During the latter half of the nineteenth-century, in London at any one time, there were no more than half a dozen such establishments and none of them explicitly dedicated to smoking opium.²⁰ They tended to be communal rooms that existed as part of the Chinese boarding houses which were set up near the docks and catered to the foreign sailors and Chinese immigrants who had brought the smoking habit with them. It was the anti-opium movement of the late nineteenth-century led by advocacy groups like the Society for the Suppression of Opium which helped to promote the myth of opium dens, equating the small minority population of Chinese with moral corruption.²¹ Although baseless, writers and artists of the time were quick to accept these ideas and proliferate them.²² In Dickens' *Lazarus, Lotus-Eating*, he finds a veritable cast of characters in the den including 'a young Lascar', 'Chinamen', 'a Bengalee', 'a mulatto' and various others, almost all non-white foreigners.²³ The one white English woman present is called Mother Abdullah as she has so completely adapted to the ways of foreigners and is most probably the model for the Princess Puffer. In *Edwin Drood*, these non-white characters are represented not as mere props but fulfill the role of grotesques. Dickens paints them almost as subhuman:

He [Jasper] looks with repugnance at his three companions. He notices that the woman has opium-smoked herself into a strange likeness of the Chinaman. His form of cheek, eye, and temple, and his colour, are repeated in her. Said Chinaman

¹⁹ De Quincey, p. 68.

²⁰ Victoria Berridge, *Opium and the People: Opiate Use in Nineteenth-Century England*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 202.

²¹ Berridge, *Victorian Opium Eating*, p. 460.

²² Foxcraft, p. 64.

²³ Charles Dickens, 'Lazarus, Lotus-Eating', *All the Year Round*, 15 (1866), 421-425 (p. 422).

convulsively wrestles with one of his many Gods, or Devils, perhaps and snarls horribly. The Lascar laughs and dribbles at the mouth.²⁴

Even the white woman takes on the features of ‘the Chinaman’ when she smokes. The Orient is present in Jasper’s visions and by the physical presence of the ‘Lascar’ and ‘Chinaman’. Against the very traditional setting of Cloisterham, amid the rising Cathedral tower, this foreignness is jarring. Dickens uses it to amplify Jasper’s own disassociated feelings from both himself and his community, solidifying his role as an outsider and like the hideously imagined opium smokers, a potential deviant. This portrayal meant to instill the novel with a sense of mystery and terror simply reiterated the already antagonistic ideas surrounding the way foreign-born Londoners were regarded with little additional nuance. Doré’s illustration is again not as pointed but the perspective is important in reflecting the way Asians and the opium den were seen on the whole, as a spectacle. In Doré’s illustration, directly in front of the female sitting on the bed is a bystander who subjects her to his intrusive gaze. He is a spectator, and his presence reflects the deeply uncomfortable fetishisation of both the Orient and the working-class that was present in Victorian representations. This is seen by the frequency of reportage and research trips taken by white journalists and writers who visited the dens in an attempt to uncover and reveal supposedly shocking truths. Although unlike Dickens, Doré does not seem to capitalise on the inferiorisation of foreigners, aiming for a more objective near-photographic representation, the words provided by Jerrold that go along with the illustration on the other hand, do. He describes the woman as “difficult to see the humanity in her face, as the enormous grey dry lips lapped about the rough wood pipe and drew in the poison” which seem incongruous with Doré’s image which one could argue leans on the flattering.²⁵ Regardless, these writings inadvertently hinted at “insidious racial hierarchies...that posit ‘non-white’ races as sub-human...and the alarming possibility that smoking opium can lead to social, racial, and cultural decline’.²⁶ Although this take would be successful in eventually stamping out opium usage, it left an

²⁴ Dickens, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, p. 8.

²⁵ Gustave Doré and Blanchard Jerrold, *London: A Pilgrimage* (Norwalk, CT.: Easton Press, 2011) p. 174.

²⁶ Josephine McDonagh and Briony Wickes, ‘The Nineteenth-Century Opium Complex: From Thomas Love Pea-

indelible mark on the way both the working class as well as foreign-born Londoners were regarded in the late 19th-century, creating high levels of distrust.

The opium den held a prevalent place in nineteenth-century imaginings. It was emblematic of the changing times and its relative novelty allowed authors and artists a certain degree of flexibility in depiction. Dickens and Doré demonstrated the different perspectives artists and writers took when representing the opium den, both having frequented the same one and coming away with very different impressions. These impressions either fueled inaccurate ideas of these dwelling or attempted to shed a less objective light on these places. Nevertheless, each indicated the highly varied way in which opium dens were regarded and were very much representative of the way in which Victorians approached the wellspring of new ideas and concepts during the time period.

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