

OPIUM USE IN VICTORIAN ENGLAND: THE WORKS OF GASKELL, ELIOT,
AND DICKENS

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INTRODUCTION

England's opium trade with China in the nineteenth century, often conjures up images of a powerful nation, for financial gain and heedless of the damage caused, nefariously thrusting addictive drugs on an unwitting Chinese people and unwilling Chinese government. But this image hides the English side of the story, i.e. England's own problem with opium. The English imported thousands of pounds for domestic use each year in the 19th century, and until the late 1860s its sale was completely unrestricted. It was used as a veritable cure-all for various diseases, as well as a relief for any kind of pain, much like aspirin today (Lomax 167). The English did not consider use of the drug to be problematic early in the century, but as the extent of usage began to be understood and associated with negative aspects of the working class, which Victorian consciousness often figured as indolent, dishonest, and even criminal, opium use began to be seen as a source of concern.

The detrimental effects of opium use and the societal concern over these effects emerged as a social problem, but for most of the century that problem was put in terms of lower class usage (Berridge and Edwards xxviii). Users from middle class tradesmen to the gentility were largely exempted from these negative associations, and their use of opium remained unproblematic and generally unremarked on until the late 1870s. However, opiate use of the nineteenth century is often associated with these upper classes, largely due to the well known addiction of famous members of those classes such as Thomas De Quincey and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Their representation of the drug as

somehow enlightening and a source of poetic inspiration would have long lasting influence in the ways the drug was thought of in regard to upper class use. The Romanticized image of opium did not, however, extend to the users of the lower classes.

Opium was not an enormously expensive commodity, and “at 1d [,] an ounce of laudanum was cheap enough—about the price of a pint of beer,” in consequence, many, even of the working class, were regular users (Wohl 34). Self-medicating, the cheapest, and often the only means available to many of the poor when sickness struck, was a socially acceptable practice. Opium was one of only a very few effective treatment methods available and was in some ways a less dangerous alternative to the medical establishment which, for the first half of the century at least, still held to belief in the biological theory of the humours, and so was still at work blistering and letting the blood of its patients.

People used opium “for a variety of complex reasons” (Berridge, “Working” 366). Opium was taken for an array of medical needs: a prophylactic against the ague, a paregoric to help counter the effects of too much drink, and a cure-all of all bodily aches and pains. They also took it for “social” ailments like depression of spirits (Berridge and Edwards 32). However, even in these more “social” reasons for taking the drug, people were not recreational drug users in the sense that we think of it today, or as Dr. F.E. Anstie said in 1864, the drug was taken by “persons who would never think of narcotising themselves, any more than they would of getting drunk, but who simply desire a relief from the pain of fatigue endured by an ill-fed, ill-housed body, and a harassed mind” (qtd. in Berridge, “Working” 372). These reasons were considered socially acceptable

ones for self-medicating with opium, but the extent of their use began to cause concern in the 1830s.

Working class usage received a great deal of press, particularly when it was seen as contributing to a social evil. Newspapers reported on the practice of administering opiates to “quieten” infants, which often resulted in severely malnourished babies and occasionally in their deaths. These incidents made their way into the news in court cases for murder, when it was suspected that opium was a deliberate agent of infanticide. That opium was often used to commit suicide was also commonly reported on, as was its potential to be used to perpetrate crime. Concern was also manifest for the use of opium as a “stimulant” among the lower classes and was often associated with gin drinking. Although it seems unlikely that this stimulative use of the drug was very extensive, and the number of actual infanticides or other crimes enacted with the use of opium were in fact quite rare, it is this image of the drug which in part gave rise to the class prejudiced view that opium use in the lower classes was a result of their unruly and degraded nature, which, rather than being treated, needed to be punished.

As data on opium use in England was gathered, and the extent of domestic usage began to be understood, it became wrapped up with other social reform movements. This same data contributed “to the developing idea that regular opiate use, even if moderate and sustained at the same level for considerable periods, was wrong” (Berridge, “Working” 372). The notion of addiction as moral failing was closely linked with the view that these users needed to be “cured” of their habit. These two notions of how to treat addicts—cure them or punish them—were a result of the different ways in which the opium addict was viewed.

As opium addiction began to be understood, it was perceived in two different ways, or more precisely, two classes of addicts emerged: sufferers under addiction, generally considered sick and in need of pity; and social deviants, those who have something innately criminal in them of which their addiction was merely symptomatic. These two classes of addicts mirrored the social classes to which the addicts belonged and one “searches the journals of the time in vain for much by way of concern about widespread use of the drug in ‘respectable society’, yet popular opium was another matter” (Berridge and Edwards 97). As opium use began to be seen as a social ill, it became increasingly associated with lower class criminality.

This negative view of lower class opium users is in part due to prevailing class prejudices, and in part due to the negative associations with Chinese usage, a constant topic, dating from the Opium Wars with China, the morality of which became increasingly contested. The Chinese were frequently portrayed as demonic in their addiction and character. As opium use became increasingly associated with this form of Orientalization in the 1860s and 70s, the older Romantic image of the drug began to fade and was replaced by a vision of opium that was frightening in its otherness, which was part of its perceived danger. Opium represented the Orient coming back to English shores and the threat of infection with the oriental’s disease (Milligan, *Pleasures* 85). Users across the classes came to be viewed as criminal and deviant, images that later gave way to the modern image of the dope fiend. As Parliament began to consider the effects of opium and the morality of the opium trade later in the century, the image of English opium usage was transformed, and restrictions on opium usage were not long in the making.

The fascination with opium's effects and a concern for its abuse were not limited to Parliament; writers of fiction and non-fiction alike commented on opium usage. This study will explore the portrayal of opium in the literature of the period, focusing on selected works by Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot and Charles Dickens. In each instance, the works of these authors interacted significantly with contemporary views on opium, and worked at times to either question or support contemporary ideology, while using opium as a way of commenting on their own thematic projects.

This study will examine the thirty year period of the late eighteen forties through the early eighteen seventies, which encompasses the publications of Gaskell's *Mary Barton* and Dickens's *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, as well as Eliot's *Silas Marner* and *Middlemarch*. The period is a significant one, and is marked by the beginning of major concern over opium usage as well as the first restriction of the drug to pharmaceutical dispense. It is during this period of changing views on opium, that these authors published work in which characters use the drug, and in the instance of *Mary Barton* and *Edwin Drood* that usage is important to the project of the text as a whole. These authors' portraits of opium usage contributed to the changing perception of opium. All three authors were phenomenally popular and their negative portraits of the drug helped form public perception of the drug that brought it from being thought of as a common, everyday drug, to be seen as a problem among the poor, and then at every social level.

Like most historical changes in ideology and perspective, this was a gradual shift allowing for various opinions and ways of thinking about the drug throughout the century. This becomes obvious in a reading of the *Royal Commission on Opium's* reports (1895). Anti-opium advocates figured the drug as one with the power to completely

dominate the will and destroy the conscience of the user. Conversely, many others would agree with the Surgeon-General William Moore, who as late as 1892 “stated flatly that ‘opium is not the destructive agent which anti-opiumists have declared it to be’” (Parssinen 90). The view that the drug was far less harmful than drink, for example, was still common in the 1890s. Although opium was still relatively freely available for purchase by the end of the century, and would fall under the category of what we term an “over-the-counter” drug, the seeds that imagined it to be a problem drug had already been sown, and set up the drug for further restriction and eventual illegality early in the twentieth century.

The study will first give a brief account of the Romantic view of opium in the writings of De Quincey and Coleridge, who at times offered us a valorized image of opium and the opium user. It is this image of the opium user which influenced perception of upper-class opium use for the first half of the century. Indeed, De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* in particular would continue to be read and responded to throughout the century. This chapter will provide an important backdrop against which to compare the Victorian novels under analysis.

Each of the remaining sections of this study will take for its examination the work of one author as it responds to the Romantic and class-related perceptions of the opium. Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton*, George Eliot’s *Silas Marner* and *Middlemarch*, and Dickens’s *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Each contains a portrait of an opium user in which the author responds to contemporary ideas about the drug, and puts forth his/her own notion of the drug’s effects, its use, and its morality.

Much has been written by such notable scholars as Virginia Berridge, Griffith Edwards and Terry Parssinen to quantify and catalogue the use of opium in the 1800s, and to note the cultural shift in thought that opium underwent in that century. Likewise, other scholars like David Ellison, Kathleen McCormack and Krista Lysack have attempted to understand opium's function in literary representations. However, very little has been written on the relationship between the cultural shift in how opium was perceived in the nineteenth century and the drug's portrayal in literature. This study seeks begin to fill this gap by examining the works of prominent writers whose portraits of opium both responded to and influenced the changing views of opium at the time. By depicting opium users in their work, Gaskell, Eliot, and Dickens involved themselves in the critical discussion surrounding opium use at the time. Each author responded to contemporary thinking about the drug and contributed to the evolving notion of what it meant to be a user of opium.

OPIUM AND THE ROMANTICS

The Romantic use and image of opium is very different from what would develop in the second half of the Victorian 19th century. The Romantics influenced thinking for the first decades of the century on topics as various as the imagination, nature, human psychology, and even opium usage. Of those known to have used the drug are such recognizable names as Percy B. Shelley, William Wilberforce, Lord Byron, and Sir Walter Scott (Berridge and Edwards 56-58). Undoubtedly however, the most famous users of the first half of century were Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Thomas De Quincey. It is their use of opium and the image they created of that usage in their writing that came to define the Romantic notion of opium. Opium, in their hands, became a tool enabling access to transcendent experience. It allowed for the heightening of expression and sensitivity and became a connecting point to the mysterious, beautiful, and exotic world of the Orient. The writings of De Quincey and Coleridge turn the user of opium from a sick person in need of a cure to a bold experimenter, visionary, and valiant adventurer. In short, the opium user became the Romantic hero.

Coleridge and De Quincey each cite medical reasons for their initial use of opium. Coleridge was sick with rheumatic fever at school in 1791 when he was first prescribed laudanum for the pain (Lowes 378). De Quincey first took laudanum to relieve “gastric pain and also to ward off the incipient tuberculosis to which he was thought to be succumbing” (Berridge and Edwards 51). Over time both became heavily habituated to laudanum, taking as much as the enormous dosage of 480 grains of opium a day

(Berridge and Edwards 51). While using the drug, both composed works that related to their experiences with opium. Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" recounts an opium dream and, as the preface claims, was composed entirely in that dream (Coleridge 511). De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* recounts his history with the drug and his perceptions of that use. Both, at one point, claim that opium inspired them with higher literary and perceptual powers. However atypical the experience of Coleridge and De Quincey, in both the amounts and the effects, it was these works that would define the Romantic vision of opium and influence Victorian reaction to the drug.

It was important to both Coleridge and De Quincey that their addiction be seen as coming about out of purely medicinal use of the drug. Later, however, they would each implicate the other in having used the drug for the "pleasurable sensations which resulted" from taking opium (Berridge and Edward 52). In a letter published in his first biography, *Life of Coleridge*, published in 1838, Coleridge claimed that De Quincey's addiction "sprang from Voluptuousness in the use of opium," something De Quincey strongly denied (Davies). De Quincey responded in *Coleridge and Opium Eating*, by claiming that Coleridge used opium "solely as a source of luxurious sensations" (Berridge and Edwards 52). As early as the 1830s, then, taking the drug for purposes of intoxication was already held to be a somehow immoral use of it. Despite this fact, Coleridge and De Quincey each at points gloried in precisely that, the pleasurable sensations opium produced. Coleridge wrote "Laudanum gave me repose, not sleep; but you, I believe, know how divine that repose is, what a spot of enchantment, a green spot of fountain and flowers and trees in the very heart of a waste of sands!" (Griggs 394).

De Quincey mirrored the sentiment when he wrote that opium “hast the keys of Paradise” (*Collected* 396). But of what did this Paradise consist?

Both the fragment “Kubla Khan” and *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* demonstrate the Romantic view of opium as a substance capable of heightening the user’s perception. The vision of “Kubla Khan” is one of huge expanses given almost from an aerial point of view. The rapidity of the poem’s composition, as well as the expanse of its scenes, noted as “measureless to man,” reflect this quality of opium, which at once makes comprehensible the incomprehensible and allows the user to realize the impossibility of the feat (Coleridge 513, 27). The line, “measureless to man,” is twice repeated in the poem, and emphasizes the stark difference between what the narrator/poet is able to see and quantify and what man is normally able to behold and know. Opium gives the narrator a unique ability to behold the poem’s pleasure dome, caverns and course of the river in completeness, and appreciate it in all its grandness, despite the fact that it is explicitly stated to be beyond the scope of human visibility and comprehension. This power is accompanied by an alienation from humanity as indicated by the instruction “Beware! Beware!/ His flashing eyes, his floating hair!/ Weave a circle round him thrice,/ and close your eyes with holy dread,/ for he on honey-dew hath fed,/ and drunk the milk of Paradise” (Coleridge 514, 49-54). There is an acknowledgment that opium, “the milk of paradise,” is the cause of this awful power, as well as that which separates the user from common human experience.

Confessions similarly recounts opium images as being endless and unfathomable in nature. De Quincey wrote that the “splendours of my dreams were indeed chiefly architectural” and that they had the “power of endless growth and self-reproduction...and

I beheld such pomp of cities and palaces as was never yet beheld by the waking eye unless in the clouds” (*Collected* 439). De Quincey linked opium explicitly to the ability to perceive things “so vast as the bodily eye is not fitted to receive” (*Collected* 435). He also claimed that opium increased the “creative state of the eye” and could allow one to remember “the minutest incidents of childhood, or forgotten scenes of later years” (De Quincey, *Collected* 434-35). In each of these cases opium is revealed as the giver of unusual gifts, heightening the senses, experiences, and memories of the user.

This experience is also a uniquely literary or artistic one. The prologue to “Kubla Khan” is as famous as the poem itself. Coleridge explains that when he composed the poem he was “in ill health” and, having taken laudanum, fell into a sleep upon reading a passage about “Khan Kubla” in “Purchas’s Pilgrimage” (511). This “profound sleep” continued for “about three hours,” during which time he claims that he “could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines” (Coleridge 511). Coleridge then retreats from the idea of “composition” because “all the images rose up before him as things...without any sensation or consciousness of effort” (511). He claims that he was able to write down as much of the poem as we have, when he was suddenly interrupted by a man from Porlock who “detained him above an hour” by which time the vision had faded to “some vague and dim recollections” which left him unable to finish it (Coleridge 512). “Kubla Khan” thus becomes a gift not originating with the author, but coming from some otherworldly, perhaps divine, source. This story “gave the first expression to one of the fundamental tropes of literary drug use, that of dictation: the sense that words or thoughts are being dictated to the writer by some unknown agency, without conscious effort on his or her part” (Boon 35). Being “gifted,” the poem puts opium in the position

of a literary muse. The fact that he is reportedly not able to re-conjure the dream afterward only reinforces this notion. Opium then becomes the means to literary genius—the user becomes the conduit of diviner thoughts than he himself could devise, or even hold on to without the aid of opium.

For De Quincey opium holds distinctly intellectual, literary, and artistic qualities as well. It is a catalyst to poetic inspiration. In *Confessions*, De Quincey recounts going to the opera under the influence of opium for the purpose of experiencing the opera intellectually. He writes: “Now, opium, by greatly increasing the activity of the mind, generally increases, of necessity, that particular mode of its activity by which we are able to construct out of the raw material of organic sound an elaborate intellectual pleasure” (*Collected* 390-91). The effect of this intellectual pleasure he further describes, saying:

...it is sufficient to say that a chorus, &c., of elaborate harmony displayed before me, as in a piece of arras work, the whole of my past life—not as if recalled by an act of memory, but as if present and incarnated in the music; no longer painful to dwell upon; but the detail of its incidents removed or blended in some hazy abstraction, and its passions exalted, spiritualized, and sublimed. (De Quincey, *Collected* 391)

This description closely reflects that of the Romantic notion of a hero, one who is inspired by and sensitive to the world around him, always searching the depths of his own soul, and passionate in everything. With opium, De Quincey saw himself and his past history in this heroic light. Coleridge, in 1797, a time he is known to have been using laudanum, recounts in a similar vein that he “ached to behold and know something *great*—something *one & indivisible*, and it is only in the faith of this that rocks and waterfalls, mountains or cavern give me the sense of sublimity or majesty!” (Griggs 209). Opium is thus portrayed as enabling the feeling intellectual to aspire to heroic heights,

not only in what is currently being experienced, but with the potential of turning one's own history, even its painful moments, into something meaningful and even sublime.

De Quincey also links opium directly to literature when he apostrophizes to opium, using a poetical trope by then standard. He not only uses the apostrophe, but mirrors "Sir Walter Raleigh's apostrophe to Death in the *History of the World*—'O eloquent, just, and mighty Death!'" when he writes the same, replacing only "opium" for "death" (Davies, De Quincey, *Collected* 396). More important than the ominous meaning of the relationship implied by this adaptation, as a segue into the "Pains of Opium," is the fact that opium is positioned in De Quincey's writing as something worthy of the attempt to characterize, praise, or even dread in poetry. This alone imparts to opium a sense of grandeur on the Romantic conception.

Opium was portrayed as opening up a new world, not just one of fantastic sensory experience, but one specifically Oriental in nature. In evoking the notion of the Orient, I assume Edward Said's view that the Orient does not in fact represent an extant reality separate from the conception of it, but that it is a construction of the West, representing its own antithesis (67). The Romantic remaking of the Orient was imbued with fascination and exoticism; it is a world both beautiful and terrific. De Quincey claimed that opium "out of the fantastic imagery of the brain" creates "cities and temples beyond the art of Phidias and Praxiteles—beyond the splendor of Babylon and Hekatómpylos..." (*Collected* 395). At another point he saw a granite bust of Ramses II "as the personification of opium reverie" (Hayter 97). Opium, on this view, is explicitly linked to the Orient and the greatness and terribleness associated with its assumed tyrannical

history. Interestingly, however, De Quincey's use of opium also renders his mind capable of outdoing the Orient's arts and beauties with his own fantasies.

Opium's relationship to the Orient is made clear by constantly comparing its use to some aspect of the Orient. Coleridge relates opium to the landscape of the Orient in a letter to his brother when he writes: opium was like "a green spot of fountain and flowers and trees in the very heart of a waste of sands!" (Griggs 237) "Kubla Khan" too is replete with Oriental imagery. The relation of opium to the Orient recasts the drug's associations, from being an everyday, "over-the-counter" drug, and gave it an exotic appeal. The relation of opium to the Orient was more than just exotic appeal, however; it also took on Oriental philosophy.

Coleridge writes that sometimes opium inspired him to "behold and know something great", but that

...at other times I adopt the Brahman Creed, and say--It is better to sit than to stand, it is better to lie than to sit, it is better to sleep than to wake--but Death is the best of all!--I should much wish, like the Indian Vishna, to float along an infinite ocean cradled in the flower of the Lotus, and wake once in a million years for a few minutes--just to know that I was going to sleep a million years more. (Griggs 208-209)

The image of the lotus and "Vishna" evoke Hindu aesthetic and philosophy. Coleridge under the influence of opium finds himself relating to these philosophies in alternative ways to his usual way of thinking. Marcus Boon argues that Coleridge's attitude evidenced here constitutes a rejection of the progress (and pain associated with that progress) of the West in favor of the stagnation, or sleep, of the East, which is perceived as somehow more spiritual, almost mystic, in a move toward "transcendence" (34-35). Opium is thus a means for achieving an escape from Western progress, a way of

transcending beyond that into a present that ignores the times and becomes deadened or asleep to the pain of them.

The Orient had two sides of meaning for the Romantics. The Orient had the power to inspire attraction, transcendence, and give wisdom, but it also was the embodiment of cruelty and tyranny. It is this other side of the Orient which had the power to evoke terror. For De Quincey, the Orient experienced through his opium dreams was largely recorded in the section of *Confessions* entitled “Pains of Opium.” To him, the East was “a region which he contemplated with profound horror and loathing” (Davies). De Quincey describes his loathing for what he conceived to be the Oriental way of life, as resulting from a “barrier of utter abhorrence placed between myself and them, by counter-sympathies deeper than I can analyse” (*Collected* 442). It is only through knowing this, he says, that we, as readers of his experiences with opium, can come to understand the “unimaginable horror which these dreams of oriental imagery and mythological tortures impressed upon me” (De Quincey, *Collected* 442). In a “final collage of terrifying opium experiences” (Davies), a medley recollection of these opium nightmares, De Quincey writes:

I ran into pagodas, and was fixed for centuries at the summit, or in secret rooms; I was the idol; I was the priest; I was worshipped; I was sacrificed. I fled from the wrath of Brama through all the forests of Asia: Vishnu hated me: Seeva lay in wait for me. I came suddenly upon Isis and Osiris: I had done a deed, they said, which the ibis and the crocodile trembled at. (*Collected* 442)

But even this description of the Orient has the appeal of the exotic. In the face of these “horrors” De Quincey admits that he was both “loathing and fascinated” (*Collected* 443). Further, these horrors impart heroism to De Quincey’s experience. Despite De Quincey’s

declarations concerning his loathing of the Orient, it is not *his* fear and trembling that we get from this passage. The crocodile figures heavily in De Quincey's Oriental nightmares, but from this passage (in which he supposed to be giving us a summation of his bad experiences) it is the crocodile that trembles because of *his* deeds. The deed itself then, the opium-eating, becomes the heroic act and a threat to the Orient. However threatening or frightening the Orient may have been, it is still De Quincey who is shown as dominating it, and triumphing over it. "Kubla Khan," again, contains the passage: "Weave a circle round him thrice,/ and close your eyes with holy dread,/ for he on honey-dew hath fed,/ and drunk the milk of Paradise" (Coleridge 514, 51-54). Here too, the poet figures as a being of awesome, though terrible, power. This is possible through a juxtaposition of himself with the powerful (and Oriental) Kubla Khan. Whatever terror the Orient may hold in the visions we gather from these opium users, it is both outweighed by the beauty of the experience, and depicted as conquerable through the very means the terror of it is made possible in the first place: opium.

Conquering and being feared by the Orient in these dreams has larger ramifications given De Quincey's and Coleridge's biographies. Each spent a lifetime in attempting to conquer pain, and it is in this context that opium also figures as a tool of heroic conquest. Boon argues:

Interest in pain relief was a consequence of the Romantic interest in exploring subjectivity and, in the midst of the turmoil of the Industrial Revolution, a developing concern with the idea of public health....Where before pain was to be endured as a sign of Divine Providence, for a writer like Shelley in *Prometheus Unbound*, pain was to be overthrown as one of the shackles of tyranny. (35)

This notion of pain as tyrant relates to conception of Oriental tyranny, but also, and more importantly, figures the opium user as hero, and as triumphant over pain. In fact, one of the frequent criticisms of *Confessions* was that De Quincey gave too much weight to the pleasures of opium and did not dwell enough on the pains; this, in spite of the fact that the “Pains” outnumber (in pages) the “Pleasures” by a great deal. De Quincey himself “was to consider ‘very just’ the objection that there is in the *Confessions* ‘an overbalance on the side of the pleasures of opium; and that the very horrors themselves...do not pass the limits of pleasure’” (Davies). This is because even in the “Pains of Opium,” De Quincey does not appear to be a sufferer so much as a hero.

It is in this way that the Orient becomes, to the Romantic opium user, both the giver of the beautiful and exotic scenes, and the enabler of heroic achievement by having built into it a conquerable enemy to vanquish. It is this impression of opium that the Romantics have left their readers. M.H. Abrams’s *The Milk of Paradise*, a standard work on opium in literature, exemplifies how many have felt about Coleridge’s poetry and other literary works, wrought out under the influence of opium:

The great gift of opium to these men was access to a new world as different from this as Mars may be; and one which ordinary mortals, hindered by terrestrial conceptions, can never, from mere description, quite comprehend. It is a world of twisted, exquisite experience, sensuous and intellectual...where color is a symphony, and one can hear the walk of an insect on the ground, the bruising of a flower. Above all, in this enchanted land man is freed at last from those petty bonds upon which Kant insists: space and time....[These works are] oases in our dusty lives. There is nothing frightening in their rich strangeness. Rather, they are to be the more dearly cherished because of the fearful toll exacted for beauty stolen from another world. (4, 49)

Abrams’s statement mirrors how the opium use of Coleridge and De Quincey was perceived by many of their contemporaries. It is this same opinion (that these poets

suffered heroically to bring us beauty) which would influence thought on opium use for the first half of the nineteenth century (it is, however, in many ways still with us, as evidenced by Abrams's 1971 writing). Upper class opinion on opium use began to shift in the second half of the century, for all classes of opium use, but until that point this, the Romantic, image of opium use prevailed when concerning the upper classes. This version of usage, attendant with heroism, did not filter down to popular use, which by the 1840s had become of some public concern.

De Quincey himself provided for the dichotomy of use which allowed for the upper class usage to be figured one way and lower class usage to be figured quite differently. De Quincey hedged the Romantic image of the drug to include only the upper classes when, at the beginning of *Confessions*, before recounting his own personal history in the first edition, he wrote that "If a man 'whose talk is of oxen' should become an opium-eater, the probability is that (if he is not too dull to dream at all) he will dream about oxen; whereas, in the case before him, the reader will find that the opium-eater boasteth himself to be a philosopher" ("Preliminary" 11). By hedging out those whose "talk is of oxen" from having the grand experiences he then goes on to describe, he is specifically closing out members of the lower classes (those who, after all, deal with oxen).

De Quincey, in further delineating the characteristics of the user he views as prerequisite to having his experience with opium, limits these users to the educated. He writes that one must need "not merely the possession of a superb intellect in its *analytic* functions" but also "*moral* faculties as shall give him an inner eye and power of intuition for the vision and the mysteries of our human nature: *that* constitution of faculties, in

short, which...our English poets have possessed in the highest degree..." (De Quincey, "Preliminary" 12). Because the education necessary for a "superb intellect" was prevalent only among the upper classes, and the lower classes were often considered to be morally bankrupt, De Quincey's "qualifications" really only fit the upper classes. It is for this reason that Romantic view of opium did not justify or even necessarily relate to the concerns that were manifest for popular usage. The Romantic attitude toward opium was pervasive, and can be attested to by the astounding influence of *Confessions* in particular.

When De Quincey first published *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, it was received with enormous praise at the outset (Parssinen 6). Not only was it praised when first published, but it continued to sell through numerous editions throughout the century (Berridge and Edward 55). Additionally, De Quincey was considered *the* expert on opium for much of the century, even in the medical field, which had yet to acquire much scientific knowledge on the subject (Milligan, "Morphine" 544). Even as public opinion on opium began to shift, the figure of De Quincey became more, not less important. Because De Quincey was held as an authority for so long, it became increasingly important, for a medical institution trying to assert its own authority, that De Quincey's views be contested and disproved (Milligan, "Morphine" 547). The popularity and influence of *Confessions* in spite of, or perhaps due to, this new opposition can be seen in the fact that it had more printings, not less, toward the end of the century (Berridge and Edwards 55).

Not only was De Quincey popular as a literary figure and taken as an authority on opium even among the medical community, he also inspired many people to try their first

dose of opium (Hayter 105). Although De Quincey claimed that you needed already to be a philosopher in order to have philosophical thoughts on opium, this did not deter some from thinking that taking opium could make them somehow poetic, philosophic, or artistic. In fact, “most nineteenth-writers on opium were convinced that” opium did stimulate artistic creation (Hayter 43). Alethea Hayter recounts the story of one boy who, “sent off to college by his mother with a bottle of [opium] in his trunk [,] was quite positive on this point”:

If a man has a poetic gift, opium almost irresistibly stirs it into utterance. If his vocation be to write, it matter not how profound, how difficult, how knotty the theme to be handled, opium imparts a before unknown power of dealing with such a theme; and after completing his task a man reads his own composition with utter amazement at its depth, its grasp, its beauty and force of expression, and wonders whence came the thoughts that stand on the page before him. (Hayter 43-44)

The image of opium that De Quincey and Coleridge gave the world, the Romantic view of opium, convinced people that opium was an inspirer of men, and a maker of heroes. This image served to valorize opium, but more particularly, the user of opium. This is precisely the image of opium that each of the realist writers under discussion, Gaskell, Eliot and Dickens, confronted foremost in attempting to reformulate and interpret the meaning of opium use for themselves.

OPIUM IN *MARY BARTON*

Elizabeth Gaskell began *Mary Barton* in 1848. The story is often told, that following the death of her son, her husband urged her to write a novel. Given these circumstances, it is perhaps an odd choice that she should have written this particularly story of a family, the Bartons, who struggle, and betimes fail, to maintain themselves physically, mentally and morally in an industrialized environment. Gaskell chose to write about their attempts to fight sickness, unsanitary living conditions, unemployment, starvation, attempts to take advantage of their poor condition, and even death. In writing this story, Gaskell was writing about something she had experienced during her charitable work among the poor of Manchester (Uglow 89-90). She was full of concern for their lot and what she saw as misunderstanding and lack of sympathy between the poor and the masters, where “masters” does not only signify the actual employers of these workers, but the wealthier classes in general. This is indicated by John Barton’s attitude: he “never could abide the gentlefolk,” who go “to bed without having done a good turn to any one of God’s creatures save [themselves]” (Gaskell 10). This is only one example of the “vehemence” of Barton’s dislike for the masters which becomes increasingly manifest in the text of *Mary Barton*, an attitude which Gaskell argues is a result of misunderstanding between masters and workers (Gaskell 10).

For Gaskell it was this misunderstanding and misinformation which resulted in the lack of sympathy and even harsh feelings between these two classes. *Mary Barton* thus is an attempt to reveal to its middle class (master) readership the true lives of the

poor in every aspect, their love, marriage, work, family, childbearing, and death. Much scholarship has focused on Gaskell's portrait of the often horrifying living conditions of the poor. While it is true that "the sanitary conditions *Mary Barton* (1848) describes are undeniably deplorable" the novel also reveals other appalling "effects of industrial poverty, including prostitution, drug addiction, starvation, and murder" (Freeland 799). Among these effects is the poorer classes' use of opium. In her portrayal of an opium addicted character, John Barton, Gaskell challenges both the Romantic depiction of opium and the view which derides lower class usage as indicative of a predisposition toward filth and deviant behavior. In challenging contemporary views, Gaskell also posits a different attitude toward lower class usage, insisting that we must recognize why they use opium, and arguing that these reasons would give rise to sympathy instead of blame.

The Problem of Working Class Usage

As already mentioned, at the time of Gaskell's writing *Mary Barton* opium was "as readily available as aspirin today, and just as cheap. For one penny a man could purchase a pint of beer and, for the same sum, a quarter of an ounce of laudanum, containing about ten grains of opium" when the "medicinal dose of opium, for an adult, varied from half a grain to two grains" (Lomax 167). In the 1830s and 40s the middle class began to be increasingly aware of working class use of the drug, as newspaper after newspaper recounted incidents of opium poisoning, accidental overdose, and suicide among the lower class; the perception of a dramatic rise in the use of some areas was reported with some alarm (Berridge, "Fenland" 279).

Concern about this usage usually stemmed from the cases of “baby doping” which resulted in a number of accidental (and occasionally purposeful) infant deaths every year. The working class practice of giving their children opium to “quiten” them and failing to give them a correct dosage, or making a habit of doping infants so that they “all lay about the floor . . . like dead ‘uns, and there's no bother with ‘em,” was seen as one more indication of the poor’s ineptitude and lowness (qtd. in Berridge, “Fenland” 280). These cases of overdosing or habitual dosing were, however, usually attributed to ignorance, and not malice.

An article published in the *Northern Star, and Leeds General Advertiser* in 1843, is a representative example of how the deaths of these infants were put to the parents’ ignorance, rather than the use of opiates as an inherent problem. A mother was given opium pills by a physician upon having given birth, “with strict directions to the woman to keep them from the children” (“Death” 3). Nevertheless, the woman “finding the opiate agreeable, and the child being cross” dissolved one of the pills and gave it to the infant. This resulted in the infant’s falling asleep, “from which it never woke again” (“Death” 3). The infant doping of this article is somewhat unusual, because it was a doctor that prescribed the drug to the mother. More common was the use of children’s opiates or cordials that were put into sweetened mixtures of laudanum. What is typical of this woman’s case, however, is the way in which her part is perceived. She is portrayed as a clearly grieved woman, who, as of the reporting, “lies very ill,” and the jury has “given a verdict leaving the question open” (“Death” 3). The woman is further described as “of rather a weak intellect” and is thus not to be faulted for this incident. These incidents were seen by those of the middle-upper class as rising out of the (inherent)

ignorance of the working class regarding all things—even the seemingly instinctive care of infants.

Of course, not all cases of opium poisoning in infants went off so well for the mother. In some cases the mother was actually accused of “more than just an unnatural dereliction of maternal duty” but of being “positively criminal—the mother, by willful neglect, had become a murderess, and stood accused of infanticide!” (Wohl 26). Cases of actual infanticide with the use of opium did occur (most frequently in the case of twins or illegitimacy), but “accounts of it were probably exaggerated by the tendency of the more comfortable Victorians to believe the very worst of the masses” (Wohl 34).

Adult opium use was not considered a hazard for the most part, however. In adults, it was observed that “except for the tendency to constipation and yellowish pallor, adult opium-eaters did not suffer any harmful effects after years of chronic use” (Parssinen 51). Opium use was often considered as something akin to, or a substitute for, drink: “to some contemporaries, opium was a ‘dram’ for the working class, a stimulant which threatened to replace drink, a denial of individual effort, or a means of racial degeneration” (Berridge, “Working” 363). Rather than being considered physically harmful, it became increasingly associated with harm to character or indicative of moral corruption. Opium was even considered to have potentially criminal implications, for example, cases of prostitutes using opium to drug unsuspecting sailors and rob them of their wages (Berridge, “Victorian” 445). The working class had long been considered ignorant and dirty, but with opium use, they became seen as participating in willful degeneration.

This was not an image that was cast on all opium users at the time. The negative perception of opium use was class bound, the Romantic notion of the opium user still alive and well, reflected in respectable society. The middle-upper class perspective on working class opium use was swept up and guided by this class prejudiced view that was willing not only to characterize the problem of opium as one due to the perceived lesser intelligence of users, but as a result of their own inherently bad natures. This view insisted on seeing callously the otherwise compassionate situations of the lower class users.

Berridge relates one such portrait of usage in the story of a woman who, having a broken hip set improperly, ended up bedridden for six years and in the course of that time, became an opium addict. This would seem to be a cause for pity, if any there would be, but the description of her recounted in the *Morning Chronicle* (1850) does not provide any:

The exhilarating effects of her last dose had passed off, and had given place to that wretched lowness of spirit in which the life of an opium taker alternates. As the repulsive-looking hag sat upright in her filthy bed by the chimney corner, her uncouth and cadaverous features streaked by the various courses her tears had taken in her intervals of despondency. With her tangled grey hair hanging over her shoulders, her shrunken neck, and withered arms which were exposed to view as she rolled up another pill of the filthy-looking drug, and raised it tremblingly to her discoloured lips, presented a spectacle more loathsome than imagination could conceive. (qtd. in Berridge, "Fenland" 279)

Not only is this a less than sympathetic account in which the reporter sharply abhors the supposed filthiness of the drug as well as the woman taking the drug, it ignores any of the woman's history that precipitated the opium use to begin with. Her mood is entirely attributed to her want of opium and not in the least to the fact that she has been bedridden

for six years; her tears are marks of her “intervals of despondency” which correlate in the text to the “lowness of spirit” which, we are told, are purely the alternations that occur between doses for an opium user, unrelated to the sorrow her history would justify. Accounts such as this one portrayed the poor users of opium as desperate addicts, emotionally controlled by opium, and living in squalor because they care for nothing else.

As early as the late 1830s “opiate use became a significant, if minor, part of the general public health cause...[when] government investigations and enquiries...revealed a situation which appeared worrying in its implications. Import statistics, and in particular the amount of opium entered for home consumption, were rising” (Berridge, “Victorian” 442). One of the main concerns about working class usage was the possibility that it might affect other classes:

There existed an explicit fear of “contamination” by working-class opium eating and a belief that it could have a disruptive impact on middle-class society. A writer in *Chambers' Journal* commented in 1845: “The evil is not only serious in its actual effects, but in prospect; all the inquiries made on the subject elicited proof of its alarming increase, with a tendency upwards to the middle classes.” (“Victorian” 447-448)

The majority of addicts of the middle to upper classes probably “pursued their habit quietly,” but the instances of some users of this class presumably justified the concern that middle-class users of opium could become like lower class users (Berridge, “Fenland” 280). *The Morning Chronicle* offers one illustrative account: “I can't live without it, we have pawned everything and sold everything that we can lay our hands on to get it. There's such a craving for it that we can't get over, and it's hopeless to do without it” (qtd. in Berridge, “Fenland” 280). The rhetoric of this confession reflects

exactly what was being applied to lower class users, and because of accounts like this one, this potential cross-over was, in the opium problem, one source of concern.

Another cause of concern over lower class opium use was expressed in the view that opium “undermin[es] the individual effort and hard work seen as necessary for the industrial work force” (Berridge, “Victorian” 447). In other words, while some thought that the working class use of the drug was acceptable due to the conditions of their lives, others felt that to “make the people exert themselves to improve their conditions[:] pain, destitution and wretchedness, must be their stimulants” (qtd. in Berridge, “Victorian” 447-448). This callously put the blame of working class poverty and attendant living conditions entirely at the door of the workers themselves. Their use of “stimulants” like opium and gin became another proof that the working classes were simply unwilling to go through the pain and hardship necessary to improve their condition.

It is against these images of the working class that Gaskell set her novel *Mary Barton*, addressing the working class plight in a new light, while accounting for the nature of working class issues in ways prejudiced assumptions had failed to. Gaskell’s story does not hide from the ugly in depicting the working class, but seeks to enable her middle-class readership to understand it, by detailing what had long been unaccounted for in middle-class renditions of working class life, namely, the history of the individual and the real underlying causes of destitution, bad habits, and even immoral action.

John Barton’s Opium Use in *Mary Barton*

In *Mary Barton*, John Barton is a working class family man who, because of the volatility of industrial Manchester’s mill work, has had his share of hard times. It is in one of these hard times that John Barton becomes addicted to opium. Gaskell portrays

this addiction as having the potential to disrupt his natural way of thinking and even influencing his temper. It may have even contributed to his willingness to assassinate Henry Carson. But Gaskell's portrait of opium ultimately rejects both the class biased view and the Romantic notion of the drug. On Gaskell's view, opium is indeed a problem, but a problem that cannot be class bound. The drug itself is shown to have a potentially damaging effect and the problems of the poor operate as a catalyst to these effects. It is these problems, and not the nature of the poor, which make recourse to such habits a sadly frequent occurrence. In *Mary Barton*, opium becomes emblematic of what is wrong with the lack of sympathy between the working classes and those who are more fortunate. Rather than blaming the working class for their own filthy habits, opium use becomes a window into the motives of the poor and the desperate measures which they take to survive in an increasingly brutal environment.

When John Barton becomes addicted to opium there is a very conspicuous shift in his temper. The first instance we hear of him taking opium it is clear his use is already a habit, accompanied by a change in temper toward his daughter. Mary remembers "what a kind and loving parent he had been, till these days of trial" but sees him now as "so often angry, so lately cruel", but she prefers the anger to the silence in which he sits by the fireplace "smoking, or chewing opium" (Gaskell 114-115). Immediately preceding Mary's reflections, the narrator recounts Barton's only incident of physical violence toward her: "once in his passion he had even beaten her" (114). The proximity of this incident to the first mention of Barton's opium use, links his behavior to this new shift in habit. This beating and Barton's harsh word are "such as he had never given her

formerly” and in the same scene Barton simply admits, “I am not the man I was” (Gaskell 114).

Barton’s opium use in the novel is often accompanied by a corresponding moment of violence in his activity or attitude. Another example of this occurs the morning of a Trade’s Union meeting when Barton “hesitated between the purchase of meal or opium, and had chosen the latter, for its use had become a necessity with him...to relieve him from the terrible depression its absence occasioned” and that “a large lump seemed only to bring him into a natural state, or what had been his natural state formerly” (Gaskell 120). After the meeting that night, Barton encounters Esther, his deceased wife’s sister, whom he blames for her death. Although clearly this would be enough to provoke any man, the detail about his opium dose in the morning may also account for some of his irrationality and anger with Esther (even though years had passed). The effects of his dose that morning would have been wearing off, something he admits will make him not himself.

Barton’s use of opium marks a shift in the novel: Barton and his actions become continually referred to as “fierce,” and Mary has come to expect from him a “wayward violence of temper” (Gaskell 154, 340). His increasingly “soured and morose” temper is attributed to Barton’s “diseased thoughts” which the narrator explains as the result of living “on when one can no longer hope” (Gaskell 164). Much of the “morbid power” of these thoughts, the narrator relates, “might be ascribed to the use of opium” (Gaskell 164).

Given the extent to which opium and violence in Barton are linked, it seems entirely likely that Gaskell’s view of opium is that it has the power to spur one to

violence and therefore deviance. But this is not the entire story. I would disagree with John Hawley's argument that opium was included as part of Barton's characterization "to explain a supposedly good man's unacceptable violence," because Gaskell, positioned as a middle class observer, needed to represent the upper classes as morally superior to the lower classes (26). Hawley finds opium use an otherwise pointless addition to Barton's character and argues that any sympathy Gaskell could evoke for the lower classes "first demanded authorial reaffirmation of the moral superiority of her readers" (27). This, however, could only be accurate if Gaskell's readers had faced similar temptation to opium and gin and had yet withstood it, but this is not Gaskell's argument. Indeed, upon first reading the novel there is the impression that Barton's violent behavior is connected to his opium use, but this remains only part of the story. Even without opium Barton has ample cause for acting moody, perhaps even justly violent. Opium is not the cause, but the catalyst to this violence and ill temper.

The middle class readership is directed to sympathize, not out of recognition that the lower classes, due to their nature, couldn't have done any better, but because they have never been where these characters are, because they have never faced anything so difficult. This response seems built into the novel when the masters claim to likewise go through tough times when work is slack. George Wilson, Barton's neighbor and friend, argues this attempting to placate Barton by relating to him that Mr. Carson had said, "I shall ha' to retrench, and be very careful in my expenditure during these bad times, I assure ye" and Wilson concludes "so yo see th' masters suffer too" (Gaskell 64). Barton's response demarcates the stark difference in their situation when he asks "Han they ever seen a child o' their'n die for want o' food?" (Gaskell 64). This point is made

even more poignant when it is recalled that Barton's own child suffered such a fate.

Further, the narrator explicitly calls on readers to sympathize with Barton in this way:

But before you blame too harshly this use, or rather abuse [of opium], try a hopeless life, with daily cravings of the body for food. Try, not alone being without hope yourself, but seeing all around you reduced to the same despair, arising from the same circumstances; all around you telling...by their looks and feeble actions, that they are suffering and sinking under the pressure of want. Would you not be glad to forget life, and its burdens? And opium gives forgetfulness for a time. (Gaskell 164)

Sympathy in *Mary Barton* is evoked not by the peculiar character of the people who suffer, but by *what* they must suffer.

On another level it seems clear that John Barton is a character with whom we are meant to sympathize in spite of (or perhaps because of) his afflictions, even his opium addiction. John's name, and not Mary's, was to have been the original title of the story. There is further indication that Gaskell intended us to see Barton as a heroic, if tragic, character. In a letter, Gaskell wrote:

Round the character of John Barton all the others formed themselves; he was my hero, the person with whom all my sympathies went, with whom I tried to identify myself at the time, because I believed from personal observation that such men were not uncommon, and would well reward such sympathy and love as should throw light down upon their groping search after the causes of suffering, and the reason why suffering is sent, and what they can do to lighten it. (Chapple and Pollard 74)

It is clear that John Barton was to be a key figure in the accomplishing of her aims for the book. However, Hawley argues that Gaskell, through Barton's opium addiction, is undermining her goal of sympathy. It seems more likely, given that Gaskell figures Barton so that she herself has sympathy for him, that Gaskell is showing us something else in his addiction, even though it is true that his addiction makes his violence more comprehensible. Almost in preemptive answer to interpretations like Hawley's, Gaskell

elaborately accounts for both Barton's moral goodness and tender nature at the beginning of the novel.

We are told continually thorough the novel that Barton means well, even in spite of his sometimes gruff manner, which did not begin with opium. Barton is described as "morose, and soured" very early in the novel, the same words used to described his attitude enhanced by opium. His attitude at that point is not attributed to opium, but to his bitterness in the face of complacent masters, who doddle seemingly unaware that their workers, through prolonged unemployment, sit at the edge of starvation. But this sourness is only seeded in Barton by his hardship and, Gaskell is careful to show us, it is not his deepest nature.

While opium and Barton's soured mind may characterize him later in the novel, early on what stands out is his overwhelming compassion and tenderness. This is most readily illustrated in Barton's dealings with the Davenports. Wilson approaches Barton for help, relating that Ben Davenport is "down wi' the fever, and ne'er a stick o' fire nor a cowl potato in the house" (Gaskell 57). At first "Barton tried not to be interested, but he could not help it in spite of his gruffness" (Gaskell 58). Although it becomes clear that Barton hardly knows the man, he is drawn into concern over his situation. Barton drops everything to go and see the sick man and his family, taking with him the only food in the house, his leftover dinner that was intended to be his supper. The Davenports' living conditions are frankly appalling, even to Barton, whose reaction is "growled inarticulate words of no benevolent import to a large class of mankind" (Gaskell 58). Yet to the Davenports he is more than kind. He pawns his coat in order to help them, but more than his monetary support, Barton "gave heart-service and love-works of far more

value” (Gaskell 59). It is this natural tenderness in Barton which Lisa SurrIDGE identifies as the main theme of *Mary Barton*.

For SurrIDGE, the novel is as much about threatened masculinity and the inability of fathers (patriarchs) to take care of their own as it is about class struggle. Gaskell strategically places this episode to Barton’s caring nature, a characteristic that goes fully against class prejudices at the time. SurrIDGE writes that “If there is a crisis in masculinity in this novel” it is in part due to “the extreme poverty of the lower class, a poverty so extreme that it crushes and corrupts the energies of working-class men” (333). Ben Davenport’s situation demonstrates perfectly this crisis. Beat down by unemployment and then by typhus (a fever caused by unsanitary living conditions) his family literally starves before his eyes.

Gaskell’s portrait of Barton here also shows him as a man who cares even when it results in hardship for himself. It also shows that there is a point when there is too much to be borne. Ben Davenport’s experience is an ominous forecast for this. Barton is at this point resilient, but the crushing effects of poverty mixed with the notion that his “betters” could have prevented it, ultimately embitter him—as we have seen the seeds of his indignation evidenced in his growled reaction to the Davenports’ situation. Gaskell foregrounds our reactions to Barton’s addiction to opium here, instructing: “the vices of the poor sometimes astound us *here*; but when the secrets of all hearts shall be made known, their virtues will astound us in far greater degree. Of this I am certain” (Gaskell 57). By placing the reader in the position to know his heart and view his virtues from his service, Gaskell places us to be astounded by Barton’s tenderness and generosity. So that

when Barton allows his vices to consume him, we may see him with sympathy rather than scorn, his situation tragic rather than contemptible.

The vices of the poor can be seen as an attempt to deal with “a poverty so extreme that it crushes and corrupts” (Surridge 333). Because Barton is positioned as a good and even noble figure at the beginning of the novel, his opium addiction becomes a way Gaskell can show us how “the very causes of human existence came to be warped” and “the way in which external circumstances influence the psychological adaptation of the person to extreme deprivation,” rather than attributable to his own evil tendencies (Horton 197-198). This supposition depends on why Barton began his addiction, a crucial element to how we treat his addiction and his behavior while addicted.

Why Barton became an opium user is never explicitly indicated in the novel. Berridge argues that Barton uses opium as a luxury (“Working Class” 366). Berridge wasn’t the only one to assume that Barton’s use was a mark of extravagance. As we have already seen, lower class usage was often attributed to “stimulant” or intoxicant use of the drug. Gaskell herself laments “habits of luxury and waste among *Mary Barton*’s working people...pepper[ing] the text with remarks faulting the Bartons for their ‘extravagance’ and ‘child-like improvidence’” (Ketabgian 129). Still, however critical Gaskell may have been of working class improvidence in other areas, this doesn’t seem to be the root of Barton’s opium addiction, to which Gaskell provides an alternate reason.

The working classes in *Mary Barton* are described using opium to quell hunger pangs. Parents “bought opium to still the hungry little ones, and make them forget their uneasiness in heavy troubled sleep. It was mother’s mercy” (Gaskell 57). Dickens’s opium woman of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* says of opium “it takes away the hunger

as well as wittles..." (2). Opium as a hunger suppressant was a known phenomenon and we know that Barton was constantly hungry at the time his opium addiction is first mentioned. Given his prolonged hunger described as "savage" and "almost to an animal pitch of ravenousness" due to unemployment, it is likely that this is the true origin of his addiction (Gaskell 137, 24). As to the improvidence of its purchase though, the novel also answers to this when it says that the pennies used to buy opium "would have gone little way enough in oatmeal or potatoes" (Gaskell 57). Opium was longer lasting for the price, when the same expended on potatoes and oatmeal could not fill one for long. In *Mary Barton* opium becomes a desperate move to maintain life and provide some relief for what must otherwise be intolerable agony.

The poor's suffering is so acute, Gaskell relates, that the "disparity between the amount of the earnings of the working classes and the price of their food, occasioned...disease and death. Whole families went through a gradual starvation" (82). We see the awful affects this starvation and its ability to turn people into unfeeling machines or animals. Mrs. Davenport's revival from the brink of death into a "weak and passive despair" was accomplished by her machine-like consumption of some gruel Barton had prepared for her: "The mouth opened mechanically to receive more, and gradually she revived" (Gaskell 60) Ben Davenport "snatched at" tea intended for his wife "with animal instinct" and "with a selfishness he had never shown in health" (Gaskell 61). The reduction to a machine-like state is something the industrialization has done to their bodies. It is this that the middle class both causes and abhors. The result of this machine-like treatment of the human body is to unbalance the natural disposition of

the poor. In Davenport's instance it becomes an unnatural selfishness, in Barton's, an unnatural rage.

It is in light of this sort of suffering that the narrator writes, "They only wanted a Dante to record their sufferings" (Gaskell 82). However, Gaskell relates, supposing they had such a poet, "even his words would fall short of the awful truth" (82). Gaskell by putting this in terms of the poetic makes the suffering of De Quincey and Coleridge seem pale by comparison. That the poor's pains are so much more awful than can be encapsulated by poetry, so too, are their dreams fantastic. On an errand to buy medicine for the Davenports early in the novel, Barton has a vision of the street shops. Although not under the influence of opium at the time of this vision, this vision informs Barton's later bitterness and the "diseased thoughts" of his addiction. They also describe the degree to which Gaskell is here rejecting the importance of Romantic dreams by comparison.

Barton has his own version of the Romantic opium dream, and there is a pause in the narration, as Barton gets to a "street with lighted shops" (Gaskell 61). Under the gas lighting of the shops "the display of goods [becomes] so much more vividly shown than by day, and of all shops a druggist's looks the most like the tales of our childhood, from Aladdin's garden of enchanted fruits to the charming Rosamond with her purple jar" (Gaskell 61). The Romantic associations with the Orient in this vision are obvious, the particular allure of the druggist's shop, suggesting the appeal of opium. Although Barton had "no such associations" as those the narrator gives from the *Thousand and One Nights*, he felt the contrast between the well-filled, well-lighted shops and the dim gloomy cellar" from whence he had just come "and it made him moody that such

contrasts should exist” (Gaskell 61). Barton had previously had a similar vision when, again outside a shop window, he dreamed of giving the nourishing food within to his son, lying at home dying for want of it. In both situations, the world inside the shop window is unpurchasable by Barton. Except in the ineffectual medicine he is able to buy for Davenport, and the equally worthless, and in fact damaging, opium Barton uses himself, he is unable to participate in the world of the shop window. It is at once the longing for that world, and the inability to obtain it, that ultimately embitters Barton.

Barton’s visions of shop goods offer us a contrast to the Romantic opium visions—because Barton’s vision is in some ways just as fantastic, just as colorful, just as unfathomable, and just as unreachable, while for others Barton’s dream world is all they know as their reality. In this vision, Barton realizes the extent to which his labor is:

orientalizing...[as commercial goods] resonated with popular period metaphors of the factory as a realm of ‘enslaving’ and mythically Eastern rule...Through their mythic and often anti-modern scenes of industrial concord, these texts promoted a vision of working-class machine culture that was intensely—if not ironically—infused by legends of Eastern grandeur, tyranny, and servility. (Ketabgian 132-133)

The vision is enlightening only insofar as it reveals to him that in this Oriental vision, he is not the sultan, or the traveler to exotic regions, but the slave that makes the goods while being no partaker of them.

Barton’s vision is even more striking, because it is not of exotic substance, pleasure, or beauty, but of the common necessities of life. These "radiant shop windows that begin to transmit images of abundance from the idealized center of the middle-class home. These apparently neutral images (of food and medicine)...are as potentially hazardous as a sketch mocking famished bodies” (Ellison 486). It is precisely this notion

that the images in the shops are linked to the hunger Barton directly experiences, and even more importantly for him, the “clemming” of those around him that bring to him a “feeling of alienation between the different classes of society” (Gaskell 82-83). In Barton’s conception, the rich must seem alien indeed, not to realize that their abundance has cost the poor their flesh and that their shops mock that very payment by announcing to the poor that which they can never obtain. It is these images that increase Barton’s bitterness against the rich.

David Ellison argues that these images of abundance also “foreground aesthetic over nutritional needs...” and, on his view this may be the real cause of Barton’s addiction; “he too succumbs to the eye's recent ascendancy over the stomach when he chooses hallucinogens over food” (486, 498). Opium allows Barton the mental illusion that he is participating in the life represented by the shop windows, as physically it tricks his body into believing it is not hungry, but opium gives Barton neither the life of plenty, nor a full stomach; it is only able to provide a seeming wellness. Yet it is this same ability, to only half-participate in the world of commodity, while it is so apparent that members of the upper classes do not think of their purchasing power or of the abundance of goods they purchase, that so embitters Barton. When his son was at home dying for want of “good nourishment” and “generous living” Barton was standing in front of the vision of plenty, represented by these shop windows, when Mrs. Hunter came out “followed by a shopman loaded with purchases for a party” and without any notice to the clear extravagance this was, or of Barton, hurriedly rushed by on her way no doubt to make further preparations for her merry making (Gaskell 24). This instance reemphasizes the fact that Barton’s world is completely unknown and uncared for by

those able to live the reality the shop window represents. Yet, at this point in the novel, Barton is not completely embittered, and believes that on some level the people must not know how bad it really is for the poor. Barton is willing to believe that the reason his class is denied access to the life of plenty, comes from a lack of knowing their circumstances. Barton goes to London in an attempt to present these circumstances to Parliament and rectify the disparity between the realities of the rich and poor. However, “a radical political movement depends on an unfettered conversation which a government can easily silence” and that is just what happens to John Barton’s group (Schor 29).

Barton’s failed venture to London marks a shift in the novel where Barton despairs of one means of participation in the world of the shop window, and takes on another. Barton’s travel to London directly affects his access to that plenty as he finds himself out of a job and unable to find work because of his delegacy. Yet Barton is unable to give over the dream of plenty, and Barton’s use of opium begins at this point. Opium becomes a desperate means of holding onto this dream. Gaskell again instructs reader reaction to these failures: “Deal gently with them, they have much endured;/ Scoff not at their fond hopes and earnest plans,/ Though they seem to thee wild dreams and fancies” (Gaskell 80). Instead of scoffing at these “fond hopes and earnest plans” the text asks us to sympathize with Barton’s dreams, even though Barton has lost faith that there is a genteel audience that will do so. Opium is unable to provide real prosperity, and so it is significant that Barton’s shift toward bitterness in the novel is accompanied by Barton’s opium addiction.

Opium's Power over Thought and Reason

The extent to which Barton has the power of agency in the novel is a question of much interest to scholars. Opium admittedly has some control over Barton's moods, and he concedes, just midway through the novel, that he needs to take "a large lump" of it in order to reach a normal state of mind (Gaskell 120). Even though opium is not the source of Barton's bitterness, it operates as a catalyst, accelerating and aggravating his angst for those of greater fortune.

Barton's "tragedy is partly that he cannot see clearly, that he falls into desperate action against his own conscience..." (Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell* 78). Opium use becomes the warping mechanism that fuels his anger against the masters, and, as Melissa Schaub suggests, may have been the cause of Barton's going through with the assassination of Henry Carson (16-17). While opium is undoubtedly an evil, the focus of that evil is the fact that it fuels the fires of discontent and doesn't allow for the greater rationality and sympathy Gaskell believes necessary to real social progress. However, opium is not shown to have ultimate control over its users, even those addicted to its use.

Although opium has the power to cloud the imagination in *Mary Barton*, it does not in the end have the power to dominate Barton's will. We can see that Barton has the ability to counter its influence, when it is noted that after beating his daughter, he apologizes and never does it again; this is an act of will and not due to the fact that he is never irritable with her again. Likewise after the assassination of Mr. Carson's son, Barton eventually repents of his animosity and his angst gives way to an understanding and sympathy for Carson's loss in the end. Barton is given "a quality of feeling that enables him to perceive why he eventually acts in such a personally self-destructive and

tragic way” (Horton 199). As Job Legh relates, “[Barton] was a loving man before he grew mad with seeing such as he was slighted” leading Barton to believe that there can be no sympathy between classes (Gaskell 370). Barton’s false conclusion, a product of opium use, likewise deadens his sensitivity to human feeling and prevents him from relating to the masters, or believing that he is (or can be) related to by them. Opium represents this divided self because it warps his previous visions of plenty, in which he figures as the caregiver, to visions of revenge for those responsible for the impossibility of obtaining the former.

Gaskell argues for a growth in sympathy between the masters and the workers as the solution for the social problems that face both classes, but Schaub contends that such a growth in sympathy may be dangerous. On Schaub’s view, the sympathy that workers have for the masters, as Barton manifests at the end, “will paralyze victims by making them morally unable to take action against their own victimization” (15). However, in equating agency with violent revolution Schaub does not account for the material changes that may be brought about by a mutual sympathy between factory workers and owners, but insists that the result of workers having sympathy for owners would be to be left with no other options than to “bear up like men through bad times” which would equate to continued suffering on only the worker’s side (Gaskell 373).

Schaub’s argument would be right if the resulting sympathy only went one way: from workers to masters. Under such circumstances what other options does Barton have than to “bear up like a man under his affliction” or turn to opium use to dull some part of pain of that affliction? But the novel is directed to a middle class readership and it is the suffering of the working class that we read of most in its pages, with the aim of inspiring

sympathy for the plight of the working class, not make them merely docile in their degraded state occasioned by both industrialization and the very lack of sympathy Gaskell saw in the principle of the cash-nexus. That Gaskell's desire is not to instill the sort of sympathy that would merely produce contentedness, is evident in her treatment of opium as a coping mechanism capable of producing short term complacency. Gaskell's portrait of opium proves that this sort of docility is not only undesirable, but damaging. It proves to be no cure for Barton's ills, producing no real peace and no relief, but actually aggravating what it was intended to sooth.

At the beginning of the novel Barton has in his features an "extreme earnestness" which, we are told, is "resolute for good or evil" and that "at the time of which I write" (i.e. the "happy times" at the beginning of the novel), "the good predominated over the bad in the countenance" (Gaskell 7). Barton does have his options: to act against his own moral conscience, to bear it like a man (if he can, and this is put into doubt by Davenport's example), or to try forgetfulness in opium. Barton's story is tragic because he attempts to do all three, and none of them can bring him peace and keep him and those he cares for from harm.

Barton's plight is intended for a type of the working class man. Samuel Bamford, a working class man of Gaskell acquaintance, in a letter to Gaskell wrote: "of John Barton, I have known hundreds, his very self in all things except his fatal crime" (Poole 103). Likewise, the novel describes Barton as "a thorough specimen of a Manchester man" (Gaskell 7). Barton is "a man made desperate by finding he cannot reconcile theory and practice" and his desperation is indicative of the desperation of his class (Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell* 78). Barton is faced with a situation for which there are no

viable solutions. Opium is one of these unlivable options, and is revealed as an evil because it has the potential to magnify beyond rationality what is already a sickness in a man's way of thinking. Opium becomes both a symbol for what is wrong with class strife that doesn't enable the view of one another as human beings and for a capitalistic system that warps the images of commodity and gain, and causes the human connection to be buried under the cash-nexus and a struggle to obtain all that is behind the shop window even at the expense of the next man. Both are revealed to be the producers of altered and perverted vision. Barton's experience calls on middle-class readers not only to pity him, but realize the magnitude of his situation and the desperation of his class produced when the sympathy Gaskell so much advocates is missing between classes, or goes only one way.

Built into Gaskell's metaphoric use of opium is a rejection of both the Romantic view and the class prejudiced view of opium. Gaskell reveals the visions of the Romantics to be hollow and vain compared to those of Barton. Through Barton's characterization, she also refutes the notion that opium use, even among the lower classes, is indicative of innate lowness in morals, principle and hygiene. Gaskell also uses opium to comment on the larger themes in her book—the need for sympathy between classes and the need to deal with one another in human terms. Opium operates as an obstacle to sympathy between classes, making the middle to upper classes think of the lower classes as machines or innately immoral, and warping the vision of the lower class to seeing their masters as inhuman task masters with only their profit in mind and working class death on their hands. Gaskell uses the image of opium to demonstrate the desperate attempts of one man to suffer and bear what he must for the sake of himself and

his family and to ask the reader to sympathize with the man as he is destroyed before our eyes.

OPIUM IN *MIDDLEMARCH* AND *SILAS MARNER*

Throughout her career, George Eliot would explore the meaning of opium in her novels, both as a metaphor for human behavior and a literal substance used by a character. Through these novels, Eliot develops a philosophy of opium which condemns its use for non-medical reasons, as she likewise condemns addiction, portraying both as damning in effect. Opium comes to have a uniform symbolic meaning for Eliot, representing an escapist attitude that seeks to avoid the unpleasant consequences of one's actions or enduring unpleasant reality. By avoiding either reality or consequences, Eliot argues, the growth that comes through these cannot be realized. In consequence, characters doing either become unable to progress, and often retrogress. In developing this philosophy of opium, Eliot responds to both the Romantic and class predicated conceptions of opium use.

The Formation of Eliot's Philosophy

Early in her career as a novelist, George Eliot makes use of opium to represent a personality type prone to escapism as a means of dealing with pain. In *Mill on the Floss*, when placed with unpleasant circumstances Maggie Tulliver could "think of no comfort but to sit...and fancy it was all different, refashioning her little world into just what she should like it to be." Indulgence in such fantasy is "the form in which she took her opium" (Eliot, *Mill* 42). Such escape, however, is not without potential harm, as Eliot had already hinted in *Scenes of Clerical Life* where "fatigue" only is called "nature's innocent opium" (129), but what sort of harm can come from escapism is made more

explicit when Philip explains to Maggie: “You want to find out a mode of renunciation that will be an escape from pain. I tell you again, there is no such escape possible except by perverting or mutilating one's nature” (Eliot, *Mill* 363). If Philip were to attempt to ease his pain, with his “opium,” there are only two equally mutilating alternatives before him: a turn of character to “scorn and cynicism” or a “fall into some kind of conceited madness” (Eliot, *Mill* 363). Both of these alternatives are damning in Eliot’s moral world. The problem with such fantasizing is that it does not allow for the realization of failure out of which can grow the self-knowledge so essential to moral vision. It may also lead to the distorting sense of self importance, where selfishness can greatly inhibit sympathy for others which is, for Eliot, the great moral compass. The importance of living without delusion for Eliot is also evidenced by a letter she wrote in December of 1860: “the highest ‘calling and election’ is to *do without opium* and live through all our pain with conscious, clear-eyed endurance” (Haight 366, emphasis in the original). It is clear that to Eliot opium is an important metaphor, indicating one way in which people fail to live up to their full potential by living in a world that does not consciously face reality. Other novels, while retaining the metaphorical significance of opium, begin to the image of literal drug use. Such is the use of opium in *Silas Marner* and *Middlemarch*.

Opium in *Silas Marner*

Silas Marner portrays opium use in a brief sketch of a literal and full blown addiction in the case of Molly Cass. Her husband Godfrey is also arguably an addict along metaphorical lines. In some ways Molly figures as Godfrey’s shadow or the doppelganger of his baser self—he himself associates her with all that is base in his life. She is the secret wife of a secret marriage which for many years Godfrey has considered

the “blight of his life” (Eliot, *Silas Marner* 29). We are not told the back story of this marriage explicitly, only that “it was an ugly story of low passion, delusion, and waking from delusion...” (Eliot, *Silas Marner* 29). It becomes evident almost from the beginning of the story that Godfrey is an opium-eater in the sense that he continually seeks out an alternate vision of reality. His first marriage was one such “delusion”; all of his attempts to hide it thereafter were yet more attempts to escape to an alternate reality, and to be saved “from unpleasant consequences” (Eliot, *Silas Marner* 71). Larry Shillock argues that Godfrey “is ill by virtue of his excessive sexuality, his many failures of self-restraint. Marriage has not degraded him, although his is characterized as ‘degrading’; [instead] passion has led to ‘delusions’--i.e., to his mind’s being compromised as well as his body” (36). But Godfrey does not seek to cure himself of the real cause of his suffering, instead he turns to other drug-like distractions to help him avoid the otherwise endless “bitter rumination on his personal circumstances” (Eliot, *Silas Marner* 28). Those things that could help break up this painful rumination are none other than “the excitement of sporting, drinking, card-playing, or the rarer and less oblivious pleasure of seeing Miss Nancy Lammeter” (Eliot, *Silas Marner* 28-29). All but this last excitement Godfrey calls “foolish habits” and declares them to be “no pleasures, but only a feverish way of annulling vacancy” (Eliot, *Silas Marner* 30). Nancy, however, he believes to be “the voice of the good angel, inviting to industry, sobriety, and peace.” With Nancy, Godfrey believes, it “would be easy...to shake off those foolish habits” (Eliot, *Silas Marner* 30).

The figure of Nancy Lammeter operates as the embodiment of a new dream. When he is with her he can pretend that he is free to court her, even to marry her.

Nancy's presence has a narcotic effect on Godfrey. The narrator describes him as "taking draughts of forgetfulness from [her] sweet presence" and "willingly losing all *sense* of that hidden bond which at other moments galled and fretted him so as to mingle irritation with the very sunshine" (Eliot, *Silas Marner* 105, emphasis added). Both of these effects are conspicuously related to his senses. In this sense it is not just the dream of life with Nancy which makes her a fantasy to Godfrey, neither is it just that she represents an alternative to his actual wife, but he experiences an actual dulling of painful reality in her presence.

However, Nancy's effect on Godfrey eventually fades as well, and this dream too ceases to satisfy him after years of marriage. Godfrey admits to this fact, saying that in spite of the happiness he pictured for himself he had "been grumbling and uneasy because [he] hadn't something else" (Eliot, *Silas Marner* 170). Godfrey's situation mirrors that of his first wife's: "Molly's decline to opium addict[ion] figures a similar decline in Godfrey's experience of the present: from a moment pregnant with consequences, the present becomes mere 'wretched un-benumbed consciousness,' as Eliot describes Molly's moments of sobriety" (Brown 236).

However, Molly's is in some ways a different story. We do not know much about her from the brief scene we get of her walking into Raveloe and then dying in the snow. Our perception of her is influenced by Godfrey's, almost the only version of her available to us in the story, and Godfrey's perception is colored by the way he sees Nancy Lammeter. Godfrey's "vision of the women in his life evokes the classic virgin/whore stereotype. He idealizes Nancy....[and] thinks of his sexual relationship with Molly as one of 'those foolish habits' for which he denies responsibility" (Davis

265). Molly's role in the novel is often seen as one of contrast, here for Nancy, and later as the model of the inadequate mother which serves, through contrast, to highlight Silas's care of Eppie (Chen 50). Both contrasts take for their model Godfrey's characterization of Molly which marks her out as reproachable for both her own misconduct and his misery. However, there is some good reason for thinking that Godfrey is at least in part responsible for Molly's ruin.

As Kathleen McCormack points out, Godfrey Cass "shares his name with the most popular brand of children's opium, Godfrey's Cordial, a name, in fact, which by midcentury had become generic for sweetened tincture of opium," so while "Godfrey's wife is full of opium on the literal level; he [is], on the figurative level" (101). Godfrey's name highlights his own addiction to escapism and is a reminder of their linked existence. It may also indicate a causal role for Godfrey in his wife's addiction. Most scholars, however, believe that Molly's "story remains too sketchy for the reader to decide whether these vices are the consequences of her seduction..." (Jumeau 277). This sketchiness leaves us in doubt of the origins of Molly's addiction, and with only Godfrey's "bitter rumination" of his wife (Eliot, *Silas Marner* 28). There is one exception, the scene in which she appears in Raveloe to take her vengeance on Godfrey by exposing his duplicity.

The narrator describes her journey to Raveloe on New Year's Eve as "a premeditated act of vengeance" in order to "mar [Godfrey's] pleasure" that day, because he had said that he would rather die than admit to being married (Eliot, *Silas Marner* 105). The image of the party she knew would be held at the red house that day rankled her in her own state of want and dinginess. This envy is a secondary source of vengeance

to Molly Cass, but Eliot writes that “Molly knew that the cause of her dingy rags was not her husband’s neglect, but the demon Opium to whom she was enslaved, body and soul” (Eliot, *Silas Marner* 105). Opium enabled her to avoid those “wretched moments of unnumbed consciousness” when she could “sense of her want and degradation” (105). Here, as in Godfrey’s attempts to divert himself, Molly narcotizes herself out of a painful existence. As in the circumstances of all the other Eliot characters similarly addicted, she is enslaved by these attempts to continue chasing after them, never finding permanent relief or progression. While these “wretched moments of unnumbed consciousness” may seem to indicate withdrawal symptoms (and perhaps these were intended to be invoked), it is equally likely that these moments are painful to Molly because they are the only times when she is cognizant of the emptiness of her own existence. Opium use did not generally allow for “just and self-reproving thoughts” to enter “Molly’s poisoned chamber” (Eliot, *Silas Marner* 105-106).

Molly’s use of opium makes her an unfit moral agent. Opium is clearly figured as feeding her vindictiveness and animosity toward her husband. Its influence over her is so strong that she did not have any power to resist it “except in the lingering mother’s tenderness that refused to give him her hungry child” (105). While this tenderness may have kept Molly from abandoning her child, it did by no means inspire her to always be a good mother, as we learn from the narrator’s reflection that Eppie “had been used to utter [‘mammy’] without expecting either tender sound or touch to follow” (Eliot, *Silas Marner* 119).

Despite the narrator repeating the idea that the child “was accustomed to be left to itself for long hours without notice from its mother,” the fact of this one last area of

resistance to the drug does much to humanize Molly Cass (Eliot, *Silas Marner* 107). It also does much to make us pity her, because although it is clear that she still wills to do the motherly thing, she does not have enough strength to resist the urge to use opium, to the inevitable neglect of her child. The opium's strength and the weakness of her own better resolutions reveal the difficulty, and problem, of living only for numbness. Kate Brown writes:

Even as she invites us to recognize the revelry available to a self whose desires are both self-generated and self-fulfilled, Eliot does not admit such revelry to be an adequate purpose in life instead requiring us to compare the miser to the opium addict, Molly Cass, for whom "supreme immediate longing ... curtained off all futurity" (165) and who therefore dies in the snow-an image of being frozen alive that might also describe Silas Marner. (244)

Many characters in Eliot's work can be said to have the same problem attributed to Molly and Silas in this paragraph. Godfrey's desire to escape consequences is just such a curtaining off of futurity, referred to as "his natural irresolution and moral cowardice" (*Silas Marner* 26). Indeed, irresolution and moral cowardice seem to be the result of distraction and fantasy living in for both Molly and Godfrey. Opium is Eliot's symbol for the destruction wrought out of literal opium use and figurative opiates each character may opt to serve instead of a reality alive in fellow feeling.

Opium in *Middlemarch*

Middlemarch is often considered "antiheroic" because very few characters accomplish the greatness they set out for themselves at the beginning of the novel (Deresiewicz 723). It is along these lines that Tertius Lydgate is analyzed as a tragic figure, but why Lydgate fails to end as the hero of science he sets out to be is a question the novel asks us to answer. While Lydgate's opium use is of rather brief mention in the

novel and has never been put forth as the cause of his failure in the critical discussion, I would argue that it is symptomatic of the root of that failure. Lydgate uses opium as a mental and moral escape from the consequences of his decisions, but these escapes merely impede him from addressing the real problems of his life and delay him from facing these until his circumstances are beyond repair.

Lydgate's failed escapism is significantly foregrounded in the novel by Will Ladislaw's use of opium. Ladislaw, like Lydgate, is full of grand aspirations, but Ladislaw's are of a particular Romantic turn at the beginning of the novel. Young, with artistic aspirations, Ladislaw is convinced of the Romantic notion that artistic thought is gifted from an extra-human source; he has tried opium as one means of encouraging "receptivity towards sublime chances" (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 81). We are told that "nothing greatly original resulted from these measures," which convinced Ladislaw merely that "the universe had not yet beckoned" (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 81). Ladislaw holds his attitude toward the universe to be a "mark of genius", but the narrator corrects this thinking, relating that genius consists "neither in self-conceit nor humility, but in a power to make or do, not anything in general, but something in particular" (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 81-82). This marks Eliot's rejection of the Romantic notion that opium can inspire genius, even going so far as labeling the notion "self-conceit" (*Middlemarch* 82). That Eliot makes Ladislaw sick on his doses of laudanum is an indicator of the extent of this rejection. Ladislaw fails in his artistic aspirations through his aimlessness, of which opium is symptomatic. Deciding to take opium, in Ladislaw's case, is a decision to do nothing, and to decide on nothing, when delay of choice is also the loss of potential

accomplishment and stagnation of purpose. Opium will have this same effect on Lydgate's circumstances.

Ladislaw's use of opium represents a failed attempt to escape to something; Lydgate's a failed attempt to escape from something. Lydgate is also intent on doing something great, but his dream to discover "the primitive tissue" has the specificity that Ladislaw's lacks (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 146). However, Lydgate is clearly out of touch with the reality of his own situation in regard to his finances, his marriage, and what it might take to accomplish his own great professional aims. In these misappraisals, Lydgate makes some disastrous choices in each.

Lydgate's tragedy is not that he is incapable of thinking rationally and acting accordingly, but that there seems to be a schism between the rational world of his medical practice and his private/social life. As Hilda Hulme has argued, "Lydgate's tragedy is that he does not seek to apply this integrating principle to the different areas of his own experience" (Hulme 38); that is, "that distinction of mind which belonged to his intellectual ardor, did not penetrate his feeling and judgment about furniture, or women" (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 148). Deresiewicz has argued that Lydgate fails for the simple reason that he "does not make choices" and instead allows things to happen to him: "Everyone recognizes the importance of sympathy to George Eliot's system of values, but the importance of conscious thought and choice is far less frequently discussed" (Deresiewicz 735). Lydgate's desire to dull the pain of his circumstances without actually facing the consequences of his actions causes him to seek out the relief of opium. Opium, in Lydgate's case, is used in exactly this way, disabling the user through its dulling effects, allowing him to put off indefinitely the struggle of choice.

Finding himself in a miserable marriage and on the brink of financial ruin, Lydgate turns to opium for relief. Mr. Farebrother suspects his use, but is unable to construe the root cause, attributing Lydgate's use to "tic-douloureux" (facial neuralgia) or "medical worries" (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 630). Both of these reasons, one medical and the other social, would have fallen under socially accepted practice for the time. Lydgate is not judged for his use of the drug, but it is cause for concern and he is unable to guess that the root social cause of Lydgate's opium use is that his "marriage was not delightful" (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 630).

Lydgate had tried opium as a way of getting away from his home-life woes, but we are told had no natural "craving after" what could only be "transient escapes from the hauntings of misery" (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 658). Yet, there is no sense that Lydgate expected to see any grand visions while using the drug. Unlike Ladislaw, Lydgate was hoping for opium merely to dull his otherwise intolerably painful existence. In Lydgate's case, however, the seeking out of a deadening agent is an impossible dream because he is never fully able to escape from his own feeling existence.

Lydgate's self-medicating is of very brief duration, only "once or twice tr[ying] a dose of opium," but in his case opium becomes only part of a larger phenomenon. Lydgate's literal opium use, like Godfrey's, is only one in a series of "opiates" Lydgate tries in order to rid himself of the thought of his financial, professional, and marital unhappiness without pain. Each of these attempts fits the metaphorical implications of opium as Eliot had been using it in her previous novels.

From opium, Lydgate's proceeds to try gambling, as the next escape from his woes. While Lydgate is winning at gambling the narrator describes his thoughts: "visions

were gleaming on him of going the next day to Brassing, where...by one powerful snatch at the devil's bait, he might carry it off without the hook, and buy his rescue from its daily solicitings" (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 660). Gambling becomes the next opiate on which Lydgate can secure for himself momentary respite from financial woes and a greater hope that he can win himself out of them. In this moment of fantasy he is going against his own better judgment. Lydgate chooses not to gamble up until this point because in his more rational moments he is able to discern his own best interest and advantage. In this "drugged" state, Lydgate can only see what he imagines will provide him an *easy chance* at relief. It is this failure to see things as they really are, and the further danger of delaying action until it is too late that make opium and all metaphorical opiates so pernicious on Eliot's conception. This prevents an actual change in Lydgate's circumstances that might have saved his finances and reputation from ruin, which likewise ruined his chances for happiness.

Opium Use in *Middlemarch* and *Silas Marner* Compared

There are many similarities between the opium use we see in Lydgate and that of Molly Cass. Both have "social" reasons to have begun their use of the drug. This is to be differentiated from what is called recreational use of the drug, for which there was no real conception in the nineteenth century (Berridge, "Working" 366). Their use of the drug is in part a selfish desire to recreate or change the world in which they live while at once escaping the consequences and implications of their reality. It is in this way that both Molly and Lydgate fit the sense of the word "poor" as Dwight H. Purdy has analyzed its meaning in Eliot's work: "poor," does not signify only those who are literally without money, but also those who are short sighted, or morally impoverished (815). Both Molly

and Lydgate are impoverished by their use of opium and their opium use is indicative of their impoverishment.

Opium falsely narrows desire and comfort only to itself in the instance of Molly. For Lydgate opium functions the same way by fixating the notion of escape in itself and providing the longing for even more of the same as a means of final escape in an alternate form (gambling). In both instances their perception of reality is warped and thus impoverished by opium. The natural impoverishment of outlook that would turn to opium for these things in the first place is another cause for these to be considered “poor,” Lydgate’s former perception of substance users.

Because of the consequences of the drug, the portraits of its use we see in Lydgate and Molly Cass leave no doubt that, for George Eliot, opium taking for these so called “social” reasons is always a bad idea. In each case (except in the case of Raffles in which we get a would-be responsible use of the drug) the drug is not medically necessary. It is this cause which allows opium to stand as a metaphor for the sort of character who seeks fantasy (alternate versions of reality) as an escape from any unpleasant reality (society, responsibility, oneself, one’s wife etc.). In every case this moral escapism is shown to be harmful because it separates the individual from “sympathy and feeling” so “crucial, in George Eliot’s view, not only for moral judgment, but also for knowledge in general” (Anger 82). This is damaging to our very potential as human beings.

However similar the cases of Lydgate and Molly’s opium usage may be as evidence against artificially numbing one’s existence or escaping from reality, they couldn’t have a more different outcome for each of the characters. Lydgate only tries the drug a few times and it has no great power over him. Opium never has the power to

dominate his desires. Molly on the other had is “enslaved, body and soul” to the drug (Eliot, *Silas Marner* 105). Lydgate is able to leave off use of the drug, while Molly’s sustained addiction produces an obsession with opium that reduces her vision of life, rendering her incapable of seeing anything more important, and she eventually dies in the snow unclaimed by her husband. While Lydgate’s use of the drug never causes society to question his respectability, though his dealings with Bulstrode do, even though Molly “is found wearing a wedding-ring...the people prefer to believe that she could well be an unmarried mother, whose child must be cared for by the parish” (Jumeau 278). The outcomes of their opium use are so vastly different, that what makes that difference must be important to understanding Eliot’s philosophy on opium as a whole.

The difference in outcome for both Lydgate and Molly seems attributable to their difference in class. We are given a reason for Lydgate’s failure to become addicted to the drug. Lydgate’s attitude toward drink informs his opinion on opium: “he was strong, could drink a great deal of wine, but did not care about it; and when men round him were drinking spirits, he took sugar and water, having a contemptuous pity even for the earliest stages of excitement from drink” (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 658). The reason for this attitude is that Lydgate “had no *hereditary* constitutional craving” after this sort of escape (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 658 emphasis added). Lydgate’s trying opium or enjoying the momentary excitement of gambling then, constitutes not only a breach of personality, but also of hereditary inclination. Here, his genetic makeup and his class ties to the blood of a baronet, becomes a key factor in deciding how opium would affect him.

Molly’s class status too is a factor determining how her opium addiction is treated. Duncan derisively terms Molly an opium “drunkard,” a term of frequent use in

accounts of lower class use, corresponding to the notion that the working class used opium as a stimulant. This notion and term were not generally applied to genteel use of the drug. Molly, on the Cass brothers' view, practically the only view the reader receives, is of a lower class, and their view of her reflects contemporary class biases regarding opium.

Another distinct point of departure in Molly's opium addiction is the fact that opium takes on a persona. In no previous or future reference in any of Eliot's novels does opium figure as a person or be portrayed as so entirely demonic. It is curious then to note that in no other novel do we get a portrait of lower class usage. It may be that the personification of opium merely fit well with the well recognized fairy tale quality of *Silas Marner*, but it also fits very well with harrowing tales of popular opium addiction from the period wherein people admit that all they cared for was opium, as in the *Morning Chronicle* account of the people who had pawned everything they owned because they "can't live without it" (Berridge "Fenland" 280).

However, Eliot's narrative handling of Molly Cass is good cause to believe that she does not share the Cass brother's ridicule of her. Molly's vindictive behavior and bitterness toward Godfrey is a result, in part, of her inability to reason her way to "just and self-reproving thoughts," not because she is naturally bitter or vengeful, but because her "poisoned chamber" will not allow for these "lessons" to be learned (Eliot, *Silas Marner* 105-106). Opium is certainly a root of this poisoning, but Molly's continued slavish devotion to the drug and poisoned state is attributed to the fact that she had "no higher memories than those of a barmaid's paradise and pink ribbons and gentlemen's jokes" (Eliot, *Silas Marner* 106). Molly's inability to envision a better and higher self

does not allow her to face her painful reality. Molly's class dictates how opium will affect her because it has provided her with no resources to see herself as anything else.

Molly lacks the power to envision herself in another way, and become empowered by those visions to face the pain of her circumstances and she does so because she lacks "the information needed to make correct moral judgments" (Anger 80). Part of this information is an accurate assessment of one's moral situation and an ability to realistically see an alternative to opium and escape. Lydgate's vision at the Green Dragon of winning himself out of financial crisis stands in direct contrast to the realistic vision necessary to change one's circumstances. Eliot reveals the Romantic version of opium, and opium dreams of which this is a type, as harmful to the individual having them because they delude the viewer with fond hopes while outward circumstances stagnate or worsen.

Eliot shows us further that these dreams will eventually give way to harsh reality, or moments of "unnumbed consciousness" where these visions reveal themselves in their small nature (*Silas Marner* 106). Eliot shows the class biases associated with opium to be the result of a lack of experience enabling them to envision higher possibilities, rather than sourced in a working class predisposition to evil or lowness. Eliot's work uses opium as a metaphor to encapsulate the struggle evident in much of her work, whether to run away or hide from one's problems, or to face them. For Eliot, the realization of these possibilities consists first in having the education necessary to conceptualize them, and finally in the ability to face the consequences of bad decisions and work our way through that pain to experience new growth.

OPIUM IN *THE MYSTERY OF EDWIN DROOD*

The Mystery of Edwin Drood (1870) was published following a decade that began a trend in sensational writing headed up by the newspapers. Journalists adventuring into the dark corners of London reported on the shocking and criminal. Opium dens in the East End began to be a topic of some interest in the press, but the descriptions of these dens would become standardized with the publication of *Edwin Drood*, where Dickens contributes a demonizing image of opium by associating it with the poor and the foreign, portraying them to be not only dirty and uneducated, but also predisposed to violence, in conformance with the contemporary class-biased image of opium use. *Drood* is unique, however, because it begins to extend these evils to those of the genteel classes. This was indicative of and contributory to a shift in popular consciousness that was beginning to see opium use as morally prohibitive. Dickens accomplishes this by using opium as an aspect of a sensational plot and by portraying opium not only as Oriental (as had the Romantics), but also as Orientalizing in its effects. This portrayal exposed opium not merely to be a Chinese problem, but the cause of everything that was perceived to be wrong with the Chinese world, wrapped up and spreadable to the Western world. Opium use becomes no longer bad only among lower classes, because they do not know how to handle themselves, but bad altogether—and frightening in its effects.

Upper class users prior to this point were generally typified in the Romantic light, or went about drug use without others noticing an addiction, likely because they never experienced privation; indeed, many users may also have been unaware of their

own dependency (Berridge, “Fenland” 280, “Working” 363). Jasper’s ability to hide his addiction in the beginning conforms to this latter notion of upper class drug use, but as readers gain admittance into Jasper’s inner thoughts his dark desires, motives, and actions are exposed. Jasper’s use of the drug causes him to take on the characteristics of the sensational and the criminal, but it is opium’s association with the Oriental and its potential to Orientalize its users, which is cause for greatest alarm. The threat in *Drood* is not just the threat of a gentleman who has chosen to act like a low class ruffian, but the potential of Oriental contagion and the brutality and irrationality of the Orient coming home to destroy even respectable Englishmen.

Edwin Drood distances opium use from its everyday place in Victorian life and otherizes it through associating it with the Oriental and the sensational. In consequence, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* contributes to fear of opium as somehow demonizing in its effects. It claims that opium has a hidden and other nature, different from that which its readership would have been familiar, that is both mysterious and threatening. Opium has the potential to take even as English a town as Cloisterham and turn it into the site of Oriental tyranny and crime. Opium is rendered the agent of Jasper’s transformation, with the portrait of his opium use coming at a turning point in the long transformation of opium’s image in the popular consciousness, and contributing significantly to the change which takes opium, in the English imagination, from an everyday, familiar and effective medicine to a drug which can take over the mind and body, producing in every case the social deviants who are enslaved to it without conscience.

Portrayal of Jasper and Upper Class Deviance

Jasper's use of opium in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* correlates very closely to popular accounts of opium dens. The thing that separates Jasper from most of these accounts, however, is the issue of his class. Jasper is different from his predecessors in Dickens's work because he "is still more intelligent, more complex psychologically, more respectable, and more ambiguous in his relation to society, than his predecessors" (qtd. in Joseph 168). Jasper is so effective at maintaining his duplicity that throughout the novel, as we have it, he remains a gentleman and a respected member of Cloisterham to all but a few people, even though at the end of the fragment it is beginning to appear as though "Jasper's secret life has begun to encroach upon his respectable life" (Parssinen 62). Jasper's respectability and class station are oddly made evident in the opening chapter—in the opium den. The characters in the opium den are pre-figured as lower class individuals and thus their otherwise inexplicable violence is acceptable. Jasper looks on his company "with repugnance" (Dickens, *Drood* 2). Although he has just been in bed with this "haggard woman", a Chinaman who "snarls horribly" and a Lascar who "laughs and dribbles at the mouth," he does not associate himself with them in class or kind (Dickens, *Drood* 1-2).

Jasper's reaction of disgust at these surroundings typifies the sort of reaction similar accounts of opium dens evidently intended to elicit in their middle to upper class readership, but his violence separates him from this respectable audience, and classes him with his company. Jasper's unexpected violence correlates with the sort of violence expected from foreigners and the lower class. Dickens's readership would have been unshocked that a Lascar (Indian sailor) under the influence of opium and assaulted, is ready

to knife someone. They would not have expected a gentleman of Jasper's standing to have been the Indian's assaulter, or to have "pounc[ed] on the Chinaman, and seizing him with both hands by the throat, turn[ing] him violently on the bed" (Dickens, *Drood* 3). Jasper's "aggressive hands" lay hold on the Chinaman for seemingly no better reason than that Jasper is disgusted and declares them to be "unintelligible" (Dickens, *Drood* 3). The inexplicable nature of Jasper's threatening and aggressive behavior in the opening scene could not contrast more with his position in Cloisterham society, which is illustrated later the same day, as Jasper he robes himself and files into the Cathedral to be part of the afternoon service.

Jasper's social position in Cloisterham is unquestioned by almost everyone for the entirety of the fragment. Edwin himself remarks that Jasper prays "like the Dean" and when Jasper confesses that there is "a hidden skeleton in every house" including his own, Edwin replies by delineating Jasper's social position. He says, "I should have put in the foreground, your being so much respected as Lay Precentor...of this Cathedral; your enjoying the reputation of having done such wonders with the choir; your choosing your society, and holding such an independent position in this queer old place..." (Dickens, *Drood* 11). Jasper is eminently respected in Cloisterham and unsuspected of having any hidden skeletons. His unhappiness in his life surprises Edwin who responds, "I thought you had so exactly found your niche in life, Jack", to which Jasper replies "I know you thought so. They all think so" (Dickens, *Drood* 11). Jasper is leading a double life, and this double life is first partially revealed here, and exposed by the symptoms of Jasper's opium use.

Jasper attributes his use of opium to a “pain—an agony—that sometimes overcomes me”, when he is questioned by Edwin about his sudden change in countenance when a “cloud” or “strange film” comes over his eyes, one of opium’s telling physical signs (Dickens, *Drood* 10). The fact that Jasper himself connects his opium use to the hidden skeleton in this way, Joachim Stanley argues, “is likely to indicate that at some level he shares the narrator's belief that opiate-habituations could have criminal repercussions” and further that his reason for taking opium “stands out because it is so vague” (18). Self medicating was common and socially acceptable, but the vagueness of these symptoms hint that this may be just a cover for an alternate reason for using opium. It is the exposure of Jasper’s frustration, and his potential for an alternate (deviant) life that reveals the first linking of Jasper’s secret world and his position in Cloisterham life, typified by what everyone else in the town thinks they know of him (Dickens, *Drood* 10).

Rosa Bud is the only person that at the beginning of the novel has any sort of notion that Jasper has a hidden skeleton. She admits to Helena Landless her true feelings about Jasper because Helena says that she would not be afraid of Jasper “under any circumstances” and this has given Rosa courage (Dickens, *Drood* 54). She confides to Helena, “He terrifies me. He haunts my thoughts, like a dreadful ghost. I feel that I am never safe from him. I feel as if he could pass in through the wall when he is spoken of” (Dickens, *Drood* 53). Rosa’s conception of Jasper as a ghost is in turn something Jasper had already associated with opium use. Rosa’s terror of Jasper is further associated with his opium use and becomes evident in her relation to Helena that “...when a glaze comes over [his eyes]...and he seems to wander away into a frightful sort of dream in which he

threatens most, he obliges me to know it, and to know that he is sitting close at my side, more terrible to me than ever” (Dickens, *Drood* 54). Dickens, as we have previously seen, links this glazing of the eyes to opium by Jasper’s own admission. It is clear then that Jasper’s threat, something Rosa finds so horrific that she has “never even dared to think or wonder what it is,” is heightened when under the effects of opium (Dickens 54).

Much later, and on a different path, the narrator remarks that “it has been often enough remarked that women have a curious power of divining the character of men, which would seem to be innate and instinctive...” (Dickens, *Drood* 76). Although this intuition, can sometimes find itself in error and be nevertheless implacable, as seems to be the case with Mr. Crisparkle’s mother concerning Landless, Rosa would prove to have gotten the threatening nature of Jasper down pat. Jasper does threaten Rosa that if she does not do as he pleases she will “do more harm to others than [she] can ever set right” (Dickens, *Drood* 170). Jasper’s threats are an important aspect of Dickens’s portrait of his deviant behavior and thus important to our reading of such behavior as a product of opium. For the same reason the issue of whether or not Jasper is in fact Edwin’s murderer is an important one.

Characterizing Jasper remains somewhat problematic given the fragmentary nature of the text. Whether or not Jasper is *Drood*’s murderer is central to how we ultimately characterize Jasper and his opium use. Those who believe that Jasper was the obvious and actual murderer base much of their claim on John Forster’s account of what Dickens confided in him about the story. Forster, Dickens’s friend and biographer, claims that Dickens’s conception for the novel “was to be that of the murder of a nephew by his uncle; the originality of which was to consist in the review of the murderer’s

career by himself at the close, when its temptations were to be dwelt upon as if, not he the culprit, but some other man, were the tempted” (366). Forster further details:

[The] discovery by the murderer of the utter needlessness of the murder for its object, was to follow hard upon commission of the deed; but all discovery of the murderer was to be baffled till towards the close, when, by means of a gold ring which had resisted the corrosive effects of the lime into which he had thrown the body [the murderer would be revealed]. (366)

As others have explicated elsewhere, this description of the murderer fits Jasper exactly, even down to the fact that Jasper discovers directly after Edwin’s disappearance/murder that Edwin and Rosa had broken off their engagement, making Jasper’s most apparent motive for the murder completely void.

Others have come up with elaborate means to explain why Jasper would not have been the murderer. Many simply claim that he cannot be the murderer because he is the most obvious suspect (Joseph 162). Some claim that his love for Edwin overcame any jealousy he had over Rosa. Others have speculated that Drood is still alive on the strength of Dickens’s previous novels; “after all, in no fewer than eight Dickens novels, somebody believed dead turns out to be alive” (James). But even on this view, most believe that Jasper at least attempted the murder and that, later in the novel, as Nathan Bengis has argued, Jasper’s behavior is explained by the fact that he “either knew or believed he had murdered Drood” (Cox 411). Despite some critics’ insistence on Jasper’s innocence, however, most critics agree with Terry Parssinen when he writes: “The novel is unfinished, but there can be little doubt that Jasper is the murderer...” (62).

Other than the fact that Jasper is jealous of Edwin’s relation to Rosa, there are other reasons given for citing him as a likely suspect in Edwin’s murder, and for thinking

that Jasper's murderous intentions are tied to his opium use. The most convincing evidence is Edwin's encounter with the opium woman and Jasper's own cryptic confessions to her, both of which are significantly tied to Jasper's opium use. She warns Drood that "Ned" (Jasper's nickname for Edwin) is "a bad name to have just now" because it is "a threatened name. A dangerous name" (Dickens, *Drood* 127). During the same encounter the opium woman tells Edwin mysteriously that she has been "looking for a needle in a haystack" but has failed to find it (126). In a later scene, when the woman emphasizes over and over the phrase "I'll not miss ye twice" in reference to Jasper, it becomes clear that the opium woman had been looking for Jasper when she ventured into Cloisterham on the previous occasion (Dickens, *Drood* 210). After Edwin is murdered or has gone missing, Jasper eventually makes his way back to the opium woman's court, where he begins to tell her about his opium dreams as he smokes. Jasper asks her the likelihood of dreaming, while under the influence of opium, about something one had thought about doing. The opium woman nods her reply and Jasper admits to having done something over and over again in his opium dreams.

Further pulling information from him, the opium woman learns the Jasper took pleasure in doing this something, and that "it was a journey, a difficult and dangerous journey....A hazardous and perilous journey, over abysses where a slip would be destruction" (Dickens, *Drood* 207). Jasper then points to something at the bottom of that imaginary abyss. Some scholars argue that Jasper is referring to the Lime pit where he murdered Edwin, and theoretically disposed of the body. It is therefore easy to side with Joachim Stanley when he concludes "Given Princess Puffer's warning to Edwin, it seems highly likely that Jasper's opiated dreams consist largely of his nephew's murder

endlessly repeated" (20). The connection between Jasper's threatening countenance and his opium use, which Rosa inadvertently took note of, becomes clear when opium figures here as means by which Jasper is able to enact the murder "hundreds of thousands of times...millions and billions of times" on his own account when partaking of opium (Dickens, *Drood* 207).

Princess Puffer's familiarity with Jasper conveys that Jasper is an accustomed user of the drug. While there are no obvious notes from the narrator on the state of Jasper's addiction, there are hints that true addiction is present. When Jasper states that he "takes opium to control a poorly-defined 'pain, an agony.'" it "stands out because it is so vague. The 'agony' is suggestive to the modern reader of the drug's then barely comprehended withdrawal symptoms..., but Dickens himself did not, I think, intend this conclusion to be drawn, or at least not in isolation" (Stanley 18). There are other hints Jasper himself makes that the agony may be (rather than any physical pain) linked to the admission he makes to Edwin that his life is miserable to him. Jasper similarly admits to the opium woman, "When I could not bear my life, I came to get relief, and I got it" at the beginning of his opium use (Dickens, *Drood* 208).

Jasper's is a case that interestingly explores the reason for deviant behavior. James argues that Jasper's is a "condition of social paralysis" and that in his case it "seems to have the effect of blurring the edges of identity: since the unfinished self cannot move forward, it moves sideways, across its own boundaries. This is particularly the case for Jasper. The 'cramped monotony' of Jasper's existence produces a 'scattered consciousness'. This scattered consciousness seems to be a direct result of his opium use. Significantly, however, in the case of Jasper, opium does not have the ability to

overpower the will in any way that we can determine. Stanley has argued that *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* “is also remarkable in its proposition that psychological dependence could also arise not because the drug physiologically problematizes will, but because its hallucinogenic aspects can render reality utterly intolerable” (23). The possibilities of acting under the influence of opium in ways restricted in life constituted relief from his otherwise unbearable existence. This double role-playing is clearly marked out as dangerous in *Edwin Drood* and opium, as the enabler of that dream life, is shown to have the potential to leech into reality with deadly consequences. Opium itself and not just the user becomes a danger.

Dickens’s readers were also picking up on the link between opium and criminality in the novel as evidenced by endings of the novel which tied the opium theme into the solution of the crime. One play adaptation ended in the opium den with Jasper awaking from an opium dream in which he is discovered, to be awakened by the knocking of policemen at the opium den door (Dickens, *Drood* 252-253). In writing the play it is clear that the opium theme was conceived as key to the solving of the crime. By associating opium with the criminal and at once making the user of that opium a gentleman, Dickens is directly confronting the Romantic notion of opium.

Anti-Romantic Picture of Opium

Up until the writing of *Edwin Drood* the gentlemen users of opium in fiction had escaped without most of the negative associated with lower class usage. While the divide was not so great that all upper class users were automatically considered great writers on par with De Quincey or Coleridge, the remnants of their influence at this time at least allowed these users to escape most negative notice for their use of the drug. Jasper

negates this image of the drug, by at once conforming to all of the requirements necessary to becoming part of the cult of De Quincey, and yet becoming criminal by its use. This is accompanied by the time when it was also recognized that even to De Quincey the drug had become a bane.

Jasper has all of the characteristics necessary to be a Romantic hero. As Juliet John has pointed out: “Unusually for a central character in a Dickens novel, [Jasper] has many of the traits of the Romantic individual--is interested in altered states of consciousness, artistically sensitive, cultured, and inwardly focused” (235). Further, Jasper’s own view of the drug is very much in line with that of the Romantics. When he dreams with opium, he expects to experience something above what the ordinary person might experience. He believes himself to have the special philosophical inclination and mind that can make the most out of opium use, in line with De Quincey’s own views on the subject. This becomes evident in the opening scene, when, looking down at the opium woman who lies still after smoking on an opium pipe, Jasper muses “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 court swept clean? What can she rise to, under any quantity of opium?” (Dickens, *Drood* 2-3). While Jasper’s own opium dreams, by contrast, are of the typical fantastic oriental imagery described by the Romantic writers, Dickens reveals these to be no higher in nature. It is almost comical that it is the opium woman who gets to point out to Jasper the banality of Jasper’s vision. He confesses to her that he had taken the “journey” (presumably murdering Drood in order to gain Rosa’s hand), “millions and billions of times. I did it so often, and through such vast expanses of time, that when it

was really done, it seemed not worth the doing, it was done so soon” (Dickens, *Drood* 207). In an odd reversal it was then the opium woman who asked Jasper if he did “never get tired of it...and try to call up something else for a change?” thereby implying Jasper’s own lack of imagination (Dickens, *Drood* 207). We might further accuse him of a lack of originality. The Oriental trappings of Jasper’s dreams are by the 1870s almost a cliché. Jasper’s visions are revealed to be nothing so grand as he had believed himself capable of; they in the end reveal him in his own smallness.

Stanley argues that Dickens “attempts to describe, and (significantly), to integrate the addictive and hallucinogenic aspects of opium, in a radically new representation of the drug” (Stanley13). While certainly the representation of the drug from Jasper’s point of view is very much the Romantic notion of the drug, as readers we observe a very different story from Jasper. We understand the degree to which he has deluded himself with the notion that opium would somehow rescue him from his own cramped existence and reveal himself to himself in his fully Romantic quality—as hero; instead Jasper gets to play the villain of his own history and opium is the maker of that villain-hood. In Dickens, characters have the potential to lose their respectability through the power of opium.

The Mystery of Edwin Drood is not the first novel in which Dickens associates opium with the loss of class and moral status. In *Bleak House*, Captain Hawdon’s background is obscured, but the facts of captancy and his relationship with Lady Dedlock are excellent indications of his gentility. Hawdon falls from this class status to the lowest possible clerical work—as a law-writer—and dies in the course of the novel of an opium overdose in conditions, although in his own apartment, alike in filth and fume

to those of an opium den. Hawdon's opium use, we are told, dates back about a year and a half, conspicuously the corresponding time frame for his move to wretched circumstances in fortune, employment, and residence (Dickens, *Bleak House* 153-154). In the case of Hawdon, opium has the frightening potential to make his situation equal to the lowest of literate workers, and drive him to such meanness that he dies barefoot and without even a candle. Dickens figures opium as an inherently corrupting article, irrespective of class.

Associating Opium with the Sensational

One further reason that *Edwin Drood's* image of opium differs from previous accounts of it, has to do with the generic style in which it was written. The eighteen sixties saw a shift toward a sensational style in writing, both in novels and in the news. Wilkie Collins, who is considered the "father" of the sensation novel as it formed in the 1860s, wrote novels in which "one will find the pattern of 'criminality and passion beneath respectable surfaces'" (Allingham). Given Dickens's connection with Collins, it is likely that Dickens was "responding to the new form...rather than merely aping it" in *Edwin Drood* (Allingham). Indeed, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* takes a line from the generic conventions of these popular pieces of literature and sensationalizes its own plot and characters thereby, including in its treatment of opium.

In *Edwin Drood*, Dickens uses conventions of the sensational novel to instill an excited dread in his audience, including romantic triangles, heightened suspense detailism, aristocratic villains, and, importantly, the use of drugs (Allingham). The stamp of the sensation novel is evident enough in the novel that critics from the book's first printing have attempted to claim that other various aspects of the genre are present in the

novel, but were unrevealed because of the novel's unfinished end. Among these are "a beautiful, clever young woman who...is adept at disguise" (Helena in disguise as Datchery) and secret illegitimacy (Jasper appears as illegitimate in various solutions to the novel) (Allingham). Other aspects of the Gothic are reprised in the sensation novel, are seen in *Drood*: "inexplicable disappearance," murder, the "persecution of" young ladies, and cathedral crypts (Schmitt). Both the Gothic romance and the Sensation novel come together in the reaction they were intended to get from their audience: fear, but at the same time and excitement and anticipation. Both forms deliver otherness, while capitalizing on the fear the other instills. The role of the other is given to opium in *Edwin Drood*, and is heightened by the fact that opium is also given the role of corruptor. Opium thus becomes the site for the mystery and the unknown of the Orient being tapped in an Englishman, and the crime itself becomes directly linked to the otherness of the drug.

Dickens's use of the sensation novel is particularly important for its portrayal of opium. Because "the sensation novel represents an infusion of romantic elements into realism" the danger and dread associated with opium in the novel take on a reality through nearness in depiction to it, that even the penny press could not have gained (Brantlinger 4). The threat of opium is more real because the world within *Edwin Drood* is closely identified with our own. Opium's portrayal in *Edwin Drood* begins to suggest that the will can be overridden by a drug's force and make criminals even of the respectable. This association may not seem strange or fantastic to modern readership, but to the Victorians it was something new and something frightening.

Associating Opium with the Poor and the Orient Reprise

One way opium was beginning to be associated with deviance is through its being linked with the filthy and vulgar. This is not new to *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, as we have seen from our readings of *Mary Barton* and *Silas Marner*. *Drood* continues the tradition, however, by associating opium not with a well kept druggist's shop which would have been Jasper's most convenient place to obtain the drug (and the place of purchase for all previous characters we have investigated), but makes a filthy opium den the site of consumption. In the opening chapter the room is described as "the meanest and closest of small rooms" with a "ragged window-curtain" and a bedstead that is literally falling apart (Dickens, *Drood* 1). The squalidness of the environment, evident by this description, is further emphasized with the addition of a set of "broken down stairs" and a "rat-ridden doorkeeper," making it enough to rival other filthy images of working class living conditions in the industrial novel (Dickens, *Drood* 3). The similarities are striking, and the type well enough recognized for the link to the otherness of the poor to be picked up on by the middle class readers of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. The link is an important one, one that emphasizes the shift away from opium as a Romantic drug, for all classes of people.

In addition to further linking opium usage with the unkempt poor, *Edwin Drood* links opium to the Orient in new ways. Britain's involvement in the Indian monopoly made the Indian market and use of opium a main concern for the English. Because China was the main market for the Indian product (most of Britain's own supply came from Turkey), China in particular is coming more frequently into Parliamentary discussion on opium production and trafficking. The opium wars are over by the time of the

publication of *Edwin Drood*, but the moral debate surrounding the trade is just getting started. For example, in a July 1868 committee meeting Colonel William Sykes, MP for Aberdeen and president of the Royal Asiatic Society, declared that the “revenue derived from opium could not be a source of gratification to the moral sense of this country, since it rendered us responsible for the destruction of the physique and morale of the Chinese” (Great Britain). Mr. Robert Fowler, MP for Penryn and Falmouth, expressed his sentiment unequivocally in 1869: “I object to this source of revenue, not only on financial but on moral grounds. I have always regarded the conduct of this country in forcing this poisonous and deleterious drug upon the Chinese, as the greatest blot upon the name of the British nation” (Great Britain). Popular consciousness was alive to the debate surrounding the Chinese opium trade, and was thus becoming conflicted about the product’s use in the homeland as well. *Edwin Drood* is evidence that at some level England was questioning its relation to the Orient in light of the Chinese opium problem and evaluating that potential crossover of what had previously been held to be a purely Oriental problem.

The Orient of Dickens’s time was an idea which evoked an array of reactions. Edward Said describes the Romantic conception of the Orient as a “chameleonlike quality” representing such various characteristics as “sensuality, promise, terror, sublimity, idyllic pleasure [and] intense energy” (Said 119, 118). These notions were firmly rooted in Victorian consciousness by the writing of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. The terror and cruelty associated with the Orient were mainly the result of an Oriental past that was perceived to be ruled by tyrants. This notion of the Orient was gaining new force because of the perceived opium problems of the people. This portrait of Chinese

opium usage was tied up with other notions of Chinese laziness and criminality. The general negative view of the Chinese and the Orient more largely, linked and yet not exclusively tied to their opium problem, becomes part of a larger picture that pits an opposition between the Orient and the Occident.

Dickens's own weekly paper, *All the Year Round*, published a number of articles relating to the Orient, which reflected Dickens views and helped form the picture the Orient would take in *Edwin Drood*. Dickens had close authorial control over his periodical because he "acknowledged as his own the political and social opinions published anonymously in the journal" (Oppenlander 39). For this reason we can assume that version of the Orient we find in Dickens's periodical are a type of his own view of it.

The *All the Year Round* articles that were published on China give us a sense of this Orient. Very different from the fantastic imagery and grand palaces of the Romantic Orient, Dickens's Orient is characterized by stagnation, and populated by those who are more animal than human, and cunningly criminal. Each of these characteristics in turn finds its representation in *Edwin Drood*, even in the character of Jasper.

In "Chinamen Afloat" the Chinese junks depicted come to be a representative example of how the Chinese civilization has not progressed for centuries and centuries. The boats as well as the people have not progressed and are described as being "like a squirrel in a cage" ("Chinamen" 116). The conditions on board these ships should warrant the wish for a change, but the Chinamen's stagnation is such that they are complacent with their situation and "appear to be happy...as they dreamily puff at their tiny opium-pipes" among other simple pleasures that allow them to not look for anything higher ("Chinamen" 117).

The description of the Orientals as squirrels is not unique; in these articles they are constantly being compared to animals in temperament. This causes the loss of their human quality. At one point this is explicitly confirmed, when the author reports that the “naked bodies” of the Chinese look “scarcely human” (“Chinamen” 117).

The Orient is full of criminality in these accounts, and this is where the Oriental’s intelligence lies. Far from being described as idle or stupid, they are all “utterably cunning.” We are told that “the science of thieving flourishes here well” and the Orientals are described as quite industrious to that end (“Chinamen” 118). The Orient’s criminality is manifest by the facts: Orientals won’t testify against a murderer; there is a “large body of life convicts” (“With Opium” 538); it is considered unsafe to venture outside at night because they are “a lawless set” (“With Opium” 540); and “Chinamen are both adroit and audacious highwaymen” (“With Opium” 540).

Dickens’s begins to build a very different portrait of the Orient in these articles, disassociated from the fantastic world of *The Thousand and One Nights* to take on the Orient’s more fearful characteristics. The dark underbelly of the Orient is exposed on this view, and Jasper’s association with it through opium causes him to take on similar characteristics. Jasper’s criminal behavior, his stagnant position in the community of Cloisterham, and his animal like ferocity with Rosa and the Chinaman he half strangles, are informed by this notion of the Oriental’s characteristics. While sultans and grand palaces are still present in Jasper’s opium dreams, the novel’s reality reveals the Orient to be reducible to the filthy opium den and low life ruffianism. It is evident that the Orient is receiving a major downgrade, from the Romantic conception of it, in *Edwin Drood*. The grandness of their visions remain illusive to everyone in the novel, so that when Jasper

condemns the opium woman to low visions of only menial charm, his pronouncement in the end rings true for the visions of the entire company. This darker part of the Orient would come to impart its characteristics not only to opium dreams, but colored the sites and means of Oriental opium consumption as well.

Opium Smoking and Opium Dens

The opium den and opium smoking came to symbolized both the extravagance and immorality of the Orient. At the time of Dickens's writing, the opium den still "functioned in the middle-and upper-class imagination as a largely phantasmic space which signified forbidden pleasures, orientalized through the effects of commodification," and it was popular to outfit rooms in the style of Oriental opium dens (Lysack 21, 19). The conception of opium dens as places of oriental exoticism, luxury, and pleasure owe much to the Romantics. However, there was an alternate side to the picture of the opium den in English consciousness. In the 1860s there began to appear numerous newspaper accounts of opium dens in the midst of London and these accounts became prolific in the 1870s. The image of the opium den received a very different—and unflattering—treatment in these accounts. Just four years before the publication of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Dickens's own magazine published one such account.

"Lazarus, Lotus Eating," published in *All the Year Round* (1866), describes a Chinese opium user as "one of the poor wretched Chinamen who shiver and cower and whine at our street-corners, and are mean and dirty, squalid and contemptible, even beyond beggars generally" (Parkinson 421). However, "Lazarus, Lotus Eating" is some ways a very different account than the ones that would follow it. While Lazarus himself is described as filthy, Yahee, the proprietor of the opium den, is described as clean and

his den is likewise swept. It is also unique in that it describes the majority of Yahee's patrons as "decent men in their way" (Parkinson 424). Without conforming to the standard account that was to follow hard upon the publication of *Edwin Drood*, "Lazarus, Lotus Eating" is a very anti-Romantic portrait of the drug. Lazarus is described as a changed creature while smoking opium:

Lazarus yonder is no longer the contemptible wretch he was when we threw him a penny on Cornhill two hours ago...Who knows the rapturous visions passing through his brain, or the blissfulness which prompts that half-expressed smile? The smallest feeted houris, the most toothsome birds'-nests and stewed dogs, nay, the yellow mandarin's button itself, are Lazarus's now. What cares he for policemen, for the cuffs and kicks, the slurs and sneers, of the barbarians from whom he has to beg? Yahee's shabby stifling little room is his glory and delight. To it he looks forward through the long and weary day; by its pleasures he is compensated for the pains and penalties of his weary life. (Parkinson 425)

These visions sound curiously like those of the Romantic turn which prefigure the pains of opium as in some ways outweighed by its pleasure, but this is not the narrator's view. The Romantic style is merely aped, and the substance of these dreams is revealed to be of small wonder and by no means grand. De Quincey is mentioned by name, and then his theory of opium is rejected in favor of "the plain truth" regarding opium, that its users "are all such slaves to the drug of which Yahee is high priest..." (Parkinson 425). The narrator makes his sentiments about Lazarus's vision plainer when he writes that Lazarus's "existence is divided between a misery which is very real, and a happiness which is as fictitious and evanescent as that of the moth killing itself at the candle's flame" (Parkinson 425). Lazarus's life is not then somehow "made up to him" in the temporary escape he thinks himself lucky to have on a nightly basis. This informs Jasper's situation, who, coming to opium for relief from his wearisome life, thought he

found it for a time, but by the end of the fragment Jasper seems aware that opium can only provide a most transient relief, saying “It WAS one. It WAS one” (Dickens, *Drood* 208). Stanley argues that this portrait of opium use in “Lazarus, Lotus Eating”, “hints darkly that opium possesses the ability to dominate the will-possibly on a long-term basis” (15). This may have been the “singular notion” in the article which struck Dickens as something worthy of reworking into what we get in *Edwin Drood* (qtd. in Oppenlander 35).

Most other accounts of opium dens agree that opium dens are not the clean picture here portrayed, nor are their customers anything close to decent. “East London Opium Smokers” published in the *Manchester Times* in 1868 is in some ways a very representative example of these depictions. Although the opium den visited (in Bluegate Fields) is considered worthy enough of curiosity “to draw earls and princes” as have reportedly visited, its regular customers and its location are described as immitigably criminal. So criminal are the inhabitants of the area that,

The mere blackening of an eye or the extraction of human hair by process of dragging it from the head, is not regarded in light of an assault in Bluegate Fields, but rather as a pleasant pastime to beguile the lazy hours of daylight. Judging from the reports of the Thames Police Court, nothing of less importance than the biting off of the nose or an ear, or the fracture of a skull with a poker, calls for the interference of the police. (“East London”)

The violent tendency of the locality is surveyed further in so much exotic detail that the effect of such sensationalizing is to completely otherize this group of people from common experience. There is something exotic and fascinating in so doing. This otherizing is reinforced by the extent to which the den walls are characteristically pictured as filthy from opium smoke, and the air laden with it to such an extent that

breathing is difficult, and a proprietor equally shabby. In “An Opium Den in London,” published in *Pall-Mall Gazette* (1868), not only is the establishment pictured as a hovel and later as a “wretched hole” but the proprietor is described as “this devil’s tapster.” While the account in Dickens’s *All the Year Round* does not pick up on this convention, Dickens himself employs it in relation to opium dens, not only in *Edwin Drood*, as we have seen, but in *Bleak House* as well. The room in which Captain Hawdon is found dead is similarly described as shabby “foul and filthy” (Dickens, *Bleak House* 151). The air is filled with opium, the furnishings are broken down and “ragged”, and Hawdon himself matches these surroundings in the description of him lying on the bed as a corpse (Dickens, *Bleak House* 151). The situation surrounding this opium-death simulates newspaper accounts of opium dens and strongly prefigures the account Dickens would make of such a den in *Edwin Drood*.

Newspaper accounts of such dens become even more standardized after the publication of *Edwin Drood*, with many accounts directly referencing *Drood* as an accurate portrayal of the scene being reported. By portraying the opium den in such mean terms, these accounts become a rejection of Romanticized image of opium dens. Parssinen has claimed that although the Romantic notions of De Quincey continued to be read late in the century “the temper of the times had changed” and this change was accompanied by the figure of opium dens, which became “moral slums which welcomed those whose actions had carried them beyond the pale of Victorian respectability” (66).

The moral wrongness we get the sense of in these accounts of opium dens and the sad descriptions of those slavishly devoted to the product they sell can be said to be a result, in part, of a greater awareness of the Chinese problem as a whole. Smoking was

not the common mode of consuming opium in England and had heavy Oriental undertone. As such it would more immediately take on the moral question that surfaced regarding opium use among the Chinese. Further, because opium taken for medical reasons was almost always consumed as laudanum or in pill form, “the opium smoker could not claim the morally ambiguous status of the opium-eater in the eyes of Victorian Society” (Parssinen 66). Even from very early in the century both De Quincey and Coleridge wanted it to be understood that their addiction rose from the medically necessary use of the drug. The opium smoker was most often indulging in the drug for pleasure. The sense that a pleasure of this kind is harmful, and even morally wrong, is directly linked to the stories of Chinese use.

Many have remarked on the similarity of the opium den accounts of the time which are so many and so similar as to achieve almost urban myth status. Sweet argues that if the image we have today is of “a Victorian East End populated by divan-sprawled dope-fiends” then “the Victorians have only themselves to blame for this misapprehension of their culture [because]...journalist and activists, rarely let the facts impede the flow of Gothic extravagance” (Sweet 91). The accounts are surely exaggerated in the scope they give of both the number of these establishments and the patrons who support them. The sheer number of reports is explained in a few different ways. Parssinen doubts “whether the authors actually made the visit, or simply plagiarized from one another’s accounts” (52). Sweet believes that the simple reason for “this shared repertoire” is that all of the accounts can only be linked to “one of two establishments” (92). Thus the epidemic quality sometimes given to these establishments is a hoax. Nevertheless, as an urban legend, the opium den became a symbol of the

Orient invading the very heart of England and having the very real threat of disturbing what is “English” about it. Dickens’s account in *Drood* makes this turn. In describing the symbolic force of the opium den, Parssinen writes, “Finally, the opium den was an alien institution—where colored men dreamt strange dreams and spoke in unintelligible languages—in the heart of London. One need not be conversant with the new germ theory of disease to perceive in these foreign particles lodged in the body of British society an unsettling threat” (Parssinen 66-67). The opium den and the oriental influence associated therein became a major source of concern for what was seen as the possibility of oriental contagion. Everything that was wrong with the orient in English eyes, its ill temper, its lack of progress, its laziness, its tyrannical cruelty and low criminality became all embodied in a single threat to English life in the form of opium.

Opium and Oriental Contagion

The Mystery of Edwin Drood is not the first text to explore the Oriental nature of opium; as we have seen from the Romantics’ writings, opium had long held a connection with the Orient. It was not only an oriental product, but was the fantastical means of transporting the user into dreams of Oriental grandeur or terror. Dickens is unique, however, in that on his account opium not only has the power to give the user access to the Orient, but opium also gives the orient access to the user. Opium can be the means of making the Occidental self into the Oriental.

Dickens sets forth the notion of Oriental contagion very early in the text, when in the opening scene Jasper observes that the opium woman has “opium-smoked herself into a strange likeness of the Chinaman” (Dickens, *Drood* 2). The women of opium dens in newspaper accounts are likewise “usually ambiguously English” (Lysack 20). The ability

of opium to transmute nationality, even in Jasper, becomes evident when in the same scene Jasper watches the opium woman, who has just taken a pipe, observing the “spasmodic shoots and darts that break out of her face and limbs, like fitful lightning out of a dark sky” when “some contagion in them seizes upon him: insomuch that he has to withdraw himself to a lean arm-chair by the hearth...until he has got the better of this unclean spirit of imitation” (Dickens, *Drood* 3). Jasper’s physical reaction to Princess Puffer’s use of opium implies a possibility that Jasper might also be making the same transformation to the Oriental countenance and manner that the opium woman manifests. It would seem that Jasper’s moments of opium use are also those in which the “dangers and delights of the East are literally ingested” and begin to represent a part of Jasper’s moral, mental, and physical make up (Lysack 18).

Stanley points out that physical transformation was a new element of drug use in Dickens's work even if moral corruption was not: "Opium affords Jasper a variety of physical and mental alterations, including occasionally demonic features, fits, preternatural composure, and considerable powers of endurance” (15). These physical transformations evoke the same response from Jasper’s countrymen. Edwin turns away with a “scared face” as his uncle undergoes the effects of the opium as they “steal over [him] like a blight” (Dickens, *Drood* 10). Rosa, as we have already pointed out, associates her fear and loathing of Jasper when this same effect of the opium is evident in his face. On receiving the news that Rosa’s engagement with Edwin was broken, rendering Jasper’s motive for the murder irrelevant, Jasper has a sort of fit which leaves him unconscious on the ground, at which point Mr. Grewgious “has his suspicions” about Jasper’s character (Dickens, *Drood* 139). In every point these physical transformations

become keys by which others discern Jasper's character and the hidden nature in him which is closely associated with his secret opium addiction, and in each instance the fright and suspicion manifest in those who glimpse this secret nature informs the shift that came to associate fear and suspicion to opium use.

Although Jasper's physical transformation is so evident in the text, Stanley argues that "Jasper's corruption is anything but Eastern" reasoning that the cause of his corruption is not of Eastern origin, but do to "the strictures under which he is forced to operate" (21-22). These strictures, the oppressiveness of Jasper's social role as he sees it, are of an English, not Oriental, nature. Stanley's claims that Jasper's social problems are the root of his corruption are no doubt justly made, but Jasper's reaction to those social strictures have clear Oriental undertones. The corollaries between his violence and the violence of the other foreigners of the novel (Landless and the Lascar opium smoker) point strongly to an Oriental origin, one which not only seems primitive in force and reason, but terrible in its consequences for both the individual and society.

It is true that Jasper was not a void that opium filled with corruption; rather, the elements of Jasper's corruption were present before his opium addiction. Stanley argues: "Opium makes conscious, and then fulfills fantastically Jasper's darkest volitions, whilst simultaneously throwing into sharp relief the frustrations upon which these are predicated" (19). Opium does not allow Jasper to see his real problems as they are, but monomaniacal magnifies them to such an extent that it evokes extreme action.

Jasper's reaction to his situation and his change in temperament in many ways mirror the more negative attributes the Oriental. Although Jasper's problems are of English and not Oriental origin, the text "suggests that Jasper's murderous hatred is at

least in part a result of contamination by the foreign in the form of that ‘oriental’ panacea and poison, opium...” (Schmitt). Jasper is like the Oriental in his cunning plotting (the plan we understand him to have had through his confession to the opium woman); in his harsh and commanding way with Rosa, he treats her “with the usual want of Gallantry of Orientals toward the fair sex” (“Oriental Superstitions” 134); and in how he “shows a primitive’s ‘lack of self-control’” (Dolin 98). However bad the oriental qualities as taken on by Jasper may be, however, the text offers an alternate version of the Oriental in the case of the Landlesses, who are from Ceylon. It has been argued elsewhere that they may function in the novel as a redeeming Oriental presence (John 236). With positive aspects of the Oriental being attributed to the Landlesses, the negative aspects of the Orient are left with only one antecedent in the novel, and that is opium.

Opium’s ability to take over the otherwise Englishness of a person, becomes evident in the case of Jasper, but so frightening are those implications that many attempts since the book’s publication have been made to somehow associate Jasper more naturally with the other, whether in the form of the lower class, or the Orient directly. R.A.S. Macalister theorizes that the “opium woman is Jasper’s mother” through “asserting that Edwin’s comment ‘How like Jack’—reveals he has perceived a family resemblance” rather than an opium smoked likeness (Cox 318). Felix Aylmer postulates that Jasper is half Egyptian, theorizing that Jasper would have been revealed as the illegitimate son of Edwin’s father by an Egyptian girl, causing a blood feud that results in the Edwin’s murder (Cox 403). Other theories proliferate that somehow Jasper is not what the text makes him out to be: an English gentlemen. But the text provides us no such convenient

escape from the possibility of Oriental contagion. The infection begins with opium and is only an importer of evil.

Through portraying opium as a corrupting influence in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Dickens was contributing to the negative press opium was already beginning to receive. This depiction of genteel use helped break down the class biased perceptions of opium use, changing the evils associated with opium use from a merely working class problem, to a more universalized opium problem. Dickens's publication thus represents a significant shift in popular thinking about opium use.

Edwin Drood's influence on the popular conception of opium can be seen in the extent to which newspaper accounts of opium dens replicated Dickens's picture of them. Some even as late as 1874 explicitly state that they set out and claim to have accomplished verification of Dickens's findings ("*Edwin Drood* and Opium Smoking"). Such accounts, written four years after the publication of *Edwin Drood*, attest to the continued interest in and credibility given to Dickens's account of opium in which opium itself becomes evil and those who use it become depraved.

CONCLUSION

Victorian writers faced a changing world of drug use. Previous to the nineteenth century, the implications of opium use had been very little remarked on, except in medical circles, but during the first half of the century there developed two very different perspectives on opium use. De Quincey's and Coleridge's view of opium would come to represent the Romantic view, which celebrated opium as a means to a heightened aesthetic experience and access to artistic inspiration. A class biased view of opium use portraying lower class users of the drug as innately filthy and criminal also emerged. As the century progressed, a negative conception of opium use across all classes became increasingly common.

The overall shift in the cultural conception of opium use was one away from acceptance of its use for any medical reason, however ambiguous, and even self-experimentation with the drug; toward an explicit rejection, fear, and suspicion of all non-medical uses of the drug, where even what constituted a medical use was coming to be more rigidly defined. Even doctors became no longer willing to self-experiment in the ways De Quincy describes because it would be risking "branding themselves degenerate inebriates" as the prevailing opinion increasingly saw opium use toward the end of the century (Milligan, "Morphine Addicted Doctors" 546). Accompanying this shift, there arose organizations like the Society for the Suppression of the Opium Trade, founded only a few years after the publications of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, organizations

which sought to bring about greater restrictions on the drug generally, and end the trade with China in particular.

The gradual nature of this shift, however, can be seen in the conclusion reached by The Royal Commission on Opium (1890s), commissioned to determine the effects of the opium trade on Indian society. The Commission “much to the dismay of anti-opium activists...not only determined that the trade should continue, but also declared that ‘the temperate use of opium in India should be viewed in the same light as the temperate use of alcohol in England’--in other words, without too much concern” (Mandancy v). The nineteenth century did not produce a homogeneous opinion on opium, but it did bring about debate on its merits and its dangers that would lead to its eventual illegality. The works of Gaskell, Eliot, and Dickens stand in the midst of a cultural shift, not only reflecting a negative societal view of opium, but contributing to the formation of that view by showing us a portrait of opium use that in each instance reveals it to be a problem drug.

For each of these novelists opium holds a slightly different meaning. For Gaskell opium becomes a coping mechanism by which the poor struggle to survive. For Eliot opium is a means to escape unpleasant reality. For Dickens opium becomes a conduit to the Orient and, like in Eliot, a means to temporarily escape from one’s actuality. Opium serves as a fruitful symbol in each case whereby the author is enabled to expound on the larger themes within their work. But opium’s emblematic meaning in these works is always a negative one, and in every instance it is accompanied by miserable consequences.

Gaskell's view of opium is that of a coping mechanism that proves to be more harmful than preserving. Hunger gives way to craving, embitterment, and murder, while preventing the user from feeling the sympathy that might have changed his circumstances. The escapism associated with Eliot's view of opium proves to be both morally damning and physically destructive, making possible both Lydgate's failure and Molly's death. In Dickens where opium operates as passage to the world of the Orient, it also operates as a means by which Oriental irrationality and violence infect the user. In all three authors the mental effect of opium is as important as any of its physical effects; opium is depicted as having the power to distort the reality of the user. This warping of perception causes the characters to act against their own better selves: Barton against his natural affection and desire to serve his fellowman, Molly against her motherly tenderness, Lydgate against his higher ideals, and Jasper against his love for his nephew.

In each of their negative responses to the drug Gaskell, Eliot, and Dickens are responding to notions of the drug which constituted the contemporary reactions to opium: the Romantic view and class biased perceptions of the drug. Gaskell and Eliot refute the negative lower class image of opium use by attributing the negative effects of its use to non-class based origins. All three authors' works provide testament that the negative effects of opium are not limited to the lower classes. All three also reject the Romantic view of opium, by revealing the motives for, and the effects of, taking opium to be always less grand than the Romantics had made them out to be. They portray opium use as a low and desperate move, one that always involves an element of moral danger and possible degradation. Each of these responses to uses of opium in these works shows us

a unique instance of how these authors responded to the world around them, using their art as a means of social commentary on contemporary issues.

While these authors were reacting to popular thought on opium at the time they wrote, but there is also evidence, in the cases of Gaskell and Dickens, that they were also a contributing influence to the social perception of the drug. As has already been noted, Dickens's audience saw a connection between opium and the murder plot and numerous newspaper journalists claim to affirm his depiction of opium dens in the East-End. In a review of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, published in the *Academy* (1870), Edith Simcox links Jasper's opium use to his villainy, characterizing him as: "John Jasper, opium-eater, music-master and murderer, is a villain of the melodramatic type..." (qtd. in Collins 545-546). Charles Kingsley recognized the negative view of opium in *Mary Barton* in a review published in *Fraser's Magazine* (1849): "Do [people] want to know what drives men to gin and opium, that they may drink and forget their sorrow, though it be in madness? Let them read *Mary Barton*" (qtd. in Easson, *Critical Heritage* 153-154). Each of these reviews demonstrates how these novels encouraged the formation of a negative view of opium in their readers. Further, it is well known that each of these were extremely popular novels. The portraits of opium in them would have reached an incredibly large audience of readers and thereby helped to influence the growing belief that opium use was a social problem.

In each of their works that portrayed the use of opium, Gaskell, Eliot, and Dickens were inspired by opium's symbolic significance, and used it to contribute to a larger theme within their work, while at the same time responding to and influencing contemporary social perception of its use. Their portraits of the drug invariably caste

opium in a negative strain, and were indicative of and tributary to an emerging popular consciousness which conceived of opium as a problem drug. Opium in their hands became a social and moral evil.

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