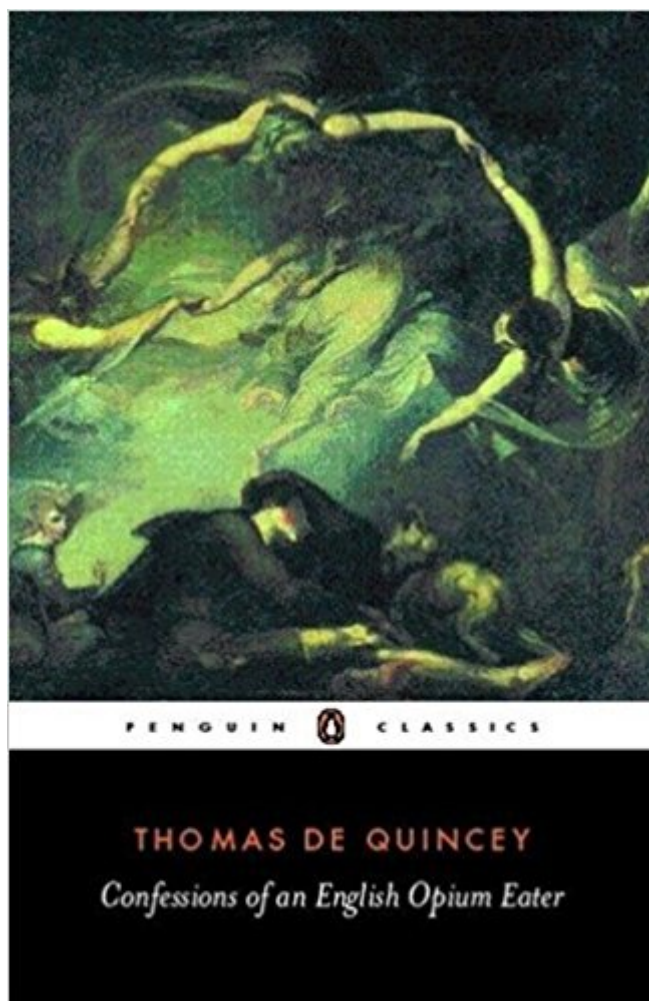


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# Confessions Of An English Opium Eater



## Synopsis

In this remarkable autobiography, Thomas De Quincey hauntingly describes the surreal visions and hallucinatory nocturnal wanderings he took through London—and the nightmares, despair, and paranoia to which he became prey—under the influence of the then-legal painkiller laudanum. Forging a link between artistic self-expression and addiction, *Confessions* seamlessly weaves the effects of drugs and the nature of dreams, memory, and imagination. First published in 1821, it paved the way for later generations of literary drug users, from Baudelaire to Burroughs, and anticipated psychoanalysis with its insights into the subconscious. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Thomas De Quincey (1785-1859) studied at Oxford, failing to take his degree but discovering opium. He later met Coleridge, Southey and the Wordsworths. From 1828 until his death he lived in Edinburgh and made his living from journalism. Barry Milligan is a professor of English at Wright State University and author of *Pleasures and Pains* (Virginia UP, 1995).

By the time Thomas De Quincey wrote "Confessions of an English Opium-Eater" the subject of narcotics was very much a taboo, thus the author was the founder of a new type of literature - addiction literature. The book's structure is as follows: Part I (To the Reader and Preliminary Confessions), Part II (Pleasures of Opium, Introduction to the Pains of Opium, The Pains of Opium, May 1818, June 1819), Appendix and Footnotes. When De Quincey was seven, his father died, leaving him in the care of four tutors. After changing several esteemed boarding schools, the protagonist came to Eton, where he discovered his passion for Old Greek and Ancient literature. However, he wanted to drop out of school when he was seventeen but his guardians didn't approve, therefore he ran away from Eton. He traveled to Northern Wales where the villagers asked him to do small work as an exchange to food and a place to stay. Unfortunately, he ran short of money and he was forced to move on, thus he found himself in London. There he almost starved to death, but a fifteen-years-old prostitute - Ann - saved him and thus the two became friends. Her gesture and his sympathy for her followed him all his life, but he did not see her again because he had never asked for her last name. Being fed up with poverty, De Quincey asks an old school friend - Earl of D - to lend him some money to return home. He reconciles with his family and goes to Oxford University. From this point on, the narrator begins to tell his reader about his good and bad experiences with opium. As De Quincey confesses, the previous period of his life left deep marks on his health - severe stomachaches, intolerance to certain foods and psychic traumas. The first time he used opium was after a friend suggested it as a pain-killer for toothache. Afterwards, he began consuming it regularly by counting the drops. Throughout the years he had to consume more because the dose didn't have the same pleasant effects. The obsessive counting of the drops may represent the fact that De Quincey wanted to keep his addiction under control, because he took it for medical reasons, not for pleasure. My favorite part of the book is when De Quincey began to feel the bad effects of opium such as the hallucinations and nightmares, which usually took place in Orient and North Africa (China, Turkey, and Egypt etc.), places that exported opium to Europe. The Malay, who has previously showed up at his door and to whom De Quincey offers a good amount of opium, he will also appear in the author's dreams. The style of the Confessions is erudite, seasoned with Greek terms, references to Ancient literature and other domains. (art, economy, political science etc.) Even if the title suggests the idea of confessions regarding the author's life, here opium is the center piece of the book, with its positive and negative effects. There are also many digressions that might annoy the reader, but they have their purpose, such as the causes and the justification for De Quincey's use of opium.

Wow what a read. A look into early investigators of not only, drugs and their effects, but those of the criminal mind, see THE FINE ART OF MURDER by David Morell

Interesting historical work that has transcended the centuries, unfortunately, i.e. heroin addiction not the book.

Only bought it because of my interest in Charles Baudelaire. Not the same sort of thing as B's prose and poetry.

well written insightful text

I decided to read this classic description of the effects of consuming opium because it was mentioned in *The Moonstone* by Wilkie Collins, a contemporary of Charles Dickens, and because opium use is such an important element in Dickens' last, uncompleted novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. I am not fully sure how the use of opium in Dickens' time differs from the use of heroin today. I know, of course, that opium was smoked and is probably still smoked in Chinese opium dens, but that it was usually dissolved in alcohol, as "laudanum", in Europe. Heroin, on the other hand, is usually melted and injected directly into the blood stream. If the author, Thomas de Quincey, suffered terrible hallucinations from heavy use of laudanum, I can only guess at the severity of the effects of heroin injection. I found this book, published about 1820, quite dated, telling me much more about its author than about the positive and negative effects of opium use. That the use was quite widespread surprised me, although I learned that opium was neither taxed nor banned in England in the author's time period. De Quincey's description of the effects of opium during the first eight or nine years of his use is really more interesting than his description of the horrors he experienced after that time, when he tried to decrease and stop his usage -- to save his life. I will cite just a couple of quotations to illustrate the different stages of the story. The effect of opium use upon the author's mind and his appreciation of music: "Certainly opium is classed under the head of narcotics, and some such effect it may produce in the end; but the primary effects of opium are always, and in the highest degree, to excite and stimulate the system . . . 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  $\tilde{f}\tilde{A}\tilde{c}\tilde{A}$   $\hat{=}$   $\tilde{A}$   $\hat{=}$  • not as if recalled by an act of memory, but as if present and incarnated in the music." One of the milder effects of over-usage: "But my proper vocation, as I well know, was the

exercise of the analytic understanding. Now, for the most part analytic studies are continuous, and not to be pursued by fits and starts, or fragmentary efforts. Mathematics, for instance, intellectual philosophy, &c, were all become insupportable to me; I shrunk from them with a sense of powerless and infantine feebleness that gave me an anguish the greater from remembering the time when I grappled with them to my own hourly delight" A compendium of several of the author's descriptions of opium's terrifying disruption of his sleep: "The sense of space, and in the end the sense of time, were both powerfully affected. Buildings, landscapes, &c., were exhibited in proportions so vast as the bodily eye is not fitted to receive . . . did not disturb me so much as the vast expansion of time; I sometimes seemed to have lived for 70 or 100 years in one night . . . nay, sometimes had feelings representative of a millennium passed in that time . . . This, from some opium experiences of mine, I can believe; I have indeed seen the same thing asserted twice in modern books, and accompanied by a remark which I am convinced is true; viz., that the dread book of account which the Scriptures speak of is in fact the mind itself of each individual." This book is interesting, but I suggest that you skim some of the early sections, which describe the author's early life in much detail, and pay more attention to his description of his actual experiences with the drug and with trying to terminate his usage. What happened to the author after the publication of this book, I do not know, but suspect that he never fully escaped the consequences of his long usage.

I loved the personal account of the main character - an observant and philosophical diarist - describing his life and descent into drug addiction during the age of reason. There was an unexpected end as well. Not a long book, but one of unique insight and impact.

exquisite language, awesome sentences, fun in its rhythm

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