

Thomas dequincey – opium eater assignment



Thomas De Quincey: The Essays of an Opium Eater In his own words he spent his life “ selling knowledge”. Did he not understand his potential or did his potential not give him enough self determination? He was born Thomas Quincey in 1785 to a textile importer in Manchester, England. One of eight children, he was the fifth child and second son. His struggles began as a young child and continued throughout his long life. He was a sickly child suffering from the whooping cough. He would later remember the dreams that he had when he was a small child.

After the death of his father, his mother moved the family to Bath; Quincey was eight years old. As a family, they did not struggle financially due to the money that his father left behind. Mrs. Quincey sent him to school under the name of Thomas de Quincey. Upon reading the Lyrical Ballads, he described them as “ the greatest event in the unfolding of my mind”. His love for literature started here. While his interest in writing was sparked, he also hated the school. After the early death of his young sister he found himself wanting to change his life and run away from his depression and troubles.

His sister’s death would haunt him for the rest of his life and would lead him to a life that he would want to escape. Thomas ran away from the school and found himself penniless and hungry on the streets of London for months. Eventually he returned to live with his family and continued to explore literature. While he began to grow as a writer, he also started his longest struggle - what would someday make him an opium addict and a famous writer writing about a confession that he was an opium user. He started using opium as a pain killer because of a problem with facial pain.

His interest in literature led him to correspond and seek English writers. His opium use led him to become an opium addict with an overwhelming fascination of dreams and fantasy. But, it also led him to have more debt in trying to finance his addiction. De Quincey lived a long and adventurous life filled with personal struggles, drug addiction, and sufferings because he could not get out of debt. The road to get out of debt led him to meet and work with many remarkable authors who noted his work. His writings included criticism, fiction, political commentaries and essays on political issues and his personal struggles.

He shared with his audience a view of his life and his opinions while on opium. He became known as the Opium Eater and was able to fund his addiction through his writings. While he describes taking the opium in drops, he was known to keep it in a decanter and pouring it into a glass. He made efforts to reduce the amount of opium or at least reduce the potency. He writes about meeting a doctor and discussing his problem with him. Unfortunately, instead of giving him advice on how to stop the addiction, the doctor provided him a recipe to boil the opium, remove impurities, and produce a known concentrate that could be diluted.

He learned to turn solid opium to “ perfect” it to opium that graduated him to an addict for the rest of his life. His writings brought attention to society about the life of an addict. While he suffered the effects of addiction on his body and his life, the public sought his writings and provided him with a way to keep his addiction going. He was not a reliable writer in that he would not produce the essays at the rate that he was supposed to. People waited

inpatiently for each publication hoping that one of his writings would be featured.

He managed to fascinate his audience with his real life stories. Thomas De Quincey initially started his writing career with writing essays for the newspaper *The Friend*. His experience led him to become the editor of the *Westmorland Gazette*. But, his addiction didn't let him use his potential and he began his troublesome routine of writing essays to make enough money to live very early in his career. It is reported that he would keep raw opium with him and that he would eat it while on the job; his writings were usually while he was under the influence of the opium.

He was hired to write a series of essays in *The London Magazine* under the title of *Confessions of an Opium-Eater*. The series is described as " a fascinating memoir distinguished by great imaginative power and prose that is splendid and elaborate without stiffness" (Murphy, 2005, p. 276). The *Confessions of an Opium Eater* became one of the most famous essays written by Thomas De Quincey. In these essays, he writes about his life as an adolescent, running away from his family and ending up penniless and hungry; seeking a way to survive and finding that writing was his answer.

The experiences that led up to his drug addiction and his struggles to get rid of the addiction are also described. His writings talk about the life of an addict giving the public a chance to experience his life through his description of dreams, fears, fantasies and childhood memories. His description of how he as an Opium Eater, the insanity and even death tantalize the audience. He exploited the curiosity of his audience through the

emphasis of the series as one about an opium addict. But, his writings in the series were not always about opium; his writings were more about “ dreams” or visions that he saw.

Over time his use of opium was one that he could not leave behind because his addiction became his agent to see these visions and write about them. His writings provided him a means of supporting himself and his addiction. “ That the opium miseries, which are now on the point of pressing forward to the front of this narrative, connect themselves with my early hardships in London (and therefore more remotely with those in Wales) by natural links of affiliation - that is, the early series of sufferings was the parent of the latter” (De Quincey, 1969, p. 37). He chooses to end *The Confessions* in a manner that makes the reader believe that he was able to conquer his opium habit. His description about his dreams towards the end of the book are similar to those that may be described as those of an addict going through withdrawal. But, his addiction continued. About 25 years later he begins to write *The Confessions* again. This second set is described as a series of fragments filled with emotions and recollections of his life. Another of his famous writings was *The English Mail-Coach*.

It is considered to be a remarkable essay; he wrote it very late in life and while he was trying to reduce his addiction to opium. In this essay he writes about his memories about a stage-coach trip before the railroad was available. This essay is written in prose. He divides his writings into four parts that mimic a musical selection. The first part, *The Glory of Motion*, brings to the reader the sense of riding on the coach and feeling the

movement of the coach. He describes his dreams and nightmares related to this ride.

The second part, *Going Down with Victory*, is where he describes the feeling of leaving London after the victorious Battle of Talavera. The fantasy he describes leads the reader to feel the enthusiasm of living such a victory.

The third part, *The Vision of Sudden Death*, describes a terrifying experience in which the coach driver falls asleep and almost causes a fatal collision. The last part, *Dream-Fugue, Founded on the Preceding Theme of Sudden Death* is described as a combination of a dream and a nightmare. His writings describe an experience of a woman and child offered as sacrifice to pay for crimes to humanity.

In reference to *The English Mail-Coach*, De Quincey “ handled them with panache and confidence, generating a sense of extravagance entirely appropriate to the semi-hallucinated states of mind he wished to convey. There can be no doubt that the essay represents the perfection of his more elaborate manner” (Lindop, 1981, p. 380). As a writer for the *Edinburgh Saturday Post*, De Quincey wrote about an article a week that spoke to society regarding politics. It is believed that his assignments were meant to provide the public with the *Post*’s political view and not his own.

During this time period (1827 - 1828) he wrote political essays that were related to the issues of the times. His political writings were based on two different assumptions: Jacobin and anti-Jacobin. Issues such as parliamentary reformers, Whigs, radical artisans, Irish Catholic leaders, people who were against slavery were all lumped together as Jacobin, and he rejected their

ideas. His second assumption was that the Whigs and the Tory's were both needed for there to be a balance between reformers wanting change and conservatives to fight change.

Basically, he felt that the tension caused by the two forces would bring about compromise. It is not clear if this was his true opinion or if he chose to write what he felt the Post wanted him to write and the viewpoint they wanted expressed. He argued that slavery should not be abolished because slave owners had invested money in slaves to farm and finance their estates; to take away their slaves would be the same as attacking the estate owners and leading them to losing their land. His writings did not address the ethical issues of owning other human beings and taking their happiness and rights away from them.

De Quincey was known as the Tory commentator for the Post but the views that he expressed sounded like he did not know much about the subject he wrote about and that he was really just expressing the views of the Post.

Regardless, society viewed him as a Tory and followed his writings (Lindop, 1981, p. 285-287). His writings during the Romantic Movement in Europe in the early 19th century took literature to a new level. His essays in

Confessions of an English Opium Eater raised the essay to a high level type of writing where De Quincey's revealed highly private matters in a very public manner (Harman, 2006, p. -10). He was considered by other famous

writers to come, such as Jorge Luis Borges, to be an exuberant romantic essayist who was probably the most crucial for those writers after him

(Bloom, 1994, p. 403). Little is known about De Quincey's church habits, but it appears he was Catholic. It does not seem like he was a regular

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churchgoer; his writings do not describe this routine. The opium was very important to his life and he found the effects to reward him with visions that he regarded as “ glimpses of a hidden spiritual world” (Lindop, 1981, p. 91). His writings reveal his choice of words to be those reflective of a Catholic. He called himself the opium “ pope”. The *Supiria de Profundis* that he wrote in 1849 allows us into his own dreams; he shares a story about four women (Levana and Our Ladies of Sorrow). The Ladies are revealed associated with the Three Fates, Three Furies and Three Graces. “ One was Our Lady of Tears, who presided over bereavement and mourning. The second, Our Lady of Sighs, he connected with the parish, the outcast, the houseless vagrant” (Lindop, 1981, p. 357).

The third is identified as the Lady of Darkness who he describes as a defier of God and who can “ approach only those in whom a profound nature has been upheaved by central convulsions; in whom the heart trembles and the brain rocks under conspiracies of tempest from without and tempest from within” (Lindop, 1981, p. 357). The writings where De Quincey speaks about God and religion share glimpses of a hidden world with some sense of his religious belief. “ There are indications that from these elements he constructed a private mystery-religion of which only a few cryptic fragments are revealed in his writings” (Lindop, 1981, p. 91). De Quincey would spend hours writing excuses as to why his work would be late when it would have taken just as long for him to write his essay. Constantly hounded by creditors because of his constant debt, he continued to write essays. His writings continue right along with his addiction and his debt throughout his long life. While he describes himself as an addict he writes about how his addiction did

not altar him morally or mentally. He stood firm that his health was impaired only temporarily and not irrecoverably while he was under the influence of the drug.

His struggles with his addiction and his constant debt slowly consumed his life. " De Quincey was secretive, introverted, poor at some kinds of decision-making and fascinated by dream and fantasy long before he took opium. All these tendencies increased" (Lindop, 1981, p. 390). What is really interesting is the fact that De Quincey died at an old age; opium dominated his life, but he used the drug addiction to creatively write about it. He was able to survive through his drug addiction and the life-long struggles that it brought to his life. He used his addiction to run away from the things in his life that had brought him pain. He did not close his eyes or resign himself to defeat, and despite the follies, indignities and failures of his life our final impression is of a man both lovable and oddly heroic" (Lindop, 1981, p. 392). Thomas De Quincey died at the age of 74. His daughter described him to be strong to the end. She recalls that moments before his death he called out for his sister as if in great surprise and most probably seeing her once again; he then fell asleep forever. Did he not understand his potential or did his potential not give him enough self determination?

Even with these questions we are still astonished with his achievements as a writer. He will be forever remembered as The Opium Eater - the man who captivated an audience while under the influence of a very powerful drug.

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