

# “Confessions of an English Opium-Eater” by Thomas De Quincey [B2]

Queste memorie sulla dipendenza e il subconscio sollevarono un grande scalpore all'epoca della loro uscita, per la descrizione cruda ma brillante degli effetti della droga sulla mente umana. Un'opera pioniera per diverse correnti culturali, dagli autori romantici ai precursori della psicoanalisi.

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In 1821 one of the most authoritative and eloquent [accounts](#) of drug addiction in English history was published anonymously in The London Magazine. Thomas De Quincey's Confessions of an English Opium-Eater describes the author's dependence on [laudanum](#), an alcoholic solution containing opium, and its effects on his physical and mental states.

## DEAR READER...

De Quincey wrote the autobiographical Confessions in the [backroom](#) of a London pub, where he was hiding from [debt collector](#). The text, of around one-hundred pages, was sent off to the magazine [in a rush](#); [stains](#) on the paper were later revealed to be coffee, and not opium as popularly believed! Confessions was initially published in two [instalments](#). It was an instant [hit](#), and a book version appeared the following year. De Quincey begins the book by stating his intentions: **“I trust that it will prove, not merely an interesting record, but, in a considerable degree, useful and instructive. In that hope it is, that I have drawn it up: and that must be my apology for breaking through that delicate and honourable reserve, which, for the most part, restrains us from the public exposure of our own errors and infirmities.”** “Confido che sarà per te, come è stata per me, non solo una storia interessante, ma in qualche modo anche utile e istruttiva. L'ho scritta con questa speranza, e questa sia la mia scusa se son venuto meno a quel delicato, dignitoso riserbo che per lo più ci trattiene dall'espore in pubblico i nostri errori e le nostre debolezze.”

## A USEFUL DRUG

In the following section, entitled “Pleasures of Opium”, the author explains why he got addicted in the first place. At the time, [laudanum](#) was widely prescribed for a [range](#) of minor illnesses, from [coughs](#) to [cramps](#) to diarrhoea. De Quincey revealed just how prolific its recreational use was: [mill workers](#), poets, and politicians all depended on it. De Quincey provides his own [backstory](#): the son of a successful Manchester [merchant](#) who died when he was young, he [ran away](#) from school and spent time [destitute](#) in London. He returned home and went to Oxford University. It was here, in 1804, that De Quincey used [laudanum](#) for the first time, to [relieve toothache](#). **“I took it: — and in an hour, oh! Heavens! what a revulsion! what an upheaving, from its lowest depths, of the inner spirit! what an apocalypse of the world within me!”** “Lo presi: e dopo un’ora, o cieli! Che rivoluzione! Come si sollevò, dalle più basse profondità, il mio spirito più intimo! Che apocalisse di tutto il mondo, dentro di me!”

## EMOTIONALLY PRONE

De Quincey, who had soon [dropped out](#) of university too, suffered terrible stomach aches which led to increased doses and addiction to [laudanum](#). He [claims](#) that his emotional state and “philosophical” character made him particularly [prone](#) to the drug. He compares opium favourably to alcohol, saying the former brought clarity and stimulated his mind — at least, at first. **“Oh! just, subtle, and mighty opium! that to the hearts of poor and rich alike, for the wounds that will never heal, and for ‘the pangs that tempt the spirit to rebel,’ bringest an assuaging balm; eloquent opium! that with thy potent rhetoric stealest away the purposes of wrath; and to the guilty man, for one night givest back the hopes of his youth, and hands washed pure of blood...”** “O giusto, misterioso e potente oppio che ai cuori dei poveri e dei ricchi, senza differenza, per le ferite insanabili e per le pene «che tentano lo spirito alla rivolta», porti un balsamo di pace! Oppio eloquente, che con la tua stringente retorica blandisci i propositi dell’ira: e al colpevole restituisci per una notte le speranze della gioventù, purificando le sue mani insanguinate”

## NASTY EFFECTS

In the following section, "The Pains of Opium", De Quincey recounts its [awful](#) effects. Opium leaves one physically immobile, he admits. His most alarming passages, however, are those describing his drug-induced ["waking dreams"](#). At a time when the British Empire was at the [pinnacle](#) of its power, the author suffered nightmares mixing up terrifying fantastical images of "the Orient". **"The unimaginable horror which these dreams of oriental imagery, and mythological tortures, impressed upon me... I was stared at, hooted at, grinned at, chattered at, by monkeys, by paroquets, by cockatoos... I was buried, for a thousand years, in stone coffins, with mummies and sphinxes, in narrow chambers at the heart of eternal pyramids."** "L'orrore inimmaginabile che suscitavano in me quei sogni pieni di visioni orientali, di torture mitologiche... Ero circondato da occhi e smorfie di scimmie, da grida e schiamazzi di pappagalli e cacatoa... Ero seppellito per mille anni in bare di pietra, con le mummie e le sfingi, in qualche stretta camera nel cuore di piramidi eterne."

## A PIONEER TEXT

De Quincey ends Confessions by suggesting he has [overcome](#) his addiction. In fact, he remained dependent on [laudanum](#) for the rest of his life. While Confessions is subjective and parts of it are probably invented, the social implications of the text are profound. It immediately provoked debate on the causes of opiate use, dependence and [withdrawal](#) techniques, topics that remain relevant today. The book also [gave rise](#) to [countless](#) journalistic and literary [accounts](#) that explore recreational drug use or addiction in a variety of ways.

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# Glossary

- **awful** = tremendi
- **cramps** = crampi
- **backstory** = retroscena
- **ran away** = scappare
- **relieve** = alleviare
- **backroom** = retrobottega
- **claims** = sostenere
- **countless** = innumerevoli
- **laudanum** = laudano
- **dropped out** = abbandonare, ritirarsi
- **toothache** = mal di denti
- **prone** = propenso, incline
- **stains** = macchie
- **destitute** = indigente
- **instalments** = fascicoli
- **merchant** = mercante
- **coughs** = tosse
- **pinnacle** = culmine
- **overcome** = superare
- **withdrawal** = astinenza
- **accounts** = testimonianze
- **hit** = successo
- **range** = serie, varietà
- **mill workers** = operai di fabbrica
- **"waking dreams"** = sogni a occhi aperti
- **gave rise** = dare luogo
- **debt collector** = addetti al recupero crediti
- **in a rush** = di corsa