

# Opium for Victorian England

Opium use didn't produce as much resistance as alcohol, or incite the interest of the temperance movement until very late in the nineteenth century when it became obvious that permissiveness towards drugs and double standards in international trade opened many ethical questions for the government.

With opium and other drugs becoming global commodities and the pharmaceutical industry making opiates the drugs of mass abuse in big European and American cities, an estimated 5 out of 6 working class English families used opium on a regular basis in Victorian England. With alcoholism denounced as one of the most notable sins of the lower classes looking for an escape from a dreary existence, opium's effects were actually preferred because it never produced the aggression or the violence that were usually associated with alcohol.



Opium was easy to come by--physicians dispensed opiates directly to patients or wrote prescriptions for them, and pharmacists sold them over the counter. There were numerous items of patent medication containing opium or morphine as well. Godfrey's Cordial was particularly popular in England, where it was sold by the thousands of bottles, and administered not only to adults, but to infants and toddlers as well. Even Marx reported in *Capital* about the English habit of "dosing their

babies" with opium.

FOR COUGHS ~~AND~~ CROUP USE  
**TAYLOR'S**  
**CHEROKEE**



**REMEDY**  
 OF  
**SWEET GUM**  
 AND  
**MULLEIN.**

The sweet gum, as gathered from a tree of the same name, growing along the small streams in the Southern States, contains a stimulating expectorant principle that loosens the phlegm, soothes the rawly sore throat, and stimulates the child to draw off the thin mucus in easy and pleasant cough. When combined with the leading medicinal principle in the mullein plant of the old world, presents in Taylor's Remedy, known as Sweet Gum and Mullein the best remedy, ready for Coughs, Croup, Whooping-Cough and Consumption; and as a reliable, safe child remedy to take it. Ask your druggist for it. Price, 25c, and 5c. **WALTER A. TAYLOR, Atlanta, Ga.**

See DR. SUTHERN'S HICKLEBERRY CURATIVE, for Diarrhoea, Dysentery and Children's Teething. For sale by all druggists.

While the medicinal use of opiates was perfectly acceptable in Victorian times, the "social," recreational use was borderline respectable, although it was legal for a long time. Of course, it was always hard to tell where the medicinal use would cross over into the field of recreation, particularly with the issue of class bearing upon availability of alternative forms of "entertainment."

In 1873, an English physician noted:

...Amongst the three millions and three-quarters [people in London] there are to be found some persons here and there who take [opium] as a luxury, though by far the greater number of those who take it in anything like quantity do so for some old neuralgia or rheumatic malady, and began under medical advice. Neither is it to be found over the agricultural or manufacturing districts, save in the most scattered and casual way. The genuine opium-eating districts are the ague and fen districts of Norfolk and Lincolnshire. There it is not casual, accidental, or rare, but popular, habitual, and common.

Anyone who visits such a town as Louth or Wisbeach, and strolls about the streets on a Saturday evening, watching the country people as they do their marketing, may soon satisfy himself that the crowds in the chemists' shops come for opium; and they have a peculiar way of getting it. They go in, lay down their money, and receive the opium pills in exchange without saying a word. For instance, I was at Wisbeach one evening in August 1871; went into a chemist's shop; laid a penny on the counter. The chemist said - "The best?" I nodded. He gave me a pill box

and took up the penny; and so the purchase was completed without my having uttered a syllable. You offer money, and get opium as a matter of course. This may show how familiar the custom is....

In these districts it is taken by people of all classes, but especially by the poor and miserable, and by those who in other districts would seek comfort from gin or beer.

Pharmaceutical research and investment into opiate drugs as the most effective pain killers brought about opium derivatives, like [heroin](#), whose use still hasn't diminished, but whose social contextualization and acceptability have in the meantime completely changed.



For a person from a non-working class, where "keeping up appearances" was order of the day, opium consumption was a less conspicuous and still a legal way to indulge in a break away from Victorian binds that prescribed an unfaltering strength of will and constant sobriety for every individual in society. The necessity of a split between public images of sensible, responsible British citizens and unaccountable drug users created a culture of opium dens - like the one frequented by Sherlock Holmes - in which the mask of decency and sobriety could be shaken off away from the public eye.

The "oriental" element was accused of badly influencing the moral British society, further disseminating prejudice and partial representations of Asians, while diminishing the role of England itself in its



"O li'l Lucia .... White Blossom .... Twelve years old!"

own infliction.

Numerous Victorian literary works and authors, who usually came from environments that didn't make their living working for wages, dealt with opiates whose function was sometimes medicinal, but frequently also was a way to re-vivify imagination or relocate into a world more colorful than Victorian England.

[Alfred Lord Tennyson's](#) less-famous brother Charles was an opium addict, and his wife Louisa (the sister of Alfred's wife) suffered from a nervous collapse after years of trying to help Charles get over his addiction. There is speculation that Charles's problem of opium was so debilitating that rather than inspiring him, it prevented him from becoming a more prolific writer. His poem "[Silkworms and Spiders](#)" alludes to the "web" of drug addiction and the opium-induced "trance" which is "deadly-deep." The style of decadence and aestheticism which characterized the end of the nineteenth century as well as the end of the Victorian era was fraught with languorous images alluding to opium use. [Oscar Wilde](#), reputed to be an opium smoker, details this decadent lifestyle in [The Picture of Dorian Gray](#). In the novel, Dorian epitomizes the British literary dandy whose haunts include opium dens tucked away in the dark corners of London streets. Opium is also widely believed to have provided inspiration for Lewis Carroll's hallucinatory images in his popular book [Alice's Adventures In Wonderland](#).

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