The Victorians' Opioid Epidemic

Susan Smith Nash, Ph.D.

Abstract

They had one at home. They caused one in China. And, they spawned mono-economies in Afghanistan, corruption in the ports, and vast networks of shipping, financing, and service companies all founded on the medicinal properties, but above all, the miraculously addictive properties of opium (Diniejko, 2002).

Victorians of the British Empire had their own opioid epidemic and opium trading of truly global extent, with repercussions that persist even into our own times.

Introduction

The Victorians wrote about their own addictions, and there is surprisingly little glamorization. There is no "heroin chic" – instead, there is an awareness of the fleeting relief that opium (mainly laudanum, liquid containing 10% opium). The most famous (or infamous) are probably Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," supposedly written about an opium dream, which was written in 1797, but not published until 1816. There is also Thomas DeQuincey's autobiographical *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821). In one famous passage, "The Pains of Opium," DeQuincey describes the horrors of withdrawals and the desperate need for more laudanum, a temporary relief, followed by self-loathing.

Wilkie Collins, of *The Moonstone* (1868) and *The Woman in White* (1860) wrote novels that were shot through with laudanum dreams, addictions, and hints. Collins was, like his friend, Charles Dickens, regularly used laudanum, supposedly to ease the pain of gout, but more probably as the addiction took hold, to ease the pain of withdrawals.

In *Armadale* (1866), the murderous anti-heroine, Lydia Gwilt, is a charming and deeply damaged femme fatale, who maintains a diary in which she opens up her heart and writes frankly of her passions, her rage, her obsessions, her calculating progress toward her ultimate goal (seducing and then killing for money, which is intermixed with self-loathing, jealousy, desire, and a weirdly pure love). The is one of the rawest, most honest voices in Victorian fiction, and it's fascinating to read her diaries. What is more remarkable is that her voice was written by a man, Wilkie Collins. Perhaps the only other conniving femme fatales who approach Miss Gwilt's melodramatic voice are the heroines (anti-heroines) of another sensation novel writer, Mary Elizabeth Braddon.

Lydia Gwilt mesmerizes with her self-awareness, and her awareness of how she impacts people upon first sight (reminding one of Lacan's notion of the looking glass self; a sense of identity built

on what one sees reflected in another's eyes). She uses her understanding for evil, of course, and very quickly learns how to skillfully apply makeup to appear much younger, and also how to preserve her angelic face and slim, youthful figure. Her plan is to lure a man she has hated since childhood to his death. In the meantime, she wrestles with herself as she addresses her own doubts and misgivings, framed in her addiction to laudanum, which she uses to assuage pain – her psychic, soul-hurt pain.

Opium addiction did not confine itself to the literary world. Victorian England was awash with not just laudanum, but all kinds of remedies and drinks meant for all age groups (including fussy or colicky babies). There was a significant mortality rate, but there was little public alarm or outcry. England was much less regulated than today, and there were many vested interests in the opium trade (Hodgson, 2001).

Opium came to England primarily from Turkey, where it was considered the highest quality (Crane, 2011). Other opium sources were Afghanistan and India, which supplied raw materials to Anglo-Indian companies, mainly trading companies, who wished to export it to the enormous market of eager potential consumers, China.

Many of heard of the Opium Wars fought by the British on Chinese soil. Few, however, recognize that these wars were fought in order to force China to participate in free trade and to allow imports. The main product that the British wanted to be able to export to China was opium from India and Afghanistan. The Chinese rulers of the Qing Dynasty were resolutely opposed to allowing opium to enter the country, and issues many statements explaining their belief in the pernicious effects of opium on the people. They resisted, and thus the First Opium War was fought from 1839 – 1842.

Unfortunately, the Chinese ruling elite could not overcome local corruption, particularly on the level of port authorities and customs officials. Opium flowed into China through ports such as Shanghai, with terrible results. According to some estimates, some 90 percent of men under the age 40 in the coastal area were in some degree addicted to opium (Roblin, 2016). The profits soared for the Anglo-Indian companies exporting to China. Corrupt officials lined their pockets.

A second Opium War was fought with England and France uniting against China in order to open trade, of which opium was a very important (although not the only) piece. It lasted from 1856 – 1860, and in the middle of it, opium trade was officially legalized. Opium imports and addiction skyrocketed (Office of the Historian, N.D.). By 1880, China was importing more than 6,500 tons of opium a year. Addiction continued, and opium trade-related crime made Shanghai notorious. People were kidnapped and transported as slave labor to the American West (railroads), to the point that "Being Shanghaied" became common parlance.

The addiction and attendant corruption and crime were so prevalent that they led to the collapse of the entire Qing Dynasty. When the Qing Dynasty fell in 1914, it was easy for the Japanese to occupy China and the continue the opium trade, continuing to enrich the traders while maintaining a weakened, humiliated populace of addicts, criminal gangs, and corrupt officials. In fact, the degradation was so complete that it became one of the rallying cries and points of unity of the Communist Party, which pointed to "foreign devils" who were allowed to destroy China's heritage, culture, and people.

In the meantime, back in England, opioids such as laudanum, along with other medicines were regulated, and the unofficial use of the drugs was criminalized. Laudanum was no longer easily accessible, and the opiates were taken out of products intended for daily use.

References

Abrams, M.H. The Milk of Paradise: The Effect of Opium Visions on the Works of DeQuincey, Crabbe, Francis Thompson, and Coleridge. New York: Octagon Books, 1971.

Aikens, Kristina. A Pharmacy of Her Own: Victorian Women and the Figure of the Opiate. Ann Arbor, MI: ProQuest, 2008.

Crane, Louis. (2011) Drugs in Victorian England. Wellcome Collection. https://wellcomecollection.org/articles/drugs-in-victorian-britain/

Diniejko, Dandrzej. (2002) Victorian Drug Use. The Victorian Web. http://www.victorianweb.org/victorian/science/addiction/addiction2.html

Foxcroft, Louise. The Making of Addiction: The 'Use and Abuse' of Opium in Nineteenth-Century Britain. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007.

Hodgson, Barbara. In the Arms of Morpheus: The Tragic History of Morphine, Laudanum and Opium and Patent Medicines. Vancouver: Greystone Books Ltd, 2001.

Office of the Historian. (N.D.) The Opening to China Part II: The Second Opium War, the United States, and the Treaty of Tianjin, 1857 – 1859). https://history.state.gov/milestones/1830-1860/china-2

Roblin, Sebastien. (2016). "The Opium Wars: The Bloody Conflicts that Destroyed Imperial China" The National Interest. http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/the-opium-wars-the-bloody-conflicts-destroyed-imperial-china-17212

Trocki, Carl A. Opium and Empire: Chinese Society in Colonial Singapore, 1800-1910. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. 1990.

Tromp, Marlene. Altered States: Sex, Nation, Drugs, and Self-Transformation in Victorian Spiritualism. Albany: State of New York University Press, 2006.

Wilde, Oscar. The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde. New Lanark: Geddes & Grosset, 2001.

Wohl, Anthony S. Endangered Lives: Public Health in Victorian Britain. Cambridge: Harvard Uuniversity Press, 1983.