

HIST 225J: London and Modernity
Professor: Becky Conekin

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations.—Teo Soares

Hearts of Darkness: Opium Dens and Urban
Exploration in Late Victorian London

by Teo Soares

Deep in the East End, beneath a moon that was a yellow skull, Dorian Gray treaded the slimy, wet pavement:

He hurried towards the left, glancing now and then to see if he was being followed. In about seven or eight minutes he reached a small shabby house, that was wedged in between two gaunt factories...The door opened quietly, and he went in without saying a word to the squat misshapen figure that flattened itself into the shadow as he passed...In one corner, with his head buried in his arms, a sailor sprawled over a table, and by the tawdrily-painted bar that ran across one complete side stood two haggard women mocking an old man who was brushing the sleeves of his coat with an expression of disgust. 'He thinks he's got red ants on him,' laughed one of them as Dorian passed by. The man looked at her in terror, and began to whimper...Dorian winced, and looked round at the grotesque things that lay in such fantastic postures on the ragged mattresses. The twisted limbs, the gaping mouths, the staring lusterless eyes, fascinated him.¹

By the end of the nineteenth-century, this was the image of the London opium den: dark, grotesque, and mysterious, a den of inequity frequented by corrupted men—often Chinese or Southeast Asian—who drowned their sorrows in opium fumes. Wreathed in connotations of moral and bodily filth, opium dens appeared in literature and the popular press and imprinted themselves on the public imagination.

So it is worth noting that the Victorian opium den did not exist. There were no establishments in Victorian London dedicated exclusively to opium smoking, and most “dens” were nothing but boarding houses, where Chinese sailors rented rooms during their stays in the city and gathered to smoke opium on their free time. Opium houses were not as pervasively sordid—and

¹ Wilde 234-6.

the habit as viciously destructive—as their reputation suggests. Most opium houses were clean, and most opium smokers were hard-workers.²

To explain the disparity between the reality of Victorian opium dens and their representation, historians point to the anti-opium movement. Starting in 1874, a series of campaigns against the Anglo-Chinese opium trade highlighted the evils of the Chinese opium habit. Appealing to humanitarian considerations, advocates argued that opium was a powerful and crippling force in Chinese society, and demanded the end of British opium export to China. That rhetoric, in turn, heightened concerns about the opium problem at home and tainted the image of the London opium “den.”³ But opium dens also owe their reputation to another factor: a tradition of urban exploration and documentation that created a distance between observer and observed and allowed urban explorers to sensationalize their subjects.

“The Victorian Opium Den”

Knowledge of opium’s narcotic effects dates back to at least 4,000 B.C., when Sumerians called the poppy the “plant of joy.” The drug appears in the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, Arab medical treatises, the *Canterbury Tales* and, famously, in Shakespeare’s *Othello*: “Not poppy, nor mandragore/Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world/ Shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep/Which thou ow’dst yesterday.” From the early days of opium use, the line between recreational narcotic and medicinal remedy was blurred, and doctors liberally prescribed opiate mixtures against a wide range of ailments. Opium addiction, while known, was seldom discussed and widely accepted.⁴

² Berridge 200-202.

³ Berridge 173-181.

⁴ Berridge xxii-xxvi.

In early-Victorian England, opium was a medical staple, taken against heart disease, bronchitis, ulcer, whooping cough, colitis, dysentery, gallstones, and diabetes, among other ailments.⁵ Englishmen saw the drug as neither threatening, nor dangerous, but as a useful medication, and opiates found their way into every household. They were sold in corner shops and high-street pharmacies, prepared as “opium pills...opium lozenges, compound powder of opium, opiate confection, opiate plaster, opium enema, opium liniment, vinegar of opium and wine of opium,” and, most famously, a tincture of opium dissolved in alcohol, known as laudanum.⁶ For most of the nineteenth-century, opiate use remained a widespread, unobjectionable British habit.

Opium smoking, however, was a Chinese practice. Starting in the seventh century, Chinese traders bartered silks and silver for opium from Arab merchants. But the Arab-Chinese opium trade was relatively small, and opiate use was restricted to the Chinese upper class, who consumed the drug orally. Widespread opium smoking did not become a reality until the seventeenth-century, when “opium from the Middle East met the native American Indian pipe.” Brought from the New World, the habit of tobacco smoking arrived in China around 1620 with European sailors. Around the same time, Dutch traders in Indonesia began to add pinches of opium to their tobacco pipes, under the belief that the practice would ward off malaria. That habit soon reached Chinese ports and, as opium became widely available thanks to European merchants, the tobacco-opium cocktail became wildly popular. When the Chinese emperor banned tobacco at the end of the seventeenth-century, the Chinese people began to smoke opium by itself, and a national habit was born.⁷

Arriving in England in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century, Chinese immigrants brought their peculiar opium habit to London. They settled in Stepney as early as the 1780s, but

⁵ Berridge 226.

⁶ Berridge 24.

⁷ Booth 103-105.

their numbers remained low until the 1860s. In 1861 there were about 147 Chinese immigrants in the whole of England, but that number had grown to 665 by 1881. Almost all came to London, and most settled in the East End, in Stepney and Poplar. In addition to a permanent population, the British capital was temporary home to Chinese sailors, who rented rooms in the East End when their ships docked in London. From the middle of the nineteenth-century, the London Chinese were an “expanding yet curiously isolated alien community.”⁸

In the East End, Chinese immigrants established London’s “Chinatown,” where they carried on many of their native cultural practices, including opium smoking. Despite their own opium habit, white Londoners developed a fascination with the Chinese practice. In the latter nineteenth-century, accounts of Chinese opium dens regularly appeared in the popular press and literature, veiled with overtones of mystery and moral depravity.

Contemporary newspapers offered periodic portrayals of opium dens in the East End, often phrased in condemnatory tones. “It is a Chinese who keeps this wretched hole where one can get intoxicated for a few coppers,” writes a journalist in the *Leeds Mercury*, in 1868, describing an opium den in London.⁹ Of a large opium den in the East End, an 1882 *Pall Mall Gazette* reports, “On a festival, such as the celebration of a new year, it is packed so full of Chinamen—all smoking opium and all in a state bordering on the nude—that it looks like a Black Hole into which has been cast a crowd of helpless and half-unconscious prisoners.” The Chinese opium habit was rendered as wretched and sub-human, whose depravity manifested itself in the smokers as well as the physical space where they congregated. Opium dens were reported to be filthy and unkempt: “Upon the wreck of a four-post bedstead (the posts of which almost met overhead, and from which depended bundles of shapeless rags), upon a mattress heaped with indescribable

⁸ Berridge 195.

⁹ “An Opium Den in London” (1868).

clothes, lay, sprawling, a Lascar*, dead-drunk with opium,” writes Gustave Doré in his pilgrimage through London.¹⁰ Such accounts in the popular press highlighted the indecency of the physical premises and the moral depravity of the opium habit.

But such portrayals pale in comparison to those present in contemporary literary works, whose authors, wielding artistic license, were free to conjure sensational depictions of the Victorian opium den. In literature, the opium den carried even stronger connotations of mystery, evil, and moral depravity. Wilde’s description in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is perhaps most famous, but the first notorious literary account of the opium den appeared in Charles Dickens’ 1870 *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. The tale of John Jasper, a choirmaster in love with his pupil, the novel deals with the disappearance of Edwin Drood, Jasper’s nephew and his pupil’s fiancé. Although Dickens died before finishing the novel, it is generally believed that Jasper murdered Edwin. Jasper’s character—veiled in mystery—first appears in a New Court opium den, where he wakes up from an opium slumber to find himself among three other smokers: a Chinese man, a South-east Asian sailor, and the woman who owns the den. Waking up, John “notices that the woman has opium smoked herself into a strange likeness of the Chinaman. His form of cheek, eye, and temple, and his color, are repeated in her. Said Chinaman convulsively wrestles with one of his many Gods, or Devils, perhaps, and snarls horribly. The Lascar laughs and dribbles at the mouth. The hostess is still.”¹¹ With this eerie depiction of an opium den, Dickens veils Jasper’s murderous character with mysterious overtones. The East End opium den, dark and grotesque, becomes a literary device associated with mystery and evil.

As if words did not suffice, illustrations often accompanied descriptions of the Victorian opium den. These images brought the dens to life—dark, mysterious, and grotesque. *The Mystery*

* A South-East Asian sailor.

¹⁰ Doré 147.

¹¹ Dickens 2.

of *Edwin Drood*, for example, features an illustration of Jasper's second and final visit to the opium den. Half-lying on bed, Jasper is sprawled corpse-like on a tattered mattress with his eyes closed and his mouth ghastly open. His haggard hostess kneels next to him and watches him sleep, a bony hand on his chest. The room is dark; only a candle lights up the scene from low angle, casting eerie shadows about the room. It is a sinister scene, drawn to create an air of mystery around the opium den. Another illustration, a sketch of an East End opium den that appeared in *The Graphic* in 1880, echoes many of these themes. The image, also dark and lit by a single candle, portrays a small, stifled room. Limbs, belonging to slumbering smokers, appear from the shadows, hardly distinguishable from the random cloths that cover their shoddy wooden beds. In the far left, a man lights a pipe. His face, barely visible in the dark, is somewhat frightening.

The reality of the Victorian opium den, however, was not as dark, as mysterious, as morally and bodily depraved as its reputation suggests. In their investigation of opium habit in nineteenth-century England, Virginia Berridge and Griffith Edwards (1981) found that the Victorian opium den was, in fact, a myth. They argue that opium dens were not dedicated establishments but existed, rather, wherever Chinese sailors and immigrants happened to congregate and smoke in their free time. Chinese boarding houses often prepared opium for smoking, but only thirteen such houses operated in the East End in the late nineteenth-century, and not all of them offered the service. Nor was the opium smoker so morally depraved as accounts would suggest. Berridge and Edwards find that "opium smoking was an aid to hard work, not a distraction from it, and smokers managed to combine their habit with a normal working existence." Rather than a pervasive evil, "opium smoking, along with gambling, was simply a relaxation enjoyed by many Chinese, and the rooms where it took place were something akin to a Chinese social club." The

Victorian opium den, as portrayed in contemporary fiction and popular press, did not exist.¹²

In fact, several contemporary voices support Berridge and Griffith's interpretation of nineteenth-century East End opium habit. "An alarm has been raised as to the increase of opium smoking in London," declared an 1883 article in *The Dundee Courier & Argus*. "As a matter of fact, the opium dens of the East End are fewer in number than they were some years ago, and are certainly not driving a more prosperous business."¹³ The reporter went on to state that only four opium dens exist in the entire East End, a figure that also appeared in an 1882 article on the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Rather than pervasive and evil establishments, opium houses in Victorian London were relatively few in numbers. Nor were opium smokers so morally depraved. An 1864 article on the *Penny Illustrated* describes the habits of a Chinese man who owns an opium den:

Before you hastily form a judgment as to the wreck of vitality you think you see, learn that the old man is seventy-five years old, that he lives quite alone, and is his own housemaid, scullion, and cook; that he is diligent in his business, such as it is; rises daily at five a.m., and is celebrated throughout his dingy neighborhood for the energetic particularity with which he scrubs and washes pots, pans, and house, and for the scrupulous care wherewith he purchases and prepares his food.

As for his customers, "They are evidently of a respectable class of Chinamen; they are clean in their persons, and both socks and shirts are of commendable purity."¹⁴ The reporter finds that the opium smokers are pleasant and well kempt, rather than licentious and vice-ridden. But most importantly, nineteenth-century sources support Berridge and Griffith's argument that opium dens were, in fact, more fiction than fact: "Properly speaking, there is no such thing in London as an opium den in the sense of a place frequented for the purpose of indulgence in this very mild debauch. Chinamen smoke in their lodgings which are neither better nor worse than the average of

¹² Berridge 200-202.

¹³ "Opium Dens in London" (1883).

¹⁴ "A Chinese Opium-Smoking Den in London" (1864).

such places,” writes a reporter on the *Manchester Times* in 1891.¹⁵

Despite these balanced contemporary voices, however, the London public held onto sensational, fetishized conceptions of the Chinese opium habit and the East End opium den. In his 1901 social-scientific account of the East End, Sir Walter Besant writes, “Greatly to my disappointment, because when one goes to an opium den for the first time one expects a creeping of the flesh at least, the place was neither dreadful nor horrible.”¹⁶ There is a sense that the opium den which he describes, plain, clean, and safe, deviates from the norm—the filthy, mysterious, and depraved opium den of popular imagination. Thanks to literature and the popular press, this dark image of the Victorian opium den was etched into the public mind.

Given its pervasiveness, it is worth trying to understand how this conception of the London opium den came to be. To explain the disparity between reality and representation, Berridge and Edwards point to the anti-opium movement of the latter half of the nineteenth-century, which held that opium was a social evil, and denounced the British government for its export of Indian opium to China, arguing that the drug had corrupted Chinese society. The movement had little impact in its early years, but gained steam in 1874, when the Society for the Suppression of the Opium Trade was founded, and its journal, the *Friend of China*, began to disseminate the anti-opium message among the London elite and educated middle class. Most of its rhetoric was directed against the foreign habit: the anti-opium movement highlighted the evils of opium smoking in China, but expressed little concern for domestic opium use.¹⁷

According to Berridge and Edwards, the anti-opium movement eventually drew attention to the growing Chinese immigrant community. With the mounting influence of the anti-opium movement, concerns about the foreign habit raised questions about opium smoking at home and

¹⁵ *Manchester Times* (1891).

¹⁶ Besant 206.

¹⁷ Berridge 173-181.

pushed the East End Chinese community into the spotlight. Public interest in Chinese opium smoking, in turn, brought the habit into the pages of novels, newspapers, and social investigations, where the rhetoric of the anti-opium movement, which highlighted the social evils of the opium habit abroad, offered observers a condemnatory vocabulary with which to describe the Chinese habit. The drug, now famous for its evil effects on Chinese society, was morally condemned, and the places where it was consumed were portrayed as dens of inequity. The Victorian opium den, wreathed with connotations of moral and bodily filth, was born.¹⁸

“Victorian Urban Exploration and the Fetishization of the East End”

But the London opium den also owes its sensational reputation to a Victorian tradition of urban exploration, which fetishized the East End and its inhabitants. For much of the nineteenth-century, upper class males ventured into the streets of London and engaged in what J.D. Walkowitz (1992) calls “urban spectatorship:” the practice of experiencing the city as a participant observer. Urban exploration—journalistic, social-scientific, and purely voyeuristic—was always a prerogative of the Victorian upper class, but, starting in the mid-century, the urban explorer became more engaged, trying to record and explain the city’s social problems. Beginning in the 1840s, urban observers ventured into the unexplored areas of the poorer London, where they found appalling living conditions.¹⁹ The city, obsessed with money and power, was particularly oppressive to the poor and the powerless. Unemployment, or the uncertainty of employment, often forced Londoners to reside in the city’s slums.²⁰ Venturing into these slums, more well-heeled urban explorers of the mid- and late-Victorian period chronicled the squalid conditions of the London poor.

¹⁸ Berridge 195-200.

¹⁹ Walkowitz 15-19.

²⁰ Ackroyd 600-602.

The accounts that emerged from these explorations often adapted the language of empire, transforming “the territory of the London poor into an alien place, both exciting and dangerous.”²¹ The poorer boroughs of city were described as a foreign land, a nation distinct from London itself. Future Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli expounded that construct in his 1845 novel *Sybil*, which portrays the rich and the poor as

Two nations; between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other’s habits, thoughts, and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets; who are formed by a different breeding, are fed by a different food, are ordered by different manners, and are not governed by the same laws.²²

The gulf between the rich and the poor is wide and transcends social status, splitting the two groups at a more fundamental level. Rather than mere social classes, rich and poor are fundamental identities, constituting two different peoples in Disraeli’s views.

With Henry Mayhew’s 1861 *London Labour and the London Poor*, these two distinct nations laid claim to London’s physical space. Mayhew’s study of London’s lower classes divided the city between East and West, highlighting the differences between the two areas. The gulf between the rich and the poor, now anchored to the city’s physical space, created a bifurcated framework for future urban spectators, who oriented their explorations of the city along a line drawn between East and West.²³

The East-West dichotomy reinforced an imagined distance between the Western urban explorer and his Eastern subject. It allowed writers to play the role of anthropologists, observing the London poor as an entirely different species.²⁴ Mayhew himself assumed an anthropological stance, proposing that the city’s lower classes comprised a distinct nomadic race: the “London

²¹ Walkowitz 18.

²² Disraeli 149.

²³ Walkowitz 21.

²⁴ See Nord; Walkowitz 20.

street-folk.” Specimens of street-folk had large heads and prominent jaws, and spoke a language of their own, an “English ‘*cuzecat*’ or ‘slang’ as it is called.” They could be distinguished from the civilized Londoner by their laziness, licentiousness, and heathenism,²⁵ and, in those traits, they were not unlike the uncivilized tribes of Africa or Australia. American writer Jack London offered a similar account of the lower class Londoner in his 1903 *People of the Abyss*. “Another race has sprung up,” he writes, “a street people.”²⁶ During his perambulations through the East End, London describes the people of the area as a “menagerie of garmented bipeds that looked something like humans and more like beasts,” whose men reminded him of gorillas.²⁷ In London’s view, the city’s poor are a different species.

The East End’s physical space, too, was described through the lens of anthropological research. “The streets and houses, alleys and courts, are their hunting grounds,” writes Jack London. “As valley and mountain are to the natural savage, street and building are valley and mountain to them. The slum is their jungle, and they live and prey in the jungle.”²⁸ London compares the uncharted territory of the East End to the dark, dense jungle, evoking connotations of savagery. If the city’s poor were a different species, the East End was their natural habitat.

In these reports of the East End and its inhabitants, images once again brought words to life. Illustrations often accompanied documentary accounts of the East End and portrayed both people and physical space in a pseudo-anthropological, sensational light. Jack London’s *People of the Abyss*, for example, features several photographs of sights from the East End. A portrait of Frying-Pan Alley, a street in Spitalfields, depicts a narrow street walled by tall three-story houses, where a handful of East End women stand about idly, some in the shadows at the corner of

²⁵ Mayhew 2.

²⁶ London 229.

²⁷ London 284.

²⁸ London 285.

the picture. Both buildings and people are unadorned, almost squalid, and the image's claustrophobic composition evokes a subtle parallel between the dense jungles of unexplored lands and the streets at the heart of the East End. Most importantly, the photograph carries a strong sense of anthropological distance, created in part by the three figures who stare at the camera. The photographer is a detached observer, documenting the habits and environment of a foreign people. The photograph, however, is not as sensational as a portrait of Bluegate Fields, in which Gustave Doré conjures an even darker portrayal of the East End. The image depicts a narrow, unpaved street, lined with dejected figures who are only barely human. The sky is hardly visible at the top of the frame, and it blends in with the tall houses that wall the street below. The image is haunting and claustrophobic. It presents a sub-human portrayal of the East End Londoner, and portrays his surroundings as a dark, unexplored territory.

By the second half of the nineteenth-century, then, Victorian urban explorers subscribed to a tradition of urban spectatorship that viewed the East End through the lens of anthropology and characterized the London lower classes as a different species. Both people and physical space appeared in the popular press in sensational terms, fetishized in the mind of the London public.

“Urban Exploration and the Victorian Opium Den”

This Victorian tradition of urban exploration and fetishization of the East End, well established by the latter half of the nineteenth-century, played a central role in the popular conception of the Victorian opium den. While the anti-opium movement added a condemnatory rhetoric to portrayals of the opium habit, the enduring image of the East End opium house—dark, mysteri-

ous, and depraved—owes much to a tradition of sensational, pseudo-anthropological urban exploration.

There is, first of all, a practical argument to be made: without a tradition of urban exploration—and the public interest in the East End which it fostered—no accounts of the East End opium den would exist. Many portrayals of the opium den came in newspaper series that explored the East End and other foreign parts of London. The *Daily News*, for example, published a series titled “Out of Season,” which described the “out-of-the-way” aspects of London life. “One of the writer’s most recent discoveries,” it reported, “is a haunt of Chinese opium smokers in ‘Palmer’s-folly,’ Ratcliff-Highway.”²⁹ Further, many curious, upper-class British gentlemen—including, reportedly, the Prince of Wales—visited the East End opium dens, not to smoke but to observe.³⁰ To the urban observer, already interested in the East End, the Victorian opium den was another exotic oddity, worth exploring and recording.

But beyond this pragmatic argument, the tradition of Victorian urban exploration also provided the tone for accounts of the. Portrayals of the opium habit, for example, were shaped by cultural curiosity and anthropological distance. Contemporary accounts depicted opium smoking as a foreign custom, worthy of detailed documentation. In one journey, a group of urban explorers notices “a peculiar smell of burning, the aroma from which is not unpleasant. Following this odd scent, and half recognizing the drug from which it comes, we push at a half-open front door...”³¹ Venturing deep into the East End, the Victorian urban explorer now follows, curious, the enticing scent of opium, which draws him into the heart of darkness that was the opium den. An account of a journey into Africa or South-East Asia could easily contain a similar description.

²⁹ “A Chinese Opium-Smoking Den in London” (1864).

³⁰ “Opium Dens in London” (1883) and “Summary of this Morning’s News” (1874).

³¹ “A Chinese Opium-Smoking Den in London” (1864).

Such account reveals a cultural gulf between the observer and the observed, which fosters cultural curiosity.

Like Mayhew's East End Londoners, the Victorian opium smoker is a distant other, described with the same callousness with which an explorer would describe an African tribesman. Finding a female opium smoker in a stifled room, a reporter for *The Leeds Mercury* opens a window, and "fresh air inundates the room, rousing up the sorceress who gives vent to a volley of complaints in an unintelligible jargon. A shilling flung on the unclean couch mollifies the old woman, who opens her eyes to their full extent by a superhuman effort. She seizes the coin with her long bony fingers and contemplates it with delight."³² The urban spectator describes the woman as a savage, who speaks an incomprehensible tongue and reacts to the coin as if it were some mysterious, foreign object. In the same vein, an 1891 edition of *Reynolds's Paper* reports, "The third [occupant of the den] was a partly-naked Malay, of decidedly evil aspect, who shrank back on my entrance, and coiled himself up in the recesses of a dark corner, where he lay furtively watching me very much in the same way in which the prisoned pythons in a serpent house watch the visitors who come to tap at the glass of their cages."³³ In this account, the opium smoker ceases to be a savage and becomes a beast, described as a frightened, dangerous animal. An 1882 issue of the *Pall Mall Gazette* is even more explicit: "The look of the wild beast seems to become more pronounce than ever as [the opium smokers] lie thus, with the feeble light of the lamp falling in patches of their dark faces."³⁴ A sense of cultural curiosity, consistent with the tradition of Victorian urban exploration, permeates these accounts of the East End opium den, as the opium smoker is portrayed as an odd, exotic other. Cultural distance stands between the ob-

³² "An Opium Den in London" (1868).

³³ *Reynolds's Paper* (1891).

³⁴ "A London Opium Den" (1882).

server and the observed, allowing the urban explorer to create a sensationalized account of his subjects.

Anthropological distance extended, too, to the opium house's physical space, which was reduced to the habitat of the opium-smoking other. Reporting on one opium den, the *Pall Mall Gazette* commented, "Not altogether without reason is it usually spoken of as 'a den.' Certainly there is more of the look of the wild beast than of the human being about the swart Lascars who glide up or down the staircase." If the opium smoker is a beast, then the places where they smoked were the dens of animals.

Finally, anthropological distance left its mark on graphic representations of the Victorian opium den. Once again, images supported words, as illustrations of the opium den reflected the urban explorer's cultural curiosity and relegate the opium smoker to the position of an anthropological other. One depiction of the East End opium den appeared in Doré's *Pilgrimage*. It documented the curious, foreign habit of opium smoking with a measure of anthropological distance, portraying an Asian figure lying on a bed and holding an opium pipe while an urban explorer looks on. There is a surreal sense to the scene: the opium smoker is androgynous and does not seem altogether human; its hands are claw-like, and its body is shapeless under a long robe. The artist emphasizes the situation's otherness with exotic adornments, including a canteen and knife which hang on the wall and while an amphora lies on the bed. In the top right, a black cat watches the scene. The urban explorer's presence in the scene highlights the cultural distance between observer and observed, as he curiously watches the opium smoker. Another illustration, appearing on the *Penny Illustrated Paper*, articulated the cultural otherness of the opium habit in terms of its Chinese heritage. At the image's center two Chinese men lie on a bed, while a sitting woman watches on from the frame's right. The artist portrays his characters as distinctly Chinese: the

woman holds an oriental fan while one man keeps his hair in a long, thin braid, typical for nineteenth century Chinese men. Chinese characters hang prominently on the wall, while a series of curious instruments rest on a table to the frame's left. The illustration accompanies an account of a London opium den, but it could just as easily portray a scene from Shanghai. Highlighting the Chinese aspect of the opium den, the image carries obvious overtones of cultural distance and foreign otherness.

Conclusion

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said writes,

As both geographical and cultural entities—to say nothing of historical entities—such locales, regions, geographical sectors as "Orient" and "Occident" are man-made. Therefore as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West. The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other.

He goes on to argue that the Orient is a misguided Western construct, a constellation of misconceptions, which influences Western attitudes towards the non-Western other. Beneath Said's argument lies a powerful idea: we define the other in opposition to ourselves and cast them in a foreign, often sensational light.

For the Victorian upper class Londoner, the Orient—the foreign other—lived in the East End. To the urban observer, the poor Londoner was a race a part, a specimen of a different species, comparable to the savages of unexplored lands. This imagined distance between observer and observed established an approach to urban exploration that fetishized the London poor, presenting them in sensational terms. Documentary accounts of the East End offered a sensational portrayal of its inhabitants, describing them alternatively as beasts, uncivilized savages, and members of a sub-human race. Their living places, too, became subjects of anthropological re-

search, as urban observers compared the East End to unexplored, distant lands, similar to the “wilds of Australia” and “the islands of the South Seas.”³⁵

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, urban explorers turned their pseudo-anthropological lenses towards the East End opium den. Owing much to the tradition of urban spectatorship that had fetishized the poor Londoner and their living spaces, accounts of the Victorian opium den maintained a distance between observer and observed that allowed for foreign and sensationalized portrayal of opium smokers, their habit, and the places where they smoked. From this tradition of urban exploration was born the image of the opium den that survives to this day—dark, grotesque and mysterious.

³⁵ Acrkoyd 602.

Bibliography

Contemporary Sources

“A Chinese Opium-Smoking Den in London,” *The Penny Illustrated Paper* (London, England), Saturday, September 10, 1864; pg. 165; Issue 154.

“A London Opium Den,” *The Pall Mall Gazette* (London, England), Thursday, August 17, 1882; Issue 5449.

“An Opium Den in London,” *The Leeds Mercury* (Leeds, England), Monday, April 27, 1868; Issue 9372.

Beames, Thomas, *The Rookeries of London: Past, Present, and Prospective* (London: Thomas Bosworth, 1852).

Besant, Walter, *East London* (New York: The Century Co., 1901).

Dickens, Charles, *The Mystery Of Edwin Drood* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1870).

Disraeli, Benjamin, *Sybil* (London: Henry Colburn, 1854).

Doré, Gustave and Blanchard Jerrold, *London: A Pilgrimage* (London: Grant & Co, 1872).

London, Jack, *The People of the Abyss* (London: Macmillan & Co, 1904).

Manchester Times (Manchester, England), Friday, May 8, 1891.

Mayhew, Henry, *London Labour and the London Poor* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1851).

“Opium Dens in London,” *The Dundee Courier & Argus* (Dundee, Scotland), Wednesday, September 05, 1883; Issue 9404.

Reynolds's Newspaper (London, England), Sunday, June 21, 1891; Issue 2132.

“Summary of this Morning’s News,” *The Pall Mall Gazette* (London, England), Wednesday, February 25, 1874; Issue 2817.

Wilde, Oscar, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Ward, Lock, and Company, 1891).

Secondary Sources

Ackroyd, Peter, *London: The Biography* (London, Anchor: 2003).

Berridge, Virginia and Griffith Edwards, *Opium and the People: Opiate Use in Nineteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

Booth, Martin, *Opium: A History* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

Nord, Deborah E., "The Social Explorer as Anthropologist: Victorian Travelers among the Urban Poor," in *Visions of the Modern City*, William Sharpe and Leonard Wallock, eds. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987) 122-134.

Walkowitz, J.D., *City of Dreadful Deligh* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).