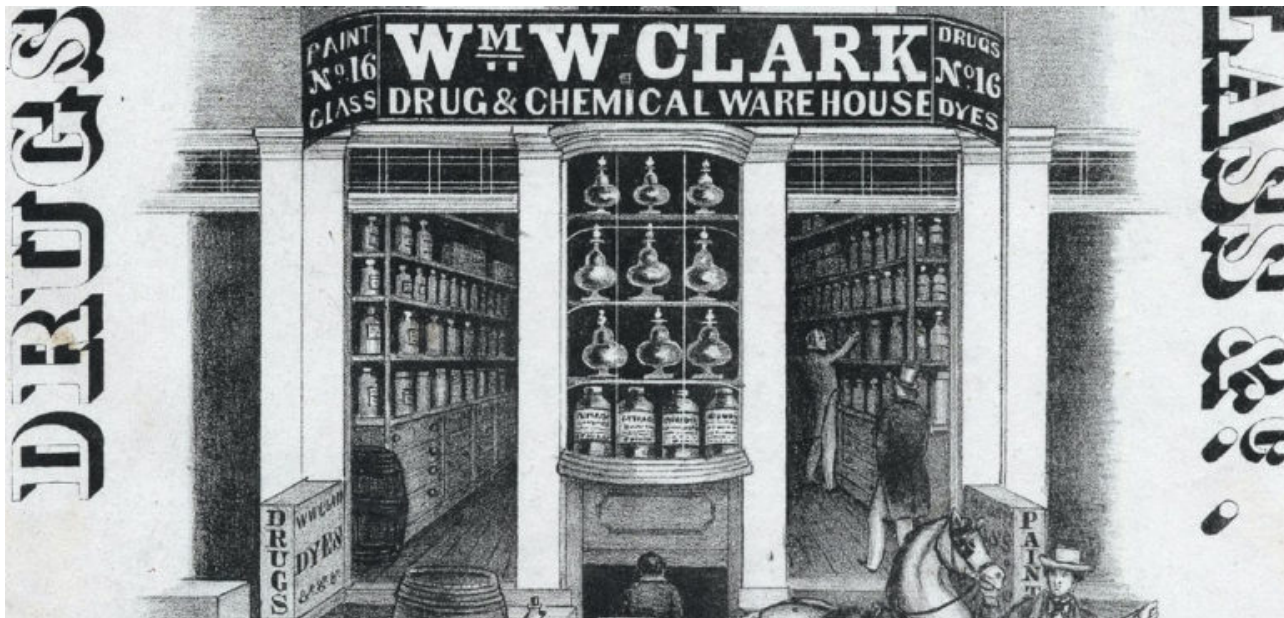


Was Edgar Allan Poe a Habitual Opium User?



By the spring of 1846, Edgar Allan Poe and his wife Virginia had been living in New York for two years. His poem "The Raven" had been published a year earlier to great acclaim, the New York literary community had welcomed him, and he had become the sole proprietor of *The Broadway Journal*. All, however, was not well. He lost the journal partly due to his alcoholism, he stirred up well-publicized battles due to his stinging literary reviews, and Virginia was in ill health. In April 1846, the *Cincinnati Chronicle* reported on a rumor circulating in New York City that Poe had "become deranged." The *Chronicle* writer insisted that if the rumor was true, it should not surprise anyone. Poe "has been an opium eater for many years," he explained, "and madness would be a natural result." The paper included no source and no evidence.

This item is intriguing, especially as no well-known Americans at the time struggled openly with the abuse of opiates—drugs that derive from the opium poppy. There was a greater degree of openness in England. Poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge became dependent on laudanum, which is opium mixed with alcohol. In 1814, he expressed hope that after his death the story of his struggle would be made public, so "at least some little good may be effected by the direful example!" Scholars believe that he wrote his poem "Kubla Khan" while under the drug's influence. Thomas De Quincey published *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* in 1821, the earliest extant memoir written by a drug-dependent person. Many assert that Poe used opium habitually—a common framing at the time for drug dependency. Most sources, however, are akin to the article from 1846: written with an air of certainty but either lacking evidence or pointing to mentions of opium in his fiction, which is hardly conclusive proof. Regardless, they were on to something, as evidence suggests that Poe had periods of

habitual indulgence in opium, probably as a substitute for alcohol.

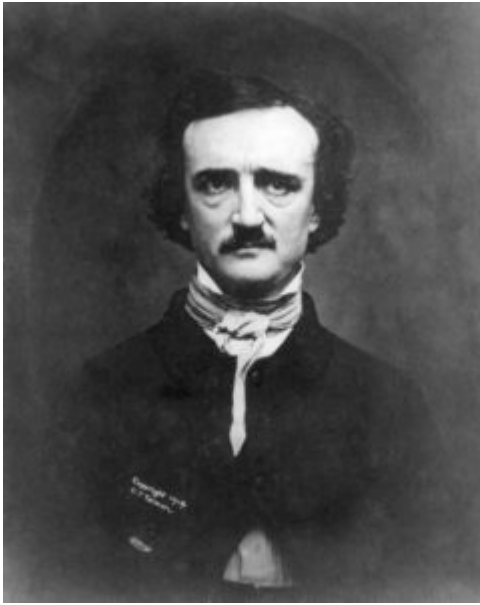


Figure 1: This daguerreotype of Poe was taken on November 9, 1848, just four days after he bought laudanum for an apparent suicide attempt. Edgar Allan Poe Daguerreotype, Providence, RI, November 9, 1848. W. S. Hartshorn, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Many writers refer to Poe's opium dependency as if it were certain, and they include no supporting evidence. In a 1909 article in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, George L. Knapp stated that few people knew that Poe "was a confirmed user of opium." In 1913, historian Harry Cook stated that Poe's "indulgence in opium and intoxicants increased" in the mid-1830s. Some maintain that opium use inspired Poe's writings, much as laudanum inspired Coleridge to write "Kubla Khan." The writer for the *Cincinnati Chronicle* stated that Poe's "horrible stories are supposed to have been written while he was under the influence" of opium. In 1881, Dr. Leslie Keeley stated that "The Raven" had been "inspired by the poppy juice."

Some authorities on Poe have rejected the rumors. In 1946 F. O. Matthiessen, the author of *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*, acknowledged that some people "believe that [Poe] was a drug-addict" based on his fiction but added that "on this question, unlike that of Poe's drinking, there is no sure external evidence." James L. Machor dismissed the rumors and attributed them to Poe's literary battles. Some people, he concluded, published "libelous stories" about the writer that other publications then reprinted.

Americans widely used opiates as medicines in Poe's time, and usage sometimes led to dependency. Prescriptions were not required. Laudanum was popular as a sleeping aid and a painkiller. Paregoric—opium mixed with camphor—was given to fretful babies. The drugs could be dangerous because overdoses could be fatal. There was also the risk of habituation. Habituees typically first took laudanum

for medical purposes and then kept using it upon discovering its pleasant effects. They tended to consume the drug alone and then become passive. As a result, their habit might not be noticed, in contrast with the behavior of a drunk person. This is one reason that early on, few recognized habitual opium use as a problem.

Many antebellum writers included opiates in their stories, but the references tended to be fleeting even when the drug use was important to the plot, and they almost never addressed dependency. In these tales, a mother might accidentally give a baby an overdose of paregoric, or a woman might take a dose of laudanum to get a good night's sleep or, if despondent, to end her life. In an example from "Love and Politics," an 1849 tale by Miss E. Bogart, Eveline decides to commit suicide due to romantic disappointment. She drinks laudanum but survives. Her true love then asks her to "promise that you will never again swallow a dose of laudanum in a fit of jealousy." Poe's friend George Lippard described pleasure-seeking drug use in *The Quaker City*, a bestseller from 1845. In the novel, a minister who seeks great wealth explains that "temperance folks" like himself need a "little excitement" and that he and others consequently "indulge our systems with a little opium." Lippard, however, did not present the minister as bearing the effects of opium dependency.

Meanwhile, time and again, Poe's characters are opium habitués whose condition defines them, as they adopt a melancholy tone and describe fanciful visions. Poe's characters state that they feel as if they are under the influence of opium in the stories "Loss of Breath," "The Duc de l'Omelette," *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, and "The Fall of the House of Usher." A central character is dependent on morphine in "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains." And his narrators are opium habitués in the stories "Life in Death," "Ligeia," and "Berenice." The narrator of 1842's "Life in Death" eats a large dose of opium and describes its "magical influence" as he looks at portraits. He dwells on "the ethereal hue that gleamed from the canvas." In his 1838 story "Ligeia," the narrator admits to being "habitually fettered in the shackles" of opium. And in 1835's "Berenice," the narrator states that his disease, aggravated by the "immoderate use of opium," has gained "ascendancy" over him. As a result of his dependency, he might spend "an entire night . . . watching the steady flame of a lamp, or the embers of a fire," and he experiences "a morbid irritability of the nerves."



Figure 2: “Life in Death” was one of Poe’s tales that featured an opium habitué as the narrator. “Life in Death” published in *Graham’s Lady’s and Gentleman’s Magazine* 20, no. 4. (April 1842): 200-201. Edgar Allan Poe, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Some suggest that the first-person narration of addiction right after the title and “by Edgar A. Poe” led some to assume that such stories were autobiographical. Poe’s friend George Eveleth admitted to Poe in 1848 that he “was afraid, from the wild imaginations manifested in your writings, that you were an opium-eater.” He suspected, however, that he was not, since Poe’s “wildness” appeared in his earlier writings too, and he doubted that Poe could have “acquired the habit when so young.”

There are alternate explanations for the references in his stories. Poe, for example, had read the popular *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*. In an 1835 letter to the editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, which had just published “Berenice,” he stated that he considered *Confessions* to be a model worth emulating. Its style, he explained, included “the fearful coloured into the horrible.” Poe scholars Dwight Thomas and David K. Jackson suggest that Poe used *Confessions* as a source when referencing opium in his own works. Also, in the late 1830s Poe became friends with John Lofland, a poet and opium habitué. It is plausible that he also learned about opium dependency from Lofland.



Figure 3: Thomas De Quincey, author of *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*. Poe read the memoir and believed that De Quincey's style was worth emulating. Thomas De Quincey, circa 1845. John Watson Gordon, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

There is no doubt that Poe sometimes used opiates medicinally. His grandmother gave him laudanum when he was a child to help him fall asleep. In 1845, his sister Rosalie visited him in Fordham, New York, where he was living with his wife, who was also their cousin. Away on business during part of the visit, Edgar came home ill. That night, according to Rosalie, Edgar “‘talked out of his head’ and begged for morphine.” After a few days, his health improved. It is possible that this was evidence of drug withdrawal. It is also possible that he was ill and sought it to help him rest. One example of Poe’s opiate use could also serve as evidence of his lack of familiarity with the drug. The year after his wife died, he told a woman named Annie Richmond that he had bought laudanum following a “long, hideous night of Despair,” and he hoped that she would visit him. He admitted that his dose was more powerful than he had anticipated. He became ill and then recovered. Some point to this episode as proof of his immoderate use, while others conclude that he was not a habitual user, given his inability to predict the impact of the dose.



Figure 4: The Poes' home in Fordham, New York, where his sister Rosalie visited him and Virginia. *Miscellaneous Items in High Demand, PPOC, Library of Congress, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).*

Some doctors who saw Poe professionally denied that he was habituated. Dr. John Carter told a Poe biographer that he "never used opii in any instance that I am aware of, and if it had been an habitual practice," he and other doctors who knew Poe "would have detected it." In 1896, Dr. Thomas Dunn English published *Reminiscences of Poe*, an unflattering portrayal of the late writer. English, however, rejected the notion that Poe was an opium user. "Had Poe the opium habit when I knew him," he wrote, "I should, both as a physician and a man of observation, have discovered it" during the many occasions when he saw him. He dismissed the allegation as "a baseless slander." The nature of opium's effects, however, sometimes made the habit easy to hide.

Other evidence is more difficult to dismiss. Helen Whitman was engaged to Poe late in 1848 but ended the relationship due to his drinking. In a letter to her, Poe insisted that he derived "no pleasure in the stimulants in which I sometimes so madly indulge." "Stimulants" is a peculiarly broad term if he were referring solely to alcohol. (Alcohol and opiates were both characterized as stimulants at the time.) In the summer of 1849, Poe arrived at the home of illustrator John Sartain and begged for his help, as he believed that some men planned to kill him. Poe "piteously begged" him for "some laudanum," Sartain would recall in 1895. Sartain gave him "a small dose of opium," to "allay his nervousness." References to opiates are absent from two other versions of the encounter. It rings true, however, that the agitated poet would have sought out laudanum to calm his nerves.

The strongest evidence of Poe's opiate usage comes from the research of biographer George Woodberry. As he worked on *The Life of Edgar Allan Poe*, Woodberry had a helpful research assistant: Amelia Fitzgerald Poe, whose father had been Edgar's second cousin. In 1884, she visited relatives who remembered Edgar and asked them to share their recollections. She knew that Woodberry's book could put the author in a bad light, but she rejected the notion that one

should not speak ill of the dead. "I fancy that truth is better than fiction," she explained in a letter to Woodberry, "even though one's erring relative should be the unfortunate subject."

Amelia visited Edgar's cousin Elizabeth Herring, who recalled Edgar's opium use during the early 1840s. Herring's recollection is convincing because Poe's opium use would have been memorable, because she apparently shared her memories unprompted, and because Amelia did not press her on the matter. As Amelia reported to Woodberry:

[Herring] was on a visit to them [Edgar and Virginia] in Philadelphia, where they lived so happily, at the time her cousin Virginia, after singing a great deal one evening, ruptured a blood vessel, from the effects of which she died several years later. [Herring] told me that she had often seen him decline to take even one glass of wine, but says, that for the most part, his periods of excess were occasioned by a free use of opium. I asked if she had any manuscripts or books which she would either lend or sell, but she had nothing.

Woodberry asked Amelia to meet with Herring again, which she did.

In that second session, Amelia asked about Edgar's opium use. Based on Amelia's notes, it appears that Herring vividly recalled Edgar's intemperance. She described not only his opium use but also his friends' efforts to minimize the damage from his intemperance—likely his use of both opium and alcohol. Amelia wrote:

[Herring] frequently went to see them [Edgar and Virginia] & had the misfortune to see him often in those sad conditions from the use of opium. She says she has seen Mr C or his wife follow him to the gate and take his money & watch away from him when he went out. During these attacks he was kept entirely quiet & they did all possible to conceal his faults & failures. After recovery his penitence was genuine, but he made good resolutions only to be broken.

"Mr C" could have been Thomas Clarke, a publisher who worked with Poe in Philadelphia on a new magazine in 1843 but who ended their partnership partly due to Poe's drinking. (**Figure 5**)



Figure 5: When George E. Woodberry wrote a biography of Poe, he enlisted the help of Amelia Fitzgerald Poe, who provided the strongest evidence of Poe's opiate use. *George Woodberry. Hollinger, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).*

While Poe was likely using opium, the efforts to keep him quiet suggest that he was also drinking. In the 1840s, pressure from the temperance movement led many tipplers to abandon alcohol only to substitute it with opium, which was socially accepted as medicine. In 1843, New Yorker George Templeton Strong wrote that "opium chewing prevails here extensively, much more so than people think." He saw the usage as having "greatly increased" as a response to "the blessed Temperance Movement." Poe could have switched to opium in an attempt to end his drinking and, thus, end its negative effects on his career.

How then can we reconcile the theory that Poe was trying to hide his opiate use with the fact that characters in several of his stories were habitual users? This contrast calls to mind the title object in another Poe story, 1844's "The Purloined Letter." In it, authorities cannot find a stolen document, but Poe's detective recovers it. While the police assume that the thief had concealed it securely, it was "full in the view of every visiter," as Auguste Dupin discovers, and it was therefore overlooked. It is possible that Poe's dependency on opium was, at that time, also both well-hidden and in plain sight.

Further Reading:

For information about Poe's life, I primarily used Jeffrey Meyers, *Edgar Allan Poe: His Life and Legacy* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000). George Woodberry's finished product was the two-volume *The Life of Edgar Allan Poe, Personal and Literary* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1909). Woodberry's correspondence with Amelia Fitzgerald Poe is in Houghton Library at Harvard University.

For information about the nonmedical use of opiates in nineteenth-century America, I primarily used David T. Courtwright, *Dark Paradise: A History of Opiate Addiction in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001) and H. Wayne Morgan, *Drugs in America: A Social History, 1800–1980* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1981).

Several literary scholars have addressed opium use in Poe's life and writings. Alethea Hayter explores rumors of Poe's habituation and the opium references in his stories in Alethea Hayter, *Opium and the Romantic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970). James L. Machor addresses these topics in James L. Machor, *Reading Fiction in Antebellum America: Informed Response and Reception Histories, 1820–1865* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011). F. O. Matthiessen weighs in on the debate over Poe and opium use in F.O. Matthiessen, "Poe," *Sewanee Review* 54 (April–June 1946): 175–205. David S. Reynolds looks at the opium references in Poe's stories, and those of his contemporaries, in David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1988). Susan Zieger more broadly studies the drug references in the century's literature in Susan Zieger, *Inventing the Addict: Drugs, Race, and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century British and American Literature* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008).

This article originally appeared in February 2022.

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