

## Pre-Raphaelite Art and the Influence of Opium on Ways of Seeing

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### Abstract

*The article explores how increased use of opium to combat epidemics and disease affected Pre-Raphaelite painters and their audiences from the 1850s to 1880s. It argues that opium altered artists' perceptions of the world and played an important role both in the development of Pre-Raphaelite composition and in forming the ideas of the Aesthetic Movement. The author also proposes that opium directly affected the highly detailed visions of artist, which has been primarily attributed to the advent of photography. Key artists discussed are Henry Wallis, John Everett Millais, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Elizabeth Siddal, and James McNeill Whistler. Images of sleep and death form a particular focus of the study and the author uses both contemporary literature and newspaper reviews to reassess important paintings, including *The Death of Chatterton* (1856), *Ophelia* (1852), *Beata Beatrix* (1870), and *The Little White Girl* (1865).*

In 1848, just six years after the First Opium War (1839-42) and following several devastating cholera waves across Britain, the Pre-Raphaelite art movement emerged. Their close-up perspectives, controversial subject matter, and hyper-realist style caused a sensation among the British art establishment, and the paintings they exhibited became the subjects of blockbuster exhibitions. This essay will examine how the medicinal use of opium to combat disease, and its widespread use among the population, dramatically altered the visions of Pre-Raphaelite artists and their audiences.

### Opium Consumption in Victorian Britain

From 1831 to 1859 domestic consumption of opium in Britain rose at an average rate of 2.4 per cent per annum. Imports, primarily from Turkey (where opium with the highest morphine content was grown), climbed from 41,300 kilos in 1830 to a staggering 280,000 kilos in 1860. Furthermore, the reduction and abolition of tax on the drug meant that, by the 1850s, opium had become significantly cheaper, with the wholesale price at 30 shillings per pound plus tax in 1818, down to 21 shillings per pound plus tax in 1851. Opium was imported to

the docks of Bristol, Liverpool, and Dover. 90% of the opium trade was conducted in London, where the Pre-Raphaelite artists were based.<sup>1</sup>

For Victorians living in rapidly industrialising cities which were experiencing epidemic waves of diseases such as tuberculosis, cholera, and typhoid, opium became the essential and most affordable drug in the doctor's medicine bag.<sup>2</sup> It was used to treat severe pain, coughs, stomach complaints, and female medical conditions, as well as anxiety, insomnia, and depression. It could be bought freely in pubs and bakers' shops, at any dose without prescription. In 1848, the President of the Pharmaceutical Society commented with concern:

At present as the law stands, any man, however ignorant – an individual unable even to sign his own name – half of whose shop is stored with butter, bacon, cheese or tape, shall from the other half, have the power of dispensing, to any person applying, preparations of mercury, arsenic, opium etc. etc.<sup>3</sup>

Medicine bottles were often reused, measurements were unreliable, and poison labels were not required by law until 1868.

Opium was drunk, frequently as laudanum, a drink spiced with alcohol and herbs, eaten, or smoked.<sup>4</sup> Popularly described as *Manus dei* (Hand of God) or *Donum dei* (Gift of God) for its pain-relieving properties, users experienced a sense of deep, euphoric wellbeing. Side effects included a reduction of pupil size and sensitivity to light and colour – recalling the high focus, *depth of field* effect found in photography.<sup>5</sup> Such effects are described by Charlotte Bronte (1816-55) in the drugged experience of Lucy Snowe in *Villette* (1853):

In a land of enchantment, a garden most gorgeous, a plain sprinkled with coloured meteors, a forest with sparks of purple and ruby and golden fire gemming the foliage; a region, not of trees and shadow, but of strangest

<sup>1</sup> Martin Booth, *Opium: A History* (New York, NY: St Martin's Press, 1998), pp. 50-53.

<sup>2</sup> See doctor's medical kit. From website: *Science Museum Group* <<https://collection.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/objects/co197663/unopened-packet-of-diarrhoea-draughts-controlled-drug-packet>> [accessed 3 August 2020].

<sup>3</sup> Peter Bartip, "'A Penurth of Arsenic for Rat Poison': The Arsenic Act of 1851 and the Prevention of Secret Poisoning", *Medical History*, 36 (1992), 53-69 (p. 60).

<sup>4</sup> Harold Kalant, 'Opium Revisited: A Brief Review of its Nature, Composition, Non-medical Use and Relative Risks', *Addiction*, (1997), 267-277 (p. 275).

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Grey, 'Understanding Depth of Field: A Beginners Guide', *Photography Life*, (2021) <<https://photographylife.com/what-is-depth-of-field>> [accessed 17 April 2023].

architectural wealth – of altar and of temple, of pyramid, obelisk, and sphinx: incredible to say, the wonders and the symbols of Egypt teemed throughout the park of Vilette.<sup>6</sup>

The dream imagery related by Thomas de Quincey (1785-1859) in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821) offers another striking example. As opium affects the parts of the brain that controls breathing, it also engendered a sense of time slowed down or stopped.

By 1860, a third of fatal poisonings, including suicide, were linked to opium.<sup>7</sup> Accidental overdoses caused shallow breathing, whereby the brain could eventually be starved of oxygen.<sup>8</sup> As opium was three to four times more addictive than alcohol, regular users often found that they needed larger repeat doses to prevent withdrawal symptoms.<sup>9</sup> Opium was not a social drug taken in pubs and was usually consumed privately at home. The harsh symptoms of withdrawal – anxiety, tearfulness, inability to sleep, abdominal cramping, nausea, pain, and trembling – made addiction a solitary and extremely distressing condition.<sup>10</sup> Such symptoms of addiction are described by the Pre-Raphaelite poets Elizabeth Siddal and Christina Rossetti in their love poetry. Artists could reference opium experiences to a knowing and perceptive audience.

### ***The Death of Chatterton: The Transcendent Powers of Opium***

The extent to which this widespread opium use altered Victorian perceptions can be seen in Henry Wallis' iconic painting *The Death of Chatterton* (1856), depicting the suicide of the 18th century poet and forger Thomas Chatterton (1752-70), the 'marvellous boy' lauded by Romantic poet William Wordsworth

<sup>6</sup> Charlotte Bronte, *Vilette*, (1853) in *Bibliotheca Virtual Universal* <<https://biblioteca.org.ar/libros/167127.pdf>> [accessed 17 April 2023] (p. 451).

<sup>7</sup> Martin Booth, *Opium: A History* (New York, NY: St Martin's Press, 1998), p. 64.

<sup>8</sup> Opium was and remains a highly dangerous drug, as witnessed by the more recent opiate scandal in America, where 1.7 million people were addicted to prescription opioids in 2017 and nearly 400,000 people are estimated to have died between 1999 and 2017. See 'In numbers: The Sackler Family, Purdue Pharma and the US Opioid Crisis', *BBC News*, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-49718388>> [accessed 10 April 2023].

<sup>9</sup> Harold Kalant, 'Opium Revisited: A Brief Review of its Nature, Composition, Non-medical Use and Relative Risks', *Addiction*, (1997), 267-277 (p. 275).

<sup>10</sup> Harry Hubble Kane, *Drugs that Enslave* (Philadelphia, PA: Presley Blakiston, 1881), p. 20.

(1770-1850).<sup>11</sup> When it was first displayed in 1856 at the Royal Academy, London, it was praised by the art critic John Ruskin (1819-1900) as:

faultless and wonderful: a most noble example of the great school. Examine it well inch by inch: it is one of the pictures which intend, and accomplish, the entire placing before your eyes of an actual fact – and that a solemn one. Give it much time.<sup>12</sup>

The subject had long been known in popular culture, but Wallis' painting marks a significant departure from 18<sup>th</sup> century depictions' focus on the hopelessness and squalor of the poet's death. John Flaxman's *Chatterton receiving a Bowl of Poison from Despair* (c.1775-80) illustrated the horror of the final suicidal act; while Edward Orme's engraving *Death of Chatterton* (1794) showed the miserable poverty of the room and the poet's suffering.<sup>13</sup> Wallis builds on the *Chatterton* myth, but the composition and mood of the painting is entirely different. Instead, he beatifies the poet and presents the audience with the sublime moment of his release through opium.

It may have been while studying in Paris in 1851 that Wallis was inspired by the novel *Stello* (1832) and play *Chatterton* (1835), both by the Romantic writer Alfred de Vigny (1797-1863). De Vigny attacked the harsh economics of capitalism and its impact on impoverished artists. In the preface to the play, he states:

The cause is the perpetual martyrdom and the perpetual immolation of the Poet. – The cause is the right he should have to live. – The cause is the bread no one gives him. – The cause is the suicide he is forced to commit.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Donald S. Taylor argued in 1952 that Chatterton may not have committed suicide. Traces of opium have been found on the poet's pocket book and it is thought that he may have died of accidental poisoning. The myth, however, has proved enduring. See Thomas Chatterton Society, 'How and Why did Chatterton Die? Accident or Suicide?' *The Thomas Chatterton Manuscript Project* <<https://www.thomaschatterton.com/death-chatterton-c9>> [accessed 10 April 2023].

<sup>12</sup> John Ruskin, *Notes on some of the Principle Pictures Exhibited in the Rooms of the Royal Academy*, Vol. 2 (London: Smith and Elder & Co., 1856), (p. 60).

<sup>13</sup> John Flaxman, *Chatterton receiving a bowl of Poison from Despair*, (1775-80), British Museum; and Edward Orme, after Henry Singleton, *Death of Chatterton*, (1794), Library of Congress.

<sup>14</sup> Alfred de Vigny, *Chatterton*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908), p. 2. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

In the play's dramatic final scene, Chatterton tears up his poetry and takes the fatal dose of opium, claiming that with it he can buy back his soul and welcome an eternal dawn (p. 68). The scene in Wallis' painting echoes this moment. In using the young writer George Meredith as a model, Wallis added a further aspect of authenticity to his painting, encouraging his audience to directly reflect on the nature of artists and their value to society. Both for de Vigny and for Wallis suicide is not a criminal act, although it was still illegal in Britain; rather, it is the response of the artistic individual to an over-commercialised society. Opium, rather than arsenic, offers a fitting release for such a nature.

The painting was displayed in an arched frame with Christopher Marlowe's quotation from *Dr Faustus* (c. 1592): 'Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight. And burned is Apollo's laurel bough' – underlining both the genius and the martyrdom of the artist. As in the religious painting *Pietà*, Chatterton's body arcs elegantly across the bed. The poet lies in his white open shirt, while his blue breeches and red coat add bright colour to dark shadowed corners of the room. The petal-like remains of his poems scattered around the casket by his head trace a parallel line with his arm to the laudanum bottle on the floor, linking opium both to his poetic creativity and death. The empty bottle's distinctively slim shape would have been instantly recognisable to a contemporary audience. Wallis' commissioned woodcut in the *National Magazine* (1856) and the 1860 print by Thomas Oldham Barlow placed the laudanum bottle even more prominently into view.<sup>15</sup>

A close friend of the Pre-Raphaelites, Wallis used a combination of their new painting techniques to replicate the mind-expanding effects of the drug on the poet. Luminous Pre-Raphaelite colours light up his pale face and halo of red hair, while the detail of the frozen smoke of the snuffed-out candle engenders a feeling of stasis at the moment of death. The unsettling, close-up perspective, noted by previous critics of the Pre-Raphaelites, directly impacts the emotions of the viewers. When compared to a painting by *The Clique* painter, Augustus Egg (1816-63), *The Death of Buckingham* (1855), which was exhibited at the Royal Academy a year earlier, the differences in the two approaches are stark. Egg uses very similar compositional detail, but his traditional perspectives ensure that the viewer can only intellectually observe the horror of Buckingham's wasted life.

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<sup>15</sup> Engraving of Chatterton after Henry Wallis, *National Magazine*, 11 (1856), p. 33. <[https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P\\_1875-0710-3739](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1875-0710-3739)> [accessed 14 April 2023]; and engraving by Thomas Oldham Barlow, *The Death of Chatterton*, (1860). British Museum. <[https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P\\_1889-0409-357](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1889-0409-357)> [accessed 14 April 2023].

Wallis encourages his audience to truly feel the sublime emotion of an artist through the painting.

Here, Wallis may have been influenced by *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821) by Thomas De Quincey (1785-1859). Two new editions of the book were published in 1853, as well as his collected works. A resurgence of interest in the writer was the result.<sup>16</sup> De Quincey argued that only a superior English mind could benefit from the effects of opium. He described how it spurred him on towards greater creativity and more profound appreciation of art. De Quincey had also claimed that the opium eater ‘feels that the diviner part of his nature is paramount’ (p. 47). In *Confessions*, De Quincy recalled his own semi-conscious state under the influence of the drug and writes:

And at that time, I often fell into these reveries upon taking opium; and more than once it has happened to me, on a summer-night, when I have been at an open window [...] and could command a view of the great town of L---, [...] that I have sate, from sun-set to sun-rise, motionless, and without wishing to move’. (p. 54)

Wallis’ view through Chatterton’s garret window, as the sun rises over St Pauls and the City of London, echoes such a moment. For De Quincy, Wallis, and Chatterton, opium, the *Donum Dei* (Gift of God), becomes the agent that allows the individual to experience a ‘Godlike’ state of being.

Wallis shows that transcendence can be achieved via the sublime experience of opium. Despite its controversial subject matter – or perhaps because of it – *The Death of Chatterton* became a huge success at the Manchester *Art Treasures Exhibition* in 1857, which attracted over 1.3 million visitors. It was subsequently restaged in 1859 by James Robinson as a tinted 3D stereoscopic photograph. Viewers were thrilled at the immediacy of the image.<sup>17</sup> Carole Jacobi notes, ‘The light and colour appear crude in comparison with the painting but the stereoscope records “every stick, straw, scratch” in a manner that the painting cannot’. Photography, unlike painting, could not be selective about the detail it showed, and Jacobi adds that ‘the haphazard creases of the bed sheet are more

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<sup>16</sup> Barry Milligan, ‘Introduction’ to Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater and Other Writings* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. xi. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>17</sup> Marcus Bunyon, ‘“painting with light: art and photography from the pre-raphaelites to the modern age’ at Tate Britain, London’, *Art Blart* (2016) <<https://artblart.com/tag/henry-wallis-chatterton/>> [accessed 15 August 2020] (para. 14 of 37).

suggestive of restless movement, now stilled, than Wallis's elegant drapery'.<sup>18</sup> This distinction between art and photography is important. It shows that the influence of photography on the Pre-Raphaelites cannot be fully relied upon as an explanation for the subtle, harmonious effects of their art.

### ***Ophelia: Sexuality, Fairies and the Social Order***

Millais' *Ophelia* (1852) also tackles suicide and escape from societal restraints, this time through a literary female figure.<sup>19</sup> The model for the painting was the non-conforming Pre-Raphaelite artist and opium addict Elizabeth Siddal.<sup>20</sup> She posed lying in a bath; and it is not implausible that she took opium to numb the cold and discomfort of modelling during the long hours lying still in water. Siddal's father sued the artist for his daughter's ill health following an incident when the bath heating lights went out.<sup>21</sup> In contrast to Wallis' treatment of Chatterton, Millais' more distanced, class-based response towards socially unfettered women like Siddal creates a highly complex image well worth examining.

For Victorians, Ophelia represented a vulnerable, young person 'too good, too fair, to be cast among the briars of this working-day world' but her sexuality also served as a popular warning to young girls to beware of passion.<sup>22</sup> However, Millais defies conventional Victorian presentations of her seated on a branch as portrayed in fellow Pre-Raphaelite artist Arthur Hughes' *Ophelia* (1852).<sup>23</sup> When both paintings were exhibited at the Royal Academy, *The Times* critic noted this departure and commented: 'There must be something strangely perverse in an imagination which souses Ophelia in a weedy ditch, and robs the drowning struggle of the lovelorn maiden of all pathos and beauty, while it studies every

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<sup>18</sup> Carole Jacobi, 'Tate Painting and the Art of Stereographic Photography', *Tate Gallery* <<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/p/photography/essay>> [accessed 14 March 2022] (para. 21 of 22).

<sup>19</sup> John Everett Millais, *Ophelia*, (1852). Tate Britain.

<sup>20</sup> Siddal suffered illness throughout her adult life and opium is likely to have been prescribed for her symptoms. Her death in 1862 was from an overdose of laudanum and was suspected as suicide from grief for her stillborn child in May 1861. The coroner's inquest on 13 February 1862 pronounced her death as accidental. See Jan Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Sisters*, (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2022), p. 33.

<sup>21</sup> Anon, 'Look Closer. The Story of Ophelia', Tate Gallery <<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/millais-ophelia-n01506/story-ophelia>> [accessed 14 March 2022] (para. 6 of 9).

<sup>22</sup> Simonetta Falchi, 'Re-mediating Ophelia with Pre-Raphaelite Eyes', *Interlitteraria*, 20.2 (2015), 171-183 (p. 176). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>23</sup> Arthur Hughes, *Ophelia*, (1852), Manchester City Art Gallery.

petal of the dandelion and anemone floating on the eddy' (p. 177). For its audience, Millais' *Ophelia* presented uncomfortable associations with the murky river Thames and the 'fallen' women who drowned themselves in it.

Millais' reasons for challenging the usual iconography of *Ophelia* are complex. In his departure from convention, it is likely that he took inspiration from close readings of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* text, but also of the French Romantic painter Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863). Delacroix's dramatic lithograph of *Act IV Scene vii. The Death of Ophelia* (1843) was part of a Shakespeare lithograph series owned by Rossetti's tutor and Millais' friend Ford Maddox Brown (1821-93) and used to inspire his *King Lear* (1848-49) pen and ink studies.<sup>24, 25</sup> There are strong compositional similarities in the two Ophelia images. Both show a chiaroscuro landscape, an overhanging willow branch, and Ophelia lying prone in the water. However, the mood of the two images is very different. Unlike Delacroix, Millais sublimates the sexual tensions inherent in the original story.<sup>26</sup> While Delacroix shows Ophelia as a wild Romantic soul, bare-breasted and clinging desperately to the branch, Millais renders Ophelia semi-conscious, drifting, and indifferent to her fate in a lush, green English landscape.

Peter Brix Søndergaard notes that 'the bourgeois response to the threat of sexuality was often asceticism'.<sup>27</sup> He argues that Millais sought to come to terms with these inner psychological conflicts by transforming Ophelia into the *femme fragile* (p. 119), but Simonetta Falchi also notes that Millais' sexualised iconography – portraying a young girl with open outstretched arms and 'mermaid-like spreading of her robes' – would have been disturbing to Victorian eyes (p. 177). Yet *Ophelia* also contains religious symbolism. Her body is posed like a mediaeval saint, surrounded by wildflowers. Pansies, signifying love in vain, or thought; poppies, sleep and death; violets, death in youth; and daisies,

<sup>24</sup> Laura MaCulloch, 'Ford Maddox Brown: Works on Paper and Archive Material at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery', Doctoral Thesis submitted to Birmingham University <<https://etheses.bham.ac.uk/id/eprint/6111/1/MaCulloch10PhD1.pdf>> [accessed 20 March 2022] p. 27-8.

<sup>25</sup> Eugène Delacroix, *Act IV Scene vii. The Death of Ophelia*, (1843). From website <[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Eug%C3%A8ne\\_Delacroix\\_-\\_The\\_Death\\_of\\_Ophelia\\_-\\_WGA06259.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Eug%C3%A8ne_Delacroix_-_The_Death_of_Ophelia_-_WGA06259.jpg)> [accessed 20 April 2021].

<sup>26</sup> In William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Queen Gertrude makes references to the bawdy flower Long Purples and Ophelia's 'mermaid-like' figure in the water. Mermaids were considered sexual creatures and were used as a euphemism for prostitutes in Shakespeare's London.

<sup>27</sup> Peter Brix Søndergaard, "'Something strangely perverse": Nature and Gender in J.E. Millais's *Ophelia*', *Journal for the Study of Romanticism*, 7 (2018), 115-125, (p. 118). Further references are given after quotations in the text.



innocence. For Millais, *Ophelia* seems to embody both the saint and sinner as she drifts towards her death.

In an attempt to contain this instability, Millais places her in a womb-like bower, surrounded by wild nature, painted with hallucinatory clarity. This Ruskinian depiction of abundant plant life increases the viewer's awareness of nature, but it also blurs the corporeality of Ophelia/Siddal's trance-like figure. Noting this confusing inversion, Tom Taylor, critic for *Punch* magazine, commented wryly:

Talk as you like, M'Gilp, eminent painter, to your friend Mr. Squench, eminent critic, about the needless elaboration of those water mosses, and the over making-out of the rose leaves, and the abominable finish of those river-side weeds matted with gossamer, which the field botanist may identify leaf by leaf. I tell you, I am aware of none of these. I see only that face of poor drowning Ophelia. My eye goes to that, and rests on that, and sees nothing else, till – buffoon as I am, mocker, joker, scurrile-knave, street jester by trade and nature – the tears blind me, and I am fain to turn from the face of the mad girl to the natural loveliness that makes her dying beautiful.<sup>28</sup>

For Taylor, Millais' inspired composition dissolved the boundaries between the minutely observed natural world and the mystic 'other world' of death and eternity. Ophelia's face carries the opiate ecstasy of release and has the power to reduce the critic to tears.

Here the 'lesser' genre of fairy painting with its magical and vividly sexualised dream imagery (often inspired by opium) becomes a useful point of exploration. Millais had painted his only contribution to the fairy genre (also from Shakespeare) *Ferdinand Lured by Ariel* (1850) just two years earlier.<sup>29</sup> It is likely that he was influenced by his close friend Joseph Noel Paton (1821-1901), whose painting *The Quarrel of Oberon and Titania* (1849) was widely celebrated at the Royal Scottish Academy in 1851.<sup>30</sup> Plants and the natural world are painted with

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<sup>28</sup> Tom Taylor, *Punch Magazine*, May (1852), pp. 216-17 in <<https://kimberlyevemusings.blogspot.com/2011/09/review-of-desperate-romantics-private.html>> [accessed 20 March 2020] (para. 4 of 9).

<sup>29</sup> John Everett Millais, *Ferdinand Lured by Ariel*, (1850). Private Collection.

<sup>30</sup> Joseph Noel Paton, *The Quarrel of Oberon and Titania*, (1849). Scottish National Gallery.

hyper-realist detail.<sup>31</sup> *The Quarrel of Oberon and Titania* shows each leaf, flower, and fairy clearly delineated. Noting the same technique used in *Ferdinand Lured by Ariel*, Allen Staley comments: ‘This microscopic natural detail appears at the expense of space, atmosphere, or any feeling of light or shade’ and ‘The hyper-real clarity of delineation does not contradict but enhances the sense of fantasy’.<sup>32</sup> Millais’ *Ophelia* replicates this hyper-real style – timeless and devoid of shadow – enabling the viewers to re-experience the natural world through ‘otherworldly’ eyes.

The same obsessive intensity of detail can be observed in *The Fairy Feller’s Master Stroke* (1855-64) by Richard Dadd, founder of the rival artistic group *The Clique* and well-documented opium user.<sup>33</sup> The painting took Dadd four years to complete and was created in Broadmoor Hospital, Berkshire, where he underwent treatment after a violent psychotic episode during which he killed his father. Dadd had first shown signs of mental illness (including hallucinations) in 1842, while on an expedition in Egypt.<sup>34</sup> What is often described as a mental illness may have been the result of increased access to medical opium while abroad for the treatment of dysentery. The subsequent withdrawal symptoms may have contributed to his ‘madness’ back in England. Medical reports after his trial confirm that once his dose was stabilised, he became a model patient who continued to work on his art while in hospital.<sup>35</sup>

It has already been noted that opium reduces the pupil size of the eye and affects how the brain perceives light and depth, producing a high overall focus known in photography as *depth of field*. It is not implausible that Dadd and other artists including Millais were reproducing this physiological effect to create the unsettling, colourful, and surreal spaces of their paintings. In both the Victorian fairy painting genre and, more obliquely, in *Ophelia*, opium loosens the boundaries between nature and self, as well as the conscious and unconscious mind.

Millais’ attitude towards female sexuality, however, remains ambivalent and reflects very real contemporary societal concerns regarding the effects of high

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<sup>31</sup> Such was the fascination that the writer Lewis Carroll (1832-1898) delightedly noted that he had counted precisely 165 individual fairies in the painting. See Lionel Lambourne, *Victorian Painting* (Phaidon Press: London 1999), p. 205.

<sup>32</sup> Allen Staley, *The Pre-Raphaelite Landscape* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 27.

<sup>33</sup> Richard Dadd, *The Fairy Feller’s Master Stroke*, (1855-64). Tate Britain.

<sup>34</sup> Lionel Lambourne, *Victorian Painting* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1999), p. 202

<sup>35</sup> Louise Lippincott, ‘Murder and the Fine Arts; or, a Reassessment of Richard Dadd’, *The John Paul Getty Museum Journal*, 16 (1988), 75-94, (pp. 78-82).

opium addiction in young women. It loosened them from domestic duties, responsibilities, and ultimately from their reproductive role. In many later Millais works, sexuality and death remain closely linked to images of languid, sleeping women. *Apple Blossoms* (1859) shows girls – descendants of Eve – involved in the domestic activities of an orchard picnic, while one wantonly meets the viewer's gaze, a scythe representing death by her side.<sup>36</sup> *The Wise Virgins* (1864) derives from the parable of 'The Ten Virgins', five of whom missed meeting their heavenly bridegroom because they fell asleep (Matthew 25:1-13).<sup>37</sup> Following the conservative Victorian view of morally 'lost' women, Millais' *Ophelia* may ultimately warn, like George Frederick Watts' *Found Drowned* (1850), that unbounded freedom in females threatens both the male social order and even the future propagation of the species.<sup>38</sup>

### Eyes Wide Shut: Elizabeth Siddal, Art, and Addiction

A fascinating counterpoint to this view can be seen in the art and poetry of Elizabeth Siddal (1829-62). Siddal's opium addiction and early death from a laudanum overdose have often overshadowed her artistic contribution to the Pre-Raphaelites, yet she participated in the earliest stages of the movement's development, modelling as Viola in Walter Deverell's *Twelfth Night, Act 2, Scene IV* (1850) as well as for Hunt, Millais, and Rossetti.<sup>39</sup> Siddal and Rossetti later married, and they collaborated closely during their relationship. Her style was greatly admired by Ruskin, who purchased her body of work for an annual stipend of 150 pounds. She was the only woman to exhibit with the Pre-Raphaelites in 1857 in Fitzroy Square, London.

In assessing Siddal as an artist, it is crucial to move beyond depictions of her as a tragic muse or iconic sleeping beauty. Detailed scholarship by Jane Marsh, and Constance Hassett's excellent assessment of her poetry, has made a strong case for her talent both as a painter and poet.<sup>40</sup> Stefania Arcara also argues powerfully that Rossetti's numerous drawings of her posed as sleeping or resting in their home have more to do with Rossetti's Victorian attitudes towards

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<sup>36</sup> John Everett Millais, *Apple Blossoms*, (1859). Lady Lever Art Gallery.

<sup>37</sup> John Everett Millais, *The Wise Virgins*, (1864). Tate Britain.

<sup>38</sup> George Frederick Watts, *Found Drowned*, (1850). Watts Gallery.

<sup>39</sup> Walter Deverell, *Twelfth Night, Act 2, Scene IV*, (1850). Private Collection.

<sup>40</sup> See Constance W. Hassett, 'Elizabeth Siddal's Poetry: A Problem and Some Suggestions', *Victorian Poetry*, 35.4 (1997), pp. 443-70.

femininity and illness than Siddal herself.<sup>41</sup> Siddal's actions contradict this image of the passive, suffering invalid. She studied with Rossetti and later at the Sheffield School of Art in 1857.<sup>42</sup> Her break with Rossetti from 1856 to 1860 further demonstrates her independent mind. A year after Rossetti and Siddal married, the 1861 census still lists her at their home in London as 'Artist and Painter', underlining her dedication to her profession.<sup>43</sup>

It therefore becomes far more interesting to ask the question: 'How might Siddal have proactively used opium to facilitate her art?'; Caroline Perez notes that the experience of mental and physical pain in females has long been misunderstood by the medical profession.<sup>44</sup> The opiate crisis in North America has also shown that females are more likely to be prescribed opiate pain killers than males. Female addicts are also more likely to suffer from depression and psychiatric problems linked to their drug taking.<sup>45</sup> Siddal may have used opium to relieve mental or physical pain, as well as to enhance her productivity as an artist. Certainly, as a working-class woman who passionately aspired to be an artist, the psychological stresses of going against societal norms were considerable.

It is possible to argue that, for a time, opium increased and supported Siddal's creativity. Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-61) provides a contemporary example of a woman artist who valued opium as a stimulus for her work; she was a functioning addict for many years. Holman Hunt's daughter Violet, in her biography of Siddal, comments on Siddal's relationship with Rossetti, writing that 'she taught him to drug'.<sup>46</sup> Although evidently a book of purple prose, it is interesting that she gives Siddal agency. Scientific studies have

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<sup>41</sup> See Stefania Arcara, 'Sleep and Liberation: The Opiate World of Elizabeth Siddal', in *Sleeping Beauties in Victorian Britain*, ed. by B. Laurent (Bern: Peter Lang, 2015), pp. 95-121.

<sup>42</sup> Jane Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Sisters* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2019), p. 29.

<sup>43</sup> Anna McNay, 'Beyond Ophelia: A Celebration of Lizzie Siddal Artist and Poet', *Studio International* (2018) <<https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/beyond-ophelia-celebration-of-lizzie-siddal-artist-poet-wightwick-manor-wolverhampton-national-trust>> [accessed 15 August 2021] (para. 11 of 11).

<sup>44</sup> Caroline Criado Perez, *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World designed for Men* (London: Vintage, 2019), p. 226.

<sup>45</sup> Kathleen T. Brady, Sudie E. Back, and Shelly F. Greenfield eds., *Women and Addiction: A Comprehensive Handbook* (New York, NY: The Guilford Press, 2009), p. 341.

<sup>46</sup> Violet Hunt, *The Wife of Rossetti, Her Life and Death* (London: Dutton and Co., 1936), p. 22.

noted the mutually supportive relationship between addicted couples.<sup>47</sup> Cunha and Marsh also note that Siddal's more mystical embrace of medievalism in her art may have influenced the style of Rossetti's work in the early years of their relationship, rather than the other way around.<sup>48</sup> Drugging may have enhanced the sensitive and powerfully original talent in Siddal that Rossetti so valued.

Siddal's *Lovers Listening to Music* (1854) forms a fascinating example of the couple's shared experience of ecstasy and art.<sup>49</sup> The description 'the two Egyptian girls playing to lovers' written onto the drawing by Rossetti strongly associates the work with Orientalism and the exotic, as well as possibly drug-inspired experiences (Egypt was a known producer of opium). This unusual cultural allusion could have been linked to their close friend Holman Hunt, who set out for Egypt and the Holy Land in 1854. We also know from Rossetti's letter to his mother that Siddal sketched two 'gypsy' girls while in Hastings.<sup>50</sup> It is interesting to speculate that Siddal may have used their dark appearance and 'otherness' ('gypsy' being a shortening of 'Egyptian') as a gateway into her opiate world.

In the drawing, the couple sits enraptured, the man singing and the woman listening to the music played by two women kneeling, while playing a stringed instrument on the ground. Siddal captures a mood of pure experience. The drawing was one of the first of Siddal's to be praised by Ruskin, when it was included in a batch presented to him. Rossetti wrote to his friend William Allingham (1824-89) in March 1854 that 'he bought on the spot every scrap of designs hitherto produced by Miss Siddal. He declared they were far better than mine' and that Ruskin paid Siddal 30 pounds, a considerable sum at the time.<sup>51</sup>

The simplicity of line and the clarity of the image produce a sense of intense rapture, which resonates with experiences of music recalled by De

<sup>47</sup> Janie Simmons and Merrill Singer, 'I love you... and heroin: Care and Collusion among Drug-using Couples', *Substance Abuse Treatment, Prevention, and Policy*, 1.7 (2006). <<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1524734/>> [accessed 18 March 2021].

<sup>48</sup> Mariana Cunha, 'Behind those Screens' – Bringing Women Forth: Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddal', *Anglo Saxonica*, 17.1 (2020) <<https://www.revista-anglo-saxonica.org/articles/10.5334/as.15/>> [accessed: 15 August 2020] (para.13 of 34).

<sup>49</sup> Elizabeth Siddal, *Lovers Listening to Music*, (1854). Wightwick Manor, National Trust Collection. <<http://www.nationaltrustcollections.org.uk/object/1287930>> [accessed: 13 August 2019].

<sup>50</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Letter to his mother, 1.7.1855 in M.W. Rossetti, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti. His Family-Letters with a Memoir (Volume One)* (London: AMS Press, 1970), p.140.

<sup>51</sup> Derrick Leon, *Ruskin: The Great Victorian*, (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 216.

Quincey. Drawing a clear link between opium and the enjoyment of music, he states:

Now opium, by greatly increasing the activity of the mind generally, increases, of necessity, that particular mode of its activity by which we are able to construct out of raw material of organic sound an elaborate intellectual pleasure.

He further explains that in order to heighten this experience he would visit the opera and:

a chorus, &c, of elaborate harmony, displayed before me, as in a piece of arras work, the whole of my past life – not, as if recalled by an act of memory, but as if present and incarnated in music: no longer painful to dwell upon: but the detail of its incidents removed, or blended in some hazy abstraction; and its passions exalted, spiritualized, and sublimed. (p. 51)

For De Quincey art, opium, and otherworldly pleasures are tightly bound together.

Siddal's two lovers also access this higher level of experience. Behind them is the tangled, Dantean wood; before them the clear, open countryside. It is this release, where the 'opium eater is too happy to observe the motion of time', that Siddal strives to reproduce (p. 53). She places a child in the picture, hinting at the innocence of childhood and the tantalising Blakean hope of recapturing that innocence. By blending the setting of the English countryside with the Egyptian musicians, Siddal creates a reimagined and enhanced scene. Just as in Rossetti's later work *The Blue Closet* (1857), narrative is dissolved and time and place cannot be fathomed, as music breaks the boundaries between earthly and heavenly experience.

While much of Siddal's work is drawn from similar 'ancient' and medieval subjects, it would be wrong to view it as pure escapism. Siddal illustrated several ballads from Walter Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802), and closer examination of the ballads themselves uncovers some disturbing and uncomfortable narratives. Chris Baldick, writing on the uses of medieval themes in Gothic literature, notes that 'prominent among its special features is a preoccupation with inherited powers and the corruptions of feudal aristocracy' and 'the memory of an age-old regime of oppression and persecution which

threatens still to fix its dead hand upon us'.<sup>52</sup> Siddal may have used the stories contained in the ballads as a critical protest against the restrictive class-based society she inhabited. The haunting singing voices of the ballads function as a mechanism to unlock the 'trauma' hidden in her images.

In Siddal's paintings and poetry, acute mental and physical pain caused by an authoritative patriarchal order feature frequently. In the sketch for *The Gay Goshawk* (1854) the heroine's parents, who are opposed to her marriage choice, test to see if she is dead by pouring molten lead on her; *Sister Helen* (1860) tells of a girl killing her unfaithful rich lover through spells; and *Clerk Saunders* (1857) shows a lover return to the woman as a ghost, after her brothers have murdered him in her bed.<sup>53</sup> Reflecting on society more broadly and very possibly with the Crimean War (1853-6) at the forefront of her mind, the richly luminous watercolour *Sir Patrick Spens* (1856) shows women left widowed on the cliff tops after their husbands are sent to sea by a despotic ruler. Viewed in this way, opium may have provided the means for Siddal to detach from the mental pain of living in a social system that constrained women's sexuality and controlled their agency.

I would further argue that the numerous images by Rossetti depicting Siddal with her eyes shut signify more than the drowsy sleep of the laudanum-addicted model and may also be viewed as a knowingly posed act of resistance and self-realisation. Strong taboos existed against middle-class women smoking and drinking alcohol in public, but opium could be consumed without censure in private. As Kristina Aikens observes, female drug-taking in Victorian literature can be considered as liberating: 'The threat of the opiate comes not from without, but from within; the threat here is not the loss of the self, but rather the discovery of a self that could destroy, or at least disrupt, a patriarchal society that wants to keep women in a fixed location and role'.<sup>54</sup> In both known photographs of her, we see that Siddal controls her image and appears with her eyes closed.<sup>55</sup> She poses in such a way as to indicate a remoteness from the domestic world – sitting

<sup>52</sup> Chris Baldick ed., *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. XX-XXII.

<sup>53</sup> Elizabeth Siddal, *The Gay Goshawk*, (1854). Ashmolean Museum. *Sister Helen*, (1860). Wightwick Manor, National Trust Collection. *Clerk Saunders*, (1857). Fitzwilliam Museum. *Sir Patrick Spens*, (1856). Tate Britain.

<sup>54</sup> Kristina Aikens, 'A Pharmacy of Her Own: Victorian Women and the Figure of the Opiate' submitted PhD Thesis, Tufts University (2008), p. 4.

<sup>55</sup> Photograph of Elizabeth Siddal from biography of Violet Hunt, *The Wife of Rossetti*, published 1936. <[http://www.lizziesiddal.com/html/photograph\\_of\\_elizabeth\\_siddal.html](http://www.lizziesiddal.com/html/photograph_of_elizabeth_siddal.html)> [accessed 16 May 2021]; and Photograph of Mrs Rossetti (1860). The Walters Art Museum. <<https://art.thewalters.org/detail/19820/mrs-rossetti/>> [accessed 16 May 2021].

in the first with eyes shut leaning her head on her hand; and in the second with clasped hands, almost as if in religious ecstasy. Her shut eyes emphasise her special status as an artist, rather than as a posed wife.

In her poem *The Lust of the Eyes*, Siddal may be imagining the thoughts of the male artist viewing his Pre-Raphaelite ‘stunner’ model.<sup>56</sup> Quoting *Revelations* (1 John 2:16), which refers to the sins of earthly desire, she warns of the danger to the individual’s soul/self when she is not truly seen and is objectified. There is an almost vampiric cruelty in the relationship between the passive beloved-woman/muse and active lover/artist. She writes:

I care not for my Lady’s soul  
 Though I worship before her smile;  
 I care not where be my Lady’s goal  
 When her beauty shall lose its wile.  
 Low sit I down at my Lady’s feet  
 Gazing through her wild eyes  
 Smiling to think how my love will fleet  
 When their starlike beauty dies.<sup>57</sup>

By shutting her own ‘wild’ eyes to the world, Siddal contradicted conventional stereotypes of female passivity and actively protected her own notion of ‘self’.

### ***Beata Beatrix: Opium, Rossetti and ‘The Fleshly School of Poetry’***

*Beata Beatrix* (1870) is Rossetti’s response to Siddal’s early death from a laudanum overdose in 1863.<sup>58</sup> He shows her as the eternally youthful Beatrice of Dante’s *Vita Nuova*, as she sits in simple, green robes, her face and hair illuminated by the setting sun. A red bird (reminiscent of the red/brown cinnamon spice found in laudanum at the time) drops a poppy into her open hands. However, for Rossetti no art work or life could stand only for itself, and, as Elizabeth Prettejohn notes, subtle Baudelairian ‘correspondences’ appear constantly in

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<sup>56</sup> Mariana Cunha ‘Behind those Screens’ – Bringing Women Forth: Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddal’, *Anglo Saxonica*, 17 (2020), pp. 1-12, (p. 9)

<sup>57</sup> Elizabeth Siddal, ‘The Lust of the Eyes’ in *Poems and Drawing of Elizabeth Siddal* (Wolfville: Wombat Press, 1978), p. 14.

<sup>58</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Beata Beatrix*, (1870). Tate Britain.



Rossetti's poetry and art.<sup>59</sup> Rossetti was exploring more than his personal tragedy and loss. He returned to a favourite obsession, the death of the poet Dante's beloved Beatrice, that had occupied him before he ever met Siddal, and which he had explored in the poem *The Blessed Damozel* (1850). In 1875, he recreated this encounter yet again in his sumptuous painting of the same name. This time his new model, Alexa Wilding, leans down from Heaven while he, her lover Dante/Rossetti, lies prostrate below.<sup>60</sup>

This restless losing and replicating of identity and self, often observed in addictive relationships, is most clearly seen in Rossetti's *How They Met Themselves* (1860-4), painted just before their marriage.<sup>61</sup> Rossetti called it his 'bogie' picture, as two lovers fatefully meet their *Doppelgänger* in a forest. Such an encounter in fairy stories foreshadowed death, and the image recalls Siddal's own watercolour *The Haunted Wood* (1856), in which a woman meets a ghostlike male figure among the trees.<sup>62</sup> Magic and enchantment form an important theme for Rossetti and Siddal and 'drugging' through opium seems to have enhanced their experience of the supernatural. The lethally dangerous combined effects of opium and chloral addiction also gave Rossetti waking visions and voices after Siddal's death, increasingly blurring the boundaries between the imagined and the real.<sup>63</sup>

Rossetti's obsessions are further channelled through the eroticism of his work. Siddal is the chaste *Beata Beatrix* but also *Regina Cordium* (1860), the erotic and nakedly sensual 'Queen of Hearts', who inspired poems such as *Nuptial Sleep*.<sup>64</sup> The theme mirrors problems with addiction in China, where Lovell notes Chinese imperial concerns about opium and the corruption of respectable people 'in the gratification of impure and sensual desires, whereby their respective duties and obligations are neglected'.<sup>65</sup> Rossetti too explores similar liberating drug-inspired sexual experiences. In *Bocca Baciata* (1859), a portrait of the model Fanny Cornforth, as the much-kissed woman of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Rossetti directly challenges Victorian society's condemnation of female promiscuity and anxiety about sexually transmitted disease. He brings the

<sup>59</sup> Elizabeth Prettejohn, *Art for Art's Sake: Aestheticism in Victorian Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 202-205.

<sup>60</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Blessed Damozel*, (1875-78). Lady Lever Art Gallery.

<sup>61</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *How they met Themselves*, (1860-64). Fitzwilliam Museum.

<sup>62</sup> Elizabeth Siddal, *The Haunted Wood*, (1856). Wightwick Manor: National Trust Collection.

<sup>63</sup> Dinah Roe, *The Rossettis in Wonderland* (London: Haus Publishing, 2011), pp. 242-45.

<sup>64</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Regina Cordium*, (1860). Johannesburg Art Gallery.

<sup>65</sup> Julia Lovell, *The Opium War* (London: Picador, 2011), p. 36.

image so close to his viewer that they must experience her beauty intimately.<sup>66</sup> Knowingly controversial yet fearing public censure, Rossetti rarely exhibited at the Royal Academy and mostly sold his paintings directly to private buyers.

More darkly, Rossetti's world of confined and sensual women was one that many Victorian men could recognise. In China, opium was used to keep concubines compliant, and in Europe chloral later became a drug of choice for many prostitutes.<sup>67</sup> Rossetti's 1860s images often show women in liminal states, waiting and resting in opulent surroundings, reflecting the contemporary situation of women kept by rich men in apartments across Britain's cities. *Lady Lilith* (1866-73) painted by Rossetti and bought by Lord Frederick R. Leyland (1831-92), the wealthy Liverpool shipping owner, puts the viewer into just such a primary, instinctive world.<sup>68</sup> Prettejohn comments: 'It is as if the picture contents were turned inside out, projecting into our spaces rather than receding into illusionist depths [...] we cannot preserve a safe moral distance' (p. 213). She continues, 'Rossetti is obliterating the I- thou relationship that had characterised western painting since the Renaissance' (p. 214). The social messages found in earlier Pre-Raphaelite paintings such as Holman Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience* (1853) become lost among the sensual pleasures of the non-narrative, 'art for art's sake' aesthetic. Rossetti's serial 'stunners' override all morality and intellect.

Ultimately, this lack of restraint and breakdown of social order in the Aesthetic Movement was not lost on the British art and literary establishment. Robert Buchanan's 'The Fleshly School of Poetry' (1871) marks the backlash against Rossetti and his followers. Buchanan is particularly disturbed by the passion Rossetti's women display in his poems, claiming he had never met such 'females who bite, scratch, scream, bubble, munch, sweat, writhe, twist, wriggle, foam'.<sup>69</sup> These descriptions of female sexual arousal also reflect states of severe illness and drug withdrawal. While the link between drugs, sickness, and intense sensuality had already been described obliquely in *Goblin Market* (1862) by Rossetti's sister, Christina Rossetti, Rossetti's un-coded, ardent kisses in *Nuptial Sleep*, and his judgement-free contemplation of the intoxicated prostitute *Jenny*,

<sup>66</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Bocca Baciata*, (1859). Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

<sup>67</sup> Martin Booth, *Opium: A History* (Kindle Edition: St Martin's Griffin, 2013), p. 104.

<sup>68</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Lady Lilith*, (1866-73). Delaware Art Museum.

<sup>69</sup> Robert Buchanan, 'The Fleshly School of Poetry: Mr D.G. Rossetti', *The Contemporary Review*, 18 (1871) in *The Victorian Web*

<<https://victorianweb.org/authors/buchanan/fleshy.html>> [accessed 12 March 2019] (para 12 of 15).

proved unacceptable. Buchanan condemned Rossetti's 'morbid deviation from the healthy forms of life' and his 'unwholesome' poems. Rossetti's reaction was strong and troubled, culminating in a suicide attempt, increased drug taking and a sustained withdrawal from society.

### ***The Little White Girl: Oriental Dreams and Escape from Reality***

While opium enabled Pre-Raphaelite artists to explore new psychological freedoms in their art, as the century progressed, accumulated societal censure led many to move towards the ever more veiled and obscure images of the Aesthetic Movement. In relation to this transition, it is useful to examine the art of James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) and his painting *Symphony in White, No. 2: The Little White Girl* (1865).<sup>70</sup> Whistler was not a Pre-Raphaelite but he and Rossetti became close friends after Rossetti moved to Chelsea in 1862, following Siddal's death. Like Rossetti, Whistler had experienced extreme critical hostility when *Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl* (1861-2), a portrait of his companion and model Jo Hiffernan, was rejected by both the Royal Academy and the Paris *Salon* for offending public decency.<sup>71</sup> Contemporary reviewers were mystified by the girl's expressionless face and the painting's lack of moral narrative. Pre-Raphaelite artist and critic Frederic George Stephens speculated in the *Athenaeum* that the model might allude to a character in Wilkie Collins' drug-fuelled bestseller *The Woman in White* (1859-61), while a French critic wrote of 'her great eyes swimming in ecstasy'.<sup>72</sup> Whistler's later painting *Symphony in White, No. 2: The Little White Girl* (1865) contrasts with the realism of the previous work through carefully coded, obscure imagery; it explores how the artist might escape to a world where 'truth and beauty' could be accessed freely, without the sting of public criticism.<sup>73</sup>

*In the Little White Girl*, Hiffernan stands by the mantelpiece looking towards a vase of the blue and white Nanking porcelain, part of the ceramic collection which marked Whistler's fascination with the Far East. Elizabeth Hope Chang has written on Britain's complex cultural engagement with China. She

<sup>70</sup> James McNeill Whistler, *Symphony in White, No. 2: The Little White Girl*, (1862). Tate Britain.

<sup>71</sup> James McNeill Whistler, *Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl*, (1862). Washington D.C. National Gallery of Art.

<sup>72</sup> Richard Dormant and Margaret F. Macdonald, *Whistler* (London: Tate Gallery Publications, 1994) pp.76-77.

<sup>73</sup> James McNeill Whistler, *Symphony in White, No. 2: The Little White Girl*, (1865). Tate Britain.

notes that, while some contemporary writers thought the Chinese perceived the world differently because of their almond shape eyes, William Rossetti's review of Whistler's *Lange Leizen of the Six Marks* (1864) suggested that a 'sensitive gaze' towards these Chinese artefacts could in turn access Chinese sensibilities.<sup>74</sup> The French artist Henri Fantin Latour commented on Whistler's studio in 1864, writing to his mother 'Here, I am nearly in Paradise. We're fashioning an impossible life, all three of us in Whistler's studio. You would believe you were at Nagasaki or in the Summer Palace, China, Japan, it is splendid'.<sup>75</sup> Ironically, by 1860, the magnificent Summer Palace near Beijing had already been destroyed and looted by British and French troops at the end of the second Opium War (1856-60). The 'Orient' existed chiefly in the artists' imagination.

In *The Little White Girl*, Hiffenan's gaze into the scene painted on the vase may be interpreted as Whistler's own intense yearning for a China of his imagination. However, Aileen Tsui comments that the model's *Doppelgänger* – her darker reflection – suggests 'an underlying emotional complexity' beneath the painting's surface (para. 8). The double portrait marks Hiffenan's uncertain social position in Whistler's home, as she was also his mistress. It shows her wearing a wedding ring but Whistler never married her. Her reflection looks towards a red cinnabar/opium lacquer, covered pot. Once again Chinese objects become a means of accessing Chinese 'experience' within the context of London. Whistler may be suggesting to the more 'knowing' viewer that the red container holds opium and a means of accessing 'Eastern' eroticism. Chang has written how the opium den represented a dangerous and 'corrupting' space in British imagination (p. 111). Similar shaped containers can be seen on the trays of opium smokers shown in the *Illustrated London News*.<sup>76</sup> The opium dens smokers occupied could be found in the Limehouse docks of east London and were later described by Dickens in the novel *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870). They were places where identities were blurred and lost.

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<sup>74</sup> Elizabeth Hope Chang, *Britain's Chinese Eye* (California: Stanford University Press, 2010), p. 98. Further references are given in quotations after the text.

<sup>75</sup> Aileen Tsui, 'Whistler's La Princesse du pays de la porcelaine: Painting Re-oriented', *Nineteenth Century Art World Wide*, 9.2 (2010) <<http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn10/whistlers-la-princesse-du-pays-de-la-porcelaine>> [accessed 12 March 2022] (para 6 of 35). Further references are given as notes in the text.

<sup>76</sup> Opium Smokers in the East End of London (1874), *Illustrated London News*, 8 (1874) in *Wikimedia Commons* <[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Opium\\_smoking\\_1874.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Opium_smoking_1874.jpg)> [accessed 12 March 2022].

In his *10 O'clock Lecture* of 1885, Whistler makes the link explicit between opium, China, and artistic sanctuary, telling his audience at the Prince's Hall, Piccadilly:

Art, the cruel jade cares not – and hardens her heart, and hies her off to the East – to find, among the opium eaters of Nankin, a favourite with whom she lingers fondly – caressing his blue porcelain, and painting his coy maidens – and marking his plates with her six marks of choice – indifferent, in her companionship with him, to all save the virtue of his refinement!<sup>77</sup>

Whistler thus uses the narrative of Empire to create a fantasy in which Chinese artists are 'opium eaters' living in primitive innocence with their 'coy maidens'. He aligns himself with them against the consumerism of Victorian London. However, in 'othering' the Orient, Whistler also reveals the ambivalent relationship between imperial expansion and the London art market. Asian porcelain and the resulting Chinamania became accessible to Rossetti, Whistler, and others because of the turmoil in China after the Opium Wars. Sir Frederick Leyland, an important patron for both Whistler and Rossetti, became rich through the China shipping trade. He used his new wealth to purchase and display his lavish collection of Chinese porcelain in the Peacock Room alongside Pre-Raphaelite paintings in his London home. Art consumers such as Leyland embraced Whistler and the Aesthetic Movement's philosophy of 'art for art's sake' partly because it allowed them to escape from the uncomfortable realities of Empire and plunder.

Thus, Algernon Swinburne's philosophy, that art should 'cut itself off from all non-artistic concerns to concentrate solely on its own craft', helped establish a sense of amnesia among late Victorian artists and their industrial clients, removing from them a need for a social conscience.<sup>78</sup> Edward Burne-Jones (1833-98) evocatively referred to his later paintings as:

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<sup>77</sup> James McNeill Whistler, '10 O'clock Lecture' (1885) in *The Correspondance of James McNeill Whistler* University of Glasgow

<<https://www.whistler.arts.gla.ac.uk/miscellany/tenoclock/>> [accessed 14 August 2020].

<sup>78</sup> Elizabeth Prettejohn, *Art for Art's Sake: Aestheticism in Victorian Painting* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 217.

a beautiful romantic dream of something that never was, never will be – in a better light than any light that ever shone – in a land that no one can define or remember, only desire – and the forms divinely beautiful.<sup>79</sup>

For Pre-Raphaelite artists transitioning into Aestheticism, ‘seeing’ now relied on opiate visions of the mind, while industrialisation, disease, and social inequality receded into the mists.

### Conclusion

Opium enabled Wallis, Millais, Siddal, and Rossetti to present their audiences with themes of sleep, suicide, and death that related closely to the population’s familiarity with the effects of the drug. By referencing opium, the Pre-Raphaelites and Whistler broke down social constructs around morality and the ‘ego’ and evoked deep spiritual experiences. These often ran counter to Establishment values but also revealed ambiguity around women’s emancipation and non-Western cultures. Literature and art were often closely linked and provided, especially for Siddal and Rossetti, a ‘double work of art’ that the literate audience could use to further decode artists’ messages. For Siddal, ancient ballads provided a way to unlock ‘trauma’ in her paintings and a means of catharsis from the daily stresses experienced as a female artist.

Opium and its effect on artists’ vision is also likely to have contributed to the distinctive Pre-Raphaelite style, as high *depth of field* detail was used by Wallis, Millais, Siddal, and Rossetti. Close-up perspectives in the works ensured that the audience were fully immersed and could participate emotionally with the artist in shared and intensely memorable encounters. While similar to the stereograph, the influence of opium on shaping composition should not be underestimated, as it allowed the artist to see and present detail selectively and for maximum effect. Opium also gave access to imaginary worlds and the colourful visions of fairy paintings, which were likely inspired by opium induced dreams. Whistler further embraced opium as a means of escape, linking opium to the ‘art for art’s sake’ philosophy of the Aesthetic Movement. By examining the influence of opium on Pre-Raphaelite artists, a complex psychological portrait of British society under the influence of a powerful drug is revealed. Medicating against contagion with opium unleashed desires that challenged orthodoxy and

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<sup>79</sup> Jan Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Sisters*, (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2019) p. 10.

hinted at personal fulfilment beyond societal needs. In their concerns about social order and convention, the British and Chinese authorities had more in common than they would have at first believed.

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