Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Question of Opium

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It is well established that biography is a literary form of creation - built, like the novel, by the storyteller and its characters. The interpretation of another’s existence is a touchy and dangerous endeavor, yet at the same time can account for a beautiful revelation of the human condition: “This is the peculiar music of biography. Haunting and uniquely life-like for a moment, but always incomplete and unsatisfactory and sending out many echoes into the future” (Holmes vol. 2, 561). The biographer’s finished product is as subject to scrutiny as is the individual they studied, and this allows for an array of readings for any one life. The validity of any character analysis, then, is left to the opinion of the reader.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge is the subject of a great many biographical pieces, a tribute, if nothing else, to the magnetic nature of examining the life that he lived. It is not necessarily the fascinating story of his life that so intrigues these authors, but the daunting challenge he offers as a subject for analysis. The questions he creates, the mysticism he connotes, and the tragic nature of his time on earth are the bait that have lured so many willing contestants. His story continues to grow, his legend metastasizing because “it is his life, and his self-abandonment of his poetic ambitions, that continue to convince us that we ought to find in him parables of the failure of genius” (Bloom 2). This concept is the string that holds together the bundle of interpretative opinions of Samuel Taylor Coleridge; the undeniable feeling that, despite his accomplishments, he fell far short of the level of historical literary greatness to which he seemed destined. The extent to which this belief is held has in itself created an unmistakable icon out of Coleridge, a consummate could-have-been who offered us a mere taste of the fantastic world inside his tortured psyche.

The hinges of Coleridge biography rest within the search for an explanation - the investigation into the causes of his life’s disintegration. The greatest realm of debate on his life, however, is that of the role that opium played in his endeavors. Coleridge’s well-publicized battles with opium addiction lasted nearly his entire life, and he was never able to overcome this vice. The problem for the biographer, then, lies in the determination of the extent to which opium dominated his career, his relationships, and his health. Was the opium a mere side effect of another flaw, a nuisance that was another in a long line of life’s struggles that Coleridge could not overcome? Or was it a crippling disability, the insurmountable obstacle that led to the demise of everything that he cared about? To embark on an understanding of Coleridge, there is no choice but to establish which of these more closely represents reality. That opium use is a prevailing theme is not the question, but rather if it was the prevailing theme, the crux of a story of hope that could never quite escape the grips of an ever-lurking despair.

As the prime focus of my analysis, I will examine Richard Holmes’ two-volume biography. To Holmes, biography is “an art of human understanding, and a celebration of human nature” (25). His observations on Coleridge’s life are, in my opinion, the most well rounded and objective (of what I have read). Specifically, it seems that Holmes directly quotes Coleridge’s Notebooks and Letters considerably more than other biographers, in effect giving his character a greater control over his own voice. He draws his opinions, then, from interpretations of Coleridge’s speech, daintily toeing the line of psychological analysis and sheer reporting of fact, either of which would fail on their own. By closely following the entire life of Samuel, he gently coaxes themes that attempt to characterize and categorize the madness that was Coleridge’s being. In so doing, he reveals the tragic man as having a starkly split world - one of hope and despair, creation and destruction, simultaneously embracing and loathing his surrounding world. Holmes’ character becomes an intricate study of human psychology, a genius with a tremendous fissure separating his lifelong disappointments from the successes of love, life, and literature that haunted him with their painful proximity. This fissure, as portrayed by Holmes, is Coleridge’s insurmountable opium addiction.

Holmes’ Coleridge is a captivating dichotomy, a man who finds himself straddling the pressures of two worlds, the cleavage of which is opium. While under the influence of the drug, Coleridge’s mind became a delirious whirlwind, be it in the form of his constant, vivid nightmares, or in his imagination run wild into the haunting battlefield where hope struggles endlessly against dejection and regret. His life, while without opium, was a perpetual string of disappointments and perceived failures, and he was unable to separate himself from the massive guilt of his secret addiction. The sober Coleridge vowed to re-appropriate the reins of his literary career, to establish the greatness he knew lay within him, and to make right the relationship with his family and friends - this, he knew, would save his health. These thoughts, however, were self-deceptions predicated on breaking his addiction, and this was a power Coleridge ultimately knew he did not have. After succumbing to the next dose of his shameful vice, Coleridge was once again left with the ‘tatters’ of his life, hopeless and lonely, doomed to repeat the cycle. As Holmes surmises, “His addiction can also be considered an
emotional state which throws light on his extraordinary imaginative ‘dependence’ on certain close, human relationships. Love and Opium are sometimes interchanged. Love is ‘self-abandonment’ and body.” (vol. 2, 12). The opium use, then, is a reflection of Coleridge’s need to be loved, to be accepted and embraced. And, like the opium, the pattern of love in his life would become further away from his inborn nature. Love and opium would symbiotically in Coleridge’s spirit, each trying to fill the void left by the other. Such was the manner that opium use drained the life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Random acts of paradoxi cal effects that twisted him into desolation. In her account of Coleridge’s life, Rosemary Ashton describes “... his bodily languor and low spirits and his anxiety about his sinfulness, particularly as it related to opium, ‘a poisonous destructive of life’ which has ‘become necessary to life’” (376).

This is Coleridge’s understanding of the seemingly inescapable trap of his use - quitting was simply physically impossible, but the necessity of its use created the same result. Rosemary Ashton wrote astutely of his terrible incapacity to do what he saw clearly enough to be right. He was referring to the ‘complete derangement’ of his volition caused by ‘the addiction’, as more technically, even the complete awareness of his emotional distress and its causes were of no use, because he was helplessly wrapped into this pattern. He was completely reliant on opium to laugh at himself, and for a man of Coleridge’s intellect, this proved too much. He himself trapped in this terrible paradox of needing to torture himself. This mentality is beautifully captured by Thomas de Quincy in his Confessions of an English Opium Eater. “A slave he was to this potent drug... his delirium and yet despotism; master, to this drug... to the rivets of his chain” (13). This potent metaphor portrays Coleridge’s ultimate doomed character; his heart needs the chain of bondage to play its tune. As Holmes described, love and opium truly do become interchangeable substances in Coleridge’s mind and account of Coleridge’s life, Rosemary Ashton describes “...his self-employment, his own life, the classic concept of his ‘self-employment’, that directly caused each important facet of his life to fall apart. In doing so, the primary emotion experienced by Coleridge, and the one that continued to drive his actions, was his sense of the near-absence of his life, the loss of it. In his manner of writing, in his manner of thinking, his manner of behaving, his manner of living, in his mere existence, he was simply a physical resort, almost as powerful as the faceless ghost. He was unable to shake his demons: “As the words of Coleridge himself, to the end that the opium furnished the mediocrity, the mediocrity of his life, and served as the ultimate impediment to the proverbial ‘what may have been...’” (Holmes 297). And so his work, his career, his livelihood - his identity as a writer - were consistently compromised by his opium addiction.

So it is seen that the Holmesian Coleridge was a withering soul, not in terms of his creative abilities or analytical thinking skills, but in those of the state to which he was reduced as a direct result of his opium use. The primary reason that the daily created was a futile pair, an interwoven set of twins, each of which refused to lessen its control over the other. Coleridge the eloquent speaker, the brilliant mind, and vault of creative energy, was forced to tend to the neurotic, fanatic, guilt-ridden form of his laudanum-doping counterpart. The veil, seemingly immovable, seems to have gone limp. But it was not merely his work that he suffered; his wife, his children, and his ensemble of well-wishing friends all were themselves affected by Coleridge’s inability to rise from the murky depths of addiction. No one saw the woman who remained an untamed beast, or maybe Coleridge, for whatever subconscious reasons, refused to overcome his afflictions, finding it easier to wallow in self-pity and public scorn; but to swallow his self-doubt and failures. Whatever the case, Holmes provides a wealth of evidence, much of it from the words of Coleridge himself, to the end that the opium furnished the mediocrity, the mediocrity of his life, and served as the ultimate impediment to the proverbial ‘what may have been...’

Coleridge, though thoroughly developed and convincingly summated, represents but one end of a spectrum; at the other, the issue of opium receives an alternate interpretation. Far from giving it credit, for instance, Coleridge, this new per­ception of opium casts it in a much duller light. The Coleridge of this mentality was, it seems, doomed from the outset. For rather than see his talents fall dormant at the hands of the monster of addiction, this outlook sees the addiction as merely another proof of the poet’s insurmountable self-pity, his inability to face his emotional pressures of his own tortured, brilliant mind. This interpretation of Coleridge finds him less a victim of the drug than a victim of his own self-employment, and mental frailty - not in the sense of weakness, but of fragility. For no biographer questions the essen­tial backbone of a Coleridgean thesis - artistic genius was destroyed by a gray cloud of personal conflicts - but rather the manner, process, and causes for the unreal­ized promise. The role of opium is widely debated - as such, it acts as a prism for any line of Coleridge study. This is to say that the question of opium produces a spectrum of viable conclusions, and that no matter what a biographer may portray, the role of opium is an essential factor in the breakdown of Coleridge’s life and work.

Even those who view Coleridge’s opium addiction as a mere offshoot of his more severe problems must still address and categorize its effect. To omit an analy­sis, or at the very least an attentive description of the problem, is to enact a substantial and incomplete under­standing of Coleridge’s life. One biographer, Elisabeth Schneider, represents a strongly conflicting view from Holmes. Interestingly, this opinion is pre­sented in her book, Coleridge, Opium, and Kubla Kahn. Her assessment embraces the nature of opium itself as the ultimate impediment to the life of genius” (Schneider 27). Her contention is that the allure of opium itself, the artistic abilities. They attempt to display the follies of pre-existing, part through examination of the opium itself, and in part through that of the pre-existing, self-destructive nature of Coleridge.

According to Geoffrey Yarlett, “A good deal of nonsense has been talked about Coleridge addicted to opium, and that it was ‘the direct result of the nervous and emotional stress arising out of his unhappy domestic situation’” (218). Like Schneider, he contends that it was far too convenient for the biographers of Coleridge to use opium as a catch-all cause of decline, and that it was merely a failed cure for a laundry list of problems. This is more than mere speculation; this is what Schneider argues. To this extent, Schneider argues that those who describe the drug as a catalyst for the decay of Coleridge employ “quite a Gothic conception,” and that because
of this "some of the writing about opium has been almost as imaginative as the effects attributed to it." (25).

Authors writing in this vein seem to almost "re-" their sort of profound "ex-" cause" for Coleridge. Enticed, they feel by the mystic history of opium, combined with its place in literary lore (which is, in no small part, attributed to the success of DeQuincey's Confessions). Coleridge biographers romanticize its effects and the consequences of a lifetime addiction. The true role of opium and addiction in his life, then, is as another failed cure, a saddening state upon which he, like Holmes, endlessly searched for relief from his other problems. This opinion arises from the belief that opium's properties are "overrated," and that an addiction to it will cause only much, its end far from the life-controlling demon depicted by their contemporaries. Schneider states that "opium more than any other cause has been held responsible for the failure of Coleridge's career." The promise of his genius and to win his everyday living by steady labors: a ruined life, however, we now know is not an inevitable consequence of addiction to opiates. Medical writers have shown that many addicted persons live entirely normal lives for a normal life-span" (31).

Claiming that advances in science now prove that opium is tamper than previously thought, she asserts that it was a desire to classify Coleridge as the enchanting drug-addict that has led to the exaggerated descriptions of opium's importance. Rather than approach the subject through Coleridge specifically, Schneider generalizes on the historically mistaken identity of opium. It is this identity that has brought so much claimed relevance to Coleridge's use of, and, consequently, to its role in the disintegration of his life and career.

In assimilating the use of opium to the life of Coleridge, these authors portray their character as increasingly neurotic, this state arising principally as a result of his stressful and disappointing life. His failures are the consequence of his tendency for self-degradation and his propensity for experiencing overwhelming guilt. Opium's place, then, is as a failed cure for these psychological maladies: "Because no physical palliatives can heal a neurosis, opium merely touched the symptoms of his trouble" (Yarlott 219). Coleridge's downfall, in effect, was caused by these emotional factors that existed and thrived in his psyche, regardless of the presence of opium in his life. Interestingly, Yarlott, like Holmes, employs the metaphor of the cycle of decay in directing the reader to his interpretation of Coleridge's addiction. The true role of opium and addiction in his life—"but hardly the constrictive force, the backbreaking vice preventing any form of success or happiness. In distancing opium from the "center" of this Coleridge's "globe circle," Yarlott places himself at a certain end of the opium interpretation-spectrum, and the course of his text follows accordingly. Schneider, too, uses the appealing metaphor of a "vicious circle" (49) while addressing the pervasive nature of Coleridge's opium-related nightmares. On the issue of users and their dreams, she explains, "They suffer increasingly from guilt and other emotional conflicts and in consequence may be likely to dream more and more. But the dreams would be neurotic dreams, not opium ones, the opium being causative, if at all, only in quite another sense than that in which Freud would consider it." Schneider, too, follows this circular reasoning, and the method by which Schneider removes opium from her perception of the "gulf circle." Opium's only real function was as a result of stress and guilt - an escape into the dream-world - but the content of the dreams was based purely on the distressed psyche of their creator: "Very likely, therefore, opium users as a whole will be characterized by frequent dreams because of their original instability" (Schneider 49). Like Yarlott, she feels the impact of opium away from the circle, and in effect further away from the heart of Coleridge's addiction.

Within this determination that the interaction between opium and the reflective quality of Coleridge's despair - lay the biographer's ultimate assessment of the Coleridge question. It is telling of the nature of his biography that there seems to be a repeated exploitation of the concept of his downward emotional spiral. The circle itself becomes a symbol of Coleridge biography, being the consummate representation of his career and life failures (the unquestionable), while at the same time forcing the author to address Coleridge's opium addiction (the debatable), and to decide where in relation to the circle it falls. The approach made by each author - their particular placement of opium within the circle - is paramount in directing the path of the text and story. This decision is, perhaps, most blind eye to a vast number of other possible subjects. For a piece that attempts to use medical fact, the very few studies she describes are lacking of any real scientific merit. In seeking to debase a long accepted fact of using the drug, Schneider relies on weakly drawn conclusions and universal assumption: "The dreamers' readiness to assume opium as the cause...illustrates the strength in the popular mind of the DeQuincey tradition...But man is a highly suggestible animal" (48).

Here she is already assuming the truth of her opinion, and finding fault in years of experience based on the unscientific proof of her ideas. In describing the opium-dreams, DeQuincey says, "I seemed every night to descend - not metaphorically, but literally to descend into chasms and sunless abysses, depths below depths, from which it seemed hopeless that I could ever reascend. No aid was used by these emotions other than that of my self; I was left to feel that I had re-ascented from DeQuincey's "veterinary", and a writer and above all to make him live, move, talk, and have his being" (50).

The critique of the alternate view uses Schneider's text, because she has portrayed herself critically with the question of opium, finding that it played a diminished role in Coleridge's disapprovals. I feel that this conclusion relies on a distancing from Coleridge the person, and falls back on medical knowledge and circumventive rhetoric. For example, her assessment and explanations for the intriguing relationship of opium use and dreams is wholly lacking. Her approach is to dispense fact that there is no significant correlation of the two whatsoever. In explanation of the claimed dream experience of two patients administered opium, she says, "Conceivably, these phenomena might have been caused by the narcotic, but the physical condition of the patients is more than enough to account for them on the basis of well know medical fact" (48). Her theory is that anyone who uses opium experiences with the drug will be frequent dreams because of their original instability" (49). She resorts to extreme characterizations, and casts an almost blind eye to a vast number of other possible subjects. For a piece that attempts to use medical fact, the very few studies she describes are lacking of any real scientific merit. In seeking to debase a long accepted fact of using the drug, Schneider relies on weakly drawn conclusions and universal assumption: "The dreamers' readiness to assume opium as the cause...illustrates the strength in the popular mind of the DeQuincey tradition...But man is a highly suggestible animal" (48).

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In the course of critiquing the different aspects of interpreting Coleridge's life, I have become a sort of de facto biographer. As such, I find myself involved in my own analysis, and as a result in the destruction of those that oppose my opinion. It seems to me that Holmes' "description of Sem en" of Coleridge is more complete, and more understanding of the emotional burdens that plagued him. As such, I stand with his evaluation of opium as more than a failed cure, more than a mere reflection or result of his psychological discord. While there were certainly factors that led to his addiction, their causal and chronological precedence do not translate into a greater importance in the cause of his all-encompassing guilt and failures. In examining the progression (regression) of his life, my personal conclusion is that his inability to escape from opium's hold was the single most devastating issue that he dealt with, and in its absence I feel that he would have reached greater heights in both his literature and his relationships.

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Holmes, Richard. "Inventing the Truth."
