

**Text A: from *Confessions of an Opium-Eater* by Thomas de Quincey (1821)**

*Thomas de Quincey was a writer much influenced by the Romantic poets Wordsworth and Coleridge. He suffered a number of childhood illnesses. Laudanum, a mixture of opium and alcohol, was widely used for pain relief in the nineteenth-century; de Quincey's most famous work describes the addictive effects the drug could have.*



**The pleasures of opium**

It is so long since I first took opium that if it had been a trifling incident in my life I might have forgotten its date; but cardinal events are not to be forgotten, and from circumstances connected with it I remember that it must be referred to the autumn of 1804. During that season I was in London, having come thither for the first time since my entrance at college. And my introduction to opium arose in the following way. From an early age I had been accustomed to wash my head in cold water at least once a day: being suddenly seized with toothache, I attributed it to some relaxation caused by an accidental intermission of that practice, jumped out of bed, plunged my head into a basin of cold water, and with hair thus wetted went to sleep. The next morning, as I need hardly say, I awoke with excruciating rheumatic pains of the head and face, from which I had hardly any respite for about twenty days. On the twenty-first day I think it was, and on a Sunday, that I went out into the streets, rather to run away, if possible, from my torments, than with any distinct purpose. By accident I met a college acquaintance, who recommended opium. Opium! dread agent of unimaginable pleasure and pain! I had heard of it as I had of manna or of ambrosia, but no further. How unmeaning a sound was it at that time: what solemn chords does it now strike upon my heart! what heart-quaking vibrations of sad and happy remembrances! Reverting for a moment to these, I feel a mystic importance attached to the minutest circumstances connected with the place and the time and the man (if man he was) that first laid open to me the Paradise of Opium-eaters. It was a Sunday afternoon, wet and cheerless: and a duller spectacle this earth of ours has not to show than a rainy Sunday in London. My road homewards lay through Oxford Street; and near “the stately Pantheon” (as Mr. Wordsworth has obligingly called it) I saw a druggist’s shop. The druggist—unconscious minister of celestial pleasures!—as if in sympathy with the rainy Sunday, looked dull and stupid, just as any mortal druggist might be expected to look on a Sunday; and when I asked for the tincture of opium, he gave it to me as any other man might do, and furthermore, out of my shilling returned me what seemed to be real copper halfpence, taken out of a real wooden drawer. Nevertheless, in spite of such indications of humanity, he has ever since existed in my mind as the beatific vision of an immortal druggist, sent down to earth on a special mission to myself. And it confirms me in this way of considering him, that when I next came up to London I sought him near the stately Pantheon, and found him not; and thus to me, who knew not his name (if indeed he had one), he seemed rather to have vanished from Oxford Street than to have removed in any bodily fashion. The reader may choose to think of him as possibly no more than a sublunary druggist; it may be so, but my faith is better—I believe him to have evanesced, or evaporated. So unwillingly would I connect any mortal remembrances with that hour, and place, and creature, that first brought me acquainted with the celestial drug.

Arrived at my lodgings, it may be supposed that I lost not a moment in taking the quantity prescribed. I was necessarily ignorant of the whole art and mystery of opium-taking, and what I took I took under every disadvantage. But I took it—and in an hour—oh, heavens! what a revulsion! what an upheaving, from its lowest depths, of inner spirit! what an apocalypse of the world within me! That my pains had vanished was now a trifle in my eyes: this negative effect was swallowed up in the immensity of those positive effects which had opened before me—in the abyss of divine enjoyment thus suddenly revealed. Here was a panacea, a φαρμακον for all human woes; here was the secret of happiness, about which philosophers had disputed for so many ages, at once discovered: happiness might now be bought for a penny, and carried in the waistcoat pocket; portable ecstasies might be had corked up in a pint bottle, and peace of mind could be sent down in gallons by the mail-coach. But if I talk in this way the reader will think I am laughing, and I can assure him that nobody will laugh long who deals much with opium: its pleasures even are of a grave and solemn complexion, and in his happiest state the opium-eater cannot present himself in the character of *L'Allegro*: even then he speaks and thinks as becomes *Il Penseroso*. Nevertheless, I have a very reprehensible way of jesting at times in the midst of my own misery; and unless when I am checked by some more powerful feelings, I am afraid I shall be guilty of this indecent practice even in these annals of suffering or enjoyment. The reader must allow a little to my infirm nature in this respect; and with a few indulgences of that sort I shall endeavour to be as grave, if not drowsy, as fits a theme like opium, so anti-mercurial as it really is, and so drowsy as it is falsely reputed.

### Task A: read & annotate Section 2.1 of Voices in Speech & Writing: An Anthology

Task B: read the above text carefully, looking up any unfamiliar words or concepts, then answer the following questions.

1. What is the overall mood of the piece? How is this achieved?
2. What are the features which characterise this text as an autobiography?
3. How has the text been crafted to meet the expectations of the assumed audience?
4. To what extent does de Quincey create a sense of his personality in the text?
5. What kind of language and methods does de Quincey use to express his attitudes to opium-taking?
6. What comparisons can be made between this text and Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis* in your anthology?

### Text B: from *Father and Son* by Edmund Gosse (1907)

*Father and Son* is a memoir by the poet and critic Edmund Gosse, which he subtitled 'a study of two temperaments.' The book describes Edmund's childhood in a home governed by exceptionally strict Christian beliefs. His father, Philip Henry Gosse, was an influential biologist and zoologist; his mother, a writer of Christian tracts, died of cancer when Edmund was still a young boy. The book focuses on the relationship between a sternly religious father who rejects the new evolutionary theories of his scientific colleague Charles Darwin and the son's gradual coming of age and rebellion against his father's fundamentalist religion.

On the subject of all feasts of the Church he held views of an almost grotesque peculiarity. He looked upon each of them as nugatory and worthless, but the keeping of Christmas appeared to him by far the most hateful, and nothing less than an act of idolatry. 'The very word is Popish', he used to exclaim, 'Christ's Mass!' pursing up his lips with the gesture of one who tastes assafoetida by accident. Then he would adduce the antiquity of the so-called feast, adapted from horrible heathen rites, and itself a soiled relic of the abominable Yule-Tide. He would denounce the horrors of Christmas until it almost made me blush to look at a holly-berry.

On Christmas Day of this year 1857 our villa saw a very unusual sight. My Father had given strictest charge that no difference whatever was to be made in our meals on that day; the dinner was to be neither more copious than usual nor less so. He was obeyed, but the servants, secretly rebellious, made a small plum-pudding for themselves. (I discovered afterwards, with pain, that Miss Marks received a slice of it in her boudoir.) Early in the afternoon, the maids,—of whom we were now advanced to keeping two,—kindly remarked that 'the poor dear child ought to have a bit, anyhow', and wheedled me into the kitchen, where I ate a slice of plum-pudding. Shortly I began to feel that pain inside which in my frail state was inevitable, and my conscience smote me violently. At length I could bear my spiritual anguish no longer, and bursting into the study I called out: 'Oh! Papa, Papa, I have eaten of flesh offered to idols!' It took some time, between my sobs, to explain what had happened. Then my Father sternly said: 'Where is the accursed thing?' I explained that as much as was left of it was still on the kitchen table. He took me by the hand, and ran with me into the midst of the startled servants, seized what remained of the pudding, and with the plate in one hand and me still tight in the other, ran until we reached the dust-heap, when he flung the idolatrous confectionery on to the middle of the ashes, and then raked it deep down into the mass. The suddenness, the violence, the velocity of this extraordinary act made an impression on my memory which nothing will ever efface.

### Task A: read & annotate Section 2.2 of *Voices in Speech & Writing: An Anthology*

**Task B:** Read the text carefully, looking up any unfamiliar words or concepts, then answer the following questions.

1. What is the overall mood of the piece? How is this achieved?
2. What are the features which characterise this text as a memoir?
3. How has the text been crafted to meet the expectations of the assumed audience?
4. To what extent does Gosse create a sense of his personality in the text?
5. What kind of language and methods does Gosse use to express his attitudes to his upbringing?
6. What comparisons can be made with the extract from *Mom & Me & Mom* by Maya Angelou in your anthology?