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Karen Karbiener

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America Passes Judgement on
Thomas De Quincey**

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Karen Karbiener

Cross-Cultural Confessions: America Passes Judgement on Thomas De Quincey

Why were the writings of a decidedly British opium addict so popular in an America just emerging from its Puritan past? Grevel Lindop suggests that nineteenth century Americans

eagerly read and looked upon [British writings] as models of literary excellence. Suspecting that their own literature lacked polish, the more discriminating American readers placed a particularly high value upon style, and now that *Suspiria de Profundis* had crossed the Atlantic there were few American writers of any calibre who did not regard De Quincey as a master.¹

Yet in the 1850s, when Thomas De Quincey's *Suspiria de Profundis* as well as his *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* became widely available to American readers, 'the spirit of nationalism was peaking in the United States', 'a national literature of considerable value had flowered', and 'the growing literate public had acquired an appreciation of novels and poems that celebrated American settings and American ideals'.² De Quincey's American contemporaries were determined to speak in and to listen to new and different voices; their goal was as much the establishment of an original American literary heritage as a distinctively un-British one.

Recognizing the ageing Tory as a 'master' was thus not the intent of a large part of the American reading public. Instead, what may account for De Quincey's immense popularity overseas was America's curiosity and feelings of superiority over this particularly needy though nevertheless representative Englishman. American reviewers consistently emphasised De Quincey's status as a dependent, which was as much truth as it was wish fulfilment for many Americans still bearing ill will towards their former oppressors. Not only was the opium addict at the mercy of one of the tools of his beloved British imperialism; he was also dependent upon the American publishing industry and the American public at large for the establishment of his long-term popularity on either side of the Atlantic. Largely