The Mockery of Tea: Reading of Tea scenes in Virginia Woolf’s Novels

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Virginia Woolf, in her essay “The Method of Henry James”, fondly accuses Henry James’s characters of having ‘an enormous appetite for afternoon tea’. We find nevertheless tea-scenes in her novels, especially in her late ones. The difference is her characters don’t like tea; tea, for most of them, is a conventional ritual they have to get through. Different from the lurid, theatrical end-of-century drawing-room tea scenes of James’s, Woolf’s, either comic or in caricature, move to new directions in a new century that saw fundamental changes in women’s life.

Woolf is one generation younger than James; so are her characters. It is relieving to observe the freedom women had won over the decades since James’s The Awkward Age (1899). Both from upper-middle class families, Woolf’s Elizabeth Dalloway in Mrs Dalloway (1925) goes to tea in a commercial tea-room in West End and walks through London all by herself, while James’s Nanda startles people by walking to a friend’s home for tea without a chaperone. Women are achieving freedom, but it remains very limited. Tea scenes in Woolf’s novels focus on moments when women try to reflect on their lives and search for a new perspective.

As a female writer, Woolf’s novels tackle women’s life from her own stance. In “Women and Fiction”(1929), Woolf contemplated women’s writing and suggested that criticism offered by one sex about the other might substantially alter the prevailing notions of what is serious; a general inversion of values might result. The reason for this is that women’s values are different from those of men: “Thus, when a woman comes to write a novel, she will find that she is perpetually wishing to alter the established values – to make serious what appears insignificant to a man, and trivial what is to him important.” (Collected Essays, 2:146) Woolf has been increasingly seen as a feminist writer; her indignation toward patriarchy society is clear in her political works. Her novels, especially those late social related ones, pulse with such feminist undercurrents. The tea scenes we are to look at in the following pages, trivial they might be, are inverted by Woolf into new forms that in effect attack conventional values.

This article looks closely at tea-scenes in four of Woolf’s novels, Mrs Dalloway(1925), Orlando: A Biography(1928), The Years(1937) and Between the Acts(1941). Set in different historical backgrounds and of different themes, these tea scenes look at different aspects of women’s life and problems. We can see in them a common and developing concern with women’s identity and desire for independence in male-dominated society and family. Tea time, a common ritual and trivial moment in daily life, however turns out to be an intensified moment of conflict. Woolf doesn’t turn these moments into battlefield, but maneuvers them into comedies and caricatures, unthreatening and appealing to a larger group of readers. Judy Little noticed such techniques that Woolf employed and discussed them in-depth and thoroughly in Comedy

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and the Women Writer: Woolf, Spark, and Feminism. Little observes, taking into consideration the historical context: “we can expect...especially in a time of social change, that the work of writers who perceive themselves as “outsiders,” as persons assigned to the threshold of a world that is not theirs, will manifest the distinctive features of inversion, mocked hierarchies, communal festivity, and redefinition of sex identity. If the work of such writers is comic, it will be comedy that mocks the norm radically...” (6). This is close to Woolf’s self-claimed motive for writing. In one of her reviews, Woolf admits: “The capacity to criticize the other sex had its share in deciding women to write novels, for indeed that particular vein of comedy has been but slightly worked, and promised great richness.” (Contemporary Writers, 26-27) This helps us to understand the comic quality and purposes of Woolf’s novels. Exactly as observed by Little, we will see in the following pages, how in her oblique way, she mocked hierarchies, patriarchy, communal festivity, and conventional sex identity in her tea scenes.

Little also quotes Soriol Hugh-Jones to explain the covert way of Woolf’s social/gender criticism: “The pity of it to me is that wit, satire, irony, a way of saying serious and indeed perhaps unpopular, controversial and dangerous things obliquely and to all appearances lightly, are the best possible methods for a woman who wishes to make some communication in this country” (Little, 7). Writing decades prior to Hugh-Jones, it is even truer for Woolf. Her employment of tea-drinking scenes to mock rather than attack is a maneuver. Caricaturing this particular English occasion is not so offensive; such caricaturing meanwhile breaks the surface to reveal a depth. The sequence that we look at these tea scenes, which is the chronological order the novels were written and published, shows Woolf’s tea scenes, as a language of social criticism, grow louder and stronger, more clearly addressed with time.

George Gissing praises tea as “a bland inspirer” that presides over British manners: “In nothing is the English genius of domesticity more notably declared than in the institution of this festival...of afternoon tea... The mere clink of cups and saucers tunes the mind to happy repose” (216). In Woolf’s novels, tea is no longer simply a bland inspirer, but a testing time, a tempest in teacup, though in accordance with Gissing, Woolf’s tea scenes, embedded in the common English cultural atmosphere, evoke and borrow from people’s understanding of tea rituals. Indeed these tea scenes play upon people’s common knowledge of and familiarity with tea to develop into tea-drinking dramas. People know what role characters of different status, sex and age are expected to play, and in what manners tea are to be made and taken, all of which are regulated by social norms and ‘established values’. Unconventional behaviours, mischievous breaking of manners set into the traditional tea ritual, are unexpectedly comic, without necessarily being threatening, otherwise Oscar Wilde’s hilariously subversive tea-scenes in The Importance of Being Earnest would not have been so whole-heartedly applauded. Of course Woolf is not Wilde: comic though her tea-scenes are, they are at the same time sober.

Miss Kilman’s Tea in Mrs Dalloway

Mrs Dalloway was connected with the poor and unattractive Doris Kilman through her daughter, Elizabeth. Miss Kilman, teaching history as a tutor, impressed Elizabeth by her total difference from her mother - her independence, her ‘frightful clever[ness]’ and poverty, and her
enthusiasm about ‘revolution’. “Miss Kilman was quite different from any one she knew; she
made one feel so small.” (132) As a young woman, Miss Kilman was asked to leave Miss
Dolby’s School, where she had thought she might have had a chance of a successful career
because she would not agree that all Germans were vicious. Having thus endured a painful lesson
in others’ narrow-mindedness, she cultivates a similar sort of intolerance – she believes that all
upper-class people think and behave according to her stereotype of them. She believes that the
upper-class people enjoy more self-assurance than she, and they intentionally exclude her. Her
(mis)perceptions epitomized the central features of Doris Kilman’s character – she is narcissistic
in her almost singular focus on herself, and hostile to others when she does think about them.
Such thoughts reflect in her interaction with the Dalloways. She despises Clarissa Dalloway –
“She came from the most worthless of all classes – the rich, with a smattering of culture,” and
believes that she herself “had a perfect right to anything that the Dalloways did for her”.

On the part of Clarissa Dalloway, though it disturbs her, she does not try to interfere with
Elizabeth’s keeping company with Miss Kilman beyond the time of their lessons. Unexpectedly
this annoying intimacy breaks down at tea table, in their excursion to the West End.

After accompanying Miss Kilman buy a petticoat in the Navy Department Store, they go to
the tea-room.

Elizabeth rather wondered whether Miss Kilman could be hungry. It was her way of
eating, eating with intensity, then looking, again and again, at a plate of sugared cakes
down on the table next them; then, when a lady and a child sat down and the child took
the cake, could Miss Kilman really mind it? Yes, Miss Kilman did mind it. She had
wanted the cake – the pink one. The pleasure of eating was almost the only pure
pleasure left her, and then to be baffled even in that!
When people are happy they have a reserve, she had told Elizabeth, upon which to
draw, whereas she was like a wheel without a tyre (she was fond of such metaphors)...
Miss Kilman took another cup of tea. Elizabeth, with her oriental bearing, her
inscrutable mystery, sat perfectly upright; no, she did not want anything more. She
looked for her gloves – her white gloves. They were under the table. Ah, but she must
not go! Miss Kilman could not let her go! This youth, that was so beautiful! This girl,
whom she genuinely loved! Her large hand opened and shut on the table, (132)

Rachel Blau Duplessis observes that Woolf satirized lesbianism when it is about power and
dominance. Depending on a difference in their perceived powers, the innocent and youthful
Elizabeth is at least temporarily subordinate in her student position to the tutor. Miss Kilman
violates Elizabeth in the way she considers herself to be violated by privileged people. She
believes that she can invade the privacy of another’s soul, and that she can possess that soul. Her
unashamed desire for the other ‘pink cake’, her bitterness when the cake is taken by others and
her ‘great hand’ which ‘opened and shut’ yearning to clasp, are the physical language that reflect
her mind; they speak even when verbal language fails. Miss Kilman goes further to interfere with
Elizabeth’s feeling about her work and the Dalloway lifestyle in general.
Miss Kilman said, Elizabeth supposed she was going; her mother wanted her to go. She must not let parties absorb her, Miss Kilman said, fingering the last two inches of a chocolate éclair. She did not much like parties, Elizabeth said. Miss Kilman opened her mouth, slightly projected her chin, and swallowed down the last inches of the chocolate éclair, then wiped her fingers, and washed the tea round in her cup. (133)

The alternative views of Miss Kilman’s inner life of jealousy, self-pity, and rage, interwoven with her external behavior of bad tea manners (a deliberate gesture to show her distance from the upper class?), and Elizabeth’s response to her reveal the inborn and social disparity of these two women. Her manners of eating and drinking, are seemingly exaggerated to make up for her unrequited desire for the ‘pink cake’ – a metaphor for her desire for Elizabeth. Rachel Bowlby appositely likens Miss Kilman to ‘a nineteenth-century specimen’ (of governess) “rudely repacked and sent on” to Mrs Dalloway (74). Elizabeth cannot help but be appalled and frightened. When she is gone, “Miss Kilman sat at the marble table among the éclairs, stricken once, twice, thrice by shocks of suffering. She has gone. Mrs. Dalloway had triumphed. Elizabeth had gone. Beauty had gone; youth had gone.” (133-134)

Linda Raphael reads Elizabeth as “a version of the new woman who will be able to avoid if she so chooses, two problems that Woolf so eloquently discussed in her lectures at Cambridge University in 1928: material poverty, and the lack of a voice that others take seriously, obstacles that frustrate Miss Kilman and Mrs. Dalloway.” (162) In this sense, the tea table theatre of the pupil and the tutor is a place of disillusionment, and metamorphosis for the young. Confronting the tutor bare of the camouflage of feigned transcendence and the exposed self-pity as both gestured at and betrayed in her tea manners and talks, Elizabeth cut herself off from the grasping tutor, and departs for a more hopeful life. Although it is not possible to be certain that Elizabeth will be a new woman, her thoughts as she rides the bus and then walks in the city indicate that females yearn for the freedom of choice and self-definition that has been more often accorded to men as in her mother’s case.

In Thinking Forward through Mrs Dalloway’s Daughter, Rachel Bowlby analyses the two contrasting women of the tutor and the pupil: “Elizabeth Dalloway comes of Establishment stock...” but Miss Kilman “has had none of her pupil’s chances, and whose bitterness is perhaps, by caricature, another Woolfian jab at the anger of the Bronte heroine.”(74) Miss Kilman is the origin of Elizabeth’s ideas of female aspiration, their afternoon’s outing is in part in defiance of her mother. Her consequent bus trip suggests that she is the bearer of new opportunities for her sex, a woman who will be able to go further than her mother, who appears bound to the conventional femininity of the Victorian Angel in the House denounced by Woolf in ‘Professions for Women’. The movement through unfamiliar parts of the city inspires Elizabeth with ideas of a life different from that of her mother:

Oh, she would like to go a little farther. Another penny, was it, to the Strand? Here was another penny, then. She would go up the Strand.

She liked people who were ill. And every profession is open to the women of your
generation, said Miss Kilman. So she might be a doctor. She might be a farmer...In short, she would like to have a profession. She would become a doctor, a farmer, possibly go into Parliament if she found it necessary, all because of the Strand. (136)

The beginning sentence is highly metaphorical, she would like to go 'a little farther', and she has the 'penny' for it. The following free indirect discourse shows she also has the inspiration to go forward, not to be trapped as Miss Kilman was or by such people like Miss Kilman. In this sense, the tea table has been the testing place for Elizabeth, the innocent and hopeful, and in effect, marks the parting moment of the two.

The Indignant Tea of Lady Orlando

In Orlando: A Biography, Woolf removed her characters from ordinary patterns of behavior, and provided an opportunity for a profound and extreme kind of comedy of cultural mockery. The work is a semi- picaresque, semi-biographical fantasy of the life of a man, sixteen years old in the sixteenth century who retains his youth for decades, becomes a woman late in the seventeenth century, marries under pressure in the nineteenth century, has a child, and finally in the twentieth century wins a prize for a poem that has been in progress for over three hundred years.

This holiday book is a caricature-biography of Woolf’s friend Vita Sackville-West; it draws upon the history of the Sackville family, its poets and diplomats, and it exaggerates the already large inventory of furnishings and staircases given in Vita’s documentary book about the family home Knole and the Sackvilles (1922). But Orlando is a mock-biography; instead of the realistic and fully developed characters of a “novel”, those in Orlando tend towards caricature and even allegory in the latter part of the book. History is parodied as well. The long time-span of the action sees its main character into and out of several revolutions and several distinct societies.

Although Orlando tries to conform outwardly to each historical age and to the decorum and the codes expected of each sex, she becomes successively disillusioned with the values of each era and each sex. The major joke of the sex change is that it makes little real difference to Orlando’s character; by implication, most expressions of sex differences are cultural and not biological. The changes that she witnesses, and usually participates in, are major ones, not merely evolutions of manner but revolutions of basic norms and codes, those which, in the real world, are rooted in primary socialization; certainly the behavior of the sexes is so rooted. Orlando herself realizes this as she tries, on the ship, to adjust to the fact that sailors may drop off the rigging with excitement if she fails to keep her ankles covered. She realized “for the first time, what, in other circumstances, she would have been taught as a child, that is to say, the sacred responsibilities of womanhood.” (113)

Orlando's knowledge of the ‘sacred responsibility of womanhood’ is again tested by her social interaction with her male, poet friend, when she is taking tea with Mr. Pope.

‘Lord, ‘ she thought, as she raised the sugar tongs, ‘how women in ages to come will envy me! And yet –’ she paused; for Mr. Pope needed her attention. And yet – let us
finish her thought for her – when anybody say ‘How future ages will envy me’, it is safe to say that they are uneasy at the present moment. Was this life quite so exciting, quite so flattering, quite so glorious as it sounds when the memoir writer has done his work upon it? For one thing, Orlando had a positive hatred of tea; for another, the intellect, divine as it is, and all-worshipful, has a habit of lodging in the most seedy of carcasses... Then the high opinion poets have of themselves; then the low one they have of others; then the enmities, injuries, envies, and repartees in which they are constantly engaged; then the volubility with which they impart them; then the rapacity with which they demand sympathy for them; all this, one may whisper, lest the wits may overhear us, makes pouring out tea a more precarious and, indeed, arduous occupation than is generally allowed. Added to which (we whisper again lest the women may overhear us), there is a little secret which men share among them; Lord Chesterfield whispered it to his son with strict injunctions to secrecy, ‘Women are but children of a larger growth... A man of sense only trifles with them, plays with them, humours and flatters them’, which, since children always hear what they are not meant to, and sometimes, even, grow up, may have somehow leaked out, so that the whole ceremony of pouring out tea is a curious one. A woman knows very well that, thought a wit sends her his poem, praises her judgment, solicits her criticism, and drinks her tea, this by no means signifies that he respects her opinions, admires her understanding, or will refuse, thought the rapier is denied him, to run her through the body with his pen. All this, we say, whisper it as low as we can, may have leaked out by now; so that even with the cream jug suspended and the sugar tongs distended the ladies may fidget a little, look out of the window a little, yawn a little, and so let the sugar fall with a great plop – as Orlando did now – into Mr. Pope’s tea. Never was any mortal so ready to suspect an insult or so quick to avenge one as Mr. Pope. He turned to Orlando and presented her instantly with the rough draught of a certain famous line in the ‘Characters of Women’. (148-49)

There is a rupture between what is going on on the surface and in the mind. And the layer that separates the two is the polite ritual of tea, but even this sociable tea, sometimes gives away the underlying tensions. This comic treatment, in a way resembles those in the Restoration Comedies that so steadfastly turn tea scenes into places to satirize relations between the sexes. Maria Dibattista observed that in Orlando, “[l]iterature and men of letters are subjected to comic irreverence primarily when they support or embody the assumption and rites – the ‘conventionality,’ to use Woolf’s comprehensive term – a dominated ‘sacred fraternity’...” (124) Dibattista comments on the tea scene as well: “Orlando, the androgynous actress, performs her role absentmindedly, as in her clumsy ministration of tea for Pope, an awkwardness the biographer claims inspired his famous line” (121).

Is Orlando’s mistake purely a result of her absent-mindedness? Hasn’t she meant it, tired of the artificial appearance of politeness between the sexes. Woolf ‘faithfully’ and literally makes Orlando let fall a lump of sugar into Mr. Pope’s tea, and ‘plop’, see what decorum it pierces through?
Woolf’s invention of this tea scene is probably triggered by Mr. Pope’s lines, and it might also been a cultural mockery directed at the poised respectability of the eighteenth-century upper-class, who often chose tea-drinking to sit for their portraits. William Hogarth’s *The Strode Family* (1738) portrays an aristocratic family at tea with their intellectual friend. Woolf’s subversively comic tea scene could have been a mockery of that surface harmoniousness the portrait highlighted, and adds, mischievously, a new and possible dimension.

The Parody of the Patriarch at tea in *The Years*

*The Years* was Woolf’s best-selling novel. She originally conceived of it as a ‘Novel Essay’ – *The Pargiters*; she was once again experimenting with form. Between the episodes dramatizing the fictional lives of her characters she had intended to place essays on their socio-historical contexts. It went through many changes, and eventually divided into two books, which were published as *The Years* in 1937 and *Three Guineas* in 1938.

*The Years* displays at times the verisimilitude associated with traditional, social realist fiction, but it undermines that mode of writing through the many interruptions, discontinuities and ellipses in the text. Woolf referred to *The Years* as her ‘Arnold Bennett novel’, in a wry recognition that it was an attempt to go back to the socially relevant novel of the nineteenth century in a deliberate and new way. As John Mepham has noted, this was an ‘astonishing turnabout’ in her thinking, (151). Ever since “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown” in 1924 Woolf had been arguing that the novel should not concern itself with the external facts of life, with the house that we live in, nor should it preach doctrines or try to impose a particular view upon the world. In her own novels she had represented social life only indirectly, as it is perceived by her characters. Yet in *The Pargiters*, she was suddenly attempting apparently to reverse the whole direction of her work. In a totally unanticipated move, the novel opens with a description of 56 Abercorn Terrace, the house that the Pargiter family lives in, and the ritual of afternoon tea.

‘It is not boiling,’ said Milly Pargiter, looking at the tea-kettle. She was sitting at the round table in the front drawing-room of the house in Abercorn Terrace... The kettle was an old-fashioned brass kettle, chased with a design of roses that was almost obliterated... A feeble little flame flickered up and down beneath the brass bowl...(10)

Jane Marcus reads the old tea kettle in association with one of the motifs in the novel – the female as the vessel of life. According to Marcus, the design on the kettle, roses and having a serpentine spout, is the clearest symbolic form of the motif, the serpent being the most ancient symbol of the Mother Goddess (42). As the invalid mother, Rose dies, the kettle won’t boil.

The attentions Woolf gives to the details makes one wonder if it is reminiscent of her own childhood. “Here she applied her hairpin to the wick again. A thin puff of steam issued from the serpent-shaped spout. At first intermittent, it gradually became more and more powerful, until, just as they heard steps on the stairs, one jet of powerful steam issued from the spout. ‘It’s boiling!’ Milly exclaimed. ‘It’s boiling!’”” (12)

But here is the turn, for Woolf’s tea scenes are never simply ‘reposeful’. The children’s
relief is soon offset by the return of the father. Colonel Pargiter, a retired army officer and an imperialist, who comes back from his mistress.

'It's papa!' Milly exclaimed waringly. Instantly Martin wriggled out of his father's armchair; Delia sat upright. Milly at once moved forward a very large rose-sprinkled cup that did not match the rest. The Colonel stood at the door and surveyed the group rather fiercely.

'Mama all right?' he said, letting himself down in one solid mass into the big armchair. He detested tea; but he always sipped a little from the huge old cup that had been his father's. He raised it and sipped perfunctorily. (12)

This family tea time is far from the cosy moment. The father's gloomy presence dictates a new order from the children. Critics such as Alex Zwerdling have stressed the novel's critique of the Victorian family. Linden Peach points as well that Woolf's initial description of the Pargiters focuses on "the archive of late-Victorian bourgeois values responsible for the construction of a particular ideology of the family – financial prosperity, property, empire, individual achievement, social advancement through personal effort and 'cultivated' taste. These are all values salient to Victorian patriarchy." (73) In the text, the Colonel's large tea-cup, inherited from his father, is symbolic of the law of the father passed down through generations. But he takes no more than a few sips from it and actually detests tea. During tea, Martin is rewarded by the father for coming top at school, but this is undermined by references to a darker side of both – the Colonel's mutilated hand (wounded in imperial wars) is like a claw and the children are frightened. The formal relationships around the Pargiter tea table are displaced by a cryptic 'reality' in which the children are bonded to a truer sense of each other through their fear of their father, an anxiety to get things right (for example, to make sure that the kettle is boiled). When the eldest girl comes back to the tea table, the generational opposition is eased. Milly who was on duty for the tea ceremony is relieved, even the snooty father smiles.

Eleanor, the surrogate mother, brings in the grace and solace of an adult woman. Peach appositely observed that The Years "returns to an idea that Woolf suggested but did not develop in The Voyage Out...Rachel's home has a public, patriarchal front that hides an alternative, feminine space"(172). Eleanor's debut, and her function throughout the narrative, constitute the feminine space that has lain in the shadow of the patriarch from the beginning, and outlives the father in the second half of the book. Originally conceived as a book about the social, political and cultural lives of women, The Years has been read recently primarily as an attack on the traditional Victorian upper- or upper-middle class family. Its plot is literally based on the loosening of family structures and the break-down of upper-middle class families during the period between 1880 and 1937, and on how the changing nature of the 'family' life in post-Victorian Britain resulted in a diversity that even embraces non-family structure. In such a reading, the traditional Victorian upper-middle class family at tea, depicted within its material reality at the outset of the novel is building up the target, for the 'attack' on the oppressive nature of the traditional Victorian family, literally, the tension and opposition between the children and the father at tea. The absence of the mother exposes the children even more to the tyranny of the
sullen father: the elder girls are anxious to boil the kettle and get things right; the little Rose sees a man exposing himself in the street and is too terrified and confused to mention the episode to anyone; the boy ‘wriggles’ out of the armchair, anticipating sitting in the father’s armchair will be taken as a challenge to paternal authority and superiority.

Marcus also argued that the name of the Pargiters is indicative that it comes from “pargetter” which means plasterer, and further pointed out that Eleanor is the pargetter in The Years. She keeps the family together, and literally she is a charity worker who plasters the ceilings of the slums, fixes leaky roofs, and cleans drains. The tea scene foregrounds such roles she is to play. But at the tea scene Eleanor is subordinate to the patriarch – the father ended the ceremony in a parodic chink of his ‘very large’ cup.

He drank up his tea. Some drops fell on his little pointed beard. He took out his large silk handkerchief and wiped his chin impatiently...They went on eating and drinking until the Colonel took up his cup, saw there was nothing in it, and put it down firmly with a little chink. The ceremony of tea-drinking was over. (15)

Julia Briggs also reads The Years as a record of the gradual release of its closely constrained young women into freedom and even self-determination as the Victorian patriarchs, like so many dinosaurs, die out. Only in middle age, Eleanor is finally released from her duties to her father and delightedly takes possession of her own life at last, free to travel to India, to lunch or dine where and with whom she likes. Briggs believes that part of the novel’s initial purpose had been to urge the young women of the 1930s that they must continue to ‘knock on the door’, that they must never forget what women had already achieved, not come to take it for granted. Peggy, the bitter young woman doctor, goes with her aunt Eleanor to the party that is the culmination of the final section, and their relationship itself further mirrors Woolf’s intention of conveying to a younger generation the sense of exhilaration felt by women like Eleanor and Kitty within the novel, who have finally discovered the pleasure of freedom, of living their own lives.

Tea Party in Between the Acts

Between the Acts is set quite specifically on an early mid-June afternoon in 1939. The characters in the book are preoccupied with the village pageant staged at the garden of the Olivers. Woolf is still experimenting with forms; originally she conceived it as a play. The work itself humorously, sometimes sardonically, interweaves literature, gossip, and communal event. The pageant binds the narrative, but as the title of the work literally implies, what is between the acts of the pageant is the event of a communal tea party. Depicting the villagers through ‘orts, scraps, and fragments’ – what’s thought, what’s said, what’s scrappily overheard - , Woolf explores the state of England on the verge of The Second World War.

As Gillian Beer observed that the novel is “preoccupied with communal survival, even at it glances across individual loss” (xiv); the tea gives the opportunity for a sober gaze at the community that is half conscious of the approaching war.

In the middle of the work, between the acts of Miss La Trobe’s sprawling, yet stylized
pageant, the villagers have tea at the Olivers’ barn. Showing people at leisure in this social ritual, is however Woolf’s method of intensification, for this moment of social entertainment that places people at ease provides the chance of genuine examination.

‘Well, I’m dying for my tea!’ she said in her public voice; and strode forward. She laid hold of a thick china mug. Mrs. Sands giving precedence, of course, to one of the gentry, filled it at once. David gave her cake. She was the first to drink, the first to bite. The villagers still hung back. ‘It’s all my eye about democracy,’ she concluded. So did Mrs. Parker, taking her mug too. The people looked to them. They led; the rest followed.

‘What delicious tea!’ each exclaimed, disgusting thought it was, like rust boiled in water, and the cake fly-blown. But they had a duty to society.

... ‘Dispersed are we,’ she murmured. And held her cup out to be filled. She took it. ‘Let me turn away,’ she murmured, turning, ‘from the array’—she looked desolately round her—‘of china faces, glazed and hard. Down the ride, that leads under the nut three and the may tree, away, till I come to the wishing well, where the washer-woman’s little boy—she dropped sugar, two lumps, into her tea, ‘dropped a pin. He got his horse, so they say. But what wishes should I drop into the well?’ She looked round. She could not see the man in grey, the gentleman farmer; nor anyone known to her. ‘That the waters should come to me,’ she added, ‘of the wishing well.’

The noise of china and chatter drowned her murmur. ‘Sugar for you?’ they were saying. ‘Just a spot of milk? And you?’ ‘Tea without milk or sugar. That’s the way I like it.’ ‘A bit too strong? Let me add water.’ (63-64)

The tea party shows that the community is class-ridden by still placing people according to the old social hierarchy. Beer observes: “Dispensing and receiving tea, and the accompanying phrases (‘Sugar for you?’), are here the forms that ritual takes, producing surface and depths alike.” (xiii-xiv) Surfing on this surface and depth is Isa’s consciousness. Brooding on desire and drowning, through a remembered fairy tale, she is passionately infatuated with Rupert Haines, the ‘man in a grey suit’ who merely hands her a cup of tea.

The imagery of water seems to release something in her, but she is not sure what wish she should make at the imaginary well. She asks, “Should I mind not again to see may tree or nut tree?” (64). Isa here incorporates into her thought fragments from a Mother Goose rhyme, “Nuts an’ May” which is a game of tug-of-war, as Nancy Bazin has pointed out; the verses imply that she hopes to be taken away by death or by Rupert Haines. In a larger context, she is torn between ‘Death’ and ‘Life’, between a threatened society, a limited domestic life, on the one hand, and a longing for a new structuring of human emotions and imagination on the other. Isa’s tug-of-war is in a sense the tug-of-war of the novel itself, the conflict between a restricted society and the restless exuberance of human passion and its creative energy.

Isa later formulates this conflict in more distinctly sociological images. At the end of the day, she is sitting with Giles in the library and notices his uniform for the evening:
Both had changed. Giles now wore the black coat and white tie of the professional classes, which needed — Isa looked down at his feet — patent leather pumps. "Our representative, our spokesman," she sneered, Yet he was extraordinarily handsome. "The father of my children, whom I love and hate." Love and hate — how they tore her asunder! Surely it was time someone invented a new plot, or that the author came out from the bushes...(127-28)

Maria DiBarttista, analyzes the emotion here called 'hate': "That Isa and Giles are the only central characters to feel this hate, and to feel it as a necessary component of their love, suggests that tragic hatred does not spring from a Satanic spirit of denial and negation, but from the aggrieved spirit of thwarted individuality, from the mistimed conjunctions of will and desire, from the intolerable passivity that is compensated by real and imagined acts of sadistic aggression" (210). DiBarttista's analysis is vital in understanding Isa - the strange way she behaves, her relation with Giles, and her impotent fascination with the romantic farmer. At the tea scene, through the medium of William Dodge, we see the relation between the couple. "Then again she changed her dress. This time, from the expression in her eyes it was apparently something in the nature of a strait waistcoat. Hirsute, handsome, virile, the young man in blue jacket and brass buttons, standing in a beam of dusty light, was her husband. And she his wife. Their relations, as he had noted at lunch, were as people say in novels 'strained'"(65). Dodge also notices that Giles is running after Mrs. Manresa.

Mrs. Manresa is drinking her tea, and trying to get rid of her company - "it was the women of her own class that bored her. So she left Mrs. Parker, abruptly"(65). The tea party consequently transmutes into a pursuit of the temporary partner of the two. While the two shuttle through the crowd and exchange social tea talks with others, readers follow them and run across scraps of dialogues, streams of observations and reflections on others, from all directions. For example, a character reflects on Mrs. Manresa: "Cobbet in his corner saw through her little game. He had known human nature in the East. It was the same in the West."(67) Ostensibly a criticism of the flighty women, it is also a covert criticism of imperialism, based on belief in the difference of the West and the East. Bart Oliver's career as an Indian Civil service officer has not been simply dry fact.

Going back to the text, as it is observed by Beer that "sexuality and desire also pulse through the book" (xxvii); the way Woolf presents her characters at the moment is in the manner which she had perfected at the dinner table in To the Lighthouse. Susan Dick and Mary Millar argued that Woolf creates a 'montage' by shifting the focus from the realistic scene to the inner drama of the characters. They argue that "[i]ts hallmarks are the freedom with which the narrator moves among the characters, entering the minds of some and not others, the blending of the narrator's voice with those of selected characters, and the use of images to convey emotions. The constantly fluctuating point of view also enables Woolf to use a variety of tones in the narrative and to develop on several levels the characters, their relationships and the themes she wishes to explore" (xxxvii). Compared to the private dinner in To the Lighthouse, the communal tea party in Between the Acts provides a wider examination, a mixture of people. For example, the old
siblings of Bart and Lucy, who are out of the sexual game of the younger generation, though murmuring the same rhyme of ‘O sister swallow...’ acknowledge their disparity: “She was thinking, he supposed, God is peace. God is love. For she belonged to the unifiers; he to the separatists.”(72) Bart is a self-acknowledged imperialist, a self-claimed ‘separatist’. “Dispersed we are” as the gramophone sings, people disperse in thought at the communal tea that fails to unite.

The occupation Woolf chose for Giles, is stockbroker, one of the three listed in Three Guineas that men monopolized. In the evening, noticing Giles has changed his clothes, Isa sneers; ‘Our representative, our spokesman.’ In his special garb, the husband speaks for the wife and family; those who have power speak for those who do not. Isa’s desire for a new plot, coming after her contempt and frustration as she regards her husband’s dress, widens the meaning of the word “plot”: she wants a new structuring of domestic and social institutions.

But Isa’s love and hate finds neither expression nor outcome in the narrative. Maria Dibattista observes that Isa is the ‘modern tragicomic heroine’ in the tradition of Ibsen and Chekhov, a heroine whose will is incommensurate to her desire, whose actions are never complete expressions of her intention. In her own self-estimate, “[s]he never came out of a shop, for example, with the clothes she admired; nor did her figure... please her...She looked what she was: Sir Richard’s daughter; and niece of the two old ladies at Wimbledon who were so proud of, being O’Neils, of their descent from the King of Ireland.”(12) Isa, is bonded to and spoken for by not only the husband, but also the father.

Jed Esty argued that “Woolf uses Giles to suggest links between capitalism, imperialism, and patriarchal aggression. By contrast, Isa...is a figure of beleaguered domesticity”, and reads their relation as “the symbolic antagonism between domestic and imperial versions of England” (91). Thus Isa, mixed with her family and common villagers, with their emotions, thought and consciousness floating at the tea party, presents a close examination of the community. As argued by Gillian Beer, Woolf wants to explore how England came to be as she described it in Three Guineas, patriarchal, imperialist, and class-ridden. Between the Acts acknowledges those characteristics, but is also faced with the probable obliterition of people, landscape, and history in the war. This is part of what Esty argues in his book, A Shrinking Island, that Woolf’s late novels constitute part of the collective ‘anthropological turn’ of the modernists in the 1930s, in the face of the national crisis: Woolf sought to produce another idea of England, one which might survive, but survive without portentousness – as a mixture and common place.

**Conclusion**

John Mepham argued ‘a crucial transformation’ in Woolf’s writings occurred in 1932, which chronologically overlaps with the ‘anthropological turn’ Esty argued. He contributes the transformation to Woolf’s established fame and determination to speak her mind: “She now felt free to express her anger about the damage done to people’s lives by men and their desire to dominate, both to women through the institutions and culture of patriarchy, and to men as well through the institutions and war.”(148) The work after this change is The Years followed by the political Three Guineas. In these works Woolf’s social criticism has finally come to the fore.

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The transformation is also acknowledged by Michele Barrett, in her discussion of Woolf’s two political works, *A Room of One’s Own* and *Three Guineas*. She observed the former is “eloquent, elegant, trenchant as well as witty, passionate as well as amusing”, and “play[s] with its own seriousness of purpose”(xix), but in the latter, Woolf distances herself: “acquit me of the desire simply to seduce and to flatter and to bring you round to my own way of thinking by means of flattery and seduction”(The Pargiters, 5). Such an attitude is reflected in her way of arrangement of tea scenes for her characters. Miss Kilman’s tea is between two women of different classes and generations; it focuses on a tormented and grasping first-generation new woman, who was historically handicapped. The narration looks forward to a new generation of New Women with new perspectives and possibilities. The patriarchal high-class man is only a shadowy figure in the background. Lady Orlando’s parodic tea with Mr Pope, occurs in a fantasy setting; its poignancy is neutralized by its deliberate comic treatment. Then the turn comes: tea scenes in *The Years* and *Between the Acts*, are set in contemporary time bearing imminent issues. Barrett concludes: “Woolf in the 1930s, had a new interest in veracity rather than vision – that make a distinctive break with the Virginia Woolf of the 1920s”. (xxvii) In these more purposeful examinations of contemporary society and national life, her criticism of patriarchy and imperialism comes to the fore; more importantly, these tea scenes constitute an organic and indispensable part of the narrative. They are not only there to look at women’s life but also to examine the social lives that formed women’s lives and look for a possible, improved future.

Mepham has for similar reasons praised Woolf’s late social relevant works, *The Years* and *Between the Acts* among others: “[H]er formal ingenuity gives way to a less elegant, more riotous composition, in which greater prominence is given to social criticism and material reality”(xviii). Here the technique and the motivation of Woolf’s tea scenes come close to those of Henry James. Tea scenes serve as oblique criticism of contemporary societies without overthrowing social decorum, because tea is ‘inconsequential’. But as a literary language and device, tea is powerful: it appeals to people, and call their attention to those seemingly trivial episodes and details in life that big social issues hinge upon. What grieved Hugh-Jones (“that wit, satire, irony, a way of saying serious and indeed perhaps unpopular, controversial and dangerous things obliquely and to all appearances lightly, are the best possible methods for a woman who wishes to make some communication in this country”) can be reasonably refuted, because tea scenes in Woolf’s novels that ‘appear lightly’, are by no means light. They maneuver heavy issues with inherent grace. The popularity and ubiquitous existence of tea make a shortcut: people’s quick understanding of tea as a social language carries Woolf’s social criticism to a much wide audience.

Bibliography

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