

# A New Type of Heterosexual Culture: Tea-shop and Tea-shop Stories

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At the end of the nineteenth century, tea-shops developed into a new location for public consumption, suitable for respectable family and female use and providing modest, affordable pleasure and relaxation for shoppers and others on urban streets. By 1890 there were already over fifty ABCs in central London. The first Lyons opened in 1894, and they spread rapidly to cover the same area.

In the space of just over a quarter of a century, the city streets had been transformed by the two chains whose visible presence was matched by their impact on the literary imagination. The tea-shop became a standard reference point in the literature of the time and seems to have had a particular interest for many early twentieth-century writers. George Gissing, H.G. Wells, Somerset Maugham, Angus Wilson, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf all mention the chains by name or make the tea-shop a key locus for urban encounters.

This paper will examine briefly the new development of tea-shop from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, to see how it functioned as a new site for heterosexual social encounter, and also to look at literary employment of tea-shop scenes in novels and short stories of the same period, to see how such social encounter at this new public yet commercial place reveals new forms and permutations of gender relations.

## The Emergence of Tea-shops

Tea-shops or tea-rooms as they were named differently in different parts of the country, began to pop up and quickly spread through the British Isles. They were distinct from the pubs, clubs and eating places associated with the provision of refreshment for manual workers, with elite masculine gatherings and restaurants for the affluent, or with 'unrespectable' lower-class sociability.

Erika Diane Rappaport examines the origin of tea-shops in the London West End in close connection with changes in women's life in that particular historical era. According to her, tea-shops were originally opened and run by women to offer a respectable and comfortable place for a predominantly female clientele to rest and dine between or after shopping; the gender code however quickly weakened in the new century and they became a fashionable place for both sexes.

Perilla Kinchin however argues that tea-shops first appeared in Glasgow. She traces the origin, development, prosperity and decline of tea-rooms in that northern city with a view on the whole country. She devoted an introduction to the well-known and well-remembered Miss Cranton tea-shops, which enjoyed great prosperity in the first half of the twentieth century,

whose prosperity and decline reflected the general fate of tea-rooms in the country.

Joanna de Groot again has a different theory about the origin of tea-shops. She traces it to stalls at the colonial exhibitions of the 1880s, and noticed that the *Times* commentator on the Colonial and Indian Exhibition of 1886 noted how weary afternoon visitors and lingering couples enjoy their tea all the more because it is served to them by white-robed Sinhalese. When the successful tobacconists Salmon and Gluckstein embarked on selling cups of tea to a wide public, their first venture was with Joseph Lyons, who ran a refreshment stall at the Liverpool colonial exhibition of 1887, an experiment repeated at a similar exhibition in Glasgow in 1888. The prelude to the opening of their first tea-shop in 1894 was an 1893 catering contract with the Imperial Institution and an agreement to purchase Ceylon tea 'and none other'. (184)

In either way it was the steady reduction of previously heavy levels of duty from the mid-1840s onward that finally turned tea into a staple of the popular diet. Consumption rose strongly from the mid-nineteenth century and went on climbing until the Second World War and the advent of powdered coffee.

Women were the new and the crucial element in the flowering of the tea-rooms. Scott McCracken observes that "[w]omen's participation in the urban public sphere begins with their increasing role as consumers..."(88) With the loosening of early Victorian obsession with the domestic sphere in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, there was a freedom and a desire among females to go out and about more. Shopping was obviously the main possibility for the woman with money and time on her hands, and this brought the burgeoning from the 1880s of palatial department stores, together with a clear need for places to rest from such exertions. Tea rooms, with their décor often appealing to ladies, and their essential 'conveniences', offered an attractive way to fit socializing into an afternoon about town, and women took to them gladly.

The popular magazine of *Queen* in 1893 published a cartoon that caricatured the many pleasures of "shopping" that centered upon the tea-shop, whose caption read: "Perhaps the pleasant part of shopping. Meeting one's brother and a friend and dropping in to a confectioner's for tea". Rappaport appositely observes with reference to the cartoon that "commercial culture was becoming associated with a new type of heterosexual culture in which young men and women could flirt without fear of the watchful eye of the Victorian chaperone." (104) Taking into consideration that the cartoon is published prior to Henry James's *The Awkward Age* (1899), it proves to have offered foresight. In the Jamesian society in the novel, though claiming itself modern, Nanda astonished her male contemporaries by walking to a single male friend's house without a chaperone for tea.

Kinchin proves that it is Kate Cranston, Stuart Cranston's sister, who first used the description 'Tea Room' when she opened her Crown Tea Rooms in 1878. Her tea-rooms promoted the feminine 'artistic' atmosphere which became one of its distinguishing features, most notably the Willow Tea Rooms (designed by Charles Rennie MacKintosh in 1904 and still running). These, by excluding any consumption of alcohol, obtained respectability and flourished. The new teashops were seen as safe havens for women. In H.G. Wells's *Ann Veronica* (1909), Ann uses a British Tea Table Company teashop to attempt to escape, unsuccessfully in this case, from a man who had been following her in the street. (82)

Another significant feature of the new chains of tea-shops was their combination of affordability, menu and ambience, aimed at those of modest means who sought refreshment as part of a new pattern of urban activity which was neither that of the sophisticated flaneur, nor of boisterous street life and manual labour. The ABC shops were often situated near the transport which took commuting office workers and shoppers to and from home. The provision of two-penny cups of tea and light food in a setting with 'waitress service' and modestly attractive decoration met the needs and tastes of women and families on shopping excursions, and of the new 'pink collar' workforce of female shop and office staff. The tea-shop atmosphere of propriety and restraint matched lifestyles developing among wider sections of the urban population, and was associated with the larger white- and pink-collar workforce, the growth of suburban communities and widespread aspirations to respectability.

The impact of the ABC and Lyons tea-shops extended beyond the lower middle class. T.S. Eliot in "A Cooking Egg" expresses a typical ambivalence to its world, which the narrator suggests will not make it to paradise, but will be missed nonetheless:

But where is the penny world I bought  
To eat with Pipit behind the screen?  
The red-eyed scavengers are creeping  
From Kentish Town and Golder's Green;

Where are the eagles and the trumpets?

Buried beneath some snow-deep Alps  
Over buttered scones and crumpets  
Weeping, weeping multitudes  
Droop in a hundred A.B.C.'s. (39)

Despite the poem's attempt to distance itself from them, tea-shops' ubiquity make them an image of mass urban culture.

A refreshment room in a railway station, though not a typical tea-shop as discussed here, is the main setting for David Lean's 1945 film, *Brief Encounter*. It is where the hero and heroine accidentally met when waiting for their train and began to fall in love, and where they finally decided to stop seeing each other. It is not unnatural for people to interact in the public space for refreshment, and it actually became a spot for a short-circuit for the two married people, and a temporary connecting point in their lives that had to diverge in the end. There are also scenes in an actual tea-shop as place of assignation before they go to see a film. In contrast to the instant shame when they are seen drinking together, it is a respectable way for a quick lunch.

On the other hand, tea-shop's female staff marked out a distinct territory and the tea-shop was as much as a zone of conflict and contestation as it was of refreshment and social encounter. A brief extract from Berta Ruck's novel *His Official Fiancée* (1914), where the heroine gives her reason for marriage, indicates the struggles for social distinction that took place in ABCs and elsewhere on the city streets:

.....No more lining up with the crowd to wait for that beastly old workman's tram at the 'Elephant!' No more strap-hanging! No more packed motor buses...no more A.B.C. girls not taking the slightest notice of your order and then giving you sauce because you've waited half an hour for your lunch. (93)

This indicates that the habitus of the ABC (in its anthropological sense) was defined as often by opposition to its distinctive spaces as by a sense of belonging. Pierre Bourdieu observes that individuals learn to want what conditions make possible for them, and not to aspire to what is not available to them. The conditions in which the individual lives generate dispositions compatible with these conditions, and in a sense pre-adapted to their demands. The heroine's self-reasoning seems to exemplify the theory.

Rappaport acknowledges Glasgow's prominence in the development of tea-rooms and mentions in particular Miss Cranston's "artistic" tearoom. (247, N.8) Remarkably, Kate Cranston opened a tea-room in 1897 of five floors, with kitchens in the basement, smoking and billiards rooms on the top floor, assorted tea and luncheon rooms on the other floors, and the exciting modernity of a passenger elevator. The scale and arrangement revealed a more ambitious catering for mass entertainment.

Micheal Moss also observes that tea-rooms and restaurants of the great stores reached new heights of luxuriousness in Edwardian days. Tea-rooms were useful magnets. Fiercely competitive, they made shopping into an addictive leisure experience, and because middle-class women had real spending power, they burgeoned and flourished. (Moss, 60)

Thus in the early decades of the twentieth century, the tea-shop grew into a site of spectacle, including sexual spectacle. In James Joyce's *Ulysses*, "Buck Mulligan's watchful eyes saw the waitress come. He helped her to unload her tray." (Episode 10) Ezra Pound's poem *The Girl in the Tea Shop* dwells on the image of a tea-shop waitress:

The girl in the tea shop  
Is not so beautiful as she was,  
The August has worn against her.  
She does not get up the stairs so eagerly;  
Yes, she also will turn middle-aged,  
And the glow of youth that she spread about us  
As she brought us our muffins  
Will be spread about us no longer.  
She also will turn middle-aged. (120)

Pound himself regularly frequented tea-shops. Richard Aldington says in his memoir that the prime mover of modernism and his friends usually spent their late afternoon over tea, either in the shop of the British Museum or at a variety of "fashionable and expensive tea-shops...Naturally then, the imagist's movement was born in a tea shop – in the royal Borough of

Kensington.”(quoted in Wilhelm, 134) Familiar with (expensive) tea-shops, Pound uses the ubiquitous image of a waitress to develop the pathetic theme of aging that applies to everybody. The waitress is taken as a muse figure who used to spread ‘the glow of youth’, and male anxiety is projected onto her (that she also will turn middle-aged) perhaps as image of literary movements grew old.

The tea-shop is also a site of work and production: as a place of employment in which the employees are worn down. Tea-shop stories that we are to look at hereafter revolve around such relations, and are narrated from both sides of clients and waitresses, to reveal complicated interaction between them in the heyday of the tea-shop.

### Tea-Shop Stories

As a new form of popular entertainment, tea-shops provide a setting for the dramatization of human affairs. They are not only the background against which the characters move, but also play a symbolic part in the problems they face. Tea-shops can even sometimes serve as a microcosm of the more general form of social exploitation, especially during the Great Depression.

In William Somerset Maugham’s *Of Human Bondage* (1915), Philip Carey came across a tea-shop waitress in London and fell in love with her. Philip noticed “the girl treated the clients whom she did not know with frigid insolence, and when she was talking to a friend was perfectly indifferent to the hurried calls of the other customers. She had the art of treating women who desired refreshment with just that degree of impertinence which irritated them without affording them an opportunity of complaining to the management.” (411) He himself was piqued when he tried to be agreeable to her, and decide to have tea at a different place. His friend “soon found another young woman to flirt with, but the snub which the waitress had inflicted on Philip rankled, and he soon went to the old place for tea, and found himself unexplainably attracted to Mildred in spite of her insolence toward him and his strong desire to express his contempt for her.”(412) In spite of the frustration, their relation improved when he drew a sketch of her. Philip took the chance to have a good look of her in her tea-shop waitress uniform:

It was true that her profile was beautiful; it was extraordinary how English girl of that class had so often a perfection of outline which took your breath away, but it was as cold as marble; and the faint green of her delicate skin gave an impression of unhealthiness. All the waitresses were dressed alike, in plain black dresses, with a white apron, cuffs, and a small cap. (414)

Philip’s thoughts betray that he was class-conscious, but it was not deep enough to insulate him from her. The sketch turned out to be a success, and he felt that Mildred looked upon him with more interest now that she was aware of his small talent. However the next day when he stepped into the shop, he found the girl was talking to a German with animation and could hardly answer his calls until he rapped the table loudly with his stick. “The waitress came and treated him with the insolent manner which he knew so well. Philip thought the other girls looked from him to the

pair at the table and exchanged significant glances. He felt certain they were laughing at him.” (417)

Soon the German stopped coming to the shop, and Mildred began to agree to go out with Philip. When he later invited her to travel with him to Paris, she pressed him for marriage. It disturbs him; though physically attracted to her, he was clear about the class differences between them, as his earlier reflection on her partially revealed:

He had middle-class instincts, and it seemed a dreadful thing to him to marry a waitress. A common wife would prevent him from getting a decent practice. Besides, he had only just enough money to last him till he was qualified; he could not keep a wife even if they arranged not to have children ...He foresaw what Mildred, with her genteel ideas and her mean mind, would become; it was impossible for him to marry her. (460-61)

Philip seems to be clear-sighted about Mildred, yet he soon irresistibly succumbed to his passion for her and allowed her drag him into emotional and later financial crisis.

Tea-shops became an intermediate location for the two whose lives would otherwise unlikely to run across each other. Tea-shop waitress as a job was not unrespectable, but could become dubious sometimes because only a few steps down would be the trade of prostitute as Mildred later in fact turned to. In the earlier days of tea-shops, one of the attractions was the waitresses. For a shy young man, she might be the only woman with whom he could converse without shame. Accordingly to Kinchin, tea-room girls in the early days were recruited on a sober basis, and covered a wider spectrum of age and beauty. Nevertheless their bewitching qualities became the subject of much journalistic copy. *The Baillie* in 1897 applauded her as ‘a product of the age, this sweet votaress of the tea-urn’. Good-looking girls often acquired a loyal following of young gents, and some employers clearly deployed their star waitresses carefully, as *St Mungo* noted when several tea-rooms are run by one person a number of girls were frequently changed from shop to shop. Whenever the popularity of a place is on the wane, one of the brightest of the girls is sent to it with the expected result that trade becomes as brisk as possible in that particular corner.

In contrast to the early tea-shops, J.B. Priestley’s *Angel Pavement* (1930) gives a detailed description of a ‘giant’ tea-shop in the West End through the eyes of his character Turgis, for whom visiting one of the big tea-shops was part of his Saturday night program, as they were always crowded with girls and so offered a chance of a pick-up. In the narrative, Priestley gives a minute and exaggerated description of the popular entertainment institutions in a satirical tone.

...It towered above the older buildings like a citadel, which indeed it was, the outpost of a new age, perhaps a new civilization, perhaps a new barbarism; and behind the thin marble front were concrete and steel, just as behind the careless profusion of luxury were millions of pence, balanced to the last halfpenny. Somewhere in the background, hidden away, behind the ten thousand lights and acres of white napery and bewildering glittering rows of teapots, behind the thousands waitresses and cash-box girls and

black-coated floor managers and temperamental long-haired violinists, behind the mounds of shimmering bonbons and multi-coloured Viennese pastries, the cauldrons of stewed steak, the vanloads of harlequin ices, were a few men who went to work juggling with fractions of a farthing, who knew how many units of electricity it took to finish a steak-and-kidney pudding and how many minutes and seconds a waitress (five feet four in height and in average health) would need to carry a tray of given weight from the kitchen lift to the table in the far corner. ...Such was the gigantic teashop into which Turgis marched, in search not of mere refreshment but of all the enchantment of unfamiliar luxury. (134-35)

Priestley uses the prosperity of this commercial tea-shop as a satirical foil to the difficult situation facing the company that Turgis worked at. To escape his dull and disappointing office life, he spends money on this fashionable and popular entertainment that offers a temporary illusion with its dazzling luxuries. In comparison to Turgis's simplicity, the narrator's sharpness mischievously and relentlessly pierces through the illusionary surface to the behind-the-door, profit-oriented calculation and exploitation of the waitress and other employees. In the eyes of the more disillusioned narrator, this commercial institution that builds on money and exploitation represents the 'new barbarism' that indulges people's vanity and desire for commercial profit. The extravagant luxuries of the shop rest on the 'cold science working in the basement', and belong to the same system that exploits Turgis. He temporarily becomes the consumer instead of the consumed for the money he is willing to pay.

The door was swung open for him by a page; there burst, like a sugary bomb, the clatter of cups, the shrill chatter of white-and-vermilion girls, and, cleaving the golden, scented air, the sensuous clamour of the strings; and, as he stood hesitating a moments, half dazed, there came, bowing, a sleek grave man, older than he was and far more distinguished than he could ever hope to be, who murmured deferentially: 'For one, Sir? This way, please.' Shyly, yet proudly, Turgis followed him.

The inside of this gigantic West End tea-shop echoes that of Miss Cranton's, with a lift and varied entertainments at different floors catering to different needs. Turgis is impressed and overwhelmed by the unfamiliar luxuries. He has not come simply for these, but also for the sexual spectacle, or even a better to find a pick-up from among the girls who are attracted to the tea-shop for reasons similar to his.

But Turgis is quickly reminded of the real world that he wished to leave outside of the flamboyant 'citadel'; it emerges in the face of a tired and inhospitable waitress. The waitress whose working load is 'scientifically' calculated, is on the verge of collapse:

At last the waitress came. She was a girl with a nose so long and so thickly powdered that a great deal of it looked as if it did not belong to her, and she was tired, exasperated, and ready at any moment to be snappy. She took the order – and it was for plaice and chips, tea, bread and butter, and cakes: the great tea of the whole fortnight –

without any enthusiasm, but she returned in time to prevent Turgis from losing any more temper. (136)

Turgis has to endure the same as Ruck's heroine did more than a decade before. The cold and ironical observation on the waitress is unsympathetic, but it reveals the heavy working-load placed on her, so heavy that she can no longer care about other things such as her looks and attitude. The thick powder that "looked as if it did not belong to her" could have been part of the job, to look pretty. A comparison of this nameless waitress to Mildred reveals that tea-shop waitresses' working condition had deteriorated over the years as competition among tea-shops grew; as they grew more commercial, the potential tension between customers and waitresses increased. Working conditions at smaller tea-shops were even worse. In George Orwell's *Keep the Aspistras Flying* (1935), the hero's sister worked "in a nasty, ladylike little teashop near Earl's Court Underground Station. She worked a seventy-two hour week and was given her lunch and tea and twenty-five shillings," (48) and when she moved out after her mother's death to live near her working place, "[s]he still worked twelve hours a day, and in six years her wages had only risen by ten shillings a week. The horribly ladylike lady who kept the teashop was a semi-friend as well as an employer, and thus could bully Julia and make her sweat to the tune of 'dearest' and 'darling'." (52) Tea as well as lunch is provided as part of her wages, and it is certainly a working-class "tea" to support her through the long working hours.

Hitchcock's 1929 *Blackmail* copied a crowded commercial tea-shop to where Flan Webber took Alice White. The two were stopped at the door because it was full; when they entered anyway they had difficulty getting a waitress to take their order. Alice seemed to have a double date, and decided to go with a second man, the artist whom she killed later when he attempted to rape her. On the part of the artist, Alice might have been a pick-up of the kind that Turgis desired. The plot reveals that tea-shops, especially those fashionable ones in the city centers, were well frequented for formal courtship as well as a place for open flirtation.

Priestley's fatigued waitress might be one of those in the Hitchcock films, and she is viewed from the outside and isn't given a voice. In the short story to be examined next, the waitress is more closely portrayed within her working environment. H.E. Bates's *The Flame* evolves around a tea-shop waitress at work who experienced an emotional crisis.

*The Flame* (1926) features an unsentimental portrayal of a waitress named Lil, handling the relentless orders for tea and sandwiches. The emotions of Lil are understood through dialogue and action without being actually described, among the monotonous process of receiving and giving orders. The reader observes the tension grow in her interaction with the clients which betrays her frustration and confusion, until she emotionally collapsed, failing to carry out orders. Challenging the conventional form of narration, Bates utilizes the grinding repetition of tea-shop labour to reflect the waitress's emotional state, and register the gradual changes that escalate to the final breakdown. The reader's active interpretation of the waitress's actions is also needed to make sense of the story. This begins at the time when Lil is expecting the coming of her date.

The waitress retreated, noticing as she did so that the clock stood at six. "Two ham and tongue, two teas," she called down the speaking-tube. The order was repeated. She put



down the tube, seemed satisfied, even bored, and patted the white frilled cap that kept her black hair in place. Then she stood still, hand on hip, pensively watching the door. The door opened and shut.

She thought: "Them two again!"

Wriggling herself upright she went across and stood by the middle-aged men. One smiled and the other said: "Usual."

The two men must be her patrons as she quickly recognizes them and remembers their usual menu. But they do not stir the usual enthusiasm that a waitress owes to her patrons. She is disturbed, as she repeatedly looks to the clock and grows pensive. Towards the end of a tiring working-day, she is frustrated by the man who is late for the date. Her customers notice her negligence:

The middle-aged customers smiled; one nudged the other when she failed to acknowledge that salute, and chirped: "Bright today, ain't you!"

She turned her back on him.

"Been brighter," she said, without smiling. (52-53)

Frustrated by the hopeless waiting, she cuts her patrons. A waitress from another corner comes to ask for a change of shift; when deciding to give up the date she agrees to it, the man comes in. It is a blessing in disguise, as she quickly finds out that the man has come for the girl she has switched shift with. She 'could not move' and the confusion swirls in her head. In spite of the swirling confusion, the girl is not allowed a moment to recover. The work drags on, and she consequently mistakes the orders and is duly complained about. Nobody noticed what was happening to her. In the text no information is provided about the man she has been waiting for, it is probably one of fickle patrons who take pretty waitresses to shows and dinners.

The story ends here. The apparently unsentimental stance that the narrator takes renders the story pathetic and relentless. The heroine is not only passive in the job, but also in her whole state of mind. She is not only physically and economically exploited, but also emotionally depressed. Employing this new social situation, Bates tries to examine the new disturbing reality of women's lives. Both Priestley and Bates employed tea-shops as setting not merely as a physical environment, but as something which constructs and effects the characters. They contain the author's social criticism and indicate the general exploitative nature of the system.

## Conclusion

After the Second World War, tea-shops faced depressing difficulties in refurbishing and a continuous struggle against ever-rising costs and high taxation. When prosperity returned to Britain at large, the process of flattening old urban areas and shifting thousands to bleak peripheral estates accelerated. Rationalization was the new watchword in business life. Tea-rooms became increasingly run down and started to collapse and be swept away.

With a growing demand for efficiency time was more pressing. Middle-class women now

had much less spare time. Domestic servants were a thing of the past for all but the very privileged; formal tea without cheap domestic labour becomes more trouble than it was worth. Cocktail bars began to appear in the late thirties, and proliferated to cater for women's new freedom to drink. Tea was also threatened as a social drink by coffee: after the invention of Espresso machine in the early fifties, it became an in-drink. Once instant coffee was widely available, making it a convenience drink, coffee overtook tea in domestic popularity too.

The closing in April 1954 of Cranston's on the corner of Argyle St and Queen St, the very first Glasgow tea room, inaugurated the real end of what had begun there. There was a regretful, if detached, awareness of the passing of something special, bound up with the greatness of Glasgow's past: "We have often heard the claim made that this was the original tea-room from which all other tea-rooms in the country have been derived. Certainly it was always a pleasant reminder that this was one of Great Britain's many institutions which had their beginning in Victorian Glasgow." (Kinchin, 171)

Tea-shops have been a new sphere that saw the further growth of tea-taking habit in British national life: tea-taking grew out of the Victorian home and became a public and commercialized form of cultural life. This produced a new type of heterosexual culture that greatly changed the social landscape. This new social institution became a new setting to a wide variety of narratives that either dramatise the new phenomenon or criticize the commercialism in it. Though having been a landmark for women's newly-won freedom of going out and later working outside home at the turn of the century, that glory waned as the century advanced as many scenes actually revealed the fact that tea-shops grew into an institution that exploited female employees.

Tea-shop stories serve as an indicator of changes in the nation's cultural habits. Its post-war decline is to be taken as part of a general retreat of the tea-taking habit from the national life. Tea-shop stories are an extension of the tradition of literary representation of tea-taking that had formerly taken place in the private drawing-room. It signals the emergence of a new ethic of mass consumption, and served as the location for a more open form of heterosexual culture that in some way substitutes for the conventional drawing room that had functioned as a place for open courtship. Because it is public and commercial, the stories reflect altered relations between the sexes. As a commercial institution, tea-shops in the narratives examined are revealed to be regulated by money, power and class, and become a cause of distress and depression as well as satisfaction.

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