

# Discovering a Literary Tradition of Tea Scenes in British Literature

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Emily Eells published in 2002 a book named *Proust's Cup of Tea: Homoeroticism and Victorian Culture*, in which tea is marked out as an icon of Victorian culture, and by implication a code for Homoeroticism. Eells analyses in-depth Proust's reading of various Victorian authors and shows how they contributed to *A la Recherche du temps perdu*.

The first chapter of the book is conspicuously named 'A Gay English Tea Party', to establish a tentative link between the English novel and English sexual mores. It begins with a recorded moment of the British ritual of tea-drinking. As Proust never set foot in England, he became acquainted with Victorian and Edwardian culture thanks to the British people he met in Paris and from the reports of Britain by French visitors. His close friend Robert d'Humieres portrayed the English in his work *L'île et l'empire de Grande-Bretagne: Angleterre, Egypte, Inde*, which Proust reviewed, praising in particular a passage relating a visit to Kipling:

A classic parlour-maid shows me in. Someone is just scrambling off a sofa: Mr. Kipling stands before me. He welcomes me charmingly, eagerly:

'Tea?'

Tea. A hostess of so perfect a distinction that one dare not insist upon it, for fear of displeasing her, presides over this rite of English life. (Eells,11)

So confidently and matter-of-factly, the foreign observer pays his tribute to tea; of course it is based on his knowledge and familiarity with the English literature and cultural life. Hasn't tea been the cultural habit that not only bloomed in daily life, but also in English literature? A contemporary English writer, George Gissing hymned to this particular ritual: "In nothing is the English genius for domesticity more notably declared than in the institution of this festival...of afternoon tea...The mere chink of cups and saucers tunes the mind to happy repose."(216)

Proust's friend sees the parlour-maid who served at tea as simply "classic", which quickly conveys British atmosphere of the meeting, and makes a convenient connection to British literature. Even so unconventional a writer as Virginia Woolf is not immune to tea. In the lyrical descriptive passages that open *The Waves* (set in the 1880s) we find such lines as: "In the basement of the long avenues of the residential quarters servant girls in cap and apron prepared tea. Deviously ascending from the basement the silver teapot was placed on the table, and virgins and spinsters with hands that had staunched the sores of Bermondsey and Hoxton carefully measured out one, two, three, four spoonfuls of tea."(5) Tea, so ubiquitous in life, could not hide itself from literature.

Indeed tea scenes are abundant in late Victorian literature. Major writers, like Henry James,

Oscar Wilde, H.G. Wells among others, unanimously blend tea scenes into their writings, not as merely decorative passages, but as a substantial device that fabricates the plot and structures the narrative. Immensely diversified as these writers' concerns and styles are from each other, tea nevertheless possesses sufficient flexibility to cope with that. The reason for this flexibility is tea's long existence in British life and the literary tradition of tea scenes which has been nurtured by writers of all times after tea was introduced into the British islands in early seventeenth century. The first tea scenes can be found in Restoration Comedy, hardly a decade after tea was formally established in the British Court. Henry Fielding's epigram generalizes how tea functioned in the satiric comedies: "Love and scandal are the best sweeteners of tea" (76). Thereafter a literary tradition of tea scenes, develops in parallel with the cultural history of tea, intriguing and enriching each other.

Over the following three centuries the tea-drinking ritual has been steadily fabricated into the core of British social and cultural life, accumulating meanings that go far beyond the drinking of the oriental leaf. Eells's book is one example to see the meanings that tea-drinking had acquired of by Victorian times. Tea-drinking, as a social and domestic activity, functions as an interface between people of different sexes, classes, countries and race. This particular contextual quality of tea, leads itself to be the complicated, yet extremely resourceful place for literary exploration.

Jane Pettigrew's book, *A Social History of Tea* examines the way tea influenced British life, and its fluctuation and development as an important social aspect in the country over centuries. As a literary device, tea is often a medium through which human relationships are examined, because tea is Janus-faced – though supposed to be a polite ritual, it produces unexpected revelations. The discrepancy it produced between surface and depth, creates the space for literary imagination and recreation. And here is also where the flexibility of tea lies: thanks to its long existence in British life, it send out roots into many social aspects: manners and aesthetics, gender, class, family economy... This entanglement proves to be worth repeated observations and examination that yield varied human dramas, while the tea ritual itself is under continuous reconstruction in response to contemporary social changes. This article looks at the process that tea-drinking establishes as a British cultural and literary tradition, in an effort to throw light onto the accumulated meanings which contribute to the unique place such scenes have achieved in literature up to the late Victorian period.

## Tea in Britan

Tea was known in Europe by the middle of the sixteenth century through Italian travel writers, and it first appeared in Holland, when in 1637 the directors of the East India Company ordered their agents in the East to send back a few jars with every ship. Leiden was at this time the center of scientific and medical research in Europe, and Dutch physicians began recommending tea as a tonic, especially for women. From Holland, tea traveled to England and France. In 1657, an enterprising café proprietor, Thomas Garraway, opened the first teashop in London. In 1661, Katherine of Braganza introduced its use, already fashionable in Portugal, to the English court.

From the beginning, tea was perceived as a feminine drink, because of its mild propensity. A contemporary poet, Duncan Campell praises tea, in comparison to wine that intoxicated, tea is 'sweet, innocent and mild', therefore 'the peaceful language of the Fair'. From then on, the ladies, not wishing to sit amongst tobacco smoke and loud drunken masculine conversation, would move to a closet or withdrawing room as soon as dinner was finished, and indulge in the more demure occupations of needlework and light conversation. Tea, in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries distinguished itself from the common drinks by its expensiveness and exoticism, and was adopted quickly by the privileged class as a fashionable and appropriate drink that marked their superior status.

In 1694, William Congreve in his play, *The Double Dealer*, included a line, which revealed that a different social pattern was already beginning to emerge. The ladies, one character explains, were "at the end of the gallery, retired to their tea and scandal according to their ancient custom after dinner" (19).

From the eighteenth century, the rising mercantile class, with its rapid increasing wealth, began to consume tea, in emulation of their social superiors, the aristocrats. Along with the arrival of consumerism, even people of less wealth began to consume the still expensive tea, and tea-drinking, grew into a gesture of wealth and fashion. Consequently, tea equipage became necessary. Along with the oriental imports of porcelains and ceramics, silvers, a native genius of craftsmanship was introduced.

The tea-table was one of the major growth areas of luxury production and consumption, and a key area for the understanding of the dynamics of household organization and communication in the eighteenth century. As a foreign aristocrat observed on his visit to England in 1784, tea drinking provided 'the rich with an opportunity to display their magnificence in the matter of tea-pots, cups and so on' (Berg, 161). Tea pots, kettles, cups and canisters, cream boats, milk jug, tea spoons, sugar tongs and basins, and eventually complete boxed equipages were invented to furnish the tea-table.

Tea things have been seen not merely as ornamental furnishings; they also carry and communicate feminine affections. In the eighteenth century and later, Maxine Berg comments, in *Consumers and Luxury*:

Decorative furnishings, as well as tea utensils, chests, trays, tables and silver teaspoons and tongs, were particularly singled out for description and bequest in the texts of the wills left by the middling orders, and especially the women during the eighteenth century. These furnishings were frequently small and associated with specific best rooms; they often featured new luxury materials or finishes such as mahogany, cane or enamel and lacquer, or new luxury goods such as tea tables and pier glasses. Some of these furnishings were bequeathed in individual legacies together with china and silverware. Tea china, described by colour, finish and origin, was bequeathed along with a range of silver novelties: coffee and teapots and spoons... (72)

The feminine association with tea things, limited to the well-off classes in the eighteenth century, became a tradition and spread to the less wealthy. A novel of 1997, *Alias Grace*, by Margaret

Atwood, faithfully reproduces this detail of feminine life. When Grace's family were forced to emigrate, her aunt, among other things, brought 'a little wicker hamper, and inside it, packed in straw, a china teapot, and two cups and saucers, with roses on them. And my mother thanked her very much, and said how good she had been to her always, and that she would treasure the teapot forever, in remembrance of her.' (111)

From the eighteenth century through the nineteenth century, opportunities for economic, political and social advancement had surged, causing the aristocratic elite to become more defensive and exclusive. More complicated etiquette was developed to keep the aristocracy as well as smaller fashionable circles apart from and more refined than those they considered beneath them in the social scale. Quoted in *Manners, Morals and Class in England 1774-1858* : "When the 'civic classes' adopted an early dinner hour, for example, they drove their fashionable superiors to change the accepted time for dining from five o'clock to eight or nine, for as the possibility of a patrician eating any repast at the same hour as a plebeian, it is a degradation which none but a radical would dream of.'" (Morgan, 28) Tea, used to be a privileged drink, but this particular classifying function weakened as it continuously spread to the 'lower classes'. To keep its symbolic social meaning, a more ceremonial ritual of tea-taking was invented in the 1840s.

In spite of its original feminine association, tea grew to be a social drink that linked the two sexes. By the Victorian period, etiquette books observed that after formal dinner parties, the ladies were served coffee in the drawing room, and the gentlemen were to remain only a short time over their wine, and joined the ladies in the drawing room, when tea was brought in.

The drawing room grew into an important place for social life. It was a formal room where convention and the social graces reigned over manners, conversation, dress and furnishings, and a refuge from the more discordant outer world: "The object of the drawing room is essentially that of repose and degage." (Morgan, 29) Person who presided over and managed this new social ceremony was, of course, the hostess; and the hallowed place of the drawing room, where society activities were staged and enjoyed, raised women to the newly designated arbiters of 'society'.

The upper-class women then initiated the ceremony of tea-taking that took place in the drawing room – a social entertainment of afternoon tea – to British upper- and middle-class society. Afternoon tea between 4 and 5 pm became popular during the 1840s. An urn of boiling water was carried into the parlor or drawing room along with teapots and a caddy, which held the loose tea. The lady of the house made the tea and poured it out; servants, sometimes the gentlemen present, handed the cups to guests. Small cakes, rolled bread and butter, and other dainty finger foods were offered around.

Being a social entertainment, tea parties also demanded special facilities, furniture, ceramics, clothes and the opportunity to use them, and this in return promoted a feminization of domestic space and time, by way of the drawing room and the tea hour. This change paralleled the rise in the status, independence and affluence of women in eighteenth-century Western Europe and the rise of consumerism. Tea provided women a space for free-will and self-design. In the late nineteenth century, the upper- and middle- class women even invented tea-gowns so that the wearer might relax and dispense temporarily with corsets and still look extremely elegant. Tea gowns were loose and comfortable but made of delicate fabrics.

Besides the sociable ceremony of tea-time amongst the leisured classes, the working-class evening meal was increasingly called “tea”, even when it consisted of bread, beer, and something savoury. While father had his “tea”, the children had bread and water (or weak tea) and some tidbits from his plate. When times grew more prosperous, the worker’s evening meal became indistinguishable from “dinner”, but it was still generally called “tea”.

“High tea” in good society, was a meal found only in the country or suburbs on a Sunday evening, when servants had been given a half-day off after clearing away the Sunday dinner. Originally it was a way to entertain unexpected guests who come from a distance. Visitors would have to travel home in the dark or rise early for hunting or shooting, therefore high tea became a late-afternoon or early evening meal eaten instead of dinner. Fruits, cakes, and hot muffins were placed on the table with a tea tray at one end and coffee at the other.

When it had finally permeated all the class scales, the positive effect of tea was generally recognized. Not only does tea relax tension and sharpen the mind, but its popularity also turned people away from drinking cold water, the greatest enemy of pre-modern public health. By boiling water to make tea, the bacteria in polluted water were neutralized. Unlike other popular drinks, tea is a beverage of sobriety, combating both belligerence and fatigue. Especially when drunk with sugar it nourished and increased the endurance of the British industrial worker and the soldier. In *Green Gold – the Empire of Tea*, Macfarlane connected tea-drinking with the Industrial Revolution which took place in Britain just as tea was gaining supremacy after 1730, and the formation of British Empire. In Elizabeth Gaskell’s 1848 *Mary Barton*, depicting the working class in Manchester, it can be observed that tea had become a necessity, for the exploited class, to supply nourishment quickly after a hard working day.

Tea greatly influenced British life, especially that of women. In the early twentieth century, it continued to accompany women when they explored their place outside home. Tea used to be a drink to be enjoyed solely at home – the woman’s domain - while coffee belonged to the streets, namely the domain of men. Later it was in teahouses that women found a respectable place to rest and meet friends outside home. Before teahouses, it was teashops that respectable women could afford to be seen in, buying tea for the household. In Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford*(1853), the gentle and respectable Miss Matty, when she lost her small fortune, chose to open a teashop to support herself. If she had opened a butcher’s shop, or even a draper’s shop, this would have been seen as a crucial drop in social class. A tea-shop retained an air of respectability and gentility.

For a long period, tea-drinking has served as a gesture of civilized behavior, and the change in the time of drinking tea, the type of tea and tea etiquette, virtually turned tea into a marker of class differentiation; in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, it gained a new social and gender significance when society underwent fundamental changes. In Henry James’s 1896 *The Awkward Age*, the heroine, Nanda, surprised her friends by walking to a friend’s house for afternoon tea, alone; thirty years later, in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*, the young daughter of the heroine, had tea in a tea room, and walked in London freely. Afternoon tea, a traditional activity for women staying at home, had finally stepped into the outer world. Tea witnessed and accompanied the progress of feminine emancipation, independence and freedom.

## Tea Scenes in Restoration Drama and Hogarth's Paintings

In the early years after its introduction into British society, because of its expense, tea was almost solely consumed by and closely connected with the privileged classes, therefore its expression in literature and art should also be found in those forms targeted at these classes.

In William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1675), tea utensils – that is, china – were used as cover for sex, when Lady Fidget, in front of her husband, locks herself and Horner, a young man who pretends to be impotent, into his chamber to search his good “china”. As she claimed, “for he kn[e]w china very well, and as himself very good, but will not let me see it lest I should beg some” (Wycherley, 105).

In keeping with the trend for social satire in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, tea – the luxury of luxuries –, was an object to be ridiculed as the civilized cover of corruption. In William Congreve's last play, *The Way of The World* (1700), Mirabell will not permit the tea table in his home to be a cover for alcoholic indulgence, while Millamant rejects Mirabell's interference in the autonomy of her tea-table. It seems the expression of tea before and at the turn of eighteenth century could be best generalized in Henry Fielding's epigram “Love and scandal are the best sweeteners of tea” (76) in his play, *Love in Several Masques* (1728).

Visual images of ladies at tea in earlier periods are abundant. Among the works of William Hogarth, tea scenes are frequent. As a fashionable and still expensive drink at the time, people liked to be portrayed with this symbol of civilized domestic life. In his later narrative pieces, though the characters portrayed were no longer portraits, tea continued its role, not to engage its partakers in a common activity, but to express their personalities and become a part of their story.

In *The Strode Family* and *Marriage a La Mode*, Hogarth employs tea scenes in diametrically opposite ways. The first portrays a real family with friends at tea, which highlights the moment of domestic harmony and comfort, while the latter portrays a couple in their total indifference to each other.

*The Strode Family*, of about 1738, is one of the last and most accomplished of Hogarth's Conversation Pieces. William Strode, the central seated figure, is portrayed with his newly married wife, Lady Ann Cecil and his Oxford University friend, and his brother around a tea table. In *The English Family Portrait*, Clair Hughes observes: “Recent cleaning and X-raying of the canvas have revealed that the figure around her have been altered to make room for her: the servant pouring the tea, for example, was originally much closer to Colonel Strode, William's brother, who had his right arm raised, instead of holding a stick as he is now doing. There was no cloth on the table, so perhaps the whole tea-drinking business was introduced later as a peculiarly feminine activity.” (Hughes, 23) Hughes's analysis convincingly explains the feminine quality of tea in the painting as well as the sociability of the drink.

The portrait naturally produces the chance to display the expensive china and silver – ornaments to this leisured sociable moment. The characters are depicted with their “small and handle-less” teacups with saucers of the same blue-and-white design, which were oriental imports. One special item is ‘the elegant mahogany tea caddy’ between Mr and Mrs Strode on the floor. The box was kept locked, and “only the lady of the house had the key” (Hughes, 24). This cautious procedure reveals the expense of this exotic drink.

William Strode, was a member of the newer aristocracy of the eighteenth century that had sprung from the successful merchant-adventurer class of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Strode made a clever and prudent marriage into the upper aristocracy, Lady Ann Cecil, sister of the Earl of Salisbury. He was also a man of education and culture; his friendship with the Oxford man was evidence of this. Taking tea together, husband and wife, with brother and friend, in Hughes's words: "The Strodes, it seems, wished to be recorded with their tea-cups and fine silver – demonstrations of their wealth, awareness of fashion and their good taste." (Hughes, 25) Exactly that explains why early eighteenth century produced so many family portrait at tea in tea-drinking countries.

In one of Hogarth's late works, *Marriage a-la-mode* (1742-3), an example of new genre of narrative painting, sat at almost the same round beautiful tea table are a different couple from that portrayed in the early painting. In the second painting, *The Tête-à-Tête*, the young couple are seated in their own rooms around a small round tea table, with tea laid for one person, the wife. The husband still wears his hat and sword, after a night out. He has been accompanied or followed into the room by his steward, who departs having failed to interest his employers in their accounts. The wife is yawning, partly from fatigue from a night spent at a card party, which was held in the further room. The wife is only partly dressed, but none of this, suggests the intimacy of a married couple.

Unlike the tea connecting all the figures in *The Strode Family*, here it is what separates the couple or marks a separated life. The table is set for the wife who stays at home; tea, the fashionable and expensive drink in the 1740s, is appropriate for her, who brought money to the loveless marriage for a title. The "noble" husband sits further from the table, tired and with a downcast attitude. In his pocket, is stuffed a woman's cap, which is an emblem of his infidelity, and evidence of the breakdown of the marriage.

If the early painting employs tea as an expensive feminine drink to mark the harmonious domestic moment of family and friends, the tea in the second painting is employed in the opposite way, so that it points to the very lack of the atmosphere it epitomizes in the earlier work. The way tea was used here, is indicative of the artist's disapproval of the marriage narrated in the sequent paintings, which ended in disgrace and the destruction of the couple. Again, if the tea, in the earlier painting, conveys genuine harmony among those partaking of tea, in the second, tea, as well as the marriage, is only a drink for appearance, affectation and vanity, which is the target of the author's satirical attack.

## Nineteenth Century Women Novelists

With the predominance of popular and respected women writers in the early nineteenth century, tea began to appear in the sensitive depiction of feminine observation. In the works of women novelists from Jane Austen through Elizabeth Gaskell to Mary Elizabeth Braddon, tea is woven to the tradition of drawing room novels.

Depicting the gentry and middle-upper classes, Austen's novels are an obvious place to look for tea: for example, in *Mansfield Park* (1814), "[t]he next opening of the door brought something more welcome; it was the tea things...Susan and attendant girl ...brought in

everything necessary for the meal...' (376); it is a detail that reflects the considerateness of the young girl. In *Sense and Sensibility*, an important moment between Elinor and Edward, occurs when he visits the Dashwoods at their country cottage. When they have tea, Marianne accidentally sees a ring on Edward's hand 'with a plait of hair in the center' – a secret hidden from her and her sister, who is in love with Edward. This causes embarrassment and prepares the discovery of the secret later. An intimate time for young people and a recognized place for open courtship, tea here indicates a future crisis.

As a realist writer, Mrs Gaskell describes tea scenes more intensively. *Mary Barton*, her first novel, was published in 1848. In chapter 2, a high tea at the Barton's is described, which reveals a working-class way of life. To prepare an impromptu high tea, Mary is sent by her mother to run the errand: "Run, Mary dear, first round the corner, and get some fresh eggs at the Tippings ... And see if he has any nice ham cut that he would let us have a pound of ... and Mary, you must get a penny worth of milk and a loaf of bread- mind you get it fresh and new and – that's all, Mary." "No, it's not all," said her husband, "Thou must get sixpenny worth of rum to warm the tea ..." (14)... 'At length the business actually began. Knives and forks, cups and saucers made a noise, but human voices were still, for human beings were hungry, and had no time to speak.' (17)

This high tea is not an ordinary meal, but a special treat for the visitors. From the way it is prepared and eaten, the tight budget of the family and the relative poverty of the class is obvious. Three years later, in *Cranford*, Gaskell depicted a different social class - the 'shabby genteel'. Tea, this time performs a new task that shows the kindness of the town-dwellers, and actually saves Miss Matty from bankruptcy.

After Miss Matty lost her small fortune she needed an occupation to support herself. The decent position for 'a rector's daughter' was teaching, but Miss Matty was too old to start. The 'I' narrator recommended Miss Matty to open a tea shop, because "[t]ea was neither grease nor sticky – grease and stickiness being two of the qualities which Miss Matty could not endure. No shop-window would be required. A small, genteel notification of her being licensed to sell tea would, it is true, be necessary, but I hope that it could be placed where no one would see it. Neither was tea a heavy article, so as to tax Miss Matty's fragile strength. The only thing against my plan was the buying and selling." (99)

Tea is respectable, even as merchandise; beside the virtuous propensity of the leaf, the process of trade is made easier by the fact that those come to buy tea are usually women and children. Selling tea not only earns Miss Matty an annual twenty-pound income, but also brought her into 'kindly intercourse with many of the people round about', especially the other tea dealer in Cranford, Mr Johnson.

[...]not only did Mr Johnson kindly put at rest all Miss Matty's scruple and fear of injuring his business, but I have reason to know he repeatedly sent customers to her, saying that the teas he kept were of a common kind, but that Miss Jenkyns had all the choice sorts. And expensive tea is a very favorite luxury with well to do tradespeople and rich farmers' wives, who turn up their noses at the Congou and Souchong prevalent at many tables of gentility, and will have nothing else than Gunpowder and



Pekoe for themselves (108).

Mr Johnson's kindness gives an unintended message about tea; people of different economic situations were drinking different types of tea. Tea-drinking nourished its own snobbishness. By the middle of the nineteenth century, people were more knowledgeable about tea and drinking more types, green and black. While the successful plantations in India and Ceylon were providing more tea, the quality product from its original country remained expensive, and a privileged item for the wealthy. Tea could be read as a convenient index to family finance.

Mary Elizabeth Braddon's novels were filled with suspense-plots and beautiful, mysterious women. In *Lady Audley's Secret* (1861-62), an extravagant afternoon tea provides an ideal chance for a close observation of 'the elegant and delicate' Lady Audley. The lengthy, detailed description of the tea ceremony, shows a beautiful woman on display, but produces a suspense incompatible with the concept of the refined lady:

Lucy Audley looked up from her occupation amongst the fragile china cups, and watched Robert rather anxiously, as he walked softly to his uncle's room, and back again to the boudoir. She looked very pretty and innocent, seated behind the graceful group of delicate opal china and glittering silver. Surely a pretty woman never looks prettier than when making tea. The most feminine and most domestic of all occupations imparts a magic harmony to her every movement, a witchery to her every glance. The floating mists from the boiling liquid in which she infuses the soothing herbs, whose secrets are known to her alone, envelop her in a cloud of scented vapour, through which she seems a social fairy, weaving potent spells with Gunpowder and Bohea. At the tea-table she reigns omnipotent, unapproachable. What do men know of the mysterious beverage? Read how poor Hazlitt made his tea, and shudder at the dreadful barbarism. How clumsily the wretched creatures attempt to assist the witch president of the tea-tray; how hopelessly they hold the kettle, how continually they imperil the frail cups and saucers, or the taper hands of the priestess. To do away with the tea-table is to rob women of her legitimate empire. To send a couple of hulking men about amongst your visitors, distributing a mixture made in the housekeeper's room, is to reduce the most social and friendly of ceremonies to a formal giving out of rations. Better the pretty influence of the tea-cups and saucers gracefully wielded in a woman's hand, than all the inappropriate power snatched at the point of the pen from the unwilling sterner sex. Imagine all the women of England elevated to the high level of masculine intellectuality; superior to crinoline; above pearl powder and Mrs. Rachel Levison; above taking the pains to be pretty; above making themselves agreeable; above tea-tables, and that cruelly scandalous and rather satirical gossip which even strong men delight in; and what a dreary, utilitarian, ugly life the sterner sex must lead.

My Lady was by no means strong-minded. The starry diamond upon her white fingers flashed hither and thither amongst the tea-things, and she bent her pretty head over the marvelous Indian tea-caddy of sandal-wood, and silver, with as much earnestness as if

life held no higher purpose than the infusion of Bohea. (222-3)

By her satirical tone, Braddon is paying a mocking compliment to the afternoon-tea ceremony, which hallows the femininity of the 'weaker' sex. In support of Mr Johnson's comments on tea in *Cranford*, the wealthy Audleys drink only the most expensive tea at the time, Gunpowder and Bohea. The extravagant tea table measures the height to which Lady Audley - a former governess - was raised by her marriage to the elderly Mr Audley. A beautiful woman 'enveloped in the cloud of scented vapor' of the 'soothing herb', is exactly the cover Lady Audley used to hide her secret. The 'by no means strong-minded' lady, is by no mean only good at making tea; she is strong enough to murder 'the sterner sex' and keep a calm face.

Compared to her immediate predecessors, Braddon's tea scene is a variation. Tea had been the place to observe feminine beauty and refinement; Braddon takes pleasure in depicting such a surface. The final disclosure is ironic and pathetic - an intelligent woman is reduced to a criminal. Braddon subverted a mimic tea scene into a satire, an open place to ridicule the blind tyranny of the other sex. The ironic tone of the narrator is that of a modern feminist. Meanwhile, the beautiful tea things wielded at Lady Audley's hands, have a metaphorical meaning: She is seen as fragile as the tea china, but she is also a witch, who is brewing her evil spells on 'the sterner sex' who were eager to recognize women as weak.

## Conclusion

Tea is originally perceived as a feminine and polite drink, because it is non-intoxicating and even health-improving, which makes it a safe and suitable social drink when the sexes met. But in the trend for satire, tea was unexpectedly set up as a dramatic prop of scandalous cover to attack the sexual mores and corruption of the upper class. The bold connection of a polite drink with the dark unspeakable sexual bankruptcy, nevertheless gives tea a social texture that grows highly metaphorical. The sociable cup of tea will also have to witness the unending melodramas staged by the sexes, who take this gender-connecting occasion for self-expression. Congreve's Millamant in *The Way of The World*, is a 'feministic' forerunner in tea scenes; she manages to preserve her womanly autonomy over tea table by her wit. Tea scenes in Austen and Mrs Gaskell's are orthodox and faithful to life, either highlighting the feminine considerateness and susceptibility or the class consciousness in tea cups. Elizabeth Braddon presents a feministic turn. Lady Auderley's tea is a 'malicious' mockery at the shallowness of gender differentiation; the mimic depiction of the tea-making, the repeated use of words like "delicate", "fragile", points to the blindness of the artificial belief based merely on sex, and sets in contrast the violence that finally locked the same woman into a madhouse. Needless to say, these variations in tea scenes are to be seen not only as characteristic of the authors, but also occasioned by their times, which they consequently reflect .

Tea is class. The ritual of afternoon tea has been originally designed for the leisured and privileged classes. The etiquettes and manners this social activity involved transform tea into a coded language and a particular social expression that finally enlarge the gap between those classes and the others.

Inheriting these literary traditions, tea in late Victorian novels grows into a more multi-layered, more suggestive language, especially when the tea scene is employed to a new and enlarged scale of social observation. Take the works of two major writers as example, Henry James and Oscar Wilde, in *The Awkward Age*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest* respectively, not only turn tea into a coded language with bolder implications, but also use tea scenes as defining structures for their works. James, experimenting with his 'scenic method' in *The Awkward Age*, coincides with Wilde in the way that they both use tea scenes to thread up and sustain the development of the plot. Henry James also used tea as a metaphorical language for the Victorian taboo of sex. Wilde is no less a satirist; he staged the tea scenes that turned the Victorian morals upside down – in his character's words: "pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time ... would be hypocrisy' (445)

The traditional use of tea as the language of class difference is active in realist school. For example, lack of knowledge of tea manners and etiquette, is shown as an obstacle, for class-climbers in H G Wells' s realist novels. This trend gains strength in the following decades, but generally speaking, tea scenes in late Victorian literature feature a highly metaphorical and suggestive language for social criticism of Victorian sexual mores and attitudes. Eells's aforementioned book, *Proust's Cup of Tea: Homoeroticism and Victorian Culture*, appositely catches the smell in the late Victorian atmosphere, which is, in her case, epitomized by Oscar Wilde and his homoerotic writings.

In general, tea scene proves to be an oblique but extremely revealing literary device, because tea-drinking habits show existent rituals and social manners. It is easy for contemporary readers to reach the suggested meanings. In other words, the roots that tea had in social life and cultural tradition, which had helped it absorb so many incompatible meanings to its status as the polite drink, make tea scenes a perfectly communicative and economic literary device.

And this device develops in the pattern of waves. New meanings and usages are read into tea by each generation of writers as a result of their own contemplation of and in response to their times. This is what we conclude from the literary tradition of tea scenes examined in this article, and what we can expect from later generations. We read them in later generations: in E.M. Forster and Virginia Woolf, in Katherine Mansfield and Elizabeth Bowen, in Bernard Shaw, Somerset Maugham and Murial Spark. Even a recent novel by Colm Tolbin, in recreating the master of Henry James, employs tea scenes, unsurprisingly, to suggest the master's homosexuality.

Seen in this scale, tea scenes in late Victorian novels and plays, function as a watershed. They step forward to the forestage, and exhibit their kaleidoscopic versatility, which is buttressed by a literary tradition that had steadily come into being over centuries. Tea, as a particular literary language, constitutes a unique aspect of the British literature.

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