

TEACHING ABOUT TEA IN BRITISH FICTION

ИЗУЧЕНИЕ ЧАЯ В ЖАНРЕ БРИТАНСКОЙ ФАНТАСТИКИ

Tea arrived in London in the 1660s as part of a network of cultural changes. Tea immediately became an upper-class exotic luxury and, in some ways, it has maintained that high status. In British fiction of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the beverage called tea can be either an exotic upper-class immigrant or a domesticated, homely, comfortable English citizen. Its foreignness has largely been tamed and commodified. This is often how tea functions in British fiction of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: as a hard-won accessory of English domestic happiness, as the center of a meal presided over by the woman of the house. Fictional scenes involving tea as a beverage are generally household scenes of conflict involving domestic expectations. The conflict becomes apparent when one or more characters resist or pervert the ceremonial rituals of the event at which tea is served. For instance, the most famous tea scene in British literature is certainly the Mad Hatter's tea party in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* where

Alice is exasperated by the (male, multi-species) others' refusal to obey the traditions of the Victorian tea-table. More often, though, a fictional conflict at the tea table involves an Englishwoman confronting the values and traditions of her society.

By the nineteenth century tea had become a symbol of Englishness. How it got to be this way is an interesting story. Until about 1850, all of the tea that came to England came from China under severely regulated conditions, both in terms of China's export restrictions and the import monopoly held by one British company. Tea was thus viewed as a dangerous but attractive immigrant with a mysterious origin. Tea needed to be domesticated and naturalized. It needed to become English if it were properly to hold the title role in the English family's central domestic event: the sociable and sustaining meal or snack that bore its name.

Through its empire, Britain consumed the world, from the tea plantations of the East to the sugar plantations of the West Indies. One way this identity

of tea as English was achieved was the deliberate, rapid, and extensive development of tea plantations in British-controlled parts of India and Ceylon, so that tea production and delivery could be totally under British control. The other, more gradual, way that tea became English was cultural. By the nineteenth century tea drinking had spread through all levels of society. It replaced beer as the traditional breakfast drink for all classes. Tea was hailed as the national drink of a nation that prided itself on its sober and hard-working citizens. Even the way of drinking tea became quintessentially English. Unlike Chinese tea drinkers, English tea drinkers added milk and sugar to their tea, and they were not expert at handling hot beverages in thin porcelain cups. So even the shape of the teacup evolved to suit English needs. A handle was added, and a shallow saucer underneath propped the spoon used to stir in the sugar.

Considerations of class also shaped the way tea was consumed in Britain. One distinction is important to keep in mind when reading British fiction. In a British text, the word “tea” can refer either to the beverage alone or, very often, to an entire late-day meal at which tea is served. This meal’s significance must be read differently depending upon the social class of the participants. Low-quality tea (chopped, powdered, re-used, adulterated) was the beverage at the workers’ main evening meal called either “tea” or, if a meat dish was served in addition to bread, cheese, and vegetables, “meat tea.” High-quality tea (made from loose tea leaves) was the beverage at the wealthy-class “tea,” a hearty snack between the midday meal and the mid-evening meal. Rarely does a novelist comment on the dishes served at a tea: he or she would have assumed that contemporary British readers would “read” the situation correctly based on what had already been revealed about the social situation of the characters involved.

In the middle and upper classes, tea was viewed as a feminine beverage, made and poured by the hostess, often as a showcase for her beauty, grace, and wealth. Expensive silver and porcelain dishes and accessories were used to make and serve the tea. These “tea-things” included an urn or kettle to boil the water, a teapot where the loose tea leaves steeped, a pitcher for milk or cream, a sugar bowl, teacups, saucers, spoons, a strainer to keep loose tea leaves out of the cups, and a slop basin where the cold dregs could be dumped from a cup before a fresh serving of hot tea was poured. A lady’s making and serving of tea was regulated by customs and rituals

that everyone present was expected to follow. Julie E. Fromer, in her 2008 study *A Necessary Luxury: Tea in Victorian England*, highlights many episodes in Victorian novels like George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* when breaches of tea etiquette reveal problems between characters.

But is knowing about the significance of tea really important for the reader of British fiction? How common are references to tea, both beverage and meal, in British fiction? I used an online concordance (*The Victorian Literary Studies Archive Hyper-Concordance*) to track the number of times the word “tea” appears in various novels and I was surprised by how often it does appear. For instance, “tea” appears in Charles Dickens’s 1850 novel *David Copperfield* 93 times, in Jane Austen’s 1814 novel *Pride and Prejudice* 13 times, and in Arnold Bennett’s 1908 novel *The Old Wives’ Tale* 112 times. Not all of these mentions of tea are semiotically rich, but certainly many of them must be, especially when characters are interacting with one another over their teapots and cups of tea.

Let’s look at how tea functions in one well-known short story, Katherine Mansfield’s “A Cup of Tea.” Mansfield was born in New Zealand, but she spent her adult life in England, and this story is set in London in what would have been her present day, presumably 1922, the year of the story’s publication.

Rosemary is an idle, rich young wife, well dressed but not beautiful, who likes to collect pretty things and interesting people, so that she can show them off to her friends. She goes shopping at an expensive antique shop and almost buys a little enameled box with the image of a romantic couple. As she is leaving the shop, feeling lonely and sorry that she hadn’t bought the box, a young woman, obviously poor, cold and dripping wet from the winter rain, asks her for “the price of a cup of tea.” Rosemary impulsively orders the girl to come home with her for tea.

The girl is fainting from starvation when they arrive in Rosemary’s warm and luxurious bedroom, but Rosemary can hardly wait to be thrilled by the details of the girl’s life story, which she knows will be so different from her own privileged life. Rosemary’s maid brings tea for two, plus little sandwiches and bread and butter. This is the “tea” that is the upper-class snack, not the working-class “tea” that is the evening meal. Rosemary smokes a cigarette while the girl eats all of the food and drinks all of the tea.

Revived, the girl lies back in the armchair, and Rosemary is about to interrogate her when her husband Philip comes in. Philip is surprised to see that Rosemary has a guest, and he looks carefully at the girl, seeing her shabby clothes and boots. The girl reveals that her last name is Smith. Philip draws Rosemary away to another room and asks her what is going on. Rosemary tells him her vague plan to “collect” Miss Smith and transform her life, but when Philip says that he finds Miss Smith to be “astonishingly pretty,” Rosemary leaves him and gets the equivalent of \$200 from her desk. When she returns to Philip, she tells him that Miss Smith has left with a gift of money. She asks him if she can buy the little \$2000 box. When he says yes, she asks him if he thinks she is pretty. And the story ends.

So how does tea function semiotically in this story?

I think a proper English tea is the catalyst that lets Rosemary believe that she will succeed in capturing and domesticating the wild and exotic street girl. A proper English tea is itself a demonstration of the taming and re-inscribing of an exotic outsider—Chinese or Indian tea—into a useful domestic comfort. Through giving the girl tea, Rosemary hopes that she will be able to begin the process of changing her into a young woman who will be presentable as a kind of trophy to her upper-class artistic friends. Miss Smith seems to want to be domesticated through being given tea. Instead of begging for money in general, she specifically begs Rosemary for “the price of a cup of tea,” and Rosemary, who had just looked at a “plump tea-kettle” in the shop, has been thinking about how her own disappointment at not buying the little box will be lifted by “an extra-special tea.” So this mutual love of the comfort of tea after a tough day is the entrée to what Rosemary thinks will be a very satisfying adventure: transforming Miss Smith. What made Rosemary in need of tea was her decision not to buy a \$2000 trinket: and implicit in her desire for the box with the romantic couple on it is her subconscious knowledge that her own marriage is lacking in romance. Of course, what made Miss Smith in need of tea was her actual starvation on the streets of London in a cold winter rain.

In Mansfield’s story as in so many British texts, the tea scene is a location for domestic struggle and conflicting expectations. Offering tea to Miss Smith will, Rosemary thinks, give her the uplift of collecting a fascinating new trinket. She sees herself

as a fairy godmother who will make Miss Smith into a lucky Cinderella who will tell Rosemary all about her luckless previous life. But Miss Smith resists Rosemary’s intention. Unlike the imported tea that has become a docile and reliable accessory in an English household, Rosemary’s guest Miss Smith becomes less tractable and more threatening once she drinks Rosemary’s tea. Miss Smith wanted only a cup of tea. She did not want to be compromised into accepting the bourgeois worldview represented by Rosemary’s plying her with all the trappings of an upper-class tea in her luxurious boudoir.

Here is the scene of transformation, picking up with the girl protesting,

“No, I don’t want no brandy. I never drink brandy. It’s a cup of tea I want, madam.” And she burst into tears....

“I’ll look after you. Don’t cry any more. Don’t you see what a good thing it was that you met me? We’ll have tea and you’ll tell me everything. And I shall arrange something. I promise. Do stop crying. It’s so exhausting. Please!”

The other did stop just in time for Rosemary to get up before the tea came. She had the table placed between them. She plied the poor little creature with everything, all the sandwiches, all the bread and butter, and every time her cup was empty she filled it with tea, cream and sugar. People always said sugar was so nourishing. As for herself she didn’t eat; she smoked and looked away tactfully so that the other should not be shy.

And really the effect of that slight meal was marvelous. When the tea-table was carried away a new being, a light, frail creature with tangled hair, dark lips, deep, lighted eyes, lay back in the big chair in a kind of sweet languor, looking at the blaze. (589)

When Rosemary smokes a cigarette and allows Miss Smith to eat and drink alone, she is avoiding the conviviality and equality that come from sharing a meal, especially from sharing tea in the iconic manner of English friends and family. Rosemary even directs the maid to put the tea-table between them, as if to emphasize their separation. Their apparent silence during the meal is not a companionable silence. Rosemary seems merely to be waiting for her guest to revive sufficiently to tell her tale of woe: “Rosemary lit a fresh cigarette: it was time to begin. ‘And when did you have your last meal?’ she asked softly” (589).

The tea does transform Miss Smith, but not

into a grateful participant in Rosemary's plan of possessing her as an exotic but tamed object. After she eats the food and drinks the tea meant for both of them, Miss Smith does not open up to Rosemary. She does not express her gratitude. She does not tell Rosemary all the fascinating details of her poverty. Instead, as her hair dries and her color returns, she becomes mysterious, silent, distant, and even more different from Rosemary, who was described to us in the story's first sentence as "not beautiful."

Rosemary's jealousy over her husband's admiration for Miss Smith's "astonishing" beauty causes her to turn the girl out of the house with a gift of money one-tenth of the cost of the little box picturing the happy couple. Would the outcome of the story have been any different if Rosemary had eaten and drunk tea with her, if she had chatted sociably with her instead of prying into the details of her poverty? A desire for tea is what had brought the two women together in the first place. If wealthy Rosemary had stepped down from her position as benefactor and had actually communed with her impoverished guest in drinking their common national beverage, perhaps she would have been able truly to connect with her and both of them would have benefited. Rosemary has perverted the English tea-table by trying to use it to lure Miss Smith into captivity, instead of offering tea freely as an act of friendly hospitality.

Paul Manning's recent study *The Semiotics of Drink and Drinking* (Continuum, 2012) looks at how different world beverages mediate modern social life, particularly in post-Soviet Georgia. He argues that specific drinks like coffee or vodka function "as the semiotic medium for a genre of

sociability in a specific time and place" (phrase from the publisher's description of the book). Applying Manning's ideas to the beverage tea and to British fiction of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, readers can see that writers were consciously manipulating scenes of tea consumption to make larger points about characters' acquiescence to social norms.

Tea and the meal at which it is served are markers of Englishness because they represent (1) the successful, almost imperial, transformation of wild and foreign elements into tame and domesticated ones, (2) household contentment and traditional family values, with a warm and nourishing drink served by a contented housewife or prospective housewife, and (3) an emphasis on social stability, with reassuring, unvarying movements and conversation focused on the hostess's preparing and distributing tea to everyone's liking. A tea table like Rosemary's is a place where this ideology is challenged. Mansfield's story "A Cup of Tea" allows a reading of tea, itself a complex cultural artifact, as a location for yet another English fictional exploration of conflicting expectations involving class and gender.

Bibliography:

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