



introduction

Tea, a Necessary Luxury

Culture, Consumption, and Identity

ACCORDING TO A NINETEENTH-CENTURY HISTORY OF TEA, tea was such a fundamental part of everyday life that English tea drinkers often failed to notice its significance within their daily lives. G. G. Sigmond, in the opening pages of *Tea: Its Effects, Medicinal and Moral*, declares, “Man is so surrounded by objects calculated to arrest his attention, and to excite either his admiration or his curiosity, that he often overlooks the humble friend that ministers to his habitual comfort; and the familiarity he holds with it almost renders him incapable of appreciating its value.”¹ By the early nineteenth century, tea had become a commodity of necessity, forming a crucial part of daily patterns of consumption and domesticity. The habitual comfort of tea, according to Sigmond’s tea treatise, does not draw attention; it is quiet and familiar and thus goes unnoticed. Tea is represented as dependable, a frequent part of everyday life that forms a comfortable, secure basis for the rest of life’s responses, decisions, and actions. As Sigmond declares, the English tea drinker is “incapable of appreciating [tea’s] value” (1). What the typical tea drinker fails to recognize, Sigmond suggests, is the crucial role that tea plays in forming the foundation of everyday life.

Despite Sigmond’s attempts to rectify the humble status of tea in nineteenth-century English culture, tea has remained a

relatively unrecognized aspect of Victorian life. Just as Sigmond implies that the beverage's mundane role precludes the tea drinker from appreciating its importance, the continued significance of tea in twentieth-century British society seems to have prevented scholars from adequately analyzing its role in British culture and national identity. As Anthony Burgess has speculated, "Perhaps tea is so woven into the stomach linings of the British that they cannot view it in either a scholarly or an aesthetic manner. It is a fact of British life, like breathing."² While numerous books, from the eighteenth century through to today, detail the history of tea in England, they tend to dramatize legends and keep cultural analysis to a minimum. Many publications about tea have been sponsored by tea companies, and they popularize the intriguing history of tea without attempting to analyze that history or cultural context.³ A limited amount of research has been done on the significance of tea in eighteenth-century Britain, corresponding with recent scholarship on the rise of the consumer society in the late 1700s, but the central importance of tea in nineteenth-century British culture has gone largely unexplored.⁴ Cultural analyses of Victorian everyday life have proliferated in recent years, and literary scholars and historians have often noted the presence of tea within the mid-nineteenth-century domestic space. For the most part, however, Victorian scholars have relied on the iconographic power of tea to connote the domestic ideal without pausing to investigate the role of tea in Victorian fiction and culture.⁵

A passage from Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, first published in 1853, describes a typical "English tea" and suggests the complex negotiation of social identity that revolved around the tea table:

How pleasant it was in its air of perfect domestic comfort! How warm in its amber lamp-light and vermilion fire-flush! To render the picture perfect, tea stood ready on the table—an English tea, whereof the whole shining service glanced at me familiarly; from the solid silver urn, of antique pattern, and the massive

pot of the same metal, to the thin porcelain cups, dark with purple and gilding. I knew the very seed-cake of peculiar form, baked in a peculiar mould, which always had a place on the tea-table at Bretton. Graham liked it, and there it was as of yore—set before Graham's plate with the silver knife and fork beside it.⁶

Lucy Snowe characterizes the Brettons' tea as "perfect domestic comfort," representing all of the necessary elements of recognizably English domesticity. The room she describes is swathed in blue damask and muffled by carpeting, creating a warm, relaxing, quiet space removed from the bustle of the city outside. An amber lamp and "vermilion fire-flush" warm up the cool blue tones of the walls and draperies with red-gold tints and suggest the warmth of the domestic hearth. In a subtle play on words, this scene is rendered "picture perfect" by the neatly laid tea table, complete with silver urn, porcelain cups, and seedcake.⁷ The tea table is presented as a frozen tableau of Englishness, tempting Lucy with its familiar glance, solid traditions, high-quality equipage, and the young man for whom the entire scene has been prepared.

Brontë's passage illustrates the unique role of tea as an icon that mediates between various subject positions within the larger category of English national identity. The tea table offers shared rituals and invites connection across its surface, creating community by crossing boundaries between individuals. The familiarity that beckons to Lucy Snowe also speaks to the reader; the rituals of the tea table, shared by all who claim an English identity, create a sense of community that invites the reader to conceptually close the literary divide that separates him or her from the character and culture within the text. At the Brettons' tea table, the rituals of tea drinking similarly work to re-create the long-lost community that once united Lucy Snowe with the Bretton family, shrinking the psychological and ideological distance between the wealthy, successful English family and the poor, orphaned teacher, between the older generation represented by Mrs. Bretton and Lucy's relative youth, and between

the women who surround the table and Graham, the young man who returns home for tea. The common enjoyment of a cup of tea, a slice of cake, and the warmth of the domestic hearth bring all of these various individuals together for a shared moment at the tea table.

The community formed by tea drinking is, nevertheless, marked by the social categories that constitute English society. Class, gender, and national identity are all invoked in Lucy's description of "perfect domestic comfort." Adjectives suggesting security and stability reveal the Brettons' middle-class status; the table bears a "solid silver urn" and a "massive" silver teapot. An "English" tea, therefore, which presumes to represent all of English culture, depends on a specifically middle-class position; it necessitates a certain income level to purchase relatively expensive commodities, the social knowledge and manners to properly equip and set the tea table, and invisible—female—hands to perform the necessary domestic labor. The tea table thus mediated between men and women in Victorian culture and reaffirmed the ideological division of labor within the middle-class household. Tea similarly evokes the binary of labor and leisure. Obliquely referring to the work that went into the preparations for the meal, this passage explicitly portrays the tea table as an offering of leisure and refreshment to the man of the family upon his return from the outside, public, world of work. Occupying a liminal position between inside and outside, private and public, tea represents private repose and comfort to the family consuming it, while simultaneously suggesting the far reaches of the British Empire and beyond, through the very presence of the Asian commodity.

Tea was introduced to Britain in the 1650s, imported from China through Dutch merchants. The British East India Company (EIC) gradually began importing small amounts of tea along with the EIC's usual cargoes of China silks and textiles.⁸ Like sugar and other imported "luxury" foods, tea originally signified status and wealth in English society.⁹ But the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed a dramatic increase in the avail-

ability and popularity of tea; by the early nineteenth century, tea had become a prominent part of daily life throughout English society. In *Tea: Its Mystery and History*, Samuel Day reports that the first records of tea imports to England, in 1675, totaled 4,713 pounds. Fifty years later, in 1725, tea imports had grown to 2 million pounds per year; imports had increased to 25 million pounds per year by 1800 and to 187 million pounds per year by 1877. According to David Crole's history of tea, *Tea: A Text Book of Tea Planting and Manufacture*, published in 1897, "80,000,000 cups of tea are daily imbibed" in England, resulting in an average consumption of more than five and a half pounds of tea per person per year.¹⁰ Crole's statistic of the cups of tea consumed each day in England emphasizes the quotidian nature of the beverage; the cups of tea consumed per person per day resonate on an individual level, creating an image of millions of English men and women simultaneously drinking their cups of tea each day.

When tea was first imported to Britain in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, it was sold as a prepared liquid beverage at London coffeehouses, like coffee and chocolate. Thus, like these other beverages, tea was initially consumed in public places, marketed as an exotic product with multiple health benefits. Sources such as *The Female Spectator* and various medical treatises responded by debating the moral and medicinal qualities of tea and warning consumers about the dangers of drinking tea.¹¹ By the late eighteenth century, however, tea had become immensely popular as a beverage brewed and consumed within the private realm of the home, and the resonances of English domestic life were added to the originally foreign, exotic image of tea.¹² Historians have offered a few theories for tea's increased association with the domestic realm during the eighteenth century. Unlike coffee beans, which must be roasted, ground, and percolated to obtain a beverage, tea leaves were relatively easy to brew within the home. Tea leaves could also be steeped numerous times, producing progressively weaker but still drinkable infusions and thus reducing the cost

of each cup of tea. A gradual reduction of the import duties on tea throughout the eighteenth century brought the price of tea into the reach of more families across the economic spectrum.¹³

Against a backdrop of industrialization, urbanization, and the resulting changes in class structure in nineteenth-century Britain, the everyday habit of tea drinking acquires cultural and social significance that reflects larger Victorian struggles of self-definition. The nineteenth century saw increasing economic and social instability, as industrialization and imperialism created new opportunities for rising middle-class English men and women. Higher standards of living and cheaper mass-produced commodities and imported goods from the British Empire contributed to the development of a fragmented range of middle classes, diverse in occupation, religious affiliation, and political views but unified by their levels of income, spending power, and a shared consumer culture.¹⁴ In the face of shifting class categories and identities, new ways of identifying oneself and one's status arose, centering on practices of consumption.¹⁵ New identification categories and new hierarchies of status developed along lines stemming from consumption habits, creating moral guidelines based on what and when and how one consumed the commodities of English culture.¹⁶

Drinking tea was an evolving ritual in English culture, and representations of the tea table reflect that fluidity. Tea, as a hot restorative drink, could be and was consumed throughout the day (and night, as De Quincey attests),¹⁷ but the more ritualized aspects of what we call the "tea table" were most often found at breakfast and in the afternoon, at varying times between lunch and retiring to bed. Afternoon tea offered an opportunity for a light meal to fill the increasing gap between lunch and dinner—what historian Jamie Shalleck calls "low tea," popularized by Anna, Duchess of Bedford.¹⁸ Midcentury novels such as Anthony Trollope's *Palliser* series reveal the surprisingly late hours kept by members of Parliament and thus by fashionable homes in London; dinner was often served at midnight or later, and thus a late afternoon meal, anchored by tea, helped to tide one

over until the more formal dinner much later. In *Wuthering Heights*, tea functions as part of a large, substantial meal to bring all the people of the household together at one common time. In *North and South*, teatime occurs in the afternoon—Thornton has to leave work early to dress and attend tea at the Hales’—and it allows people who do not know each other well to become acquainted without the expense of a formal, seated dinner. In *Alice in Wonderland*, the Hatter explains that his watch stopped at six o’clock, suggesting a late afternoon teatime potentially preceding a later supper (since the food includes only bread and butter). Hester Vernon experiences endless afternoons filled with the scent of tea, while the narrator in *The Portrait of a Lady* states that teatime occurs between the hours of five and eight p.m., during the final hours of sunlight in the summer months in England.

In other literary representations, however, the most ritualized tea tables occur *after* characters have dined in the evening. In many novels, after characters have finished their dinner, the women “withdraw” into the drawing room (thus giving this room its name) while the men remain at the table to drink port and smoke cigars. Once the men have enjoyed enough of their masculine consumables, they rejoin the women in the drawing room for tea. Isabel Archer’s Thursday evenings, during which Pansy serves tea to her suitors, occur late in the evening and presumably after dinner, since Isabel and Pansy usually repair to bed as soon as their guests have gone home. In *Middlemarch* and *Orley Farm*, tea is specifically served after dinner. In these instances, the tea table offers an opportunity to bring men and women together again, reinforcing their shared domestic identities and values.

Everyday habits of consumption lend meaning to people’s lives in their familiarity, in the participation in tradition and ritual that carries forward both their own previous habits and those of the Englishmen and women around them. According to Fernand Braudel, historian and author of *The Structures of Everyday Life*, “Everyday life consists of the little things that one

hardly notices in time and space. . . . The everyday happening is repeated, and the more often it is repeated the more likely it is to become a generality or rather a structure. It pervades society at all levels, and characterises ways of being and behaving which are perpetuated through endless ages. . . . The ways people eat, dress, or lodge, at the different levels of society, are never a matter of indifference.”¹⁹ The repetition of a specific consumption pattern gives it meaning, providing shape and order to the days of one’s life and one’s place within the family, the community, the nation, the empire, and the world. Repeated daily activities thus contribute to constructions of identity from within, but these are based on social norms and ideals and occur within social spheres. Habits confirm one’s sense of self, one’s place within the relationships of a household and within a community, affirming one’s identity by linking discrete segments of time and creating a more continuous, fluid experience of the self and one’s physical environment. Each time a habit is repeated, an individual is able to confirm his or her sense of self, reminding himself or herself of previous moments, envisioning future events, and connecting past, present, and future through the repetition of small daily habits.

My definition of habit draws upon Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of *habitus*. According to Bourdieu, an individual’s embodied dispositions, which may or may not reside at the level of conscious thought, are what influence intentional behaviors and actions.²⁰ As “a product of history” that “produces individual and collective practices—more history,” *habitus* connects past, present, and future, incorporating the social conditions of the past and generating responses to future conditions based on past experiences (53). Serving and sharing tea within Victorian households follows formalized rules, forging ritualized behaviors out of daily habits. In the preface to *The Logic of Practice*, Bourdieu draws a useful distinction between *habitus* and ritual. He suggests that *habitus*, created by one’s social context, generates specific strategies for maintaining and forwarding one’s social position and accumulated capital (in its multiple forms: economic,

cultural, symbolic). These strategies are articulated in formalized, stylized rituals; Bourdieu defines a ritual as “a social strategy defined by its position in a system of strategies oriented towards maximizing of material and symbolic profit . . . taking on its meaning in a system of strategies generated by the habitus” (16). The tasks of the tea table, defining the roles of nourisher and consumer, mother and father, parent and child, wife and husband, represent formal behaviors that fit anthropological definitions of secular rituals, and analyzing these tasks as rituals further reveals their important social function in Victorian everyday life.²¹

The implications of the repeated, ongoing rituals of the tea table expand the concept of identity toward a dynamic negotiation of one’s roles within one’s family, community, and nation. If, as Sally F. Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff suggest in *Secular Ritual*, rituals offer insights into the ways in which people “think about social life,” then rituals inform individuals’ interactions with other people within their family and provide cultural scripts of larger patterns of approved English actions (4). Habits of drinking tea provide narratives of courtship, family pleasantries, visiting other women, male/female interactions, male patterns of creating domesticity within their home through their choice of wives, and wives’ responsibilities in terms of providing a warm, comforting, nourishing tea table at the center of their home. The term *narrative* implies action over time, incorporating the repeated, ongoing element of ritualized behavior and suggesting that each rendition of the ritual of tea drinking contributes in a slightly different way to the accumulated significance of tea within an individual’s everyday life. The rituals of tea drinking dramatize historical narratives of the origins of English tea drinking, and they provide a glimpse of the future, highlighting the imperial narrative of progress and providing a crucial sense of English history to authorize individual decisions and goals.

When we begin to look at the specific products that English consumers were purchasing, we begin to see the importance of

national identity in the social character ideals being formed and tested by consumption patterns within the home. During the mid-nineteenth century, many extremely popular commodities, essential to the construction of individual character and national identity, were being imported to England from the empire. Goods ranging from Indian cotton to Caribbean sugar, from Chinese tea to Japanned trays and fans, from Indian shawls to American tobacco were incorporated into the everyday habits of middle-class English consumers.²² As Catherine Hall and Sonya Rose argue, Britons' "everyday lives were infused with an imperial presence."²³ Importing and consuming goods from outside the borders of England created concern about definitions and boundaries, questions about what it meant to be English and how to remain English despite habits that depended on the production of commodities by other cultures and nations. In response, English consumers strengthened their self-image as English, articulating new boundaries—boundaries of morality, character, and respectability, of domesticity and gender identity—to help maintain national distinctions and individual characteristics.

In turning toward the habits of everyday life in middle-class Victorian English culture, I focus on the daily activities within the home, within the domestic space. The term *domestic* signals the clearly delineated gender roles within the family, and the comfort of the private sphere, as well as the location of England as the core, the domestic center of its empire. The nineteenth century represents an important period of domestication in the history of tea drinking in England, both in a local sense (as tea became an important icon of the home) and in a more global sense (as England struggled to gain economic and political control over the production and importation of tea). England's taste for tea grew within a culture of shifting public and private consumption patterns accompanying imperial expansion, an increasing influx of imported luxury commercial goods, and the industrial and economic revolutions' impact on English spending capacity.²⁴

The fluid nature of tea as a signifier in English culture suggests that the rituals of the tea table operate as liminal, or threshold, rituals, according to Victor Turner's anthropological model. According to Turner, liminal rituals poise people on the brink between various social positions—between childhood and adulthood, between layperson and clergy, between ordinary citizen and some kind of specialized social status. Rites of passage and other rituals that highlight such in-between states create temporarily marginal positions that disrupt the hierarchical power structure of society; people who usually occupy the lower rungs of the social system momentarily take on the power of those higher in rank, class, or prestige. While Turner's examples are drawn from religious rituals of maturity or investiture, his analysis implies a broader view of the role of liminal rituals in society.²⁵ He views society as dialectically cycling between two very different states—a hierarchical, power-inflected structured system that imposes order on individuals, and an unstructured, undefined state of connection between individuals, which he calls *communitas*. Liminal rituals temporarily suspend hierarchical structures and reverse systems of power, creating the opportunity for *communitas* to emerge.²⁶

The rituals of the tea table, occurring every day throughout nineteenth-century English homes, function in many ways as liminal (or threshold) rituals. In Turner's model, liminal rituals help to build community, or *communitas*, by temporarily revoking the structured elements of society and allowing for more-intimate connections to form between individuals. Nineteenth-century representations of tea highlight the role of the tea table in forging a unified English national identity out of disparate social groups, economic classes, and genders separated by ideologically distinct spheres of daily life. Tea appears on the cusp between multiple binaries in Victorian culture, forging a link between otherwise-opposing forces and simultaneously reinforcing the distinction between them: men/women, middle class/lower class, labor/leisure, necessity/luxury, England/Orient, home/empire, ideal/real. Tea mediates all of these contradictions within

Victorian culture, creating “*communitas*” in the ideal of a unified English national identity. The shared culture of tea drinking domesticates tensions between these categories and ideological positionings, bridging distinctions in ways that both forge connections and highlight the differences that mark those distinctions in the first place.

Tea, as a fluid constant in English culture, with its accompanying social rituals, was flexible enough to accommodate—and to mark—subtle differences in social status, to mediate these differences between individuals, and to serve as a shared cultural symbol between groups within the English nation. A commodity cultivated in the Orient crossed vast geographical distances to take its place on English tea tables, permeating physical boundaries of nation and body and thus creating anxieties about cultural and physiological pollution. Crossing colonial divides, tea sharpened the distinction between producer and consumer, affirming imperial practices and offering an ideological nexus of questions concerning labor and leisure within the home, within the nation, and within the empire.

The authors of Victorian histories of tea award tea with the title of the “national beverage,” celebrating tea’s unique ability to forge a national culture and identity through the habit of drinking tea.²⁷ At the same time, however, the details of the rituals of tea drinking signal differences in class status, gender, and generation, reinscribing the boundaries temporarily obscured by the universal taste for tea and highlighting the underlying moral differences that supported class structure. Tea crossed class lines, appearing at the humblest suppers and gracing the table of Queen Victoria, creating a universal English habit. People from different socioeconomic classes joined an imagined community of like-minded tea drinkers each time they sat down to a hot cup of tea, according to Victorian tea histories, but at the same time, the details of tea preparation and consumption marked class status and concomitant moral position within the culture. In a similar way, tea drinking elided gendered boundaries by providing a unique opportunity to share comestibles and conversation.

Men and women met at the tea table, temporarily crossing ideological borders to form friendships, carry out courtships, and reaffirm marital bonds. The rituals of the tea table, however, insist on gender distinctions, and they highlight a woman's privileged role in nourishing her family and her nation.

Women's roles at the tea table—proffering a soothing, warming drink that represented English identity—sustained Britain in all of its endeavors, including the enlargement of the empire to ensure continued supplies of the tea that symbolized the process of nourishment and imperial expansion. Within the ideal of the tea table, women nourished their family, providing physical and moral sustenance for individual family members and for all of Britain. Tea histories, advertisements for tea, and Victorian novels agree on the fundamental role of the tea table in representing Englishness and the gendered activities that contributed to the domestic ideal. Performing household tasks constructs a sense of identity for each member of the household and signals that identity to others, both within the home and within the larger community.²⁸ The roles that men and women enacted at private tea tables echoed their larger roles within the family and within English society.

The gendered activities of the tea table, of serving and drinking tea, functioned within an unbreakable cycle of private moments of English domesticity reinforcing and mutually constituting the domesticity of England as a nation. Gender and class are intertwined in the creation of the domestic ideal, which depended on financial spending power, a certain standard of living, and the gendered labor of the nuclear family.²⁹ In Sarah Ellis's terms, domesticity provides a safe, private haven from the chaos of the outer world.³⁰ As Ellis explains, the wives and women of England constructed the domestic ideal in their own individual homes, offering a peaceful refuge for their husbands and fathers. These men imbibed the moral influences of domesticity and femininity at home and reentered the public, commercial, political world refreshed and renewed, ready to impart their newly moral outlook through their masculine tasks. Women's individual roles

as domestic angels thus resonated throughout English culture. As John Ruskin elaborates in “Of Queens’ Gardens,” women worked toward ordering and beautifying the home, creating a moral environment for the education of children and contributing to a moral nation.³¹

The portrait of Englishness offered by nineteenth-century representations of tea depicts interconnected threads of identity, including class relations, gender dynamics, the creation and sustenance of the family, and a sense of nation. Tea drinking temporarily united all of these categories within the space of the home, offering a unique ritual that crystallized multiple identities into a single vision of Englishness. But as Judy Giles and Tim Middleton suggest, such unified visions of Englishness tended to favor particularly powerful groups within the larger community.³² In Victorian culture, the middle class exemplified Giles and Middleton’s “particular social group” with the potential to define English national identity in their own terms.³³ My analysis of tea in Victorian culture and fiction suggests that the middle-class values of consumerism—appreciating commodities within the bounds of moderation and thrift—came to represent the nation as a whole.

Encapsulating a middle-class approach to moderated consumption, Victorian tea histories invoke the unique status of tea as a liminal icon by referring to tea as a “necessary luxury.” Tea thus straddles the ideological divide between necessity and indulgence, between frugality and excess, and between nourishment and pleasure. As an exotic commodity imported from afar and originally rare, difficult to acquire, and fiscally prohibitive for most individuals, tea initially represented a luxury item. During the eighteenth century, the price of tea dropped dramatically, taxes on tea were reduced throughout the century, and imports of tea to Great Britain increased steadily. By the nineteenth century, tea had become popular in all social circles, economic classes, and regions of the country and, according to Victorian tea historians such as Samuel Day and Arthur K. Reade, had become necessary to the English diet, culture, and nation. Dub-

bing tea a “necessary luxury,” these authors emphasize the singular place of tea within Victorian ideology; tea epitomized the concept of middle-class moderation by occupying a position between necessity and luxury, between bodily needs and psychological benefits, between the realities of a limited budget and the tropes of consumer culture. Poised on the boundary that separated the abnegation or the neglectfulness of the working classes and the wanton, indiscriminate spending of the aristocracy, the middle classes found in tea an icon of moderation—the enjoyment of consumer goods tempered by the knowledge that such goods were literally, physically, and culturally necessary to their everyday lives.

Explanations of culture necessitate an exploration of the significance of naming the culture, the nation, and the people of the United Kingdom of Great Britain. The slippage between “English” and “British” highlights the tension between the simultaneous inclusive/exclusive function of tea drinking in nineteenth-century literature. Nevertheless, I have attempted to draw a distinction between the terms “English” and “British.” I have chosen the term “British” to refer to the institutions and actions of people from Great Britain in their functions outside of the nation itself. This term takes all of the subgroups within Great Britain into account, including people from England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland (during the nineteenth century), as well as the different socioeconomic classes that made up nineteenth-century British society. As a signifier, “British” necessarily represents a heterogeneous mix of peoples and subcultures, both within the island nation and outside of its geographical borders. Nineteenth-century tea histories tend to use the term “Great Britain” when specifically referring to the relationship between their own country and its empire; this term signals the political, economic, and imperial presence of the nation within a global context. When discussing tea drinking within their own culture, however, nineteenth-century tea historians almost invariably define their national identity as “English.” Similarly, most nineteenth-century novelists identify their characters as

Englishmen and Englishwomen, rather than British men and women. Even the Scottish-born Margaret Oliphant explores the implications of a specifically “English” identity in her novel *Hester*, published in 1871 and discussed in further detail in chapter 6. Following the tendencies of novels and histories of tea, I have consciously chosen this more limited, exclusionary term to indicate the cultural work performed by the rituals and representations of tea drinking in nineteenth-century texts. The ideal domestic setting evoked by many depictions of the tea table reflects a particularly insular, enclosed, “English” sense of boundaries between self and other, between inside and outside, private and public, middle class and other, less culturally and economically privileged classes.³⁴

Two related, but subtly different, idealized images of the tea table illustrate the distinction I am drawing between the monikers “English” and “British.” An “English” tea, which recurs often throughout the following chapters, necessitates an enclosed setting, complete with heavy fabric curtains or shutters covering closed windows and creating multiple layers of protection between interior and exterior spaces. A shining silver urn, porcelain cups, and delicate finger foods rest on a draped tea table, and a fire warms the hearth and casts a ruddy glow over the scene. A nuclear family consisting of mother, father, and children take their places around the table and perform their respective tasks. The entire image resonates with the qualities of enclosure, exclusivity, and security. My use of the term “British,” by contrast, can be illustrated by taking the same tea table, complete with tea urn and porcelain cups, and placing it under the hot sun of an Indian tea plantation. Shaded by a canopy and fanned by young Indian boys, the same family partakes of the delicacies on the table, but the setting connotes a different sense of self and one’s relationship to the world. The two senses of identity—English and British—are mutually dependent. To be British conveys a stalwart confidence in one’s own power, in the face of different cultures and peoples, based on the might of the nation to which one belongs. The supreme inner strength of British-

ness rests on a foundation of the safe, enclosed, domestic spaces that exemplify English national identity. At the same time, the comfortable security of the English tea table—an assurance of the protected nature of the domestic space—depends on the knowledge that the British Empire is ever-expanding and unstoppable and that it will continue to provide the necessary luxuries that grace every English tea table.

Analyzing novels, tea histories, and advertisements, this study establishes the cultural context of tea in Victorian England. My exploration of the representations of tea drinking in fiction, history, and advertising suggests that diverse texts worked together to create a sense of self and society and to establish the role of tea in helping to shape that society. Written representations of the tea table clearly reflect contemporary and historical trends, but they also contribute to the continued resonance of these rituals within the culture. Tea histories quote from poetry and scientific treatises, and the images they depict influenced advertisements and further histories of tea in English culture.³⁵ Small, specific details from fictional passages—such as a tea urn, a woman’s slender fingers preparing tea, male characters’ participation in the rituals of the tea table, and the economic and moral status of tea in Victorian culture—gain in significance and meaning when placed beside the rich context of tea advertisements and historical accounts of tea drinking in England. The convergence of all of these texts, genres, and representations of tea emphasizes the role of tea as a necessary luxury in Victorian culture.

This study explores representations of tea in both fiction and nonfiction texts, aiming to place fictional scenes of characters serving and drinking tea against a larger backdrop of depictions of tea in nineteenth-century English everyday life—the “ephemera” that surround daily experiences negotiating the world of consumer goods. Representations of tea in English culture carry the resonances of a unique moment of creating an ideal community that crosses multiple boundaries of identity, fusing complex categories of self into a single moment of *communitas*.

Tea mediates the contradictions inherent within the project of constructing a unified English national identity, negotiating between the diversities of gender and class, and merging differences into a single social community. Tea elides the binaries that define capitalism: production and consumption, labor and leisure, masculine and feminine, necessity and luxury. Within the context of imperialism, tea bridges the gap between colony and metropole and between an exotic product of the empire and the domestic consumer in the heart of England.

Nevertheless, generic boundaries—boundaries between fictional and nonfictional representations—are, to some extent, maintained. Tea cannot completely blur the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction. Nonfiction sources—tea histories, advertisements, and periodical articles—tend to portray tea drinking as a ritual that successfully elides boundaries between identity categories and does, in fact, create shared moments of Englishness. These nonfiction sources advise, exhort, instruct, and analyze the ideal vision of tea's ability to temporarily erase certain boundaries and to create a shared community of English tea drinkers. Nonfiction sources suggest that if English tea drinkers will shop wisely for the "best and cheapest" tea, and if that tea is prepared correctly by middle-class women who earnestly undertake to nourish their families and their nation with their own hands, then tea can in fact produce ideal English domesticity. In such a context, tea crosses the boundaries of class and gender to bring people together in a moment of shared values—values that, at the same time, indicate a specific vision of Englishness clearly influenced by middle-class domestic ideology. According to histories and advertisements for tea, drinking tea can unite the diverse peoples of England.

Against this larger cultural depiction of tea's creating shared ideals of community, I place my reading of nine nineteenth-century British novels, suggesting that fictional representations of tea drinking offer a more complex portrait of the role played by tea within English culture. Scenes of tea in novels suggest a wider spectrum for the possible outcomes of drinking tea together. For

some characters, including Margaret Hale in *North and South* and Madeline Stavelly in *Orley Farm*, the rituals of serving and drinking tea do open up liminal spaces, bringing men and women, working class and middle class, together. Played out in the fictional lives of characters such as Heathcliff, Alice in *Wonderland*, Rosamond Vincy, and Jude Fawley, however, tea drinking does not always lead to such ideal moments of community and connection. While nonfiction sources encourage readers to view tea drinking as a method of inserting a moment of ideal connection into everyday lives, fictional scenes of tea drinking suggest that the classed and gendered moments of preparing, serving, and consuming tea remain more complicated and embroiled in personal perspectives and potential misinterpretations.

Within Victorian novels, the production and presentation of class status often revolve around the consumption habits of the men and women who inhabit their social worlds. As historians have noted, class terminology in Victorian England often merged with moral classifications, rendering class divisions markers of moral character as well as economic position.³⁶ But English men and women's frequent social movement, rising and falling economically throughout the social order, created tangled questions about the link between socioeconomic class and moral character. With new families rising into the middle class and moving throughout the social structure, discerning between good and evil, moral and immoral, respectably middle class and merely wealthy with poor taste and no inner morality becomes a challenge fraught with anxiety. In these novels, the outer symbols of wealth and status within the community no longer serve as discernable signs of a character's inner qualities. Class position has become confused, more closely allied with wealth rather than with the intangible characteristics that define a gentleman or a lady. Gauging characters on the basis of their consumer spending power or even the size of their house or estate no longer produces predictable results.

Instead, Victorian novels suggest that within a world of mutable class status and indeterminable signs of moral character,

the day-to-day cultural habits of consumption provide the only reliable clues to social identity and inner morality. Many novels outline the relative social positions of characters who hover around the boundaries of the middle class, and their consumption practices indicate their relative position within the social world of the novel as well as within the moral compass of the narrators' judgments. A character's consumption habits reveal his or her inner moral status, these authors suggest, emphasizing flaws or virtues obscured by the outer symbols of wealth and position. Class status is therefore transformed from a fixed, static position within a defined social structure to a flexible, mutable social relationship that must be repeatedly rehearsed, literally "practiced" every day, with every meal and every cup of tea consumed. Class not only represents a flexible relationship across space and personalities but also suggests that identity is in flux through time and must be continually renewed through the practices of everyday life.

Among the detailed consumption practices that signal character and social status, the rituals of the tea table assert the clearest signals of a character's inner qualities. Tea functions as a moral arbiter—an arbiter of taste and middle-class respectability—aiding in determining characters' class status and moral position and revealing how these two judgments are inextricably connected in Victorian ideology. The tea ritual thus becomes crucial in exhibiting characters' inner morality and their familial bonds, and as such, the participation in this ritual by both men and women is essential, contributing to the reproduction of their middle-class status.

The everyday repetition of consumption habits in the domestic setting becomes a crucial ritual of establishing and reaffirming social identity and moral character. The domestic sphere, with its powerfully comforting, supportive rituals of eating and drinking, represents a place not simply of moral refuge but of moral construction, the foundation and scaffolding of the continued renewal of class, gender, and national identity.

As a beverage—as a choice of a liquid to drink in Victorian England—tea is ubiquitous and therefore could be viewed as

relatively meaningless, like eating bread or drinking water. Having a cup of tea could be viewed as a simple necessity of life that passes unnoticed and unconsidered and thus, according to some views, as not worth exploring further. But necessary articles of life, such as bread and water, are rendered complex and meaningful when considered in a larger cultural context. Even such simple choices as what to drink when one is physically in need of slaking one's thirst carry cultural weight and meaning. Water in nineteenth-century England bore multiple challenging and potentially threatening questions regarding hygiene, engineering, the responsibility of the state toward the health of its constituents, and temperance, as well as socioeconomic class.³⁷ Bread, which seems relatively basic in terms of serving the human need of satisfying hunger, has been the focus of cultural studies works such as Piero Camporesi's *Bread of Dreams*. Tea thus becomes meaningful because it is consumed every day, around the nation; it becomes meaningful because "it's just a cuppa."

Even a single cup of tea consumed in private, according to the novels I have focused on here, carries cultural resonances that situate and articulate a character's identity to himself or herself, to the author, and to the reader. No character in a novel is ever truly alone, of course, since the reader is an ever-present witness to ostensibly private scenes. These scenes signal important psychological information to the reader, and each cup of tea contributes to the larger picture of character being drawn throughout the novel. A quietly consumed cup of tea in solitude opens up a mental space for an individual, inviting reflection and conjuring a connection to the social ideals that tea represents: comfort, hominess, family, hospitality, spiritual nourishment, connection to others and to the past—*communitas*.

The cultural concept of tea can be interpreted as a continuum, with a simple cup of tea consumed when one is alone at one end, a relatively casual family gathering for breakfast in the center, and a more socially implicative, formal afternoon or evening tea with both family members and invited guests at the opposite end. No cup of tea is immune to social and cultural implications,

but some events are more ritualistic and charged with meaning for the characters involved. For the most part, the novels I address focus on scenes of the tea table—a scene involving more than one person, with the serving of tea operating as a central moment in the scene. Gathering for tea functions as a marker of time, as a meal to break up the day, as an opportunity to socialize, and as a moment of intimacy and connection between characters. These primarily social functions become so tightly intertwined with the icon of tea that even on the few occasions when characters consume tea in solitude, the moment is described in largely social terms and has an impact on characters' social personas within the novel.

The choice of what beverage to drink in Victorian novels includes, among codes of socioeconomic class and national identity, highly gendered symbolic meanings. Men connect with other men over other substances, including tobacco (in *Middlemarch*), coffee (in *David Copperfield*), alcohol (in *Jude the Obscure*), or intellectual debate (in *Middlemarch* and *Jude*). When men seek a hot beverage to restore them emotionally and physically, they usually choose coffee. Women, in contrast, select tea as a restorative even when they are alone. When men and women assemble to share a moment or a meal together, they all drink tea. Tea, therefore, is associated with women; tea is the drink that women choose when alone, and tea functions as a beverage that can cross gender lines to bring men into the domestic space of the home. Tea is ranged with more-feminine, private, domestic connotations, and it lubricates men's transitions into the domestic space of the home.

Victorian novels suggest that tea (especially but not exclusively the rituals of the tea table) enables, allows, and enhances connection between characters. The consumption of tea establishes expectations of connection and allows characters to interact in ways that would be more strained or awkward, or even impossible, without tea. Tea is expected to create connection, to signal hospitality, warmth, and friendship, to break down barriers, and to temporarily elide boundaries of gender, class,

profession, and family. Tea is consistently associated with an ideal: an ideal moment of hospitality, community, nourishment, and comfort, and an ideal vision of femininity to uphold all of those elements of home. As Victorian novels depict, however, this vision of the ideal comforts of home continually eludes the characters who attempt to enact it at their tea tables. Nevertheless, the rituals of serving and consuming tea offer characters opportunities, every day, to rehearse this ideal moment of Englishness.

In an effort to articulate the nexus of identity categories within concepts of the “domestic,” I have selected nonfiction sources that particularly address the arenas of national identity, class, and gender and fall into three generic categories. Single-sheet advertisements from grocers, tea dealers, and importing firms offer glimpses into circulating ideas about tea, gender, class, domesticity, and English identity. Rather than offering the reader a proliferation of images, I have chosen to focus on a limited number of specific advertisements, and I read and interpret these visual and verbal constructions with the same careful attention to detail, language, and nuance as I apply to the novels that follow. I have concentrated on advertisements that highlight the portrayal of tea as a liminal commodity—a commodity on the boundaries of identity. The advertisements I analyze in the chapters that follow offer fascinatingly intertwined ideological messages of gender, class, empire, and nation.³⁸

I have also focused on a slightly peculiar genre that blurs the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, advertisement and travelogue, personal account and scientific treatise—the book-length tea history. Appearing throughout the nineteenth century and often explicitly funded by various portions of the changing tea industry (thus resembling the nineteenth-century equivalent of an infomercial), tea histories formed an ongoing, intertextual record of the role of tea in English culture. Although some tea histories focus on the technological or the financial impact of the burgeoning tea industry, I have primarily relied on three particular tea histories that emphasize the cultural significance of tea in England: G. G. Sigmond’s *Tea: Its Effects*,

Medicinal and Moral (1839), Samuel Day's *Tea: Its Mystery and History* (1878), and Arthur K. Reade's *Tea and Tea Drinking* (1884). When Sigmond's text was published, the East India Company had recently lost its China monopoly. Sigmond's text honors the "recent discovery in British India of the Tea Plant" (vii) and celebrates British ingenuity in securing sources of tea for the British population. Samuel Phillips Day, writing forty years later, suggests that more-recent technological innovations provided similar assurances of quality and safety for tea imported from China.³⁹ Day's history emphasizes changes in tea manufacturing, as well as the shifts in the balance of power between the East India Company and smaller private tea-importing firms. Arthur K. Reade's *Tea and Tea Drinking*, published almost half a century after Sigmond's text, builds on Sigmond's earlier national pride, and Reade quotes extensively from Sigmond's *Tea: Its Effects, Medicinal and Moral*. Reade's text celebrates Indian tea production and the British Indian Empire, reflecting the political and agricultural advances that Britain had accomplished in India in the intervening forty-five years. Reade's emphasis on the salutary power of tea draws from the previous decades of temperance reform and the importance of tea as a proposed alternative to alcohol, allegedly forming the basis of the word *teetotaler* or, as it occasionally appears, *teatotaler*.

I also include several articles from periodicals such as the *Westminster Review*; *Chambers's Journal of Popular Literature, Science, and Arts*; *All the Year Round*; and *Temple Bar*. These articles range from paeans to the "social influence of tea" to analyses of the financial impact of tea on the empire, and from romantic details of the manufacture of tea in China to exhortations to support British efforts to produce tea in India. Together, these sources provide a cultural overview of tea drinking in nineteenth-century England and the technological and cultural changes occurring during this period.

Structurally, the image of concentric rings informs my approach to the different arenas of identity impinged upon by tea. I begin with the concept of national identity, specifically a

national identity forged with and against the increasingly global world of the nineteenth century. This category encompasses the broadest group of people, of all classes, both men and women, who identify themselves as English. From there, I move down a level to the category of class, exploring the ways in which tea drinking is inflected by class in advertisements, articles, tea histories, and novels and focusing on the defining middle-class characteristics of the idealized English tea table. Within this portrait of middle-class Englishness, however, there remains a third level of identity, which neatly bifurcates those participating into two parties: men and women. Thus, I then move on to discuss the interplay between gender identity and the rituals of the tea table. Finally, I turn to the ways in which the role of tea in mediating domestic identity shifted toward the end of the nineteenth century, reflecting broader questions of class and gender that were emerging in *fin-de-siècle* England.