

The Cultural Values of Tea in Virginia Woolf's *The Years*

MA Xiao-li

School of International Studies,
Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, China

WANG Ya-xuan

Carlson School of Management,
University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, U.S. A.

The paper probes into the connotations of tea in Virginia Woolf's *The Years*, showing historical changes of the relationship between women and tea. On the basis of the female characters' attitude and their understanding of tea, the tea values shed light on the culturally feminine roles, identity, social identity changes and family position in the Victorian Era and the New Era.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, *The Years*, tea culture, women

Introduction

The Years was the last novel Virginia Woolf saw to be published, being very expansive. It traces the fifty years of British and the middle-class Pargiters' history from 1880 to the mid-1930s, interweaving everyday lives of characters into the sharp social changes of Britain and revealing conflicts, ambivalence, changes and law of reality and life. The emotions or thoughts of characters are much reflected by surrounding things and details in everyday life. It is rich in historical and cultural allusions. Tea plays a key role in the cultural values in *The Years*. Although she once fondly accused Henry James "of giving his characters too much tea" (ZHAN, 2005, p. 129), Woolf "uses the recurring symbols of tea and china to render impossible any belief in the unified, undifferentiated white English subject" (Urmila, 2004, p. 69). Moreover, the word "tea" appears more than forty times in *The Years*, which reflects Woolf's preference for tea and its relationship with women, especially the female characters' emotional changes and attitude toward tea.

Connotations of Tea

"In the basements of the long avenues of the residential quarters servant girls in cap and apron prepared tea" (Woolf, 1965, p. 4). In the very beginning of *The Years*, Virginia Woolf presents her readers with a panoramic view of the British Empire, subtly introducing the background of this novel. It is the most flourishing time of Britain. Well-dressed gentlemen are talking about commercial gain from marine trade; elegant ladies are busy shopping fancy clothes in the West End. When it's afternoon, everyone stops their business for tea. Back in the Victorian era, tea seems to be an essential part of life, an issue hard to ignore and a fashion pleased to follow. It is not only a custom for British people, but also a deep-rooted culture covering numerous aspects of life. The English afternoon tea culture has created a system of its own; luxurious tea cloth and elegant tea-table manner are the epitome of the British Empire (MA, 2010, p. 56).

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MA Xiao-li, Associate professor, School of International Studies, Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, China.

WANG Ya-xuan, Carlson School of Management, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, U.S. A..

In *The Years*, “everyday life carries historical meanings” (Davis, 2014, p. 8). There are no narratives directly showing what’s happening or what happened in the society. Instead, people have to read between the lines, looking deeper to the details for an answer. The image of tea has its historical role in this novel for sure. Tea is a symbol of the Victorian era, witnessing its ups and downs.

In the first two chapters, there are a number of descriptions on tea scenes. The ritual of afternoon tea is literally ubiquitous, from upper class to working class families. Characters in the novel strictly observe this custom as a force of habit, no matter they really enjoy drinking tea or not. The Pargiters, a typical middle-class family of England, is an obedient follower of the afternoon tea ritual. “The kettle was an old-fashioned brass kettle, chased with a design of roses that was almost obliterated” (Woolf, 1965, p. 10). The words “old-fashioned” and “obliterated” indicate the length of time the Pargiters have used the kettle and thus, the ingrained tradition of drinking tea. Moreover, the flame is so feeble that “Milly took a hairpin from her head and began to fray the wick into separate strands so as to increase the size of the flame” (Woolf, 1965, p. 10), even if her attempt has no use. “It still kept up its faint melancholy singing as the little flame flickered under the swinging bowl of brass” (Woolf, 1965, p. 11). All the evidence points out that the kettle is too old to be efficient enough. When the water is finally boiling, family members come together around the table for tea, and even little Rose, the youngest child in the family, knows that she must stop playing in the outside and be punctual for the tea ritual. The Pargiters had their tea quietly, treating it like a serious and sacred ceremony. Abel Pargiter, the host of the family, “always sipped a little from the huge old cup that had been his father’s” (Woolf, 1965, p. 12), although he doesn’t like tea at all. He won’t leave his chair unless he finishes the tea. To him, afternoon tea involves more than just a few sipping. It represents the social norms that he believes as impregnable and impeccable. When he observes the tea ritual, he actually shows his respect towards Victorian tradition, etiquette, culture... everything that constitutes the glorious Victorian era.

As the Victorian era declines in the novel, the images of tea appear much less than before. Instead of detailed descriptions of tea scenes, there are mainly fragmented depictions of tea and memories about tea, which implies the change of social values. With the old times fading away, people no longer worship tea ritual that much. More importantly, they begin to question or even refuse to observe the social norms which they had to accept. The second tea scene of the Pargiters in the novel, which happens in the chapter of 1908, presents a very different picture, compared to the one in the first tea scene in the opening chapter. It reflects different family conditions and social backgrounds over twenty-eight years. Abel Pargiter who used to be a majestic-looking tough guy becomes terribly old and dull. “He looked lethargic, and rather gloomy” (Woolf, 1965, p. 150). “He had grown inert and ponderous after his stroke; there were red veins in his nose and in his cheeks” (Woolf, 1965, p. 150). Since most of his children are married and have family of their own, only Eleanor lives in the mansion with him. When Martin comes to visit them, he is glad to see “nothing has changed” (Woolf, 1965, p. 149). The arrangement of furniture and decorations in the mansion may remain the same way so that Martin has the feeling that the old times are coming back at the first sight. But indeed, everything has changed. He can’t find the flower in the grass in his mother’s picture any longer—there is only dirty brown paint. His sister is gradually losing her bright color, and he notices that “her hair had a tuft of grey in it” (Woolf, 1965, p. 150). And she starts reading studies of history and religion, in which woman is not expected to be interested. Also, there is no formal tea ceremony in this family anymore. Gone are the days when family members follow the ritual strictly and gather together for tea at time. When Eleanor asks Rose whether she would like some tea, Rose directly refuses her invitation. “No. It’s a bath I want” (Woolf, 1965, p.

156). She is the woman of new time, an advocate of revolution and a pioneer of feminism. Of course, she wouldn't let herself be constrained by social norms like having afternoon tea. She is open to new social values and doesn't consider tea ritual important and sacred now. She's not the little girl who always comes to the tea-table at time any longer. And Martin, who has always hated the kettle, bluntly expresses his deep detest of it. "Damn that kettle" (Woolf, 1965, p. 152). In the past, even though he finds the kettle annoying, he is afraid to speak out his inner thoughts about it because he has respect for his family habit, the afternoon tea ritual, and for sure, the Victorian tradition.

Tea ritual is gradually stepping down from the stage of history, along with other social values and norms in the Victorian era, especially the traditional feminine role.

Tea and women are always highly related. At first, it is Anna Maria Russell, Duchess of Bedford, who initiated the fashion of drinking tea in the afternoon. After her invention, the other classy ladies followed the trend and observed the custom. Tea ceremony is regarded as a pleasant and elegant event which perfectly shows the polite manner and graceful behavior of ladies. In the Victorian era, women who attend the afternoon tea party shall wear lace dresses, taste tea and snacks slowly, speak in a soft voice and have distinguished manner (MA, 2010, p. 64). However, while tea-table manner is elegant and graceful, it can be regarded as a ritual that satisfies man's imagination of woman. Woolf in her essay "A Sketch of the Past" calls the tea-table manner "surface manner" (Woolf, 1976, p. 150). She describes the tea-table manner as feminine and hostess-like, "sidelong", polite, and expressly unthreatening to men, and thus it is a signal of its female user's weakness (Shirkhani, 2011, p. 65). The features of woman revealed through tea ceremony exactly cater to man's desire. Man would naturally associate tea with some traditional gorgeous women who have an air of elegance and obedience. As Abel Pargiter watches Eugénie sipping cold tea, "some memory of the East came back to him; so women sat in hot countries in their doorways in the sun" (Woolf, 1965, p. 119). The precious herb of the Orient not only conjures up his memory of India but also reminds him of women there. Also, Martin finds himself obsessed with the lady of fashion at Ebury Street and the exquisite teapot by her side at the same time. The beauty of the lady and the pot bring out the best in each other. "He stood at the window for a moment admiring a lady of fashion in a charming hat who was looking at a pot in the curiosity shop opposite" (Woolf, 1965, p. 225). "The sloping symmetrical body, the depth of blue, the little cracks in the glaze pleased him. And the lady looking at the pot was also charming" (Woolf, 1965, p. 225).

Furthermore, as regards to the underlying relation between tea and woman, making tea can be seen as an epitome of daily life for most of women in the Victorian era. Ever since they're young, women should learn how to serve tea properly and remember the etiquettes. While men were responsible of business in the public sphere, women were expected to be in charge of everything in the domestic sphere—their life was centered around the house, and they were devoted to the family. In the patriarchal family of the Victorian era, the ideal woman shall be like an "Angel in the House". "She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily" (Woolf, 1965, p. 151). Tea, as one of trivial things to handle, was their long-held company in lonely days, and at the same time, the constraint which kept them from pursuing what they really long for. Almost every feminine character's first appearance in the novel is accompanied with tea. Milly and Delia wait for the water to boil at tea time; Eugénie sips half cup of tea as usual while talking to Abel; Mrs. C holds her tea cup in her hand in the nursery room... And when women gain more freedom of their own and are not constrained in the traditional feminine role any more, they show signs of abandoning "tea" in the novel. In the chapter of 1911 and 1914,

Eleanor and Kitty successively leave their home and have a vacation on the countryside, getting rid of traditional feminine duties and enjoying their freedom. On the train heading to their destinations, they both have a glimpse of the tea urn on the train. "The tea urn slid past" (Woolf, 1965, p. 193), "Then she saw the tea urn sliding past" (Woolf, 1965, p. 269). The tea urn actually represents a reminder of their old life in which they are fettered by social values and norms such as afternoon tea ritual. "Sliding past" subtly implies that they are saying goodbye to those constraints that tea represents. Tea is only a glimpse to them now, rather than some duty they have to keep an eye on.

Generally speaking, as one of the social norms in the Victorian era, tea ritual reveals man's demands on women, representing traditional feminine role in the Victorian era. With rich connotations, the images of tea, to a large extent, can be applied to reflect characters' emotions, attitudes and mentality as regards to gender issue.

The Victorian Era: Nostalgia Feelings and Women Pursuing Love and Self-satisfaction of "Angel in the House"

In *The Years*, emotions and thoughts of characters are not directly narrated. "The writer reveals the innermost feelings and beings of his characters through the relations in which they stand to one another and to the objects surrounding them" (Proudfit, 1975, p. 61). Tea, which has rich connotations and symbolizes the traditional feminine role in the Victorian era, can be seen as a window to look into woman's inner world and a means to penetrate into gender issue in the novel. By analyzing woman's views towards tea, we can largely perceive their views towards the feminine role.

In the chapter of 1880, the opening chapter, family members of the Pargiters are vividly portrayed via an afternoon tea scene at home. The cognitions and attitudes of Milly and Delia towards tea are particularly manifested through the depiction of the preparation of tea. Since the hostess of the Pargiter is too sick to bare any responsibility at home, her daughters learn to deal with chores at early ages. When it's time for tea in that afternoon, Milly Pargiter and Delia Pargiter, even if they are still young, look at the tea kettle and wait for the water to boil. They know that it's what a woman should do for the family. They're expected to take the traditional feminine role, and serving tea is part of their education. The social norm is inherently branded in their mind. However, it would be naive to believe that they are both willing to do so. In fact, they hold utterly different attitudes towards making tea.

Milly patiently sits at the round table and waits for the water to boil. When she notices that the flame is very feeble, she initially takes action to make it larger. "Milly took a hairpin from her head and began to fray the wick into separate strands so as to increase the size of the flame" (Woolf, 1965, p. 10). And then, she again applies her hairpin twice till the water is finally boiling. She keeps an eye on the kettle with no complaints as if she is actually taking care of her own baby. At last, she exclaims in delight when the water is ready for making tea, and tells everyone to come for tea. Milly is willing to handle chores at home such as making tea and thinks it's natural for a woman to do so. It can be reflected that Milly plays a typical traditional feminine role in the family through her attitude towards tea.

While Milly Pargiter feels pleased to take the responsibility to handle trivial things at home, Delia Pargiter only sees making tea as a boredom and shackle. Delia is fettered by social norms, which restrict woman's freedom and keep them from the outside world. "She fidgeted. Everything seems to take such an intolerable time" (Woolf, 1965, p. 10). "How can I put a stop to this fiddling and trifling, she said to herself, tapping a knife on the table and looking at the feeble flame that her sister was teasing with a hairpin" (Woolf, 1965, p.

10). Seeing her sister teasing flame with a hairpin annoys her, for she believes it's no use doing so, just as she believes there is no way to get rid of the deadening routine of her life at that time. When Milly teases the flame again, "Delia leant back and glanced over her shoulder out of the window. From where she sat she could see the front door steps" (Woolf, 1965, p. 11). "Front door steps" mark the way to the outside world, representing freedom that she can't get. She wishes to go out without restrictions, just like a man. Deep inside her heart, she desperately seeks venture and passion. "'Must a kettle boil?' she asked idly after a moment, as if she expected no answer, and Milly did not answer" (Woolf, 1965, p. 10). By asking "Must a kettle boil", what Delia really wonders is "Must we follow the tea ritual", "Must we make tea for the family" and more importantly, "Must we live a life like this". However, she knows there is no use asking that question. It's the social norm of the Victorian Era. An individual can do nothing about it. Although her sister Milly believes that devoting herself to domestic sphere is the right thing to do, she merely blindly follows the social value and can't exactly explain the reason why. Thus, she remains silent as well. They just sit in silence and keep watching the teapot, feeling lost at what to say or do next. In a word, Delia detests the traditional feminine role and is dying to live the venturesome life she wants. Traditional feminine role symbolized by tea is not what she's into.

The New Era: Women Pursuing Spiritual Freedom

In the Victorian era, both Milly and Delia have explicit viewpoints towards tea. However, it is not the case with Eleanor and Rose, whose opinions are rather complex and ambivalent as social changes take place. In the new era in which the Victorian era declines, women were not constrained within the traditional social norms. Rather, they could be more independent, having the rights of education and professionalization. The decline of traditions and the rise of new values in the society result in the ambivalence of woman's attitudes towards tea, the symbol of traditional feminine role. On one hand, women appreciate the elegance and graciousness of tea ritual and consider it as a harmonious event for family to gather together and enjoy the pleasant feelings that the scent of tea brings. On the other hand, they're sick of the constraints that tea ritual represents and aspire to gain their own freedom. Living in the transition of times, women haven't figured out how to treat the tradition of tea, just as they're ambivalent about their feminine role.

Eleanor, the eldest daughter in the Pargiters, plays the role as the backbone in the family. "Thank goodness, there's Eleanor she thought, looking up-the soother, the make-up of quarrels, the buffer between her and the intensities and strifes of family life. She adores her sister" (Woolf, 1965, p. 14). The first appearance of Eleanor in the novel is introduced by the internal monologue of Milly. As Eleanor comes back home and enters the room, Milly feels greatly delighted, for Eleanor is always the "big sister" who comforts everyone. She is kind with empathy and sensitivity, and is devoted to her family. After almost all the other children leave home and start lives of their own, Eleanor chooses to stay and take care of her father. When Martin comes to visit them, it's about tea time. Eleanor is responsible for making tea as usual. She teases the flame with hairpin to make it larger, measures tea methodically from the nice silver tea-caddy, and lifts the lid of the kettle to see if there're bubbles on the water. She makes tea sophisticatedly and patiently, just like thousands of women do in England. Martin finds that there's a book of hers propped up against the teapot. Tea, symbolizing the traditional feminine role she must take, has become an indispensable part of her life. No matter what she is reading, wondering or doing anything else, the teapot is right there, under her nose.

However, her attitude towards tea has changed after the deaths of her father and the king, Edward I. Father and King are both symbols of patriarchy, and their deaths emblemize the end of an era, in which women were

always submissive to men and were imposed the value of traditional feminine role. In the summer after her father's death, she comes to visit Morris at his mother-in-law's house. In the station yard, she sees the tea-urn sliding past. It's just a glimpse, a faint reminiscent of her daily life of which making tea is an epitome. It haunts her, but also is doomed to fade away with time, just as the tea-urn slides past and never goes back. As she pictures her future life in the countryside, she decides that she does not want to have tea with a clergyman. She has grown tired of all the etiquettes and rules that she has to observe. She doesn't want to be fettered by social norms that impose on her anymore. When Eleanor sells the family mansion and bids farewell to Crosby, the old servant of the Pargiters, memories of afternoon tea are brought back. "'And the kettle that wouldn't boil,' said Eleanor. 'D'you remember that?'" (Woolf, 1965, p. 216). She tries hard to hold back her tears, suffering from nostalgia for the old days of Victorian era. On the one hand, she misses the social norms and routines back then; on the other hand, she feels relieved to get rid of them now. "She thought of herself sitting there... The mixture of emotions was positively painful; she was so glad to be quit of it all..." (Woolf, 1965, p. 216).

Therefore, it can be concluded that Eleanor's attitudes towards feminine roles have palpable contradictions via her attitudes towards tea. As mentioned in the novel, she has mixed emotions. At first, she takes on the traditional feminine role in the family without complaints. After the absolute authority of patriarchy declines, she is awakened and enjoys her freedom, but still misses something about the social values and norms in the old days.

Rose is certainly the most rebellious girl with a reckless soul in the Pargiters. When she's a little child, she plays wildly just like a tom-boy, having her hair rumbled and her clothes covered with stains. She once ventures to Lamley's shop on her own in the middle of the night, imagining that she is riding by night on a desperate mission to a besieged garrison. She is often involved in conflicts with boys, and even cuts her wrist with knife out of anger. Her brother Martin comments her that, "'Rose always was a firebrand!' said Martin. He got up. 'She always had the devil's own temper,' he added" (Woolf, 1965, p. 158).

After she's become a grown woman, she devotes herself into the revolution of politics rather than the family. She barely has anything in common with a traditional woman. First, she's not elegant nor well-dressed. Although she is a beauty, she doesn't really care about how well she dresses. "...[As] she stepped onto the pavement and caught a glimpse of her own figure in a tailor's window, not to dress better, not to look nicer. Always reach-me-downs, coats and skirts from Whiteley's" (Woolf, 1965, p. 161). Moreover, she doesn't really follow the social norms of Victorian era. When Eleanor asks her whether she would like some tea, she resolutely refuses to have it. And even when she sits around the tea table, her fists are still clenched, which presents a gesture of pugnacity and tension that is absolutely out of place during a relaxing and decorous afternoon tea ritual. Rose never fits in the society in which women have no life of their own and observe so many social norms such as the tea ritual. She doesn't live in the square. She breaks out of the square.

Rebellious as she is, she has her own nostalgia of the old days when everyone should observe the habit of tea. When she visits Sara and Maggie and talks about the family mansion, the flush of memories runs up to her. "She saw them sitting around a table; and a detail that she had not thought of for years came back to her—how Milly used to take her hair pin and fray the wick of the kettle" (Woolf, 1965, p. 166). She remembers how her sister makes tea as a traditional feminine role, and she misses it. For some reason, she feels like talking about her past. She wants to recall the memories of afternoon tea at that time. There is something about tea which even charms a tomboy like Rose. There is something about the traditional feminine role that even attracts a rebel like Rose. She won't become one of the traditional ladies for sure, but she can't deny the fact that part of

her wishes to cultivate some femininity and be able to serve tea gracefully, bringing the atmosphere of harmony and peace to people.

Conclusion

The cultural values of tea are embodied in the changes of woman's attitudes toward tea. The above-mentioned tea is more than a drink, but art deeply rooted in British culture. It represents social values and norms of the Victorian era, and is highly related to women. As a graceful ceremony that reveals femininity and a domestic affair that constraints freedom, tea ritual reveals man's demands on women and symbolizes traditional feminine roles in the Victorian era. With rich connotations, the images of tea, to a large extent, can be applied to reflect characters' emotions, attitudes and mentality as regards to gender issues. By analyzing woman's views towards tea, we can explore their views of feminine roles in different times. Patriarchal family reached its peak in the Victorian era, in which women played the traditional feminine role. Some women were willing to take care of trivial things like serving tea, because they believed that tea ritual added to their femininity and women were born to play the traditional feminine role with no reason. However, some were not into serving tea, the seemingly natural duty for women. They were fettered by the Victorian social norms and didn't know how to live the life as they wished. The decline of the Victorian era marks the awakening of women. Social values and social norms of the past were dwindling, stepping down from the stage of history. The decline of traditions and the rise of new values in the society resulted in the ambivalence of woman's attitudes towards tea. Living in the transition of times, women hadn't figured out how to treat the tradition of tea, just as they were ambivalent about their feminine role. In the last chapter, when Peggy watches people dancing, talking and walking around at the party, there comes a voice, "And what about the cocktail and the tea, said he to me, said he to me..." (Woolf, 1965, p. 385). The same sentence appears twice in that chapter, reflecting the aroused thoughts of Peggy herself. Tea, an indispensable part of Victorian woman's daily life, represents woman's family life, the gentle and graceful side of women. "Cocktail", a very common alcohol at social events, symbolizes woman's public responsibility, their careers and causes in the society. The question "what about tea and cocktail" can be seen to convey the underlying meaning that "what about your family life and career" and "how to balance them". It's a question asked from men to women of the new era, and it's also a wonder inhabited inside women themselves, waiting to be figured out.

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