

Tea and social class boundaries in 19th century england

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Matthew Geronimo Professor Haydu SOCI 106 12 March 2013 Tea and Social Class Boundaries in 19th Century England How did tea rituals, customs, and etiquette reinforce social class boundaries in 19th century England? This question is relevant, in that it asks us to reflect on how simple commodities such as tea can distinguish social differences between classes, both past and present; it also allows us to ponder on how tea was popularized into the daily-consumed beverage it is to this day with people of all class backgrounds. In her book *A Necessary Luxury: Tea in Victorian England* (2008), Julie E.

Fromer discusses how in 19th century England “ 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,” (Fromer, 6). After discussing some origins of certain tea rituals such as low and high tea, I will elaborate on how those rituals influenced and reinforced social boundaries between the lower and upper classes; furthermore, I will analyze how certain tea customs and etiquette shaped the practice of tea-time between the lower and upper classes.

There are variations on the origin of the afternoon tea ritual. “ The accepted tea legend always attributes the ‘ invention’ of afternoon tea to Anna Maria, wife of the 7th Duke of Bedford, who wrote to her brother-in-law in a letter sent from Windsor Castle in 1841: ‘ I forgot to name my old friend Prince Esterhazy who drank tea with me the other evening at 5 o’clock, or rather was my guest amongst eight ladies at the Castle,” (Pettigrew, 102).

While tea was already a luxurious beverage at the time, when to drink tea during the day became a national cultural custom. “ The Duchess is said to have experienced ‘ a sinking feeling’ in the middle of the afternoon, because of the long gap between luncheon and dinner and so asked her maid to bring her all the necessary tea things and something to eat - probably the traditional bread and butter - to her private room in order that she might stave off her hunger pangs,” (Pettigrew, 102).

Upper-class citizens caught on with this trend, participating in a ritual that would define a nation. Upper-class families would participate in low tea at a good hour between lunch and dinner. “ Manners of Modern Society, written in 1872, described the way in which afternoon tea had gradually become an established event. ‘ Little Teas’, it explained, ‘ take place in the afternoon’ and were so-called because of the small amount of food served and the neatness and elegance of the meal,” (Pettigrew, 104).

Consuming food with tea during the day between meals might have speculated the English people for growing accustomed to eating too much during the day, but according to Marie Bayard in her Hints on Etiquette (1884), afternoon tea was “ not supposed to be a substantial meal, merely a light refreshment. ” She adds, “ Cakes, thin bread and butter, and hot buttered scones, muffins, or toast are all the accompaniments strictly necessary. ” The upper classes during the 19th century were known more for drinking more expensive and refined teas, such as those from China, Ceylon, or Assam.

The wealthy and privileged groups of 19th century England took pride in their customs; with the custom of tea, they spared no expense in staying
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true to their idealized rituals. Low tea was a daily practice for the upper classes. Martha Chute created a series of watercolor paintings that portrayed daily life at the Vyne in Hampshire in the mid-nineteenth century. This particular 1860 watercolor (Pettigrew, 99) depicts a dining room table prepared for breakfast with the tea urn in the middle of the table and the tea cups laid out.

The painting's setting takes place in a very upper class room with portraits of upper class citizens and scenery artwork hung all around the room. Published in 1807, Thomas Rowlandson's *Miseries Personal* (Pettigrew, 65) illustrates powerful upper-class men and women socializing while consuming tea to the extent that the men are all practically drunk because of drinking too much tea. From the illustration, the audience can see that these powerful men have no cares, worries, or concerns at all; they're not worried about getting food on the table for their families.

They are only concerned with having a good time with the somewhat disgusted women in the painting while they consume heavy amounts of tea, symbolizing their refinery and high social class status. Published in 1824, Edward Villiers Ripplingille's *The Travellers' Breakfast* (Pettigrew, 77) illustrates members of the literary circle that idealized Sir Charles Elton, including Coleridge, Southey, and Dorothy and William Wordsworth, as they have breakfast in an inn, with the tea urn focused in the middle of the table. According to Mrs.

Beeton in the 1879 edition of her *Book of Household Management*, "'At Home' teas and 'Tea Receptions' were large afternoon events for up to two hundred guests. Tea was laid out on a large table in the corner of the <https://assignbuster.com/tea-and-social-class-boundaries-in-19th-century-england/>

drawing or dining room, and servants would be on hand to pour and hand round the cups of tea, sugar, cream or milk, cakes, and bread and butter," (Pettigrew, 107). Beeton reinforces the notion that these products were expected to be present at the tea table for afternoon tea with the upper classes. For the upper-classes, afternoon tea could be taken out to the garden.

In an 1871 graphic artwork titled *Kettledrum in Knightsbridge*, (Pettigrew, 106) the artist displays men, women, and a child socializing in a garden, with trees and flowers surrounding them, while they enjoy their afternoon tea. According to Pettigrew, the caption reads " In this form of afternoon party, ladies and gentlemen can mingle . . . it is certainly much better to talk scandal in the garden than indoors," (Pettigrew, 107). From this context, Pettigrew hints that scandalous gossip was common in between people in the upper classes during afternoon tea, and that it was better to gossip outdoors rather than indoors.

While the etiquette and customs of low tea can be reflected in the mannerisms of upper class breakfast with tea, " In 1884, Marie Bayard advised in *Hints on Etiquette* that ' the proper time . . . is from four to seven', whereas others advised ' about five', or referred to ' small 5 o'clock teas', (Pettigrew, 108). Staying true to the specific hours with afternoon tea was significant to the upper classes in order to preserve the expectations that came with afternoon low tea. " Guests were not expected to stay for the entire time that tea was going on, but to come and go as they pleased during the allotted hours.

Most stayed half an hour or an hour but 'should on no account stay later than seven o'clock', (Pettigrew, 108). The relationships between upper-class families and servants were distinguished with tea. "Families who employed servants very often took high tea on Sunday in order to allow the maids and butler time to go to church and not worry about cooking an evening meal for the family," (Pettigrew, 112). Tea was so relevant during the 19th century that Pettigrew notes how upper-class families would rarely take a break from it.

On Sundays, instead of eliminating tea from the day entirely, upper-class families would substitute their afternoon tea for high tea, which included heavier foods to replace dinner, all for the sake of allowing their maids and servants go to church. Servants of the Queen reference her liking of tea in the 19th century as well. "In London, Queen Victoria introduced afternoon receptions at Buckingham Palace in 1865 and garden parties, known as 'breakfasts' in 1868," (Pettigrew, 115). One of Her Majesty's Servants" is quoted in *The Private Life of the Queen* (1897), "Her Majesty has a strong weakness for afternoon tea. From her early days in Scotland, when Brown and the other gillies used to boil the kettle in a sheltered corner of the moors while Her Majesty and the young Princesses sketched, the refreshing cup of tea has ever ranked high in the Royal favour." Various forms of artwork captured the ritual of tea-time during 19th century England.

A photograph from the 1880s presents a clear black-and-white image of what tea time looked like for the wealthy; in this particular case, for the Prince and Princess of Wales as they socialize with the Rothschild family at Waddesdon Manor in Buckinghamshire, (Pettigrew, 114). In the photo, we see

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a garden tea party taking place, both men and women well-dressed, all sitting down in a straight posture except for the single servant, the tea table set with the tea urn in the middle, a tent set up, and even an umbrella placed at an angle to prevent any discomfort from the sun.

While consuming tea was popular in the 19th century, the art and strategy of selling it as a valuable commodity grew in trend. Advertisements in the 19th century for tea advocated certain product brands, claiming that that specific brand was better than the rest, even hinting that they were a brand for more sophisticated, upper-class tea drinkers. An advertisement for Lipton, Tea, Coffee and Provision Dealer (Fromer, 84) attempts to differentiate regular tea drinkers from Lipton tea drinkers: " On the left, an illustration depicts two women smiling as they drink their tea.

Their features are smooth and regular, their cheeks are pleasingly plump, and they wear bonnets over their fashionably curled hair. Their dresses indicate their middle-class wealth and fashion sense; they wear modest, high-necked gowns without excess frills or ornaments, yet the designs of their dresses reveal up-to-date fashion, with curving bodices, bustles, and narrow waists," (Fromer, 83). In the advertisement, the choice to drink other tea besides the Lipton brand is reflected on their mis-shaped bodies, poor etiquette, and disappointing behavior. Tea and its consumption reinforced social class boundaries in 19th century England.

In Mary Gaskell's *North and South* (1855), tea consumption serves as a statement of people's social class and their standards. " Throughout the changes in the Hales' financial and social status throughout the novel, their tea drinking continues unabated, and despite the economies that they are

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forced to observe after Mr. Hale gives up his living, they never mention giving up tea," (Fromer, 132). Fromer comments on Gaskell's *North and South* (1855), marking how tea for upper-class citizens, such as the Hales, is too valuable in social status to sacrifice.

Fromer continues "...their [the Hales] identity within the industrial town of Milton derives from their consumption patterns, their participation in the market economy of the city, the amount of money they have to spend, and the ways in which they spend it. " Mr. Hale is caught off guard and is petrified by Margaret's story of a mill worker who has come to join them for tea. Margaret " Told [the story] completely; and her father was rather ' taken aback' by the idea of the drunken weaver awaiting him in his quiet study, with whom he was expected to drink tea," (Gaskell, 285). "'Oh dear! A drunken infidel weaver!' said Mr.

Hale to himself, in dismay," (Gaskell, 286). Mr. Hale cannot handle the idea of having a low-class worker in his home, participating in his family's afternoon tea. The very thought of it is inconceivable to him, especially seeing how Margaret invited the mill worker for tea. The working class was distinguished by having less etiquette and being not nearly as strict with their tea rituals as the middle and upper classes. Tea for the poor was still cherished, was still valuable, but as far as how refined they could be, based on their social class status alone, they constantly went through hard times on a daily basis. During the working day farm workers and labourers generally drank beer," but in the 19th century, there was a drastic shift from beer being the common beverage workers drank throughout the day to tea.

" All around the country, workers refreshed themselves with hot or cold tea -

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in factories, mines, offices and farmers' fields, on railways, roads and fishing boats. Tea had become the best drink of the day," (Pettigrew, 125). The poor and working class participated mostly in high tea, which was substituted for dinner. Meals throughout the day for the working class included tea. The first National Food Inquiry of 1863 discovered that little had changed for the working classes since the late eighteenth century and that farm labourers and home workers, such as silk weavers, needlewomen, glover makers and shoemakers, throughout Britain, started the day with a meager meal of milk or water gruel or porridge, bread and butter, and tea," (Pettigrew, 98). Every day was a struggle for the lower classes. Many working class families started each day still hungry. They would be "sent off in the morning after a meager breakfast of potatoes and tea to walk several miles to their place of work.

Lunch was dry bread with perhaps a little cheese in good times, and more potatoes and tea at home in the evening," (Pettigrew, 124). While daily meal intakes were simply meant to fuel laborers to get through the day, tea was always considered a luxury, something that still connected them to the upper classes, regardless of how less refined their etiquette was. "Dickens's stories are full of poor families, young apprentices, social outcasts, and those who survived from hand to mouth, just about coping in very mean lodgings that contrast markedly with the sumptuous breakfast tables of the upper and middle classes," (Pettigrew, 99).

In Elizabeth Gaskell's novel *Mary Barton* (1848), Gaskell conveys the thought-processing that went into listing what was needed for working-class meals and the importance of tea: "Run, Mary dear, first round the corner, and get some fresh eggs at Tippings . . . and see if he has any nice ham cut

that he would let us have a pound of . . . and Mary, you must get a pennyworth of milk and a loaf of bread - mind you get it fresh and new - that's all, Mary. " " No, it's not all" said her husband. " Though must get sixpennyworth of rum to warm the tea . . . "

A watercolor painting by Thomas Unwins (1782-1857) titled *Living off the Fat of the Land, a Country Feast* (Pettigrew, 111) illustrates " high tea in a country cottage," with what is depicted as a lower class family eating hams, cheeses, and baked bread while drinking tea. The painting portrays many people filled in a small cottage having high tea in replacement of dinner, with children playing on the floor, vegetables fallen from a sack lying on the floor, cats and dogs sleeping and jumping around, a man sneezing close to the ham, a woman drinking her tea out of a saucer while tending to a child, etc. the whole illustration is a mess. While refined tea was mainly consumed by the upper classes, the working class still treasured tea as a luxury, its value and worth could be tasted even with just a little bit of sugar. " In 1853, the *Edinburgh Review* wrote: ' By her fireside, in her humble cottage, the lonely widow sits; the kettle simmers over the ruddy embers, and the blackened tea-pot on the hot brick prepares her evening drink.

Her crust is scanty, yet as she sips the warm beverage - little sweetened, it may be, with the produce of the sugar-cane - genial thoughts awaken in her mind; her cottage grows less dark and lonely, and comfort seems to enliven the ill-furnished cabin,'" (Pettigrew, 111). In an 1878 photo of a poor Victorian household during tea time (Pettigrew, 104), the audience can make out the small room in which they are all in, laundry drying on a clothesline,

with some of the children not even being able to sit at the table, just sitting on a bench close to it against the wall.

This photo demonstrates the difference in tea etiquette between the upper and lower classes, especially with what looks like the eldest daughter caring for the youngest infant on her lap at the table, this being unlikely at an upper-class tea table. Tea was just as imperative as a daily commodity as it was to the upper classes. “ The poor household, therefore, represented a scaled-down version of the middle-class home, suggesting that nineteenth-century histories of tea portray class as a matter of degree rather than kind.

Working-class families aspired to the same values as the middle classes, responding to their smaller incomes by taking further measures of economy but not by sacrificing the consumer commodities that had become necessary to English everyday life,” (Fromer, 79). Tea served as a revitalizing commodity for all, even the elderly. According to Day from the Edinburgh Review in *Tea: Its Mystery and History* (1878), “ It is not surprising that the aged female whose earnings are barely sufficient to buy what are called the common necessities of life, should yet spare a portion of her small gains in procuring the grateful indulgence.

She can sustain her strength with less common food when she takes her Tea along with it; while she, at the same time, feels lighter in spirits, more cheerful, and fitter for this dull work of life, because of this little indulgence, (Day, 75-76). While the wealthy upper classes had standards and expectations with their consumption of tea, the lower classes, even the poor elderly, perceived tea as a great luxury of worth that altered their everyday behavior. “ Tea affected her (the poor aged female’s) demeanor, her <https://assignbuster.com/tea-and-social-class-boundaries-in-19th-century-england/>

manner, and her cheer, enabling her to accept her burden and work harder, being 'fitter' for the dull work life," (Fromer, 83).

Tea time for the working class wasn't meant to be a socializing event, nor was it a strict ritual. "Tea drinking, according to nineteenth-century ads and histories of tea, replaced the vices that were typically found among the 'humbler classes,' including alcoholism, violence, and a lack of attention to domestic arrangements, with the values of domestic economy, respectability, good taste, thrift, and an appreciation for high-quality consumer luxuries associated with more-fortunate, middle-class economic circumstances," (Fromer, 87).

Within Gaskell's *North and South*, we get glimpses of Margaret Hale's life as a younger girl. "She remembered the dark, dim look of the London nursery. . . . She recollected the first tea up there - separate from her father and aunt, who were dining somewhere down below an infinite depth of stairs; . . . At home - before she came to live in Harley Street - her mother's dressing-room had been her nursery; and, as they had her meals with her father and mother," (Gaskell, 38).

Gaskell emphasizes the difference in settings in Margaret Hale's life, contrasting the less refined and luxurious life she had "before she came to live in Harley Street," to her now higher social status in Harley Street. Gaskell hints this with how tea was consumed between the two settings. More than simply differentiating the social boundaries created by tea through certain tea rituals, the etiquette of tea drinking of both the lower and upper classes reinforced these social class boundaries in 19th century England.

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English upper class etiquette did not just distinguish them from the poor, but also from other countries as well. A cartoon published in 1825 (Pettigrew, 84) points out the difference in manners and etiquette between the English and the French. The cartoon refers to the English custom of placing a spoon across or inside the teacup to express that the drinker does not need a refill, though the audience can see that the English characters in the cartoon have been refilling the Frenchman's teacup multiple times in a humorous manner. Certain rules and expectations went into tea-time with the upper classes. Invitations to tea were issued verbally or by a small informal note or card," (Pettigrew, 108). Many aspects and variations went into tea etiquette that defined the upper classes. For how to receive guests into one's home, the *Lady at Home and Abroad* (1898) explains that for small tea gatherings "the hostess receives her friends in the drawing rooms on any other afternoon . . . but when it is a case of a regular afternoon entertainment, she stands at the head of the staircase and receives as she would at a ball or a wedding reception. Like Gaskell's *North and South*, novels such as Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) capture the norms and etiquette that come with upper class tea time and how those norms are broken and revealed through character reactions. " Within ' *Wuthering Heights*,' tea creates boundaries between characters, rather than erasing them. The rituals of the tea table cause Lockwood (and readers of the novel, to an extent) to feel isolated, unwanted, and threatened, rather than welcomed in and nourished as guests and as intimates," (Fromer, 152-153).

In a scene from Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, the character named Lockwood, an upper-class male, seeks refuge from an early snowstorm in *Wuthering*

Heights. Young Catherine hesitatingly admits Lockwood into Wuthering Heights and he accepts it as an ideal setting for tea. While Catherine attempts to attain a canister of tea leaves almost out of reach, Lockwood makes a “ motion to aid her” (Bronte, 16), but she responds, “ I won’t want your help . . . I can get them for myself. ” Bronte continues with Lockwood’s narration: “‘I beg your pardon,’ I hastened to reply. Were you asked to tea? ’ she demanded, tying an apron over her neat black frock, and standing with a spoonful of the leaf poised over the pot. ‘ I shall be glad to have a cup,’ I answered. ‘ Were you asked? ’ she repeated. ‘ No,’ I said, half smiling. ‘ You are the proper person to ask me. ’ She flung the tea back, spoon and all; and resumed her chair in a pet, her forehead corrugated, and her red underlip pushed out, like a child’s, ready to cry,” (Bronte, 16-17). Bronte uses this scene to underscore a significant aspect of upper-class tea tiquette: again, “ Invitations to tea were issued verbally or by a small informal note or card,” (Pettigrew, 108). While to present day audiences of Wuthering Heights, Catherine’s behavior may have seemed rude, to Bronte’s audience in the 19th century, Catherine’s response to Lockwood probably seemed understandable because according to upper-class tea etiquette, in order to engage and participate in tea-time with someone, he or she needs to be invited first. In another scene from Wuthering Heights, Catherine plays hostess during tea-time with characters Edgar and Heathcliff at Wuthering Heights. The meal hardly endured ten minutes. Catherine’s cup was never filled; she could neither eat nor drink. Edgar had made a slop in his saucer, and scarcely swallowed a mouthful,” (Bronte, 97-98). Here the audience can see the difference in etiquette between the higher and lower classes, even if

the difference in class is not too vast. “ Edgar’s ‘ slop’ in his saucer signals his unsteady hand...” (Fromer, 162). “ This moment of tea, which is supposed to bring people together and erase boundaries, instead emphasizes those boundaries and signals the end of peace and familial happiness,” (Fromer, 162-163).

Again, Bronte distinguishes the class differences reinforced through the tea ritual and form of etiquette. Like Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847), 19th century novels such as Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) delineates social class boundaries reinforced by tea etiquette. The story of Alice adventuring into Wonderland is a reflection of facing elements people are not used to; for Alice, what she believed was her forte was etiquette. Carroll thus plays on the idea of expectations; he assumes that we as readers, like Alice, have certain expectations of what a tea party offers, and he continually frustrates those expectations through his depiction of “ A Mad Tea Party,” (Fromer, 169). During the infamous “ Mad Tea Party” scene, Alice encounters the Mad Hatter, the March Hare, and the mouse at their tea party. Alice expects to be welcomed at the tea table, seeing how “ the table was a large one, but the three were all crowded together at one corner of it . . . ” (Carroll, 60).

But as she approached the table, the Hare and the Mad Hatter cried out, “ No room! No room! ” (Carroll, 60). Both audiences of the 19th century and present day may have found the hosts to be incredibly rude exclaiming that there is no room while there obviously was, but, again, we must remember principle etiquette: that guests must be invited to tea. Both Bronte’s Lockwood and Carroll’s Alice encounter tea setting and expect to be invited;

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therefore, they approach the hosts and proceed to the tables, yet both characters are actually unwanted from both hosts in each novel.

Lockwood and Alice are characterized as being of middle or upper class in their own storylines and they both invite themselves to these tea tables where they were never originally invited to; and when they are confronted about it, they both are shocked. " At any rate I'll never go there again! . . . It's the stupidest tea-party I ever was at in all my life," (Carroll, 68). Carroll reinforces Alice's stubbornness and inability to realize that she was the one who violated the etiquette and customs of tea time by inviting herself to tea instead of waiting for an invitation from the Mad Hatter and the March Hare.

The exchange between Alice and the Mad Hatter and March Hare exceeds levels of rudeness that audiences of both 19th century and present-day England would be appalled by. " I don't think - " then the Hatter cuts her off, " Then you shouldn't talk. " " This piece of rudeness was more than Alice could bear: she got up in great disgust, and walked off: the Dormouse fell asleep instantly, and neither of the others took the least notice of her going, though she looked back once or twice, half hoping that they would call after her," (Carroll, 67).

While Alice storms off believing that the Mad Hatter and March Hare are in the wrong, Carroll's use of depicting Alice looking back conveys that in her heart, perhaps Alice knew that she was the one who violated the proper mannerisms and etiquette of tea time. From Fromer's perspective, " After feeling adrift and confused during her travels through Wonderland, Alice has finally stumbled upon a setting where she feels at home and thinks that she knows what to expect and how to act - at the tea table . . .

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She expects the boundaries that so clearly separate her from all of the other characters she has met to finally be overcome, so that she can feel welcomed and nourished as an intimate guest rather than an unexpected and unwelcome intruder," (Fromer, 170-171). Tea rituals, customs, and etiquette distinguish people from one another, they sort them into groups labeled either poor or wealthy. "Teatime functions, in countless novels, as a moment of highlighting the boundaries between self and other, inside and outside, day and night - boundaries both within outside of the intimate realm . . . Part of what makes this particular tea party 'mad' is the fact that it violates the boundaries of time just as much as it destroys expectation of hospitality and civility," (Fromer, 172). Both Alice and Bronte's Lockwood assume that simply by being part of the upper classes of society that they are entitled to respect from others; but as Gaskell's and Carroll's audiences have realized, having respect for others defines social status and influences social mannerisms and proper etiquette. Within Gaskell's *North and South* (1854-55), the image of the tea table functions as a crystallization of English national identity and the various social classes that make up that national sense of self," (Fromer, 129). Fromer analyzes *North and South* as a novel that distinguishes the different social classes in 19th century England and how their social statuses are formed and reinforced by through tea rituals and etiquette.

Furthermore, "based on circulating cultural expectations of the social manners and consumption rituals performed during teatime, the English ideal of the tea table served as shared experience upon which to base one's identity and to gauge the social status of others," (Fromer, 129). "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 groups within the English nation," (Fromer, 12).

Members of both the lower and upper classes participated in tea rituals; depending on their social class statuses, they were more than likely to participate in one or the other. Quite simply, the middle and upper-class members of societies engaged in afternoon low tea the majority of the time because of its origin to English royalty and the purpose to keep hunger away between noon and dinner meals. On the other end, the poor and working class members of society engaged in high tea, combining their dinner meal with tea in order to alleviate the time and costs of tea time in the middle of the afternoon.

The working class did not concern themselves with strict and traditional customs and etiquette like the middle and upper classes did. They participated in high tea for the practical purpose of fighting off hunger while retaining a sense of dignity and luxury with the value and worth of tea. As put by Fromer (11): "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. Bibliography Bayard, Marie. *Hints on Etiquette*. Edited by Marie Bayard. London: Weldon & Company, 1884. Beeton, Mrs. *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management*. Edited by Nicola Humble. Abridged version of 1861 edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. Bronte, Emily. *Wuthering Heights*. New York. Penguin Books, 1993. <https://assignbuster.com/tea-and-social-class-boundaries-in-19th-century-england/>

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