

## MIDDLE-CLASS WOMEN, TEA DRINKING AND VICTORIAN CULTURAL PARADIGMS: DOMESTICITY, STABILITY AND RESPECTABILITY

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### **Abstract**

*The cultural practice of tea drinking played an important part in the Victorian lifestyle. Inside a Victorian house, the roles of husband and wife were clearly established through (un)written rules, and men and women were expected to behave in certain ways. Organizing and conducting a tea drinking party, as well as coordinating the setting of the table for a private family tea gathering, or just for the purpose of having one or two guests over tea, was the task of Victorian wives. Our paper attempts to identify the functions of the Victorian cultural practice of tea drinking. We shall approach the ritual of tea drinking as a sign of the Victorian (male) expectations concerning the image of the ideal Victorian wife by analysing several literary fragments from three Victorian novels: "David Copperfield" (1849) and Dombey and Son (1846-1848) by Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy's "Jude the Obscure" (1895).*

**Keywords:** cultural practice, tea drinking, Victorian cultural paradigms, domesticity, stability, respectability

### **Rezumat**

*Practica culturală a consumului de ceai a jucat un rol important în stilul de viață victorian. În interiorul unei case victoriene, rolurile soțului și soției erau clar stabilite prin reguli (ne)scrise, în sensul că bărbații și femeile trebuiau să se comporte în anumite moduri. Organizarea și desfășurarea unei petreceri cu consumarea de ceai, precum și servirea mesei pentru o reuniune privată în familie sau, pur și simplu, pentru a avea unul sau doi invitați la ceai, era sarcina care cădea pe umerii soțiilor în epoca victoriană. În articol, încercăm să identificăm funcțiile practicii culturale victoriene de consum a ceaiului. Abordăm ritualul consumului de ceai ca semn al așteptărilor victoriene (masculine) cu privire la imaginea soției victoriene ideale, analizând mai multe fragmente literare din trei romane care aparțin perioadei menționate: „David Copperfield” (1849) și „Dombey and Son” (1846-1848) de Charles Dickens, și „Jude the Obscure” (1895) de Thomas Hardy.*

**Cuvinte-cheie:** practică culturală, luarea cheaiului, paradigme culturale victoriene, domesticitate, stabilitate, respect

### **1. Introduction**

#### **1.1. The Victorian Cultural Paradigms of Stability, Domesticity and Respectability**

This section of the paper will deal with defining the Victorian cultural paradigms of stability, domesticity and respectability. We chose to refer to the

relation between middle-class women and the cultural practice of tea drinking because, during the nineteenth century, the English middle class experienced significant growth, in terms of size and importance. The middle class included industrialists and bankers, as well as poor clerks earning half the wage of skilled workers, such as a printer or railway engine driver; a clerk was regarded as belonging to the middle class because the source of money, and not the income itself, was considered to be important; the upper middle class included professionals such as clergymen, military and naval officers, men in higher positions of law, medicine, the government and university professors, civil engineers and architects, large-scale merchants; the lower middle class included small shopkeepers and clerical workers, middle managers, bookkeepers and lower-level government employees (Prewitt, 1985, pp. 1-28). Besides, women from the lower classes had no time or material support to pay attention to, in this case, tea drinking etiquette, whereas the Victorian middle-class constantly attempted to copy the habits and lifestyle of the aristocracy, being also provided with a certain amount of the financial means involved.

The values of the middle class – hard work, sexual morality, individual responsibility, education, religion, ambition, sobriety, thrift, punctuality and a constructive use of leisure time –, as well as their idealization of family life and togetherness translated themselves into the more general cultural paradigms of stability, respectability and domesticity.

The three main Victorian cultural paradigms<sup>17</sup> shaping the roles of men, women and children in their private as well as social lives are respectability, domesticity and stability. Although often mocked at and ironically depicted, particularly by nineteenth-century English writers, these paradigms were constructed according to the Victorians' hierarchy of values, virtues and needs.

The Victorian cultural paradigms of stability, respectability and domesticity were closely related to the value Victorians attributed to money: the poor, for

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<sup>17</sup> The term "paradigm" was first introduced by the historian and philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* (1970), where it stood for the shared commitment by the members of a scientific community to a particular form of scientific practice. Despite Kuhn's suggestion, the term has been generalized to apply to almost any theoretical, philosophical or ideological commitment (Payne 1997, p. 395); another definition of "paradigm" is "pattern, model or exemplary case" (Wolfrey *et alii*, 2006, p. 76). The 'scientific' version of culture is represented by the totality of human habits, customs and artifacts, but literary criticism is concerned with culture as a body of values, particularly those values transmitted from the past to the future through imaginative works (Childs & Fowler, 2006, pp. 44-45). Another view defines culture as the "patterns of human knowledge that refer to the customary beliefs, social formations and traits of racial, religious or social groups", but also "assemblages of social practices defined periodically and in terms of race, belief and class" (Wolfrey *et alii*, 2006, p. 27).

example, were often regarded as immoral beings only because they were poor. The Victorian house as a semiotic sign embodies these three principles governing the life of the Victorians: owning a stately house or manor meant supremacy over the others. This is why, for the three representatives of the Victorian family, the house turns into a symbolic space: for men, it is the symbol of their power and authority, their property with everything inside under their control, objects, animals and human beings alike, and the idea of domesticity usually meant certain domestic roles: the man/husband/father is the master of the house, the woman/wife/mother is the mistress of the house; for women, the house is the space which offers a respectable position in society, either as wives/relatives of an owner, or as human beings struggling to climb the social hierarchy, to gain financial independence; for children, the house is a space of shelter, protection and comfort, while for orphans it is more than that, it becomes the symbol of human warmth, communication and affection.

## **1.2. The Victorian Middle-Class Family**

The three cultural paradigms of respectability, domesticity and stability found their expression in the relationships between men, women and children, inside and outside the house. A respectable man had at least one house and some lands, a gentlemanly behaviour, a tranquil and peaceful domestic life – obedient wife, children and servants – and, of course, money.

Once the requirements for respectability and domesticity were being met with, one only had to add some wealthy inheritance or some thriving business, so that stability could be reached. For the Christian socialist Charles Kingsley, the house/home and the traditional functions of women were of primary importance. He saw women as the moral lights of society; he preached to middle-class women on the proper behaviour towards the poor, but warned them that their caring for the poor should not lead them to neglecting their own families. He preached to women on the necessity of thrift, moderation and the injustice of difficult situations.

Eighteenth-century painters often portrayed family gatherings. These usually consisted of parents, children, dogs and ponies, painted in open air, with a landscape stretching out in the background on tens of acres, and often with a stately mansion, too. Such paintings suggest a crucial relationship between generation and property: the oldest son, the heir, is usually in the centre of attention, most often riding a pony; the girls are pretty, graceful and dressed in rich garments: they are the pawns needed in the game of expansion and acquisition. During the nineteenth century, this expansive relation between the family and its possessions seems to be restricting itself, but this is rather due to the focus on the rising middle class rather than to any radical change. Since the middle-class relationship restricts itself as a consequence of, among other things, a smaller physical living space, there appears in the middle-

class fiction, a much closer relation between money, on the one hand, and aspirations and life style on the other. It becomes more and more important that properties should reflect wealth – it becomes even more important than needs or beauty and partially explains the Victorian taste. One should not lead only a comfortable and constructive life, but also a consciously commercial one.

A vital element of this way of life was the patriarchal role, since the middle-class family ideal was a family organized and structured so clearly that it felt the need of a master at the head. Women were taught to be submissive to their husbands and fathers, their life was rationalized and motivated by a great accent placed on self-sacrifice. A major and recurrent theme in Victorian literature was that of the authoritarian husband and/or father under different shapes and disguises, as a hero and/or wrongdoer, a decent and/or a pervert man, a pillar of society and/or a destroyer of individual freedom; he represents one of the most interesting figures in Charles Dickens' novels.

Through much dedication and self-discipline, particularly from the part of women, the middle-class acquired a union of material and moral interests reflected in most of the fiction of the time, criticized by some authors, explored and revealed by others, as for example by George Eliot. The union worked at the very heart of the middle-class family. Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* and Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* present two fathers who raise their sons, by offering them a moral and religious education on the surface, but preparing them in fact for earning money and reaching success. The middle-class ideal of morality, comfortable domesticity, patriarchal authority was impossible in the absence of money. It was only attainable in the presence of money since certain aspects of the living style were inseparable from its morality. Domestic comfort required a relatively large house, good quality furniture, certain commodities and ornaments seen as essential to a tasteful life, and, above all, servants.

For a wife shut in at home, the objects and the comfort that money could buy should have been of great importance. A middle-class wife was most surely "kept" at home by children, domestic responsibilities and duty towards her husband, and any thing that could represent a value in her limited perspective could be seen as significant. The husband too had responsibilities, the greatest one being that of providing the necessary money, and he enjoyed seeing the symbolical value of his fortune solidly reflected in his home. He was supposed to provide his sons with a good education and initiate them at the right time in a respectable occupation, which could have nevertheless meant an expensive deal. He also needed money in order to respectably marry away his daughters; in fact, paternal responsibility was very much regarded in terms of money, and after all, the father's authority and power

resided in money. The money belonged to him and only him; he owned the family house; he paid for the servants, the tea gowns, his son's debts and his daughters' ball dresses (Nelson, 2007, pp. 15-40). How a Victorian wife presided over the Victorian tea drinking ritual indicated, according to Victorian conventions, a sign of the domesticity, stability and respectability of the respective house. A Victorian wife was expected to embody the ideas of domesticity, stability and respectability.

## **2. The Victorian Cultural Practice of Tea Drinking**

### **2.1. Tea Consumption as a Means of Stabilizing the Society**

Tea was the cheapest next drink after water, as we may deduce from a fragment in *David Copperfield*: "We had half an hour, I think, for tea. When I had money enough, I used to get half a pint of ready-made coffee and a slice of bread-and-butter" (Dickens, 2004, p. 156). By the end of the nineteenth century, the declining cost of tea had spread tea drinking to all the social classes, with the poor becoming subjected to frequent dyspepsia as a result of an exaggerated consumption of tea; the decline in working-class health further contributed to pessimism about British national vitality and social progression. In fact, tea-drinking practiced in the refined context of the middle-class home was generally regarded as safe, compared to the dangerous tea habits of the lower classes, which were, moreover, considered to be morally dangerous (Miller, 2013).

Excessive tea-drinking was regarded as having disastrous consequences not only at the physical and mental level of the human body, but also in terms of social order: too much time spent drinking tea would result in "nervous, hysterical, discontented people, always complaining of the existing order of the universe, scolding their neighbours and sighing after the impossible" (*ibidem*). Thus, heavy tea-drinking was, in fact, acting like a revolutionary force.

The consumption of tea was also interpreted in relation to gender: the tea drinking housewife was diagnosed by physicians as suffering and displaying a series of nervous symptoms, allegedly connected to her culinary habits. Chronic dyspepsia was also regarded as a sign of poor nutritional choices, at a time when the role of a housewife was considered central and essential to the health of her family and, implicitly, society. Therefore, housewives who failed in nurturing, feeding and preserving the health of the family risked public remonstrance, particularly if the respective failure was explained through a long time interval of tea self-intoxication: "a culturally charged set of anxieties about the physical and mental symptoms of excessive tea consumption co-existed alongside the development of civil middle-class modes of tea consumption. The extension of cheaper tea products into working-class communities throughout the nineteenth century fostered middle-class apprehension about the misuse of a product that provided an emblem of

middle-class civility [...] [tea consumption] was a practice with national implications" (*ibidem*).

As noted above, there was a deeper and stronger connection between the apparently innocent Victorians' habit of drinking tea and the domestic, as well as wider social implications of this practice. In other words, excessive tea consumption may be understood as challenging domestic and national stability. With England developing at a fast pace during, and as a result of the Industrial Revolution, there also was the fear that the rapidly changing society would threaten the patriarchal system (Fromer, 2008, p. 13). Viewing the practice of tea consumption as a means to stabilize the society was also the result of the changing public sphere (Heath, 2012, p. 3). Initially, tea had been consumed in public places, being endowed with the features of exoticism. It was only by the late eighteenth century that tea had begun to be drunk in the private home space and hence be also associated with the domestic dimensions of English life.

## 2.2. Middle Class-Women and the Practice of Tea Drinking

This section of the paper will discuss the functions of the Victorian cultural practice<sup>18</sup> of tea drinking in relation to middle-class women.

The cultural practice of tea drinking is iconic for the British Islands. The relation between tea and women, as well as the role of a Victorian wife, is accurately expressed by Walter Gay in Charles Dickens's novel *Dombey and Son*, who admits to his uncle, Solomon Gills, that a lady is of great importance for a man's general well-being:

"What I mean, Uncle Sol,' pursued Walter, [...], 'is, that then I feel you ought to have, sitting here and pouring out the tea instead of me, a nice littledumpling of a wife, you know, - a comfortable, capital, cosy old lady, who was just a match for you, and knew how to manage you, and keep you in good heart [...]' (p. 127).

A Victorian wife should be a "cosy" companion to her husband, whom she should "manage" and "keep in good heart". Furthermore, the role of a wife cannot be played by any other relative, and "pouring out the tea" should be a task worthy only of a woman. Tea was not "women's chosen domain; rather, their adoption of the tea ritual was the result of male subordination" (Heath, 2012, p. 2).

During Victorianism, there were two types of tea parties: High Tea and Afternoon Tea. High Tea was also of two types: with or without dancing.

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<sup>18</sup> Cultural practices are patterns of social interactions and behaviors, involving the use of products (in our case, tea trays, cups, table-spoons); they represent knowledge of "what to do when and where" (National Standards for Foreign Language Education Project. (1999). *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Lawrence. AllenPress. [http://www.carla.umn.edu/cobaltt/modules/curriculum/textanalysis/Practices\\_Products\\_Perspectives\\_Examples.pdf](http://www.carla.umn.edu/cobaltt/modules/curriculum/textanalysis/Practices_Products_Perspectives_Examples.pdf).

High tea parties with dancing were thrown to “bring out” a daughter or to present a new daughter-in-law. The hostess for high tea parties with dancing was usually the mother or the mother-in-law. The middle-class wife was indeed expected to belong to the domestic rather than the public space, a reality readable not only in Victorian novels, but also visible in Victorian paintings. Piehler analyses a series of paintings by the social painter George Elgar Hicks, depicting the familial roles that the Victorian society expected women to fulfil: his works present (the same) woman in relation to three different men (son, husband and father) as wives, mothers and daughters; “women are depicted serving others unselfishly, accommodating others’ needs, and fulfilling their roles to the utmost”; in the painting *Companion to Manhood* (1863), the ideal woman clings to her husband in an attempt to comfort his grief; to her right, there is the neatly arranged table with the family tea set and her husband’s mail, alluding to the woman’s domestic duties (Piehler, 2003, pp. 13-14). Here, too, the tea tray occurs like an accessory of the Victorian wife.

Tea drinking after dinner was also, most often, not only the duty, but also the activity of women. Men would retreat to a separate study or library, with their glasses of brandy or whisky, to discuss business matters or simply manly issues, while women would retreat to a saloon or small parlour to chat and have tea. There is a very illustrative example in this respect in *Dombey and Son*:

“Tea was served in a style no less polite than the dinner; and after tea, the young gentlemen rising and bowing as before, withdrew to fetch up the unfinished tasks of the day, or to get up the already looming tasks of tomorrow. In the meantime Mr Feeder withdrew to his own room; and Paul sat in a corner wondering whether Florence was thinking of him, and what they were all about at Mrs Pipchin’s” (p. 175).

The important role of women in organizing festivals, galas and tea parties is confirmed by other authors as well (Morgan, 2007, p. 98). Such events were significant also due to the raising of funds for various social causes, such as temperance societies or donations to the poor. Temperance, briefly defined as moderate drinking, was a woman’s issue: the effects of alcohol on family life, with women and children starving at home, while husbands spent their wages at the pub, were expected to be counteracted by tea parties presided over by women (*idem*, p. 99). Women made the tea, presided over it and ended the tea-drinking gathering:

“Agnes made the tea, and presided over it; and the time passed away after it, as after dinner, until she went to bed; when her father took her in his arms and kissed her, and, she being gone, ordered candles in his office. Then I went to bed too” (p. 214).

Another good example for illustrating the connection between women, tea and domestic life may be found in analyzing the fragment in which Phillotson decides to free Sue of her marriage to him. The alleged supremacy of Victorian men is visible in this gendered discourse, in which Phillotson regards himself as superior, and Sue as dependent upon him: "His mild serenity at the sense that he was doing his duty by a woman who was at his mercy almost overpowered his grief at relinquishing her" (Hardy, 2004, p. 351). The description of their last meal together before separation is that of a habit of a family: "[...] that look of her as she glided into the parlour to tea [...]" and how Phillotson urges Sue to eat is again illustrative of his generosity, similar to the care that a father has for his daughter: "'You had better have a slice of ham or an egg, or something with your tea? You can't travel on a mouthful of bread and butter'"; an hour later, with Sue gone away, Phillotson shows her tea cup to Gillingham, as if in disbelief of the fact that she was gone: it seems unbelievable that her tea cup still rests on his table, while she is gone; and, immediately after that, Phillotson first pushes the tea-things aside, and then does what a woman/wife would have been expected to do, that is, invites the guest to a cup of tea: "'She is gone – just gone. That's her teacup, that she drank out of only an hour ago'. [...] He turned and pushed the tea-things aside. 'Have you had any tea, by the by?' he asked presently, in a renewed voice" (*idem*, pp. 351-352). Here, Phillotson is in fact the image of the Victorian man destabilized by the absence of a Victorian perfect wife/woman.

In *Dombey and Son*, tea drinking is used to depict the love and affection which should unite the members of a family. After her mother's death, on returning home from school, Florence discovers that the once empty house across the street had been occupied by several children and their father, the mother of the respective children having died, too. She watches, from the loneliness of her house, how much comfort and happiness there may be where there is love and affection. The role of the dead mother in preparing and serving tea in the family which Florence watches unseen has been taken by the elder of the sisters:

"The elder child remained with her father when the rest had gone away, and made his tea for him – happy little house-keeper she was then! – and sat conversing with him, sometimes at the window, sometimes in the room, until the candles came. He made her his companion, though she was some years younger than Florence [...]" (p. 270).

It is that kind of happiness which Florence wants so much and which she does not receive from her father. She, herself, would be happy to fulfill the role of the tea maker in the house, only for a bit of affection.

### 2.3. The Functions of the Cultural Practices of Tea Drinking

In the nineteenth century, tea became an icon of the English home. We may argue, as some authors do, that tea table rituals often function as "luminous (or threshold) rituals", dissolving binaries such as masculine/ femi-

nine, public/private, middle class/lower class, foreign/domestic or necessity/luxury (Fromer, 2008, p. 11). However, it seems that whereas tea histories provided an ideal image of tea as able to build a sense of community, fictional depictions of tea drinking reveal the practice of tea drinking as associated with class and gender structure.

Besides building or failing to build communities, tea also serves other purposes. Here, too, there is a clash between Victorian histories of tea and Victorian novels. Victorian tea histories construct a gendered dynamics in which men produce income and wives consume the goods needed in running a household; these same histories also suggest that serving tea supports women in producing domesticity, so that their husbands may consume domestic peace and tranquility (*idem*, p. 101). In *David Copperfield*, the hero negotiates his relationships with women (Emily, Aunt Betsey, Dora) during tea time. However, Dora seems to be ironically associated with tea during David's courtship, just to be later revealed as incapable of managing a home. However, David's second wife, Agnes, is never associated with the tea table, nevertheless, she seems to be a better wife for David than Dora. So far, we have referred to the cultural practice of tea drinking and the Victorians' expectations regarding an ideal woman/wife/daughter/mother. In fact, Dickens seems to be mocking precisely these Victorian expectations: being able to arrange a perfect tea table should not be a standard in appreciating a woman's value. In other words, David is misled by the Victorian belief according to which the setting of a perfect tea table indicates an ideal, perfect and complete woman, endowed with sexual as well as domestic ideal features. By the time he marries Agnes, David has given up his unrealistic goals regarding the perfect wife. However, the novel provides readers with the image of a successful sexual and domestic union of Tommy and Sophie Traddles, the symbol of which is the 'happy' tea table which David sodesires:

"We all sat round the fire [...] Mrs. Traddles, with perfect pleasure and composure beaming from her household eyes, having made the tea, then quietly made the toast as she sat in a corner by the fire" (p. 763).

In *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy associates both Arabella and Sue with the tea table throughout the novel, creating images of Jude's expectations, regarding women and womanhood. Significantly, on their first walk, Jude and Arabella stop at an inn and ask for tea. But, the tea takes too long to be served and as it grows dark, they ask for beer. Arabella tastes the beer and, although she finds it has a bad taste, she manages to identify several of the beer's ingredients and then drinks her share (Hardy, 2004, p. 63). On another occasion, returning in the evening at Arabella's home after their walk, Jude says he does not want any tea as it is too late. Instead, he chooses to just sit and talk to Arabella (*idem*, p. 76). Three years later, at Christminster, Sue's photograph which Jude places on the mantel-piece, reveals Jude's (Victorian) ex-

pectations regarding an ideal Victorian woman, recommended by her ability to preside over the tea table: "Jude [...] put the photograph on the mantelpiece, kissed it – he did not know why – and felt more at home. She seemed to look down and preside over his tea. It was cheering ..." (*idem*, p. 123). Meditating upon the possible relationship between himself and Sue, Jude introduces in the description of their friendship the possibility that she may invite him to tea (given the fact that during the nineteenth century, tea drinking was regarded as a common practice through which time was spent in a pleasant way by friends) (*idem*, p. 131). It is interesting the fact that inviting a friend to tea is an act to be performed by women, and not by men. There is no anticipation or expectation regarding Jude's inviting Sue (or some other woman, friend etc.) over to his place for tea. Whereas there was no tea drinking during his courting Arabella, there is only a hasty tea on the evening Jude oversees Sue and Phillotson walking. On the night Sue escapes and goes to Jude's place, all wet for having crossed the stream, she reaches Jude after he had had his tea. When she says she is cold, he fetches some brandy instead of, possibly, some hot tea. It is barely later that evening that Jude offers her some tea. The effects of tea upon them are described by Hardy: "when she had had some tea and had lain back again she was bright and cheerful. The tea must have been green, or too long drawn, for she seemed preternaturally wakeful afterwards, though Jude, who had not taken any, began to feel heavy" (*idem*, p. 219).

Upon receiving Sue's letter announcing her engagement, Jude gives in to excessive (dangerous) tea drinking, as he "could eat no breakfast; and kept on drinking tea because his mouth was so dry" (*idem*, p. 255). At Shaston, Sue invites Jude to have tea together in the school in which she teaches, rather than in the house she lives in (*idem*, p. 304). Ironically, they use the kettle which Jude had offered to her as a wedding gift. It seems that there are no domestic tea drinking scenes in *Jude the Obscure*, a sign of, and an anticipation, we may say, of their later socially ostracized status for living together unmarried and the novel's tragic end.

Not being able to drink any tea signifies sadness, incapacity, lack of control over one's destiny and hence, the related feeling of helplessness, as when, for example, David Copperfield is announced by his aunt that he will be sent away to school, realizing at the same time that his mother has been persuaded that he was a 'wicked fellow':

"I felt it sorely. I tried to eat my parting breakfast, but my tears dropped upon my bread-and-butter, and trickled into my tea" (p. 64).

What makes the tea undrinkable is a woman, his aunt, Miss Murdstone. On returning home for vacation, David is welcomed by Miss Murdstone's "tea-caddy scoop instead of her fingers", and upon leaving at the end of the vacation, he is given "the closing cup of tea of the vacation" (pp. 115-119), by

the same Miss Murdstone. Miss Murdstone is significantly identified with the tea-scoop and the offering of tea appears, in her case, like a ritual in which she is the one who establishes the rules, in other words, who should come and who should go.

In relation to Emily, tea acquires a different signification, related to domestic, emotional comfort:

"She was tender-hearted, too; for when, as we sat round the fire after tea [...] she looked at me so kindly across the table..." (p. 138).

Drinking tea in a peaceful environment becomes David's image of an ideal domestic life defined, among other things, by financial independence:

"I know that if a shilling were given me by Mr. Quinion at any time, I spent it in a dinner or tea [...] also, on a Sunday morning, when I mixed the portion of tea or coffee I had bought overnight, in a little shavingpot, and sat late at my breakfast" (pp. 157-158).

Tea time is often taken as a reference point for indicating the time of the day when something takes place, for example, before tea or after tea. The instances are numerous in Victorian novels: "... she was just the same as ever, and went out for a stroll with little Em'ly and me before tea ..." (Dickens, 2004, p. 143); "After tea, we sat at the window – on the look-out as I imagined, from my aunt's sharp expression of face, for more invaders" (Dickens, 2004, p. 190); "When the gossip had departed Arabella said suddenly to her mother: 'I want you and Father to go and inquire how the Edlins be, this evening after tea'" (Hardy, 2004, p. 75); "But to-night, having finished tea and brushed himself up [...] He fancied he heard something rattle lightly against his window; then he heard it again. Certainly somebody had thrown gravel" (*idem*, p. 213). It is Sue who has escaped her family and come to spend the night at Jude's place.

### 3. Conclusions

Our paper constituted an attempt to highlight the relation between Victorian women and the Victorian tea-drinking habit regarded in its domestic version. Our conclusion implies a paradox: a respectable Victorian house needed the presence of an ideal woman/wife/mother/daughter, responsible for, among other things, making and serving tea. However, this responsibility gave women only a false sense of authority: "Hosting was considered a high honor and gave women a small sense of empowerment in a world designed against female advancement" (Heath, 2012, p. 8).

Reading the two novels from the perspective of analysing the presence of tea-drinking habits and rituals has supported us in reaching the conclusion that Victorian middle-class women presided over the ritual of tea-drinking not necessarily due to their own, conscious choice, but rather as a result of their education. Etiquette books written by Victorian men for Victorian women

promoted the image of an ideal Victorian woman, who was expected to (want to) learn and acquire only certain things (such as knitting, embroidery, drawing, non-controversial subjects like geography or popular literature) which could help them in contributing to a successful and pleasant tea-drinking party/gathering. Women's reading purpose should not have been that of turning women in what was known at the time by the name of 'blue-stocking', but that of rendering a pleasant, profitable society for others. However, Victorian novels have challenged the very supremacy of men by, in our case, trying to reveal the fact that men needed the comfort of a peaceful home and by showing that this peaceful domestic environment meant more than just perfect tea served by women. It also meant the feelings and activities shared by the family members.

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