

**“AN ACT APART”:  
TEA-DRINKING, PLAY AND RITUAL**

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts in American Material Culture

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## **ABSTRACT**

Studies of tea-drinking emphasize gentility as a fundamental value in early American culture and primarily examine the eighteenth century. But tea continued to be consumed widely in the nineteenth century, and the manufacture and use of miniature tea sets as toys for children suggests a playful element to culture. How did children use these objects, and what does that mean? This study examines several miniature tea sets, children's book illustrations, one novel, and domestic advice manuals in order to provide a clearer picture of tea-drinking practices in the understudied nineteenth century, and the use of tea in children's play. It ultimately examines both tea-drinking and play as ritual practices that challenge the limits of the ordered world. Its conclusions complicate the notion of tea-drinking as an exclusively genteel practice and contribute to the ongoing scholarly discussion surrounding the meaning and purpose of play in human behavior.

## Chapter 1

### “AN ACT APART”: TEA-DRINKING, PLAY AND RITUAL

#### Introduction

Joseph Seymour Guy's 1866 painting *Contest for the Bouquet* depicts a wealthy family in their dining room, where the table is set for tea (Figure 1). While one might expect family tea-time to be a restrained, demure affair, this image shows something quite different. The mother, Frances Burton Gordon, sits passively as her youngest child clings to her and the elder three rambunctiously compete for the bouquet that the oldest brother holds. The younger brother has climbed atop a dining chair; the sister stretches upward to try and retrieve the bouquet while still maintaining a ladylike posture. The room is decorated in high style, with imposing furniture and fine art, but these children are playing. They are making light of the seriousness of the room, of the expensive silver tea set, of the supposed refinement of the space. One wrong move could crack or break the porcelain cups behind them, break the vitrine filled with plants, or dangerously overturn the silver hot water urn on the sideboard. The image captures the capacity of children to play in any circumstances. Vastly different from eighteenth century conversation pieces that often depicted families enjoying tea in a refined fashion, this portrait does not seem to be about establishment

of social class so much as a celebration of the spirit of the family's children. The image raises questions about both the performance of the tea ceremony, scholars' assumptions about Victorian deportment, and the nature of play. Why do people drink tea in the first place? What are the rules surrounding tea-drinking in a family setting such as this one? In what ways are the children breaking those rules, and how are they able to do so? Furthermore, does the game the children are playing have rules of its own? Why are they playing that way? What are the competing cultural values dictating both the tea-drinking and the children's game?

This essay investigates tea-drinking practices in the nineteenth century, especially the use of children's tea sets and the concept of playing with teawares. Ultimately, it views tea-drinking and play as rituals that have the same purpose: to mediate individual desires against the needs of society. As play scholar John Huizinga sees it, ritual practices and play are the same. "All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart."<sup>1</sup> This highlights the transformative nature of both tea-drinking and play. This examination of miniature tea sets and their usage will probe the tension between children creating their own worlds and children learning how to act in society. Both play and tea-drinking operate according to their own set of rules and have the capacity to create their own miniature societies. This study focuses on tensions: between order and chaos, between individual and group, between play and seriousness, between the tangible and the imagined. In

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<sup>1</sup> J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 10.



the space between these polarities we can find insights about the purpose of play, the process of growing up, and what it means to be human.

Scholars have studied tea-drinking extensively. Most authors have approached the activity as a demonstration of social status, emphasizing gentility and refinement as essential values in early America. In her 1961 article *Tea-Drinking in 18<sup>th</sup>-Century America: Its Etiquette and Equipage*, Rodris Roth considers the social aspects of tea-drinking; before this point, other studies had only dealt with its “political, historical, or economic importance.”<sup>2</sup> Because of the time period covered and the nature of her evidence, Roth discussed upper-class usage only, using period pictures and writings to provide an incisive description of the meaning of the tea ceremony in social and domestic life.<sup>3</sup> Her exploration led her to themes of gentility and social status: “Tea was the social beverage of the eighteenth century; serving it was a sign of politeness and hospitality, and drinking it was a custom with distinctive manners and specific equipment.”<sup>4</sup> Roth observes that people thought tea was healthy and used it for medicinal purposes.<sup>5</sup> She went on to provide a summary of how tea was used during this time period: normally at home, at breakfast and again at 3pm.<sup>6</sup> Roth described the

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<sup>2</sup> Rodris Roth, “Tea Drinking in 18<sup>th</sup>- Century America: Its Etiquette and Equipage,” *United States National Museum Bulletin* 225 (1961): 63.

<sup>3</sup> Roth, “Tea Drinking in 18<sup>th</sup>- Century America,”64.

<sup>4</sup> Roth, “Tea Drinking in 18<sup>th</sup>- Century America,”63.

<sup>5</sup> Roth, “Tea Drinking in 18<sup>th</sup>- Century America,”64.

<sup>6</sup> Roth, “Tea Drinking in 18<sup>th</sup>- Century America,”66.

ceremony as the “very core of family life,” although others might be invited to join.<sup>7</sup> She made it clear that several types of social situations were possible at this time, including festive tea parties, more subdued afternoon gatherings, or families taking tea without guests. It was important to know and follow the rules of tea-drinking: to eat and drink at the same time required particular grace; using each piece of specialized equipment properly required specialized knowledge.

Roth was not the only one to write about gentility and tea-drinking in the eighteenth century. In *The Refinement of America*, Richard Bushman used teawares as a marker of genteel living and tracked their presence in inventories between 1768 and 1777. In *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters*, David Shields considered tea tables as part of women’s inclusion in the eighteenth century emergence of the public sphere. In another material-culture based study, T.H. Breen argued that importation, purchase, and consumption of tea during the Revolutionary era were critical to the formation of a national consciousness.

Given its charged symbolism during the events leading up to the Revolution, it is not surprising that the majority of research on this topic examines the eighteenth century. This essay instead focuses on the meaning of the tea ceremony in nineteenth-century America. By that time, tea and teawares were available not only to the middle class but also segments of the working class. If tea-drinking helped with the formation of a national consciousness that enabled a revolution, what was its meaning in the new

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<sup>7</sup> Roth, “Tea Drinking in 18<sup>th</sup>- Century America,” 68.

nation? Tea-drinking is understudied in the nineteenth century, and authors shift their focus to manners, deportment, and sociability. Katherine C. Grier's *Culture and Comfort: Parlor Making and Middle-Class Identity, 1850-1930* is a fascinating material culture study that helps us achieve a richer understanding of American culture by analyzing the development and meaning of the parlor space, and its eventual transformation into the living room. Grier focuses on gentility and sincerity as American values.<sup>8</sup> Other authors focus on the persistence of gentility into the nineteenth century, even as a larger middle class emerged and found its own way to play by the rules.<sup>9</sup> Discourses of the eighteenth-century emergence of the public sphere continue into nineteenth century scholarship with the notion of sociability; Karen V. Hansen examines the ways in which people crossed gender boundaries into the social sphere.<sup>10</sup>

While eighteenth and nineteenth-century scholarship diverge in terms of subject matter, particularly concerning tea-drinking, scholars of both centuries seem to emphasize notions of gentility and class divisions. We ought not to assume that early national and Victorian habits were driven only by class boundary maintenance. This

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<sup>8</sup> Katherine C. Grier, *Culture and Comfort: Parlor Making and Middle-Class Identity, 1850-1930* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> See Dallett Hemphill, *Bowing To Necessities: A History Of Manners In America, 1620-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).  
See also John Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1991).

<sup>10</sup> Karen V. Hansen, *A Very Social Time: Crafting Community in Antebellum New England* (Berkeley: University of California, 1996).

study will argue that play is a driving force in human behavior and introduce ambiguity into the motivations behind the tea-drinking ritual. It will do so using various types of evidence, including objects, documents, literature, fine art, and children's book illustrations. Object-based evidence is drawn from various collections, but primarily from Winterthur Museum, Garden and Library, and the National Museum of Play at the Strong. This essay considers objects for patterns of materials, forms, decoration, and use. Documentary evidence provides context and comes from period literature including newspapers, periodicals, and advice manuals. Domestic advice manuals provide critical challenges; despite their discussion of tea-drinking, health and domestic life, one cannot assume that people practiced the ideals listed in them. However, they do provide valuable information about how people conceived of tea-drinking and its importance in the domestic sphere. Additionally, Susan Warner's widely popular novel of the period, *Wide Wide World*, provides examples of tea-drinking practice in the mid-nineteenth century and children's interaction with tea. Although she does not write about actual events, and the scenes described are fictional, Warner needed to write with a certain level of authenticity in order for these depictions to be accepted by her readers. Similarly, illustrations from children's books and child-related periodicals suggest patterns of play behaviors.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> These books were drawn from Cotsen Children's Library at Princeton University, the Winterthur Library, and the Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play. Many types of sources have been consulted in the hope that through piecing them together, an accurate picture of play in the nineteenth century might be achieved.

This study substantially concerns itself with the ritual nature of tea-drinking and of playing. Drinking various beverages throughout history has been thought of as religious and mystical and included in ritual practice. Many studies of play and of the material culture surrounding childhood identify variations in the nature of play and objects, and attempt to explain changes in society based on these variations. Instead of establishing change over time, I argue that play is essential to human behavior. Changes in the nature of play and of tea-drinking over time can be tracked, but the meaning of these practices are more complicated than a chronological studies reveal. This study complicates some of our notions of tea-drinking, play, and human nature, not only for the nineteenth century focus of this study, but for what the evidence suggests about play and human development in all periods. Adults were aware of social conventions and they tried to indoctrinate their children with social expectations but humans are also creative and playful. Play, like tea-drinking, can be considered a ritual practice that marks human growth and transformation.

The first section will address basic questions of how tea was prepared and consumed in the nineteenth century, and then show how adults used miniature tea sets to educate and socialize children. The second section summarizes basic theories of play, although there is not currently a universally accepted definition of its meaning or purpose.<sup>12</sup> Next, several case studies show how children played with tea sets outside of an educational context. The final section points out the ritual nature of tea-drinking

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<sup>12</sup> Johan Huizinga and Brian Sutton-Smith are emphasized as the most widely-referenced and prolific play scholars.

and play, and shows how both practices mediate individual desires and social needs.

### **Tea-Drinking**

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the tea ceremony was ubiquitous—so ubiquitous, in fact, that detailed descriptions of it are difficult to find. From scarce documentary references, it can be determined that tea was consumed at various levels of formality in the home during this time period.

Frances Trollope, an Englishwoman visiting America in the early nineteenth century, mentions taking part in the “serious matter of tea-drinking,” which occurred some hours after dinner.<sup>13</sup> It is apparent that Mrs. Trollope experienced tea-drinking as a gathering which followed specific rules and conventions. When tea was served formally, as Mrs. Trollope described, hosts paid close attention to detail. *The Skilful Housewife's Book*, published in 1846, is one of few that details specific appropriate behaviors for the host of such a tea party. It reads: “When the tea is to be sent around, let every thing be well arranged and in perfect readiness.” The text references at least two people, in addition to the host, who should wait on the guests. Age and gender are highlighted: the youngest of the servers should serve the women first, followed by the gentlemen. Furthermore, when the server enters, he or she should “cast an eye around the room and observe where the most of the elderly ladies are seated, and proceed forward, and help one of them first.” Tea coffee, cream, sugar, and sweets are

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<sup>13</sup> Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, (London : G. Routledge, 1927), 256.

circulated through the party in a prescribed manner. Temporal aspects are very important: each step of the process should begin as soon as the previous has ended. The entire circulation of all available food and beverages should be repeated at least twice, with the lady of the house partaking last. Finally, when the empty cups have been collected, the host should take care to tend to the fire.<sup>14</sup> Such a tea party was the most formal type of service practiced in the nineteenth century.

Tea was also served to company in a less formal manner. This practice is illustrated in John Lewis Krimmel's 1813 painting *The Quilting Frolic* (Figure 2). In this fictional image, a group of revelers burst in and begin celebrating just as a quilt is finished and before the room is even properly straightened up. An African-American servant stands with a tea-tray, ready to serve them as they please. This is an intermediate level of formality for tea consumption: the tea is served to guests in what appears to be fine blue-and-white porcelain, but guests are not served in any prescribed manner. This scene is far from the "serious matter" that Mrs. Trollope informed her readers about; guests are not even seated. They dance and socialize, while the hosts scramble to retrieve fabric scraps off the floor.

While tea could be enjoyed as a genteel expression of social class, *The Quilting Frolic* shows that it was also part of more casual hospitality where revelry and disorder were acceptable. Although some of the behaviors depicted, such as tea-drinking, may be imitations of urban or upper-class practices, Krimmel makes it clear

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<sup>14</sup> LG Abell, *The Skilful Housewife's Book*, (New York: D. Newell, 1846), 160-161.

that country life and domesticity held practices all of their own. Like the room in which the gathering is held, tea-drinking can be used for a variety of purposes and the rules surrounding it can flex to meet the needs of the participants. A little boy prematurely helps himself to food from the table; like in *Contest for the Bouquet*, rule-breaking is depicted alongside tea objects, which are culturally imbued with notions of gentility.

Finally, tea was sometimes consumed informally in the home, either individually or as a family meal. A notation in *The American Woman's Home* indicates housekeepers had a difficult time regulating the consumption of tea and preventing excess use in the household; clearly, not all tea-drinking occurred in a formal or controlled setting.<sup>15</sup> These cases are not as well documented, perhaps due to their more private nature or perhaps because the practice was routine. Tea acted as “an ordinary domestic meal,”<sup>16</sup> according to an 1834 author in Godey's Lady's book. The author emphasizes that while the tea-table was the center of gossip in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it evolved to be more commonplace by the mid-nineteenth century.

There is no more disposition to draw forth the failings of our neighbours over tea than over roast-beef or punch, at seven o'clock anymore than at five. In the upper classes of society, what with late dinners, routs, and frivolities of every description, tea-drinking may be put aside as a vulgarity; but as being, in point of fact, a powerful agent in humanizing the harsh feelings of our nature, and cultivating the domestic affections,

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<sup>15</sup> Catharine Beecher, *The American Woman's Home*, (New York: J.B. Ford, 1869), 144.

<sup>16</sup> “Tea-Drinking,” *Godey's Lady's Book*, February, 1834.



I trust it will long hold a place in the dietetics of the respectable middle and lower classes...<sup>17</sup>

By discussing the “humanizing” power of tea and “domestic affections,” this author confirms the intimate nature of the tea service and its status as a family meal.

Several instances of tea-drinking in Susan Warner’s 1850 novel *Wide Wide World* underscore the various levels of intimacy and formality present in the tea ritual during the nineteenth century. Warner’s novel centers around a child protagonist, Ellen Montgomery, who is forced to leave her home because of her mother’s illness. During the rest of the novel Ellen travels, resides with several other families, and encounters various misadventures. Tea is consumed many times throughout the novel.

For a great deal of her childhood Ellen lives with her Aunt Fortune. At one point Fortune is reluctant to go through with a bee for her neighbors if she is going to be required to serve tea. Fortune needs much help paring apples and cutting pork, and it is typical for neighbors to assist each other in such cases. But Fortune refuses to serve the helpers tea, as would be customary: “But I won't have 'em to tea, mind you I'd rather throw apples and all into the fire at once. I'll have but one plague of setting up tables, and that I won't have 'em to tea. I'll make it up to' em in the supper though.”<sup>18</sup> Fortune hesitates to have the neighbors to tea, either because she does not want the trouble of the formal tea ceremony, as described above, because tea is too expensive to provide too all of the neighbors, or because it offends the sense of

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<sup>17</sup> “Tea-Drinking,” *Godey's Lady's Book*, February, 1834.

<sup>18</sup> Susan Warner, *The Wide Wide World*, (New York: The Feminist Press, 1987), 229.

intimacy surrounding the tea ceremony. We might imagine that tea in such a rural location would resemble the scene in *The Quilting Frolic*; perhaps Fortune wishes to avoid the mess associated with such a gathering!

Warner's novel also provides a rare, detailed description of the preparation of tea. Domestic manuals sometimes offer tips for the most efficient preparation of tea, but do not describe the process step-by-step, perhaps a further indication that everyone knew the basics of tea preparation during this period. Even ten-year-old Ellen prepares tea daily. The scene occurs very early in the novel, after Ellen has found out that she will be separated from her mother, but before she leaves her home. She prepares tea for her mother:

She used in the first place to make sure that the kettle really boiled; then she carefully poured some water into the teapot and rinsed it, both to make it clean and to make it hot; then she knew exactly how much tea to put into the tiny little teapot, which was just big enough to hold two cups of tea; and having poured a very little boiling water to it, she used to set it by the side of the fire while she made half a slice of toast. How careful Ellen was about that toast! The bread must not be cut too thick, nor too thin; the fire must, if possible, burn clear and bright; and she herself held the bread on a fork, just at the right distance from the coals to get nicely browned without burning. When this was done to her satisfaction (and if the first piece failed, she would take another), she filled up the little tea-pot from the boiling kettle, and proceeded to make a cup of tea. She knew, and was very careful to put in, just the quantity of milk and sugar that her mother liked; and then she used to carry the tea and toast on a little tray to her mother's side, and very often held it there for her while she ate.<sup>19</sup>

Ellen's technique for preparation is confirmed as proper by scarce references in domestic manuals. The *Ladies' Guide* of 1853 advises to scald the tea-pot before

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<sup>19</sup> Warner, *The Wide Wide World*, 13.

drinking, and to let the tea “draw” for about five minutes.<sup>20</sup> When Ellen pours “very little boiling water” over the tea and leaves it while she is preparing the toast, she is allowing the tea to draw. Although the ceremonial component of tea-drinking might seem to diminish when it is not served to guests, it is clear from this description that the simple preparation of tea in such a repetitive and specific manner retains a ceremonial or ritualistic quality.

Manuals and periodicals include tips of selecting the best tea leaves, comments on water quality, discussions on how to get the best “draw”, and instructions for cleaning tea implements.<sup>21</sup> The 1845 *Encyclopedia of Domestic Economy* makes it clear that families took seriously choices about the material of their tea sets; it details the pros and cons of metal and earthenware tea sets.<sup>22</sup> The *Treatise* also covers health issues surrounding tea-drinking in depth. Notes on tea preparation are contained in a majority of period home economics literature, suggesting that consumption was a widespread cultural norm.

Surviving tea sets and archeological assemblages provide us with a record of what pieces a family typically owned for serving tea. Teacups and saucers, sometimes including matching coffee cups, a teapot and stand, a sugar dish and stand, a slop bowl, a tea canister, a creampot, a spoon tray, and cake plates are all standard pieces

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<sup>20</sup> Abell, *The Skilful Housewife's Book*, 119.

<sup>21</sup> “Economy of the Tea-Table”, *Godey's Lady's Book*, February, 1863.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Webster, *An Encyclopaedia of Domestic Economy* (New York : Harper & Brothers, 1845), 704.

of a full-sized tea set.<sup>23</sup> The function of these standard pieces confirm several aspects of tea-drinking practice, such as the idea that in America, tea was consumed with milk and sugar and often along with a small amount of food.

Miniature tea sets were available in a range of refinement; in Winterthur's collection alone, nineteenth-century miniature tea sets are represented in porcelain, spatterware, pewter, and silver, among other materials and various decorative schemes.<sup>24</sup> These miniature tea sets were available to a wide segment of the population, as even decorated sets made from coarse earthenware were sold for as little as ten cents per individual piece.<sup>25</sup> Heightened oversupply as the nineteenth century progressed caused prices of ceramics to drop, therefore teawares were "increasingly affordable" to everyone.<sup>26</sup>

During the early nineteenth century, the establishment of the New Republic caused a new emphasis on socialization of children for their future responsibility as citizens. Adults began to attempt to "domesticate" children more so than in prior generations.<sup>27</sup> Miniature teawares had been used as playthings for centuries, but in the nineteenth century there is a distinct emphasis in the literature on their educational

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<sup>23</sup> Rebecca Yamin, *Digging in the City of Brotherly Love: Stories from Philadelphia Archaeology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 72.

<sup>24</sup> See Winterthur Object ID numbers 1965.1189.009, 1968.0610, 1959.1035.

<sup>25</sup> Washington County Museum of Fine Arts, *Spatterware from the Louis G. & Shirley F. Hecht Collection* (Hagerstown, M.D.: 1991), 5.

<sup>26</sup> George L. Miller and Amy C. Earls, "War and Pots: The Impact of Economics and Politics on Ceramic Consumption Patterns," *Ceramics in America* (2008): 102.

<sup>27</sup> Howard P. Chudacoff, *Children at Play: An American History* (New York: NYU Press, 2008), 39.

use. Several contemporary authors who have examined a broad range of miniature tea ware insist that its ultimate purpose was to teach social roles. In *Ceramics for Children: 1650-1835*, Rick Pardue argues that small tea sets “served as a means through which parents taught their children to succeed in an adult world and carry themselves with proper refinement in polite society.”<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, he notes that period etiquette books rarely contain tea manners; he concludes that these were not learned formally but rather “culturally encoded.”<sup>29</sup> Little tea sets that children played with were part of that process.

The objects themselves can show how manners were culturally encoded. This mid nineteenth-century miniature tea set in the collection of the National Museum of Play at the Strong<sup>30</sup> consists of nine teacups, six saucers, a teapot, creampot, sugar bowl, and slop bowl (Figure 3). All of the pieces are made of porcelain and are decorated with gilding around the edges; the teapot, creampot, and sugar bowl bear a leafy naturalistic design. All pieces have ridges that run from the center or bottom to the upper edge. The cups have a lip that curves outward. When viewed from above, some of the cups look circular, while the ridges are more apparent and come to a point on others; this suggests that some of the cups are not original to the set. The set must have been assembled, either by a collector or by a consumer buying some items as he

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<sup>28</sup> Rick Pardue, *Ceramics for Children, 1650-1835*, (Winston-Salem, NC: Jostens, 2008), xx.

<sup>29</sup> Pardue, *Ceramics for Children*, xix.

<sup>30</sup> Toy tea service. Porcelain, gilt. Maker unknown, c. 1850. National Museum of Play at the Strong Object ID 77.3072.

or she had money. The handles of the cups come to an extended point at the top and are also squared off at the bottom. The handles of the teapot, cream pitcher, and sugar bowl contain multiple scrolled patterns and are extremely decorative. The cups measure 1.3 inches in diameter.

Minor staining in some of the cups provides evidence of use. However, there is very little chipping or cracking of the fine and delicate porcelain, and the gilding is largely intact. When held, the pieces of this set seem to communicate fragility and delicacy. The porcelain itself is thin and cold, and the handles are so tiny that they require much care to be pinched between two fingers. To hold the cup this way feels precarious and requires discipline. The children who used this set must have taken very good care of it, and must have been instructed in proper use. The nature of the material, the size of the objects, and the fineness of the handles speak for themselves: without being told, children know they must be careful with these. Furthermore, each of the pieces has a specialized use. The base of the cups fit neatly into the saucers, instructing children how they should be arranged. The proper use of the teapot, creampot, sugar bowl, and slop bowl require specialized knowledge, and their presence may prompt children to acquire such knowledge. In this sense, the objects themselves shape behaviors.

There is extensive documentary evidence indicating that children were taught the particularities of the tea ritual. An article in the July 1866 issue of Godey's Lady's Book entitled "Domestic Education" indicates that competency in the tea ritual was an

important part of a maturing young woman's education. On the process of training a girl to manage a household:

The next great step is in allowing little miss to make the tea, which is a very great promotion indeed, and ere many years go by she presides at the tea and breakfast table with a perfect sense of what is required of her; and to the great relief of mamma, who knows that if she goes out to tea she leaves some one behind who is quite capable of conducting things satisfactorily in her absence.<sup>31</sup>

This shows that the preparation of tea was a social responsibility, and not simply a private expression of care or practical preparation of a meal. Women "preside" over tea-table hospitality, and someone must conduct the ceremony even when mother is gone.

Furthermore, *The American Girl's Home Book of Work and Play*, an 1883 text, discusses "Make-Believe Housekeeping" and concludes that "The transition is an easy on from the make-believe to the real, and a child who has this training will never feel the terror of housekeeping that fills many a girl before marriage."<sup>32</sup> Roland Barthes also discusses the potential indoctrinating function of toys, using the example of dolls that wet themselves and claiming that "This is meant to prepare the little girl for the causality of house-keeping, to 'condition' her to her future role as mother."<sup>33</sup> More broadly, he points out that the French in particular seem to create toys that treat

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<sup>31</sup> Mrs. Francis, "Domestic Education," *Godey's Lady's Book*, July, 1866.

<sup>32</sup> Helen Campbell, *The American Girl's Home Book of Work and Play*, (New York: Putnam, 1883), 282.

<sup>33</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 53.

children as miniature versions of adults, that toys are a “microcosm of the adult world.”<sup>34</sup> He argues that this helps children accept the adult world—that toys “*always mean something*, and this something is always entirely socialized, constituted by the myths or the techniques of modern adult life.”<sup>35</sup> These statements concerning the importance of toys and play to learning adult behaviors are consistent with Jean Piaget’s modern developmental theory, in which children learn by either assimilating new experiences to existing mental schemas, or changing those schemas to accommodate new experiences.<sup>36</sup> Play with miniature tea sets allows children to more easily assimilate tea-drinking behavior into adult roles. However, I do not mean to suggest that play is an essential human behavior only for purposes of learning. It is easy to imagine play activities that do not seem connected to any “productive” or educational behavior. Anyone who has observed children playing might find it difficult to believe they would interact quietly and carefully with a tea set such as the one illustrated above. Did children simply play with these tea sets? What does it mean to just play?

## **Play**

We all have instincts about what play is when we see it, but playful behavior often goes far beyond games, toys, and the typical behaviors of childhood. The

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<sup>34</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, 53.

<sup>35</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, 53.

<sup>36</sup> Jean Piaget, *The Construction of Reality in the Child*, trans. Margaret Cook (Routledge and Kegan, 1955).



meaning and purpose of play has been debated for hundreds of years across many disciplines. There are many play theorists, none are in total agreement, and there is not one universally accepted definition/purpose of play. Nineteenth century psychologists Sigmund Freud, Jean Piaget, and Lev Vygotsky, incorporate play heavily into their theories of human development. Freud emphasized the role of play as a way for children to rid themselves of negative emotions and gain power over their situation; Piaget and Vygotsky argued that play had more to do with socialization and learning.

While these psychologists focused more on the purpose of play, leaving aside attempts at defining it, modern theorists have concentrated more on defining the practice. Dutch scholar John Huizinga provoked much of that conversation with his 1938 text *Homo Ludens*, where he offers five defining characteristics of play:

- 1) "it is free, is in fact freedom"<sup>37</sup>
- 2) "play is not 'ordinary' or 'real' life. It is rather a stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own"<sup>38</sup>
- 3) "It is 'played out' within certain limits of time and space. It contains its own course and meaning."<sup>39</sup>
- 4) "it creates order, it *is* order"<sup>40</sup>
- 5) "It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, 8.

<sup>38</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, 8.

<sup>39</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, 9.

<sup>40</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, 10.

<sup>41</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, 13.

These characteristics are not entirely related, reflecting the lack of a cogent definition of play. The first and fourth characteristics seem to contradict each other; how can play embody both freedom and order? This apparent contradiction highlights an essential quality of play: it simultaneously imposes rules and invites transgression. Huizinga explains, “[Play] promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means.”<sup>42</sup> Creating “in” and “out” groups, secret handshakes and other boundaries are common features of childhood play. Play sets children apart; from adults, from other groups of children, from the usual rules. Subversion and transgression are often elements of play theory, but are perhaps understated in our current understanding of the definition and purpose of play. Much play can involve children rejecting adult expectations and creating their own systems of order.<sup>43</sup> Children’s behavior surrounding their play can be remarkably consistent across time and cultures, in that they typically construct ideas regarding who is permitted to play, where, and with what, spontaneously creating mini-societies with rules of their own.<sup>44</sup> Anthropologist Douglas Newton says, ‘The world-wide

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<sup>42</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, 13.

<sup>43</sup> Chudacoff, *Children at Play: An American History*, 8.

<sup>44</sup> Chudacoff, *Children at Play: An American History*, 11.

fraternity of children is the greatest of savage tribes, and the only one which shows no signs of dying out.”<sup>45</sup>

Brian Sutton-Smith summarizes much of the conversation on play since Huziniga and offers his own approach to the subject. Even though he has extensively investigated the idea of play, Sutton-Smith emphasizes that there is little agreement on a definition. He briefly captures the problem by saying “In short we don’t know why children play, even if they can’t help doing it.”<sup>46</sup> Smith divides his major work, 1997’s *The Ambiguity of Play*, into sections based on the different arguments or “rhetorics” people use to explain play: progress, fate, power, identity, the imaginary, the self, and frivolity. He ultimately concludes that, despite these various and sometimes compelling options for explaining play behavior, the experience of play can always diverge from the explanation: “it is impossible to keep ambiguity from creeping into the relationship between how [forms of play] are perceived and how they are experienced.”<sup>47</sup> This is why there is so little agreement on the meaning of play. He ultimately argues that the adaptability of the concept may be its essence.<sup>48</sup>

What Sutton-Smith calls the rhetorics of the self are useful in understanding play with tea sets. These rhetorics “focus on play as having its basis in the psychology

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<sup>45</sup> Iona Opie and Peter Opie, *Children’s Games in Street and Playground* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969), 2.

<sup>46</sup> Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 49.

<sup>47</sup> Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, 216.

<sup>48</sup> Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, 278.

of the individual player.”<sup>49</sup> This rhetoric conceives of play as individually, intrinsically motivated, leading Sutton-Smith to conclude that it is “more concerned with individuals than with groups.”<sup>50</sup> However, even individually motivated play activities can have much to do with groups if the individual engages in the activity in order to enter into or identify with the group. Viewed as rituals, both play and tea-drinking can be seen as rites of passage into groups or larger society.

At some point theory must be tested with observations of actual behavior. There is evidence that children in the nineteenth century enjoyed a wide variety of games and toys, and also that they participated in outdoor play.<sup>51</sup> While children attempted to challenge the notion, there was a firmly entrenched idea that each gender had its own proper activities and manner of behavior.<sup>52</sup> This gendered distinction manifested itself in the toys generally provided for boys and girls respectively. Children also balanced play with many other responsibilities, including duties around the house, family obligations, and increasingly with education.<sup>53</sup>

The engraving *Children Playing as Horses* <sup>54</sup> in an 1863 issue of Peterson’s Magazine shows four children engaging with various objects in their parlor to create

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<sup>49</sup> Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, 173.

<sup>50</sup> Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, 174.

<sup>51</sup> Miriam Formanek-Brunell, *Made to Play House: Dolls and the Commercialization of American Girlhood, 1830-1930* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 5.

<sup>52</sup> Chudacoff, *Children at Play: An American History*, 43.

<sup>53</sup> Miriam Formanek-Brunell, *Made to Play House*, 13-14.

<sup>54</sup> *Peterson’s Magazine*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (Oct 1863).

their own imaginary scenario (Figure 4): the two smallest sisters serve as horses to pull the carriage, composed of three chairs, driven by their brother and carrying a young woman who might be their older sister. The boy has stacked books to serve as his seat. He uses smocks as reins to control the girls. The passenger lounges with an umbrella to protect her and her baby doll, who completes the scenario. Much like the scene in *Contest for the Bouquet*, these children have appropriated and repurposed adult objects, and play in a formal space. The scene is an illustration of that essential quality of play as a means of imposing order and fostering transgression: the children operate within the known/learned scenario of using a horse and carriage, but they dictate their own terms for this game. They find alternate uses for everyday objects and risk harming the valuable things around them. The transmission of power is evident: the smaller girls are literally bound and may be unwilling participants in the game. While the young boy controls the girls, the entire game may be for the benefit of the older girl, who must fancy herself the matriarch as she cares for her baby doll. These children have formed their own miniature society. They may mimic adult behaviors, but exist explicitly outside of the situation they mimic (there are no horses; there is no carriage). The game allows them to situate themselves within systems of their own invention.

There is documentary, visual, and material evidence that children played with tea sets outside of an educational context during this period. While none of the period documents reference the idea that it was important for *boys* to learn social rituals from tea sets, there are two stories in period newspapers which indicate that boys did play

with them. A story called “Don’t Break it, Jose” which appeared in the *Baltimore Patriot* in 1830 includes a mother trying to distract her unruly son with a “little tea set.”<sup>55</sup> An 1865 newspaper indicates that a little boy played with his sister’s miniature tea set at his birthday supper.<sup>56</sup> The fact that boys interacted with miniature tea sets suggests that they were sometimes used outside of their intended social function.

Not all children’s tea sets communicate the same sense of fragility and require the level of gentility in handling as the porcelain gilded tea set described above. This miniature tea bowl in the Winterthur collection<sup>57</sup> is 2.75 inches in diameter, seeming well suited to a child’s ability to achieve a secure grasp (Figure 5). It is made of earthenware, making it thicker and sturdier than the porcelain set. The earthenware also insulates better against heat, meaning that less care was required if the teabowl was actually used to serve tea. The decoration is appealing: it is sponged with blue and green, and a painted scene depicts a castle or fort. The bright colors and interest created by the various textures and lines capture the eye and the imagination. Although Winterthur’s policies do not allow such experiments, it seems clear that this tea bowl could survive being dropped or otherwise roughly handled, and a crack and repair in the wall of the teabowl indicate it may have received such rough handling. The idea that child-sized teacups and tea sets were produced suggests an element of

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<sup>55</sup> “Don’t Break it, Jose,” *Baltimore Patriot*, February 8, 1830.

<sup>56</sup> E.B.H., “Children,” *Zion’s Herald and Wesleyan Journal*, July 12, 1865, 36.

<sup>57</sup> Miniature teabowl or teacup. Earthenware (spatterware); Lead glaze. Maker unknown, 1825-1855, Staffordshire, England. Winterthur Object ID 1965.1233.006, Bequest of Henry Francis du Pont.

play all by itself: if children were only meant to be supervised in their use of tea sets, and if their interaction with tea sets was only meant to be didactic, they could use adult sized objects or delicate, porcelain versions with decorated handles. The existence of a study earthenware miniature tea bowl like this one suggests that children played with tea sets at varying levels of supervision.

Pieces like this were mass-produced in Staffordshire, England, during the second quarter of the nineteenth century specifically for export to an American market. They were cheap and exceedingly common, so there is no visual or documentary evidence of use for this piece specifically. However, the material, size, condition, and decoration on this object indicate that it may have been used by children at play; such play may or may not have involved tea-drinking. Such objects were saved and ultimately ended up in museum collections for various reasons. Adults may have valued a teacup such as this for reasons of sentiment or collectability. In fact, spatterware became highly collectable during the twentieth century. The 1930 publication of an article in *Antiques Magazine* dealing with the colorful wares captured the interest of notable collectors such as Henry Francis du Pont, sparking a collecting craze that lasted for decades.<sup>58</sup> In this way, adults played with the teacup as well: admiring its colors, noting its unusual center decoration, and acquiring it as part of the collecting game.

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<sup>58</sup> Karla Klein Albertson. "Collecting the Best Spatter and Sponge." *Early American Life* (April 1989): 42, 50.

An 1882 children's book includes an illustration that depicts casual play with a miniature tea set; it further supports the notion of play with tea sets with little or no adult supervision.<sup>59</sup> In the story *The Three Good Friends: Carrie, Lily and Floss*, two girls, their dog (Floss), an unnamed cat, and two baby dolls enact a variety of scenes that imitate adult life. In this scene, the text tells us that they accept visitors and give gifts of apples as they have tea (Figure 6). They have built a house by opening an umbrella overtop of themselves, and Mary's wool shawl serves as a rug. One girl sits on a chair with her baby doll, while the other crouches on the floor leaning against a small dressing table and holding an angry cat. On the dressing table sits a tiny cup and saucer; on the floor a few feet away from the girls sits another cup and saucer, a cream pitcher, and a stray lid from some part of the tea set. Both girls hold relaxed postures, and it is apparent that they are engaged in casual play. Like the children in *Playing at Horses*, these girls have repurposed everyday objects to create a world of their own. The umbrella becomes a shelter. The bonnet is divorced from its function and is perhaps meant to be decorative. The girl in purple leans against the dressing table without regard to its potential fragility or intended use. The girls have set themselves apart in a world under their umbrella, bringing baby doll and cat along with them. In this world, they decide the proper use of the objects that surround them. We can see playthings: the small village on the tabletop behind them, the miniature dressing table, the tea set. But none of these are used in an ordered, polite way. The girls are

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<sup>59</sup> *The Three Good Friends: Carrie, Lily and Floss*, (New York: McLoughlin Brothers, 1882).



permitted to reorder the things around them in spite of the fact that they seemingly come from a polite household. This and the other scenarios they enact (a market scene, wash day) betray their middle-class origins and may tend to suggest that they are learning to participate in domestic life through these games; however, their less-than proper treatment of domestic objects and the lack of adult supervision indicates they are also motivated simply by their desire to subvert those domestic lessons.

Another children's book from the mid-nineteenth century carries this message of play as a willful act of separation even farther. In *Dolls House-Keeping*, the story of "An Only Child's Tea Party," a little girl narrates a story which begins:

When I go to tea with the little Smiths, there are eight of them there, but there's only one of me.

Which makes it not so easy to have a fancy tea party as if there were two or three.

I had a tea-party on my birthday, but Joe Smith says it can't have been a regular one.

Because as to a tea-party with only one tea-cup and no teapot, sugar-basin, cream jug, or slop basin he never heard of such a thing under the sun.<sup>60</sup>

The story goes on to describe the girl's interactions with Towser the dog, Charles the Canary, the Prince of Wales who is her male doll, and Cinderella her female doll. She uses a cup and a saucer and chair to furnish her tea-party (Figure 7).

Joe Smith outlines society's rules: you cannot have a tea party without teapot, sugar-basin, cream jug, or slop basin, and with only one tea cup. She chooses to transcend this rule and have her tea party anyway. It seems she wishes to be a part of

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<sup>60</sup> Juliana Horatia Ewing, *Dolls House-Keeping*, (New York: E. & J.B. Young, 1841-1885), 17. Located at Rare Books and Special Collections Cotsen Children's Library.

the society of children that surrounds her. But in trying to join that society through the tea ritual, she further sets herself apart. Joe Smith tells her: “a kitchen chair isn’t a table,” to which she replies “but it has got four legs and a top, so it would be if the back wasn’t there.”<sup>61</sup> Of her companions, he tells her “You can’t possibly have fun with four people when you have to pretend what they say.”<sup>62</sup> Her conclusion of the whole affair is that “whatever he says I don’t believe I shall ever enjoy a tea-party more than the one that we had on that day.”<sup>63</sup> The story highlights several tensions implicit in the idea of playing with tea sets. Certainly, it illustrates the principle of working within a system of rules while also transgressing them; she attempts to mimic the refined behavior of adults around her, while breaking all the rules about how to do so. She enjoys this behavior despite being told it is improper. Her tea party is not a “regular” one, and she defiantly derives pleasure from that.

These examples have all shown similar behavior with regard to miniature tea sets and other domestic objects that children appropriate into play. Despite awareness of the rules and intended functions of the things around them, they create material and social worlds all of their own. Just because miniature tea sets are intended to replicate the function of adult objects does not mean that they are exempt from this re-appropriation. Despite his ideas about the indoctrinating function of objects, Barthes points out that if toys are always a microcosm of the adult universe, both children and

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<sup>61</sup> Ewing, *Dolls House-Keeping*, 20.

<sup>62</sup> Ewing, *Dolls House-Keeping*, 31.

<sup>63</sup> Ewing, *Dolls House-Keeping*, 32.

objects lack agency, saying "...faced with this world of faithful and complicated objects, the child can only identify himself as owner, as user, never as creator; he does not invent the world, he uses it: there are, prepared for him, actions without adventure, without wonder, without joy."<sup>64</sup> He discusses blocks as a flexible toy. When a child uses blocks to create something, "...objects now act by themselves, they are no longer an inert and complicated material in the palm of his hand."<sup>65</sup> In children's minds, tea sets can become a raw material of play just as much as a chair or an umbrella can; the use of this object is not fixed. Walter Benjamin, too, includes creative play outside the context of an adult microcosm in his theories. He asserts that children are drawn to everyday objects and scraps, and that

They use these things, not so much to reproduce the works of adults, as to put the most disparate materials in new and discontinuous relationships, by turning them into something through play. In this manner, children build for themselves, all on their own, the world of objects, a small world within the big one.<sup>66</sup>

### **Ritual**

How can it be that children play with tea sets to learn how to participate in the adult world, yet they also play with tea sets in order to set themselves apart from that

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<sup>64</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, 53-54.

<sup>65</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, 54.

<sup>66</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, trans. Harry Zohn, (New York: Harcourt, 1968), 13.

world? In *Children at Play: An American History*, Howard Chudacoff argues that this tension became particularly pronounced in the nineteenth century.

More than in previous generations, preadolescent children were developing a dual existence, as expressed by both Harriet Doubney and William Dean Howells: an acceptable one that occurred in the presence of adults and a separate one that was flourishing beyond what adults observed or accepted. The tensions of this duality, one part structured, the other part uncontrolled, would widen in the latter half of the century.<sup>67</sup>

However, Thomas Henricks points out that “Play scholars have tended to focus on play activities that are constructive (rather than destructive) and socially appropriate (rather than deviant).”<sup>68</sup> Play need not always be an agent of social cohesion; we have seen that it can just as easily separate children from society through self-interest.

Henricks goes on: “[Play is] an occasion marked by tension, resistance, and disharmony that are the outcomes of self-assertion or partisanship. In other words, play activities seem to express—at the same time—qualities of social harmony and disharmony, cooperation and competition, rationality and nonrationality.”<sup>69</sup> Playing with tea sets embodies this conflict between cooperation and competition—between individual and group needs in society.

Examination of nineteenth century periodicals and advice manuals reveal that tea-drinking served a similar function. The wide variety of tea-drinking practices in this period show that while it could sometimes be an expression of sociability and

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<sup>67</sup> Chudacoff, *Children at Play: An American History*, 66.

<sup>68</sup> Thomas Henricks, “The Nature of Play: An Overview,” *American Journal of Play* Vol. 1, No. 2. (Fall 2008): 164.

<sup>69</sup> Henricks, “The Nature of Play,” 165.

refinement, it was also practiced throughout the day in a less controlled manner. Additionally, people consumed tea and served it to children despite mixed health warnings. Tea-drinking is never just about containers or rituals. It is also about nourishment via the category of “Beverages” that typically included a section covering coffee, tea, chocolate, and alcohol. Many people in the nineteenth century believed that beverages had special properties; Catherine Beecher argued that “Fluids taken into the stomach are not subject to the slow process of digestion, but are immediately absorbed and carried into the blood. This is reason why drink, more speedily than food, restores from exhaustion.”<sup>70</sup> Like Beecher, many nineteenth-century people believed beverages could have such a dramatic effect on the constitution.

To show that tea-drinking is unhealthful and damaging, Beecher drew on several arguments. She warned that people enjoy stimulating beverages so much that they become addicted:

Their peculiarity consists in so exciting the nervous system, that all the functions of the body are accelerated, and the fluids are caused to move quicker than at their natural speed. This increased motion of the animal fluids, always produces an agreeable effect on the mind. The intellect is invigorated, the imagination is excited, the spirits are enlivened; and these effects are so agreeable, that all mankind, after having once experienced them, feel a great desire for their repetition.<sup>71</sup>

Beecher was not alone in warning against tea-drinking for health reasons. Other authors shared her views: “A writer in the American Traveller is endeavoring to prove,

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<sup>70</sup> Catharine Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*, (New York : Harper & Brothers, 1849), 104.

<sup>71</sup> Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*, 106-107.

that common tea is an active poison. He states, that its effects are so gradual, as not to be apparent, and that its tendency is to shorten life. We opine that the ladies will not be discouraged from the use of their favorite beverage, by such melancholy statements.”<sup>72</sup> Tea and tea-drinking, like play and ritual, involve elements of risk that some nineteenth century Americans worried about and others ignored.

Examined in the context of rituals, both children’s play with tea sets and adult tea consumption can be viewed as attempts to fit into society and as attempts to satisfy selfish longings. In *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, Victor Turner discusses the importance of ritual in society. As rituals typically mark a person moving between one state and another, Turner argues that during rituals there is always a moment of between-ness, during which opportunities for creative thought arise:

In this gap between ordered worlds almost anything may happen. In this interim of “liminality,” the possibility exists of standing aside not only from one’s own social position but from all social positions and of formulating a potentially unlimited series of alternative social arrangements. That this danger is recognized in all tolerably orderly societies is made evident by the proliferation of taboos that hedge in and constrain those on whom the normative structure loses its grip during such potent transitions...<sup>73</sup>

The concept of a “tea ritual” is already part of our lexicon, and it is not difficult to see the characteristics of a ritual in that act: a series of actions are performed in a prescribed order, using specialized objects dedicated to the ritual usage. It also fits

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<sup>72</sup> “Tea Poisonous,” *The Liberator*, October 27, 1832.

<sup>73</sup> Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, (Ithaca : Cornell, 1974), 13-14.

Turner's criteria of moving a person between one state and another. While it lost such significance through the nineteenth century, tea-drinking historically marked one as a member of a privileged class. In all periods, the consumption of the stimulating beverage was meant to move a person from one state of mind to another. Furthermore, drinking tea in a formal or group context reinforces an individual's identity as a member of a discrete group. He or she is linked by expectations of reciprocity and conformity.

Can play be considered a ritual as well? Huizinga playfully upends this question for his reader by claiming not that play is a ritual, but that all forms of ritual are play. "The ritual act has all the formal and essential characteristics of play which we enumerated above, particularly in so far as it transports the participants to another world."<sup>74</sup> The transformative nature of play, whether through the creation of imaginary realms or through the re-arranging of social relationships, is the key to its ritual nature. Or, as Huizinga might argue, the transformative nature of rituals are the key to why they should be considered play activities! If both are rituals, then both create the moment of between-ness or liminality that Turner identifies. Both are destructive processes in which the "I" is reincorporated into the "we." The ever-present matching tea set materializes the drinker's place in society; each drinker receives a cup to mark them as an individual, but by participating in the ritual they identify with the set and become part of the group.

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<sup>74</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, 18.

In the story “The New Tea-Set” contained in *The Girl’s Story Book*, Jane Gregory, child host of a tea party for four girls, unleashes her self-destructive impulses during their play. One of her companions makes a joke that she does not agree with, and when Jane pouts and another companion makes light of her feelings, Jane has a violent reaction: “Jane’s face grew red with anger. She got up, gave the table a push, and upset it. Over it went, with every thing that was on it. What a spilling of tea and milk there was; what a smashing of china; what a jingling of knives, and forks, and spoons!”<sup>75</sup> Although this is treated as a negative turn in the story, it is worth noting the apparent glee of the author as he describes the destruction. Similarly, in the illustration Jane holds her shoulders at a jaunty angle (Figure 8). As much as she may regret the broken tea set later, she takes pleasure in her selfish, impulsive action in the moment. Is upsetting the tea table considered play? The story states “That put an end to the play, of course.”<sup>76</sup> Jane moved beyond the rules of tea-drinking, beyond the rules of the game with her friends, to create her own game. Certainly, the upending of the tea table might be considered a ritual action that moved Jane from one state to another: polite host to petulant child. In the liminal space between those two states, Jane is able to see more possibilities than just fitting into her group of friends. She is able to express herself and dictate her own course. The game, and Jane’s reaction to it, mitigated her need to be an individual.

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<sup>75</sup> Theodore Thinker, *The Girl’s Story Book*, (New York: Published by Clark, Austin & Co, 1851), 27-28.

<sup>76</sup> Thinker, *The Girl’s Story Book*, 28.



Such transgressive actions may seem destructive, but may ultimately function to sustain order in society. Similar to lude festivals and carnival celebrations, controlled instances of breaking the rules can allow individuals to calmly re-enter ordered society.

Especially in highly ordered and hierarchical societies, carnival reinforces the status quo because, first of all, it provides the exceptions that prove the rules.... Mocking but not changing the order of things, ritual dirt-work operates as a kind of safety valve, allowing internal conflicts and nagging anomalies to be expressed without serious consequence... Carnival is thus a sort of psychic and social drainage system in which structure's garbage gets expressed only to be carted away when the banners come down.<sup>77</sup>

In fact, Jane immediately regrets her actions in our example. The text says:

And how bitterly did that foolish girl repent of what she had done, when she got over her fit of anger! Don't you think she would have given a good deal the next day, if she had not broken her tea-set in such a foolish manner? But the loss of the tea-set was not the worst of it. She felt ashamed to think how she had given way to her temper, and she was afraid that her playmates were so much displeased with what she had done, that they would not love her any more.

Of course, perhaps Jane's repentance is only fictional and meant as a moral for the young girls reading this story. But in a society that valued order and politeness enough to produce such a tale, any child who practiced such uncontrolled behavior was bound to feel some self-loathing. So, immediately after her expression of selfish desires, Jane wishes to re-enter the ordered world of her playmates. Both her expression of selfishness and her desire to feel a part of society were enabled by tea-drinking and by play.

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<sup>77</sup> Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth and Art* (New York: North Point Press, 1998), 187.

The story is about taking risks through play and learning lessons through mistakes. The game starts out innocently but as with most play, the ending is unpredictable. The girls are not yet old enough to fully understand the expectations surrounding tea-drinking; they can try out their roles through this game. However, in this case, Jane's frustration yields to loss of self control. In destroying her toys and their ordered landscape, Jane has made a world apart; from her playmates, from her parents, from society's expectations of her manners. Play challenges the casual assumption of socially determined outcomes. In the space between real life and the game, or between the game and the outburst, Jane can see infinite possibilities for herself. Play allows people to be creative through risk-taking. Ritual may be a form of play, but the outcomes are anticipated if not mostly already known. Play allows people to test the rules of ordered society in a way that involves risk and unpredictable outcomes. By using it to approach the limits of what is acceptable, subversive play can help both children and adults understand those limits and ultimately conform to them. In this way, play can be seen as a transformative ritual action that is both constructive and destructive, but essentially creative.



Figure 1 *Contest for the Bouquet*, Seymour Joseph Guy, American, 1866, Oil on canvas. Image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, through the Images for Academic Publishing program.



Figure 2     *The Quilting Frolic*, John Lewis Krimmel, American, 1813, Oil on canvas. Courtesy, Winterthur Museum.



Figure 3 Toy tea service. Maker unknown; c. 1850. Porcelain, gilt. National Museum of Play at the Strong: Object ID 77.3072. Image courtesy of The Strong®, Rochester, New York.





Figure 4      *Children Playing at Horses*, from *Peterson's Magazine*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (Oct 1863); engraving. Image courtesy of The Strong®, Rochester, New York.



Figure 5      Miniature teabowl or teacup. Staffordshire, England; 1825-1855.  
Spatterware (lead-glazed). Winterthur Museum, Garden and Library:  
Object ID 1965.1233.006, Bequest of Henry Francis du Pont. Courtesy,  
Winterthur Museum.



Figure 6 Illustration from *The Three Good Friends: Carrie, Lily and Floss*, (New York: McLoughlin Brothers, 1882). RBR PZ8.3 T53 Courtesy, The Winterthur Library: Printed Book and Periodical Collection.





Figure 7 Illustration from *Dolls House-Keeping* by Juliana Horatia Ewing, (New York: E. & J.B. Young, 1841-1885), 18. CTSN 5856 Cotsen Children's Library. Department of Rare Books and Special Collections. Courtesy Princeton University Library.



Figure 8 Illustration from *The Girl's Story Book* by Theodore Thinker, (New York: Published by Clark, Austin & Co, 1851), 29. Image courtesy of The Strong®, Rochester, New York.

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## **Appendix**

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25 April 2013

Nina Ranalli  
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April 24, 2013

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Winterthur Program in American Material Culture  
Academic Programs Department  
Winterthur Museum, Library, & Garden  
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