

**Melissa Dickson, “Confessions of an English Green Tea Drinker: Sheridan Le Fanu and the Medical and Metaphysical Dangers of Green Tea.” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 45. 1 (2017): 77–94.**

Tea has a strong cultural association with Britain, which developed a love affair with the beverage after importing it from China in the sixteenth century. One of the earliest uses of tea was medicinal and it was commonly found in apothecaries to treat various ailments. This link between tea and treatments has persisted to the modern day, as various flavours of tea are packaged to aid with everything from memory to digestion.

Melissa Dickson’s article examines the historical context of therapeutic tea in the Victorian short story “Green Tea” by Sheridan Le Fanu. In the tale, a preacher is haunted by a strange monkey hallucination, who eventually drives the man to suicide. The tale is told through the notes of a physician, who observes that the green tea the preacher had been imbibing had contributed to his unraveling psyche.

Dickson gives an excellent historical overview of the archetype associated with green tea drinkers, neurotic middle- and upper-class intellectuals, befitting Le Fanu’s protagonist. She traces the cultural context of green tea, which was the predominant form of tea in Britain in the early 1800s, and cites other scholars in the field, including Brenda Hammack and Suzanne Daly. Anxieties about tea included its origins from China and adulteration with other chemicals in Britain. Illustrations from the time period are used to further illustrate this point. By using green tea specifically, Dickson theorizes that it is a symbolic representation of the clergyman’s interest in the occult.

Green tea was also associated with certain archetypes. Other authors such as Jane Austen and Elizabeth Gaskell used green tea as shorthand for anxious intellectuals, “a peculiar class of tea drinker whose consumption of green tea in particular becomes representative of a scholarly temperament and a tendency towards excess and obsession” (80). Those authors used green tea as a satirical device that is slightly at odds with portraying green tea as a drink of mystics. Arthur from Austen’s *Sanditon* (1817) is a hypochondriac who loves butter but is more anxious than his wife about green tea. His wife’s sardonic response “is mocking not only of Arthur’s hyperbolic attempt to garner her sympathy, but also of the contributions of medical and scientific communities to studies on the pernicious effects of tea drinking” (80). This is a valid interpretation but can this also be read as overreaction to a food understood by his wife and readers as fairly benign.

There are occasionally confused definitions, such as when “tea disease” is first referenced in the paper (83). The prior documentation refers to its side effects and its use as a drug, but not necessarily an independent malady and it is not clear that the thesis of a “tea disease” was accepted by the broader medical community at the time. Disease usually refers to an affliction that does not have an external source. Poisoning and chemical addictions, while they may cause damage to tissue and organs, are generally not referred to as such (for example, arsenic disease). Although there are exceptions, like silicosis, most of the parallels were to psychoactive substances such as the symptoms of narcotics.

In keeping with the parallels of narcotics, the effects of withdrawal versus intoxication are also often quite different. The author takes pains to point out that the story does not provide definitive evidence for any particular interpretation of the

preacher's mental or physical health. Distinguishing between intoxication, addiction, and withdrawal is difficult but may have provided clues to the preacher's illness. Was it the encounter with, or exorcism of, the exotic mysteries of green tea that caused his ultimate collapse? While it is not the focus of her paper, the story references "delirium tremens" in the doctor's notes, a state of mental and physical agitation from alcohol withdrawal, which can include hallucinations. In a small touch of irony, perhaps intentional by Le Fanu, caffeine is a stimulant, and alcohol is a depressant.

Overall, this paper provides an excellent overview of the role of green tea in British society during the early 1800s and a thoughtful examination of the cultural and medicinal baggage associated with green tea in particular. Dickson makes a strong argument that Le Fanu's choice of green tea intoxication is strongly connected to the story's themes of occult mysteries and the character's underlying neurotic predisposition. Her overview of green tea's history in Britain and its connotations in the minds of the leisure class are thorough and detailed. While it may have benefited from more robust definitions of its medical terms and thesis, the author makes a strong case for the symbolic importance of green tea in Le Fanu's tale.

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