

# Widow Fleck

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The Widow Fleck remains one of the most mysterious female poets in Canada as there is very little known about her and her work. She published a twelve-page pamphlet, *Poems on Various Subjects*, in 1833, and a second edition of it in 1835. It consists of only five poems and was printed for the author in Montreal, which meant that Fleck paid for the printing out of her own pocket in hopes of earning it back through sales. Writing under the pseudonym Widow Fleck, she portrays herself as a poor single mother. She capitalizes on her misfortune to entice readers to support her literary work. In clues from her various poems, especially the first poem “Dialogue Between a Dying Husband and His Wife,” the poet indicates that her husband was named John and died of cholera. Scholars hypothesize that her husband was either John Fleck or John Fleming (Huenemann and Bannister), as men of those names passed due to cholera in the Lower Canada in 1832. However, there is insufficient evidence to prove either man to be her husband.

We do not know if the poet is writing under a false persona or writing out of genuine grief and desperation. The only contextual and biographical information readers are provided is from her dedication on the front page:

Kind Readers,

You have here the humble attempt of a Widowed Mother, to record in simple rhymes the feelings excited by the sickness and departure of the bread-winner of herself and her helpless little ones—who was snatched from her and them, by the same pestilence which must have bereaved too many of you of your dearest friends. On your sympathetic bounty, a Mother, whom that pestilence has left destitute, throws herself and her humble verses.

New Glasgow, July, 1833.

New Glasgow is a small town in Nova Scotia. Founded in 1784 by Scottish settlers, the town was named after Glasgow in Scotland. It is unknown if/how long Fleck lived there for or what her cultural background was; some key words in

her poem suggest potential Scottish background, or she was simply influenced by the Scottish culture in Nova Scotia.

“In Praise of a Good Cup of Tea” is the final poem in her pamphlet, and it romanticizes the role tea-drinking plays in the speaker’s life. The poem is written in ballad form with alternating iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. Traditional ballad poems are one of the oldest forms of poetry and associated with hymns and storytelling.

In the poem, Fleck enthusiastically proclaims the benefits of drinking tea. She explains tea’s ability to transform her sadness to relief, relaxation, peace, and happiness. Though the poem opens with sweet and light remarks about drinking tea, there is a shift in tone in the middle, where she recounts vulnerable emotions surrounding her husband’s death. Fleck finishes the poem on her relationship with God. No longer being able to find solace in tea-drinking because of poverty, she turns to her faith and reminds herself that there is happiness to come. Despite the hardships she faces in widowhood, she is comforted by the promise of being reunited with her husband in heaven. The poem covers themes of faith, femininity, intimacy, grief, and love. Though tea is simple and unassuming on the outside, Fleck vividly illustrates the depth of a teacup by its ability to hold emotions, memories, and hopes.

### Further Reading

- Boghian, Ioana. “Middle-Class Women, Tea Drinking and Victorian Cultural Paradigms: Domesticity, Stability and Respectability.” *Speech and Context*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2014, pp. 92- 133.
- Kowaleski-Wallace, Elizabeth. “Tea, Gender, and Domesticity in Eighteenth-Century England.” *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, vol. 23, no. 1, 1994, pp. 131–145.
- Rappaport, Erika. “Sacred and Useful Pleasures: The Temperance Tea Party and the Creation of a Sober Consumer Culture in Early Industrial Britain.” *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 52, no. 4, 2013, pp. 990-1016.

### References

- Widow Fleck. *Poems on Various Subjects*. 2nd ed., A. Bowman, 1835. *Canada Women Poets*, Chadwyck Healey Collections.
- Huenemann, Karyn and Lindsay Bannister. "Widow Fleck." *Canada's Early Women Writers*, Canadian Writing Research Collaboratory, 2018.

## “In Praise of a Good Cup of Tea”<sup>1</sup>

Of all the joys that sweeten life,  
 The very best to me,  
 Is when I’m wearied wet or cold—  
 To take a cup of Tea.

It is the same with womankind — 5  
 With all, as well as me;  
 There’s nothing gives them such delight,  
 As a dainty cup of Tea.

With hoeing tired, or washing wet,<sup>2</sup>  
 What e’er their toil may be, 10  
 They’ll do their task with cheerfulness,  
 If they but have their Tea.

Now, husbands all, take my advice,  
 From Liquors keep you free;<sup>3</sup>  
 But never grudge, with your own wife, 15  
 To take a cup of Tea.

Without their tea they’re sour and sad,  
 And in your face they’ll flee;

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<sup>1</sup> Without access to the first edition, the second edition of 1835 is the copytext here, accessed in *Canada Women Poets*.

<sup>2</sup> Suggests that Widow Fleck comes from a farm background. Also gives insight into her social status. Without servants to help her, she washes laundry by herself. She may have been in the upper end of the lower class or the lower end of the middle class.

<sup>3</sup> A strong indication that the poem relates to the nineteenth-century Temperance Movement. See Rappaport for more on this movement to encourage men not to drink alcohol.

But if you want a happy life,  
     Be sure give them their Tea. 20

They'll manage all with canny<sup>4</sup> care,  
     And aye<sup>5</sup> will careful be;  
 And if you want a thrifty<sup>6</sup> wife,  
     Deny them not their Tea.

But ah, alas! I do confess 25  
     Its altered days with me,  
 For since my dearest husband died,<sup>7</sup>  
     I scarce can get my Tea.

When he was well, I tell the truth,  
     He was both frank and free,<sup>8</sup> 30  
 And ever said, with cheerful face—  
     “You're welcome to your Tea.”

And when that he came home at night,  
     So cold and tired was he,  
 It made him glad with me to sit, 35  
     And take a cup of Tea.

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<sup>4</sup> Originating from Scottish, Northern English, and Irish-English, the OED defines this as “knowing, wise; judicious, prudent; wary, cautious.”

<sup>5</sup> Originating from the Scottish dialect, meaning always and continually.

<sup>6</sup> Prosperous, successful, flourishing.

<sup>7</sup> Though not mentioned within the poem, Fleck's other poems suggests that her husband passed due to cholera. First edition was published with a note that it was “written by a lady... whose husband was carried off by the cholera (1833).”

<sup>8</sup> To live lavishly; generous, liberal.

Then he would sit a winter's night,  
 For sensible was he,  
 Talk of politics, commerce, Arts,<sup>9</sup>  
 Cheer'd by his cup of Tea. 40

And when I indisposed was,  
 Or headache troubled me,  
 He knew right well that woman's cure,<sup>10</sup>  
 Was a good strong<sup>11</sup> cup of Tea.

But now he's dead whom I did love, 45  
 The tear's still in my e'e;  
 For many comforts I must want,  
 Besides my cup of Tea.

But what sits heaviest on my mind,  
 Is my poor family; 50  
 If they but get their daily bread,<sup>12</sup>  
 I must not mind my Tea.

But I adore that heavenly power,  
 That orders all for me;  
 And humbled low before him<sup>13</sup> bow, 55  
 Though he deny me Tea.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> An interesting detail, as many men did not talk politics with their wives.

<sup>10</sup> May refer to a woman's time of menstruation.

<sup>11</sup> Sharp contrast against a "dainty" cup in line 8.

<sup>12</sup> Reference to the Lord's prayer, "give us this day our daily bread."

<sup>13</sup> Traditionally, subject pronouns referring to God are capitalized. However, Fleck does not.

<sup>14</sup> God taking her husband away.

And well I know that pleasures pure,  
    Remain in store for me,  
When I arrive in that blest land,<sup>15</sup>  
    Where there's no need for Tea.

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I would advise all widows poor,  
    To come along with me,<sup>16</sup>  
Where the least pleasure there enjoyed,  
    Is better far than Tea.

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<sup>15</sup> Heaven.

<sup>16</sup> Follow her example by having strong faith in God, as that will lead to salvation.



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