

The Ruined Maid

'O 'Melia, my dear, this does everything crown!
Who could have supposed I should meet you in Town?
And whence such fair garments, such prosperi-ty?' –
'O didn't you know I'd been ruined?' said she.

ruined – morally ruined, a prostitute or a kept woman

– 'You left us in tatters, without shoes or socks,
Tired of digging potatoes, and spudding up docks; *
And now you've gay bracelets and bright feathers three!' –
'Yes: that's how we dress when we're ruined,' said she.

– 'At home in the barton you said "thee" and "thou",
And "thik oon", and "theäs oon", and "t'other"; but now
Your talking quite fits 'ee for high compa-ny!' –
'Some polish is gained with one's ruin,' said she.

barton - farmyard
this one, that one, the other

– 'Your hands were like paws then, your face blue and bleak
But now I'm bewitched by your delicate cheek,
And your little gloves fit as on any la-dy!' –
'We never do work when we're ruined,' said she.

– 'You used to call home-life a hag-ridden dream,
And you'd sigh, and you'd sock; but at present you seem
To know not of megrims or melancho-ly!' –
'True. One's pretty lively when ruined,' said she.

hag-ridden – a nightmare
sock – to sigh loudly (Dor dialect)

– 'I wish I had feathers, a fine sweeping gown,
And a delicate face, and could strut about Town!' –
'My dear – a raw country girl, such as you be,
Cannot quite expect that. You ain't ruined,' said she.
Westbourne Park Villas, 1866

raw – inexperienced, naive

* digging up docks (weeds) with a narrow spade called a spud

Hardy wrote this poem in 1866, very early in his writing career. It shows that, even as a young man, he was ahead of his time in his views on women, as he was later to prove himself in his views on war. Whereas Victorian society generally had one rule of acceptable behaviour for women and quite another for men, in this poem Hardy forces his reader to reconsider conventional values. It is true that novelists like Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell had already revealed the hypocrisy of a society that allowed its men a sexual freedom it condemned in women. Hardy was later to write *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) which he subtitled *A Pure Woman*, thus scandalising his readership.

A 'maid' is a chaste young woman, and if she is 'ruined' she is no longer a maid. She is either working as a prostitute or she is a kept woman; in either case, her good name and reputation are ruined and in all probability, so is the good name of her family. She is ostracised by society, and cannot get a respectable job; certainly in the case of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, her illegitimate child cannot be baptized or buried in a Christian churchyard. No self-respecting man will marry her. Today, it is hard to imagine the total desolation that prostitution and pregnancy outside marriage brought with them. Many young women resorted to killing their children, their case was so desperate.

Hardy imagines a young Dorset farm girl up in Town (London) from the country, and unexpectedly meeting 'Melia (Amelia, a name meaning work or effort). He writes the poem as a conversation between the two.

The first things the young Dorset girl notices about 'Melia are her lovely clothes and general air of prosperity. 'Melia is a girl who was last seen working in terrible conditions on a Dorset farm. She was barefoot, wearing rags, and her job had been to dig up potatoes and pull out docks (weeds). She was reduced to almost subhuman status, such was the extent of her poverty – hands like 'paws' (like an animal's) and her face blue with the cold. This destitution ruined her health; it brought on depression (melancholy) and migraines (megrims). Her speech was that of a raw country peasant: 'thik oon' and 'theas oon'.

So Hardy is not endorsing the pastoral idyll of a cottage with roses round the door, and a happy, healthy, innocent lifestyle for the people living within. He subverts this all-too-easy cosy assumption and reveals the stark, unendurable reality of life for Dorset farm labourers. What was this girl to do, reduced as she was to the life of an animal? Does the Victorian reader blame her for trying to improve her material circumstances? How could she earn more money?

The ruined girl's flippant answers to her friend's questions reveal a brittle bitterness about the way she is now regarded. 'O didn't you know I'd been ruined?' 'Yes: that's how we dress when we're ruined.' 'We never do work when we're ruined.' Some of her young country friend's questions go a bit near the bone:

'Your talking quite fits 'ee for high compa-ny!'

But of course 'high company' is exactly the company that will never accept her, hence the rueful reply:

'Some polish is gained with one's ruin.'

Hardy constructs the poem round the country girl's questions, admiring comments, and envy of the feathers, gowns and polish, all expressed in Dorset dialect which he indicates through the dialect words and the clumsy pronunciation 'melancho-ly'. In the final line of each quatrain comes the ruined girl's much more articulate answer, each time repeating and emphasising the fact that she is now ruined. The bouncy amphibrachs (light strong light) give the poem a cheerful rhythm. What are we to make of it? Is Hardy subverting the idea of the ruined maid and showing us a young woman who has improved her circumstances, risen out of appalling poverty and has no regret, no shame, no self-loathing in having done so? If so, he is mocking the self-righteous values of a society that turns in disgust from such a girl. Or is the girl bitter about the society that will never accept her again, now she has enough money to live on? Maybe he is showing us that comparative riches may hide a morally rotten core, although I cannot find in the poem any condemnation from

Hardy of the girl who has taken this path. It seems to me that Hardy is illustrating two alternatives for a working class country girl, both impossible. One is the 'virtuous' life of destitution where absolute poverty makes for an animal existence; the other materially more comfortable life as a prostitute is condemned and rejected by society. Hardy makes a scathing criticism of the society that treats young women like this.

For more information on Dorset dialect words. Go to OEDonline, login, and look for sock v 4 (the fourth definition of the verb to sock). sock, v.4 If you then click on Gloss. Dorset Dial. you will arrive at two different links to Barnes' glossary of dialect words. 1863 W. Barnes [Gloss. Dorset Dial.](#), *Sock*, to sigh with a loudish sound. The OEDonline also provides information from the Eng. Dial. Dict. (English Dialect Dictionary).

Literary terms

Very often writers highlight important words. They do this with:

Alliteration – several words starting with the same letter or sound, for example, 'bleared and black and blind'.

Assonance – same vowel sound in different words, for example, 'abode', 'sloped'.

Cesura – a break or pause in the middle of a line of poetry.

Consonance – same consonants in words that contain different vowel sounds, for example, 'bode', 'boughed'.

Enjambement or run-on lines – when there is no punctuation at the end of a line of verse and it runs straight on to the next line.

Onomatopoeia – the effect when the sound of a word reflects its meaning, like 'plash'.

Personification – when something that is not human is referred to as if it is a person, for example, the Titanic, 'still couches she'. The effect is usually to exaggerate some aspect of the topic.

Repetition – repeated word or meaning.

Rhyme – very similar to assonance; same vowel sound and final consonant, for example, 'say', 'decay'. Masculine rhyme – when the final syllable is stress, as in 'say' and 'decay'. Feminine rhyme – when the final syllable is not stressed, as in 'growing', 'showing'.

Rhythm – the musical beat of the line, with stressed and unstressed syllables (the stressed syllables will be the important ones). The different rhythms have different names. Trochee (trochaic): strong light, strong light; iamb (iambic): light strong, light strong; dactyl: strong light light, strong light light; anapaest: light light strong, light light strong. If puzzled, try Wikipedia which is very clear on the subject.

Then there are technical words for the number of lines in a verse or stanza.

Quatrain – four lines in a verse

Sestet – six line

Octave – eight lines