

The Ruined Maid
A Poem by: Thomas Hardy

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Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) was a great poet and novelist. By nature and choice, he has read poetry at the very beginning of his life and he has written poetry before prose from his twenties until his death at the age of eighty-eight. He wrote poetry from 1863-68 then turned to fiction and spent about twenty-five years in writing novels, but for him, novel writing was a profession, he never considered the novels as an art form, believing that verse was contained the essence of all imaginative and emotional literature. In 1896 he abandoned the novel forever and devoted his career to poetry writing. Through over than sixty years, Hardy composed 920 poems and they were all printed in a series in the 1930s.

Hardy is a famous poet for certain features which distinguish him as a modern poet. He is a precursor of modern poetry for his use of language, his themes and his use of irony. Hardy wrote most of his poems in a simple language and sometimes they are conversational. His themes are also modern; he deals with metaphysical subjects like his poem "God Forgotten", and with the ugly side of modern life as in "The Ruined Maid". He expresses the loneliness and the ugly nature of the modern man in a great number of his poems such as: "The Moth Signal", and "An August Midnight".

Historical background

This poem was published in 1866. The industrial revolution, agricultural depression, and the change in the village caused the end of rural England. Therefore; most of the inhabitants of the United Kingdom came to live in urban districts. After finding their way to the capital, most of rural people became vagrants, suffered a lot of poverty because they didn't find even a place for sleeping. Then it seemed impossible for the

lower and middle class families to keep their discipline under these severe circumstances, therefore; they tried to avoid the breakdown by some solutions which were unacceptable from all social and moral considerations. The loss of innocence seems to be the easier way to survive in this world, which led to what is called prostitution.

Prostitution was referred to by the Victorians as "the great social evil." It was a wide-spread phenomenon which appeared in the Victorian period as a result of Industrialization. Most of the prostitutes were the domestic servants. Their fear of starvation let some of them deviate from virtue. The prostitution phenomenon started in 1840 and grew wider through the sixties. This poem is an example in which he dealt with this subject.

Commentary

"The Ruined Maid" is a conversational poem between two countryside girls, the first is the speaker in most of the lines and the second one Melia (Amelia) takes the last line in each stanza and the last two lines in the last stanza.

Hardy exposes the contrast between two countryside girls who were friends, but now one of them is still a rural, raw and naïve girl who knows little about life and the other one who came to the town and became well-clothed, cheerful and polished as a result of her being ruined .

"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 .

The country girl met her friend Melia who was living in the country and then shifted to the town. She was surprised when she found her well-clothed, polished in such an appearance, completely different from that

of the past. Asking her about the reason; Omelia said that she was ruined.

“ You left us in tatters, without shoes or socks,
Tired of digging potatoes, and spidding up docks;
And now you’ve gay bracelets and bright feathers three!”-
“Yes: that’s how we dress when were ruined,” said she.

Omelia’s friend is still talking in a naively way, telling her that she left the countryside in tatters, bare-footed, tired of working in the farm, of spading up weeds, and of digging potatoes. And now she looks beautiful and clean, wearing bracelets and three feathers on her hat. She answers that when we are ruined, we dress like that.

“- At home in the barton you said “thee” and “thou”
And “thik oon” and “theas 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.

The countryside girl said to her friend that even her language became more polished in the city, It is very polite and of high level. Instead of “thee” and “thou”, “thik oon”, and “theas oon”, and t ‘other, she speaks the language of the high “compa-ny” and that is because she is ruined.

-“Your hands were like paws then, your face blue and bleak
But now I’m bewitched by your delicate check,
And your little gloves fit as on any la-dy”-
“We never do work when we’re reuined,” said she.

She said to her friend that her hands were like paws, her face was blue dark, but now she admires her soft cheeks and her gloves. Then she answered that one doesn’t work with ones hands when one is ruined.

-“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 melan-choly!”-
“True. There’s an advantage in ruin,” said she.

She used to call life as an old woman or as a bad, ugly dream, and she was very sad and miserable, but now she seems very happy and amused and she doesn’t know megrims. She answered that “we look active because we are ruined”.

-“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,
Isn’t equal to that. You ain’t ruined.” Said she.

The last stanza reveals the country girl’s wish to be like her friend; had feathers, a fine sweeping gown, and beautiful soft face and could walk in the streets of the town. But her friend frustrates her wishes because she answers her that any country girl cannot expect this unless she is ruined.

Irony

Irony can be found everywhere in Hardy’s poems. One must begin with a good example of irony (of both types: verbal and situational) as a social criticism in “The Ruined Maid” which is also considered as an embodiment of the other features of Hardy’s verse.

One can consider most of the speech of the ruined girl as a verbal irony. The word “ruined” exposes the corruption of the girl. This poem reveals the differences between the appearance and the essence of the civilized people. Melia has a beautiful appearance and she is supposed to be praised but in reality she is blamed because this is a result of her being prostituted after her coming to the town.

The major situational irony in the poem is that in order to look clean, beautiful, healthy and respectable, and in order to speak a polished, civilized language one should prostitute herself, i.e. be “ruined”. This in fact, is a severe criticism of Victorian England; of respectability as well as of women exploitation especially after the middle of the nineteenth century in England.

Language

It was a great achievement of dialect, and it is a mixture of standard and dialect language.
