

Melia's existential feminism: A critical study of gender and authenticity in Thomas Hardy's *The Ruined Maid*

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Abstract: Thomas Hardy's *The Ruined Maid* (1866), has been extensively examined within the context of the nineteenth century. It is often regarded as a representation of social themes during the Victorian era, the plight of working-class women as victims of sexual exploitation, the depiction of fallen women, the challenges of prostitution, and the incorporation of local attributes associated with the Dorset dialect. Moreover, the text's discourse is typically interpreted as a dialogue occurring between two characters, namely Melia and an unknown speaker. However, this study introduces a novel perspective by identifying a third character inherent within the recounted interaction. Furthermore, this paper aims to deviate from conventional interpretations, instead, it concentrates on aspects of the verse that pertain to philosophical concepts such as the influence of social ideologies. This objective is achieved by following the semiotic approach; the words are meticulously analyzed to unveil their underlying meanings, drawing inspiration from the works of Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes. In addition, the notion of the gaze, as expounded by Michel Foucault, is engaged to shed light on the work's implications. The existentialist insights of Jean-Paul Sartre are also linked to the analysis. Furthermore, the poem's exploration of capitalism is informed by the views of Karl Marx, while gender-related aspects are interpreted through the lens of Simone de Beauvoir's theory.

Keywords: Thomas Hardy, *The Ruined Maid*, gaze, existentialism, capitalism, semiotics

Introduction

Hardy's *The Ruined Maid* was written in 1866 and published in the collection *Poems of the Past and Present* in 1901. The second edition

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was published by Macmillan in London in 1903. The verse consists of six four-line stanzas that depict a conversation between two characters, with a central character named Melia who undergoes a significant transformation. The text begins with a female speaker reporting Melia's words and describing her various changes, from a poor country girl to a lady. The poem's focus is on Melia's logic, how she shapes her life through her actions, particularly the act of becoming "ruined," and the resulting changes in her appearance and language. This challenges the stereotype that the working class is confined to victimhood, suggesting empowerment through various forms of uprising. Melia herself participates in this rebellion. Readers have analyzed the poem's use of language, particularly the Dorset dialect, often comparing Melia and Tess, two characters who speak this dialect, representing rural maids from the working class. The poem's use of this dialect can be attributed to Hardy's childhood experiences and his inspiration from his advisor, William Barnes. The inclusion of archaic pronouns like "thee" and "thou" also links to the Dorset dialect. The verse's language and dialect choices highlight social conventions and convey a sense of mockery. Some critics focus on the cultural context of the poem, seeing it as a reflection of Victorian social issues, including prostitution. The term "ruined" is interpreted differently, as it historically referred to premarital intimacy. Despite this, Melia seems content with her changed circumstances. The text's perspective on prostitution and social problems is addressed through the dialogue between Melia and her friend, who contrasts Melia's current status with her previous impoverished state. The verse also explores sexuality, gender issues, and social conventions. It presents a woman's journey of self-development and challenges the capitalist societal structure. The contrast between the proletariat and bourgeoisie is evident through the transformation of Melia's appearance and language. The poem also explores the passage of time, emphasizing the shift in the female character's social class. The use of different tenses signifies the transition from working class to upper class.

In essence, Hardy's *The Ruined Maid* addresses various themes such as transformation, class distinctions, language, sexuality, and social conventions through the female persona, her evolution, and the societal contexts of Victorian England.

Theoretical framework

Through a close reading of the expressions and terminologies in the verse, I explore the meanings and the philosophical concepts, but not the biography of the author; because the focus is on the text rather than the context in which it was composed, The analysis draws from the principles of linguistics as articulated by Ferdinand de Saussure, as well as the insights of Roland Barthes's semiotics.:

In his *Course in General Linguistics*, first published in 1916, Saussure postulated the existence of a general science of signs, or Semiology, of which linguistics would form only one part. Semiology therefore aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all these, which form the content of ritual, convention or public entertainment: these constitute, if not languages, at least systems of signification. (Barthes 1967, 9)

Put differently, Barthes's semiotic framework builds upon Saussure's concept that language functions as a pure system of signs, consisting of signifiers (words, images, sounds), and their corresponding signified meanings (Marklemon 2015). According to Saussure, language comprises signs wherein these signifiers are arbitrarily linked to their meanings or concepts.

Roland Barthes, in "The Death of the Author," argues that the unknown voice in a literary piece leads to the absence of any clear origin, rendering it ambiguous as to who is the speaker within the text. Consequently, in a poem, the narrative voice becomes indeterminate, leaving uncertainty about whether it is the poet speaking or various characters within the text (Barthes, 1977, p. 142).

Reading the text

The general interpretation of the title, *The Ruined Maid*, is based on the historical context – the poem was composed at the time when Victorian society suffered from social problems, such as the differences between the working class and the bourgeoisie, prostitution, and the spread of diseases (Renner 1992, 10). From this perspective, the title appears to depict a victimized woman, both sexually and socially: the title character literally appears to suggest multiple meanings; the term "maid" in the context of the poem means – an unmarried girl – while today the word signifies the meaning of a female servant. And the signifier "ruined" has different meanings: in the Victorian era it was used to indicate women who have been

sexually exploited and lost their virginity before marriage, and who were also called “fallen women”, while currently, the term suggests the meaning of damage financially and it also means ancient (Warmelo 2015). However, this reading focuses on the irony in the title, which suggests two different ideas. On the one hand, Melia calls herself “ruined”, hence the title character – a ‘ruined maid’ – implies it is a subjective concept that is chosen by Melia, not by her audience. On the other hand, if the title describes a ‘ruined maid’ and not ‘ruined Melia’, to suggest that only working women are being “ruined” then it may be a more objective perception.

The first line of the verse introduces the readers to an absent character – “O’Melia” –using a female name that is derived from ‘Melia’; the apostrophe functions as an indication that Melia is actually away. Therefore, the dialogue is being recited by an anonymous female speaker to a narratee – an unknown receiver. To put it another way, the narrative voice is recounting a prior conversation to the readers:

“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 speaker quotes the conversation from a meeting that she had with Melia, and describes her marvelous appearance that “crowns everything” – the signifiers here connote something that is sublime. Moreover, the narrative voice seems to be astonished to see Melia in “town”, and in her “fair garment”. The location of their conversation seems to be problematic; since ruined women are supposed to be in town then the speaker also might be a fallen woman. Her “prosperity” suggests wealth, fortune, or well-being, so it seems to be a surprise to see Melia in that status. Melia gives a striking reply, “O didn’t you know I [have] been ruined?” This declaration is daring and fearless, and at first appears to suggest a feminine sense of prestige, beauty, and character, but the verse suggests broader issues, as readers are introduced to a farming scene:

— “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.

The view of working on a farm with starvation and poverty is presented through the terms “you left us in tatters, without shoes or socks” and the aura of deprivation is depicted through the phrases “digging potatoes, and spudding up docks”. In addition, Melia's torn clothes have turned to “gay bracelets and bright feathers three”; this transformation seems to be a choice that Melia has made, because she repeats the expression, “that's how we dress when we're ruined”. Melia does not appear to be in disgrace or miserable; instead, she seems to show fearless attitudes.

As the recounting of the conversation continues, its language shows that the transitions are not only in the maid's aristocratic mien, but also in her accent:

— “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.

The narrative voice points out that Melia's former language was rural, for instance, she used the pronouns “thee and thou” instead of “you”. Loriaux (2016, 107) suggests that Hardy's use of Dorset grammar and the archaic pronouns ‘thee’ and ‘thou’ in the position of subject and object are related to the same dialect which shows the language of workers. The logic of the verse shows the significance of the transformation because Melia states that “some polish is gained with one's ruin,” an expression that indicates a step toward achievement, and in this way, Melia shows the skill she has gained through developing her way of speaking. The argument here is that her accomplishment is having the courage to use the upper-class language without being a member of that community. This seems to be extremely offensive for the bourgeoisie because she calls herself ‘ruined’ and at the same time presents herself as a woman from the upper class.

The fact that “[Omelia's] talking quite fits 'ee for high compa-ny!” suggests that Melia appears to be like those of the capitalist class because her language is elevated and has become standard, in the same way that, as sociolinguistic studies of dialectology show, dialects that are used by certain groups may depend on their geographical location or social status (Mallinson 2015). Labov (2006, 5), for example, states that language is a means of communication that varies from one group of people to another because it relies on their culture and the way they

live, thus languages are diverse because they are based on different social classes, ages, and ethnicity. From these perspectives, the poem presents another side of the story which is based on the significance of language. Readers of the poem have focused on the pronouns “thee” and “thou” stating that they belong to the Dorset dialect, but I suggest that these pronouns do not necessarily belong to that dialect because they are an archaic and old-fashioned form in the English language (Enless 2019). In addition, it seems to be difficult for contemporary readers to realize that those terms belong to a certain dialect, so the focus can be seen as neither on one particular dialect nor on the significance of the upper-class accent because language is purely a means of communication and each community has its own version of the language.

The following lines of the poem show the significance of social conventions:

— “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.

Here, the female speaker reminds Melia about her former appearance; her “hands” used to look like “paws” – very thick and large like feet. Not only her hands but also her face used to be bloodless and thin, while at the moment her rosy “cheeks” are surprising the speaker. The poem presents an image of a lady wearing a fine dress, gloves, and a hat with three feathers. Each of these features shows the significance not of Victorian fashion, but the social conventions. For instance, wearing gloves played an important role for women to show their character, especially during meals or walking on streets: not only women from the upper class, but also working women had gloves. In short, the eyes of the society in every corner of town made women extremely watchful, and the gaze here does not imply only sexual dominance, but also social norms. As Foucault shows in his discussion of power relations, which focuses on the concept of power in “panopticism”, observation and the eyes of the society control every individual through imposing certain ideologies of behavior and appearance.

Thus, Victorian women were presented in the uniform of dresses, gloves, and decorated hats, actually not as a fashion, but as a homogenous look to show their femininity in the way it had been

constructed by social conventions. Therefore, Melia states “we never do work when we're ruined”: this suggests that the poem does not focus on ‘prostitution’, because it is considered to be a job and some of the “fallen women” had worked in that business. But Hardy's character declares that she does not work. Hence, Melia is acting as a member of the bourgeoisie in her language and her appearance, and she does not do labor.

Similarly, the narrative voice tells Melia of how “[she] used to call home-life a hag-ridden dream”, portraying domestic life to look like a nightmare that is full of black magic and witches:

“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.

“Sighing” and “socking” are the way Melia used to complain about the misery, while in the current situation, she seems unaware “of megrims or melancho-ly” she lives in luxury. Melia's reply shows she is not upset at all about being ruined – “true. One's pretty lively when ruined” –bringing down the curtains on the social conventions by declaring that there is actually pleasure in being ruined.

The speaker concludes the narration with the wish that she had “feathers” – either a pen or wings:

“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.

On the literal level, she is showing her desire to have the same high-class fashion. On the metaphorical level, however, she wishes to have both a pen and wings; that is to say, she wishes to have the literacy to improve her language, and to have wings to fly, and have freedom and courage like Melia. But Melia calls the narrative voice “a raw country girl” who “ain't ruined” – she is still a virgin – the term “raw” refers to someone who lacks experience or who is immature. The grammatical form “ain't” is informal and plainly does not fit “high [company]”, because it is considered to be nonstandard, and it is usually used by less educated people (Nordquist 2019).

From this angle, Melia is still the same rural maid, yet she is not a virgin. Therefore, the struggle shifts from the problems of prostitution

or the victimization of working women to a broader issue, which is the courage to speak up and announce that women are capable of choosing their destiny and breaking the laws and traditions. The poem, therefore, suggests the same perspective that appears later in the 20th century in the existentialist slogan “existence precedes essence”, which was coined by Jean-Paul Sartre (2007, 22-23) to refer to the fact that human beings are first born, and then the decisions they make construct their identity and choose their destiny.

Another issue that is raised in the poem is the problem of gender. Readers of the poem may wonder why only women would be called “ruined”, “fallen” or “prostitute”. There is a missing part of the logic, which is that they depend on the perspective and gaze of the opposite gender – men: since women are being “ruined” by the other sex, they must resist and take their own role in the story. This is the argument of the existential feminist Simone de Beauvoir, who states that “one is not born, but rather becomes, woman”. In a nutshell, social conventions construct women with feminine features as a gender and to be different from men (Beauvoir 2010, 15-16). Therefore, the terms “ruined” or “fallen” are applied to women only, not men because this is what society has agreed on. De Beauvoir’s perspective suggests that feminist issues should be viewed through existential lenses; that is to say, women like Melia become free to show their essence through the decisions they make.

Conclusion

The Ruined Maid is often interpreted in terms of social problems: critics see ‘Melia’ as a typical character of Hardy who is being ‘ruined’ and in return, she has shifted socially. My analysis shows that the language of the verse provides a sense of rebellion against social conventions – a woman announces that she has been “ruined” as a result of having a sexual relationship before marriage. The term ‘ruined’ is utilized only for the female gender: women are supposed to obey the social ideology, so even though they have “feathers” on their hat or they walk in their “sweeping dress,” they are still called “ruined”. Hence, Melia wants to create an equation between a fallen woman and the aristocratic one: she ignores the social classifications and invents a new conception that she is a maid, “ruined”, “bourgeois” – and still a *woman*! From an existentialist perspective, ‘Melia’ is a free woman, choosing her destination rather than being victimized.

However, through the eyes of society and readers of the poem, she is usually viewed as a victim who is being sexually abused.

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