

AQA English Literature A-level

Poetry: Love through the Ages Anthology (Pre-1900)

Thomas Hardy: 'The Ruined Maid'

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THE RUINED MAID

Thomas Hardy

Brief Summary

'The Ruined Maid' sees the **reunion of two former neighbours** who now find themselves in **opposing circumstances**; Amelia is the mistress to a rich man in the city and now lives a life of luxury with beautiful clothes and no need to work, whereas her unnamed friend remains a farm woman in the poverty of their rural home town. Hardy comments on the **sexism of the Victorian period** and the trials of being a woman. Hardy uses **irony** extensively to suggest that Amelia's luxurious city life is superficially an improvement on her previous impoverished state. However, Amelia has been "**ruined**" and Victorian standards of morality exclude her from ever being a member of respectable society. Her apparent freedom is reliant on a man who will not be judged or punished for his part in her ruin.

Synopsis

- **Stanza 1:** The women meet in the city. The rural friend expresses her surprise in finding Amelia there, who explains she has been "**ruined**". By this she means she has become the mistress to a rich man.
- **Stanza 2:** The rural friend notices how well dressed Amelia is now compared to when she lived in the country when she wore rags, didn't own shoes and was exhausted from manual labour. Amelia explains that as a mistress, she is given good clothes and looked after.
- **Stanza 3:** The rural friend points out that her accent has changed and she sounds like she belongs in upper class society. Amelia agrees that she has become more sophisticated since becoming a mistress.
- **Stanza 4:** The rural friend says her complexion is beautiful compared to when she used to work in the fields and her hands are now like an upper class lady's. Amelia replies that as a mistress, she doesn't need to work.

Summary

Context

Written in the Victorian period when there were **deep divisions** between rich and poor, the upper and lower classes and men and women. Hardy **critiques the Victorian norm of sexually demonising and exploiting women**.

Structure

6 quatrains each with 2 rhyming couplets and an **AABB rhyme scheme**. BB rhyming couplets are consistent throughout each stanza ends with "said she".

Language

The poem is a dialogue between 2 friends, one **chatty and conversational** from the country and the other **haughty and curt**. **Anapestic tetrameter** gives the poem pace. The **slight changes in metre** emphasise the **differences between the two women** and their diction. Other linguistic features include **alliteration, assonance** and **polysyndeta**.

Key Points

The poem presents a **deeply ironic perspective on Victorian sexism**. It critiques the way Victorian society would condemn the "ruined maid" for having sexual relations out of wedlock, despite the fact she now lives a more comfortable and satisfying life than she did as a rural labourer. The poem asks **what is so bad in wanting an escape from poverty** and why does it seem to the two women that being ruined is the more favourable way to live?



- **Stanza 5:** The rural friend remembers when Amelia used to be sad about her status in life. Amelia concedes that she is much happier now that she is a mistress.
- **Stanza 6:** The rural friend exclaims her longing to be like Amelia, to fit into upper class society and to be unashamed whilst walking around the wealth of the city. Amelia suggests that a rural woman like her friend cannot expect a luxurious life like the one she now has, unless they become a mistress.

Context

The Victorian Era:

- England experienced great change during the years under Queen Victoria. Advances in technology resulted in greater factory production and **accelerated growth of European economies**. This in turn saw the creation of **large amounts of wealth** which mostly benefited the “middle class”.
- The Victorian period was **extremely strict in terms of permitted sexual relations**; sex was not openly discussed which meant that many people born into the Victorian age were both factually uninformed and emotionally ill at ease about sexual matters. Additionally, moral panic over prostitution was at height in the 1850s and 1860s. This was partly because it betokened **visible female freedom** from social control. Female prostitutes enjoyed economic and personal freedom.
- New scientific discoveries, such as Darwin’s theory of evolution **posed challenges to the Church**.
- The new market economy favoured industrial development and discouraged agriculture. This resulted in large numbers of farmers and peasants losing their livelihoods and moving to the cities in search for employment.

Literary Context:

- The Victorian period (1837-1901) was known to be carefully censored, straight and exacting in standards. **Hardy passionately opposed these constraints** in his literary work as a poet and a novelist.
- One of the most notable things about Victorian-era poetry is the **constant return to themes of isolation** and **loss of innocence** as well as **romantic love** and **social injustice**.
- In the Victorian period, poetry was highly valued and very popular. Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth (died 1850) were particularly revered and recited.
- Much of Victorian poetry had a **moral purpose**, intended to oppose and object to the unfair social and political systems in England.
- Another notable characteristic of Victorian poetry is that it was **highly idealistic** and tackled issues of love, truth and justice. This includes the suppression of women in society. This can be seen in ‘The Ruined Maid’ as it reflects on the role of women in society and especially on their reliance on men.



Hardy:

- Hardy is often considered a **Victorian realist**, examining the **social constraints** on the lives of those living in Victorian Britain.
- Hardy was born in 1840 in Dorset and died in 1928, meaning that he experienced life in high Victorian decorum and the awful destruction and devastation of World War I.
 - The effect of these experiences means his work is often read to be justifiably **angry and pessimistic**.
- At the time, Hardy was best known for his poetry (in the 20th century he solely published poetry) and only later did his novels become recognised as great literary works (such as *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Far from the Madding Crowd*).

Dorset:

- Hardy was deeply influenced by his rural upbringing where he saw and experienced the kind of suffering examined in 'The Ruined Maid'.
- He fictionalised the name of his home county as "Wessex" which acts as the setting for many of his novels and poems.
- Hardy's friend William Barnes was similarly interested in rural identity and had a significant influence on him.
- Hardy became **passionate about the denouncement of sexual hypocrisy and misogyny**, following in other author's footsteps, such as Mary Wollstonecraft.

Thomas Hardy questioned Victorian standards in other works. In *The Ruined Maid* Amelia attempts to improve her social standing through a sexual relationship out of marriage. *Jude the Obscure* is similarly about a couple's serious relationship out of marriage and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* follows the story of a ruined woman.

Women:

- 'The Ruined Maid' was published in 1866 when England was thriving in terms of power and prosperity. There were also deep divisions between rich and poor as well as men and women.
- The poem casts a **weary eye** on the Victorian woman's life; femininity was demonised and exploited by men constantly and with no remorse.
- **Queen Victoria's rule was paradoxical** for the women of the time. She was the first queen to hold any significant power since Elizabeth I and she was a loved and successful ruler. However, societal customs and expectations meant she had to uphold severe female propriety in order to be respected in a position of power usually reserved for men. **Her strict mode of feminine decorum** was consequently **reflected in Victorian society**.
- There was **double standard** throughout the Victorian era, with women unable to express sexuality outside the confines of marriage whereas men were allowed to do as they pleased. A woman known to have had sex out of wedlock or to have given birth was most likely rejected from respectable society. Many women were consequently forced into prostitution.
 - This problem was exacerbated by class divisions and the wealth gap.



- Hardy's rural maid makes clear that life in the countryside remained hard whilst wealth from the industrial revolution moved into the cities.
 - It is understandable how **becoming the mistress of a rich man** in the city **may appear desirable** to a starving farmworker, but there is always the **unnerving prospect** that **he may cast her aside**.

The Title

- The title describes the poem's subject matter in a straightforward manner. Initially, we can understand the poem concerns someone who is **morally questionable** (as according to the standards of the time) and who has **compromised her virtue**.
 - A Victorian reader would be especially aware of the implications and the scandal of being a **"ruined maid"**
- The title, although **initially unambiguous, becomes ambiguous** once the poem has been read. Amelia labels herself as **"ruined"** repeatedly throughout the poem but by the end, the reader is conscious of the way **Hardy toys with the definition of "ruined"**. Amelia appears comfortable, clean and well dressed whereas her rural friend, by implication, is her opposite. In this regard, the rural woman, although not ruined in the Victorian societal sense, is also ruined. Most notably, she is **physically ruined and worn out from labour** and longs for another life.
- The expectations the title lays out at the start are therefore **met and then subverted**. The reader is left wondering what really ruins a maid and which depiction of the Victorian woman is more tragic. **Which woman is truly ruined?**



The Ruined Maid

Brought straight into the conversation with an emphatic exclamation of surprise. The reader is immediately made aware of the womens' common upbringing.

Somehow, Amelia has come across beautiful clothes. The speaker is surprised. Her question suggests that her ruination is common knowledge and that she is unashamed of it.

Suggestion of abandonment in search of better life - Amelia went looking to be ruined, fed up with the harshness of rural life.

Listing - gives the reader the chance to draw comparison to what Amelia had and has now. Feathers may relate to freedom, birds flying away.

Colon creates a pause which increases the haughtiness of Amelia's response. She seems to talk down to her friend who greeted her kindly "my dear".

"Barton" = farm, signalling of class difference in the dialect. The presence of the country language makes the speaker seem more authentic and personable than the sterile responses of Amelia.

Simile shows the ravages of country life on the body.

Each stanza juxtaposes the life of the "ruined maid" and the rural friend. Their voices, their social standing and their current situations.

Sibilance - the friend's tone appears to have shifted, she seems annoyed by Amelia's indifference. There's a new bitterness to her words.

Megrims = migraines. So, it appears that Amelia has forgotten the difficulties of rural life.

Fricative- creates a tone of annoyance or disdain, she's unimpressed by Amelia's behaviour despite her admiration of her appearance and the way her words seem to praise her.

Metaphor for the rural woman's social status, base and lowly. Contrasts with Amelia's metaphoric "polished".

"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.

— "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.

— "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.

— "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.

A "maid" is a chaste young woman. If she is ruined, we can assume she is no longer a maid. Therefore this is an oxymoron.

Starts with an iamb, followed by anapestic tetrameter. Emphasises the rural accent.

Hyphen stresses the vernacular of the rural woman, creates a disparity between the two voices which can be linked to the polars of class and the city vs the country
Repetition: reinforces the irony of Amelia's position. It becomes refrain-like.

In describing how Amelia used to be the nameless woman describes her own current situation.

Spelling captures the accent of rural England. Amelia used to speak this way but has rid herself of the defining characteristic.

Enjambment puts emphasis on how Amelia is different now.

Polish is a metaphor for her new clothes and appearance as well as the social class and elegance gained from ruin.

Juxtaposition of then and now, constantly through each stanza. Amelia's new social status and life, symbolised by her appearance, is contrasted with the grime of the country.

Metaphor emphasises the difficulty of rural life. "Hag-ridden dream" is a nightmare filled with witches, or terrible people but "hag-ridden" also refers to sleep paralysis which implies the inability to escape the difficulties and hardship of rural life.

Use of slightly aggressive words imply the rural woman did not feel positive towards Amelia when she lived in the country.

Dash creates an elongated pause, increasing Amelia's condescending tone.

The poem is ironic in tone, Amelia is afforded 2 lines of speech at the end. Her formal manner is tarnished by a slippage into her old, country vernacular. The irony lies in the fact that she appears wealthy but she will never be respectable and, while she has forgotten her past, her rural upbringing still shows through her speech.



Themes

Doubling:

- The poem is about **doubling and pairing**, the two women, their opposing dialects, the town and the country.
- The country is where the **“bartons”** (line 9) (farms) are and the women work in the fields digging potatoes and pulling weeds. It is made clear that the city dwellers speak a more **formal and proper language** whereas the rural dwellers speak a **less formal dialect**.
- The **town symbolises wealth, culture and education**. The context of the poem suggests that things are done properly and with good manners within the town and this is reiterated by **Amelia’s prim and curt tone**. The **country symbolises dirt, labour and lack of education**. Ironically, the town seems less pure than the country.
 - In the city, the rural woman has come across a **“ruined maid”**, Amelia, who used to be ‘chaste’ has been ‘spoilt’ by the city.
 - Amelia represents the women who have left behind their former lives and compromised themselves in order to fit into a society which will never accept them.
- Simultaneously, the country is not an easy life. The **rural woman has been “ruined” in a different way**.

Appearance - social conventions and taboos and truth and deception:

- Amelia seems to be living a grander life than the one she lived in the country, with **“fair garments”** (line 3), **“gay bracelets”** (line 6) and **“little gloves”** (line 15), but the reader questions the truthfulness of her appearance.
 - As readers, we know Amelia is ruined. She has **violated the sexual norms of Victorian England** and consequently, we know that her **newfound riches have come at a price**.
 - The social constructs of the time limit her ability to ever be accepted in Victorian upper-class society.
- If her purity has been compromised, so too has her country flair, which her friend points out constantly by comparing how she used to be and how she is now. **“At home in the barton you said thee’ and thou”** (line 9), **“your hands were like paws then... but now I’m bewitched by your delicate cheek”** (line 13-4). Amelia falls into the category of a city woman, **“as on any la-dy”** (line 15) her friend says, grouping her with those of the upper class in the city. This removes any unique identity. This sense of a **new, generic (supposedly) upper-class identity** is reinforced by her **formulaic, curt responses** to her friend’s enquiries.
- Amelia’s **demeanour can be seen as a reversion to the snobbery of upper-class ladies**. This is ironic as this conversation is probably one of the very few in which she is regarded as a lady. In the city society, no ladies would accept her as their equal but here her rural friend gives her admiration.
- Her contrasting expression to her rural friend could also suggest a **loss of spirit**. She appears to have all she wanted - the clothes, leisure and an escape from manual labour. Nevertheless, we may **conjecture that she is shunned by society** and as such her ability to enjoy her newfound pleasures may be consequently limited.



Womanhood:

- Concentration of items belonging to female clothing: “**bracelets**”, “**feathers**”, “**dress**”, “**gloves**”, “**sweeping gown**”.
- In addition to these semantically related terms, Hardy uses phrases and terms related to femininity: “**my dear**”, “**delicate cheek**”, “**delicate face**”.
- Female ‘charms’ are seemingly enhanced by wealth; in the country Amelia has crude, “**paw**”-like hands, whereas after she gains wealth, beautiful clothes and perhaps cosmetics, she has the ability to “**bewitch**”.
- Hardy assesses the difficulty and injustices women in the Victorian era experienced. Amelia would rather be “**ruined**” than work on the farm unruined, because it affords her luxuries and a more comfortable life. Hardy asks the reader how they feel about this and whether both women are actually ruined?
- We are led to question the positions of the women in terms of love and the double standards of the time. A woman’s love was dismissed as secondary to a man who could treat a woman however he liked.
- The reader is **unsure of what the future holds for Amelia**; as a mistress she is reliant on a rich man who will not be punished should he decide suddenly that he no longer needs her services or presence.

The natural world:

- Hardy **examines the hardships endured by country dwellers**. This is seen in the character of the unnamed woman, the fact that Amelia is named and she is not alludes to the contrasting status between the two.
- One of the most noticeable aspects of the poem is the way dichotomy is drawn between the two women, as one from the country and one now rooted in town life. The nameless woman gives the readers **glimpses of the troubles experienced in the country**: “**you left us in tatters, without shoes or socks**” (line 6), alluding to the poverty of the country-people. This is contrasted with Amelia, who represents town life: “**now you’ve gay bracelets and bright feather three!**” (line 8)
- The effect of the hard life in the country is exacerbated by ways the nameless woman notices the changes in her friend. These changes point to the hardship of the workers in the country such as the state of the woman’s hands and skin; “**your hands were like paws then**” (line 13), “**now I’m bewitched by your delicate cheek**” (line 14).
- The nameless woman, it is implied, has all the qualities of a country woman who experiences the hardships of country life and manual labour. The qualities that Amelia has left behind. She desires the kind of life that limits these qualities; “**I wish I had feathers, a fine sweeping gown, / and a delicate face**” (lines 21-22)
- Hardy suggests that **the country is hard and unforgiving** where those in the city appear to live easier lives.



Class- approval and disapproval:

- Class is defined not only by living in the city or in the country but also by speech.
- The Victorian period was very class driven and Hardy, through voice, speaker and manipulation of sound, explores the ways in which class played a central role in individual lives. For example, the use of the **country dialect exacerbates the differences between the women**; “**at home in the barton you said thee’ and thou,’ / And thik oon**” (lines 9-10). The nameless woman points out that Amelia now avoids country dialect and we presume this is because it would expose her within the town setting as a country woman. Her status as a town woman would be jeopardized if her accent were to give her true country origins away. Perhaps Amelia fears what people will think of her if she is discovered to be a country lady; she is **ashamed of her roots**. Amelia’s shame is so extreme that she hides her former self from her friend who knew her when she lived in the country, which implies the country people admire and aspire to be like the class of people in the towns. The idea that “**polish is gained**” (line 12) also demonstrates this idea that one becomes a better and more refined, classy person by living amongst the town people.
- Amelia tries very hard to climb the social ladder by dressing and speaking in a way that resembles upper class society. Despite this, the reader must question whether her attempts are futile. The nameless woman points out **all the things that have changed** about her but these **are noticeably aesthetic and external characteristics** such as “**your hands**” (line 13), “**your face**” (line 13), “**your talking**” (line 11), “**your delicate cheek**” (line 14). The final line “you ain’t ruined” exposes Amelia’s true country roots.

Love

- In this poem, a romantic liaison is seen as an **opportunity for social or economic mobility**. Through her implied affair, Amelia gains wealth and “**polish**” (line 12). The reader **does not gain any information about the nature of her relationship**, except that it is **presumably extramarital** (if it were sanctioned by law, through marriage, it would also be sanctioned by Victorian society, and therefore she would not be ruined).
- A more cynical reader might see Amelia as **using an affair to gain wealth or disposable income** and may wonder whether she intentionally became “**ruined**”.

Structure

Form:

- It is composed of **six quatrains** of **two rhyming couplets** and has a **singsong AABB rhyme scheme**.
 - Therefore, the first 2 lines of each stanza rhyme and so do the last.
 - The 2 last lines of each stanza all rhyme with each other.
- The poem is a **dialogue**, thus it makes sense the poem is composed of couplets. In this way, the couplets often respond to each other.



Metre:

- The metre is not perfect, but mostly in an anapestic trimeter (three anapests or beats consisting of two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable - da da dum.)
 - **“Who could have supposed i should meet you in town?”** (line 1)
 - The start, unstressed followed by stressed is not an anapest, it is an iamb (the most common beat in English poetry)
 - This has the effect of drawing the reader's attention before they revert back to the **comfortable metrical lull of the anapestic trimeter**.
 - Here, the metre also has the effect of drawing out the **rural friend's unusual stresses**. “Prosperi-ty”, “compa-ny”, “la-dy”- the rustic pattern of her speech is emphasised by the hyphens.
 - The anapestic trimeter is quick paced and suits the conversational tone as well as the irony of the poem.
- Similarly, the voice of Amelia is emphasised by the metre of the poem.
 - **“My dear, a raw country girl, such as you be, / Cannot quite expect that.”** (lines 24-5)
 - The anapests give the reader a **strong sense of the formal accent put on by Amelia** as it stresses **“quite”** and **“that”** with haughtiness.
- The metre exacerbates the differences between Amelia and the rural woman. Amelia's speeches are curt and tailed with **“said she”**, implying she has even less than a line to say. In contrast, the friend is more **loquacious and open** and her speech takes up full lines.

Rhyme Scheme:

- AABB with the BB rhyme remaining steady throughout.
 - The last 2 lines always rhyme with a long “e” sound and every stanza concludes with **“said she”**.
- This lends the poem a **lively beat**, evoking the rural friend's babbling tone. It also underlines the poem's irony as it allows for the repetition of **“ruined said she”**. This draws attention to the fact that Amelia's new wealth is the result of her **“ruin”**.

Language

Voices:

- The poem is a dialogue between two women who used to work on a farm. Since the poem is a dialogue with two speakers, there is a **clear sense of dichotomy** and contrasts between the town and country they represent.
- The majority of the poem is spoken by the nameless, rural woman. She still lives in the country and is visiting the city. It is clear that **she doesn't belong in the city** because of her country accent, emphasised by her pronunciation of certain words such as **“prosperi-ty”, “compan-ny”, “la-dy”, “melancho-ly”**.



- Amelia, in contrast, speaks in a much more formal and restricted manner. She **resigns herself to little speech**, as opposed to the rural women who babbles on. Her **responses uphold the Victorian standards for a lady**; they are curt and formulaic, ending with “**been ruined**”, “**we’re ruined**”, “**one’s ruin**”, “**when ruined**” and finally “**ain’t ruined**”.
- The final “**ain’t ruined**”, however, is unladylike and unexpected. Hardy seems to point out that no matter how much effort is put into the outward appearance, **Amelia cannot escape her country roots**. Hardy makes the reader question whether this is **a blessing in disguise for Amelia** who faces the potential of being rejected by upper-class society and forced into prostitution. Possibly, he suggests Amelia’s inability to rid herself of her rural roots will save her later on as surely a life back on the farm would be less ruining than a life of prostitution.
- Hardy’s presentation of two different sounding voices presents Victorian England with its large class separation, a distance physically and socially between the country and the city. He makes the point that the differences are extreme, so much so that even **dialect insinuates class**, status and acceptance.

Colloquialisms:

“**spudding up docks**” = pulling up weeds

“**barton**” = a farm

“**And thik oon,' and theäs oon,' and t'other**” = this one/ these ones/ the other

“**you'd sock**” = you’d grumble

- Hardy **uses colloquialisms to draw out the differences between the two women**.
- Amelia used to talk like her rural friend who tries to remind her of her rural roots.
- Gives the unnamed woman a sense of **organicness, greater personality and authenticity** in contrast to the formulaic language used by Amelia.

Polysyndeton:

“**And thik oon,' and theäs oon,' and t'other'; but now**” (line 10)

- The and creates a listing effect and makes the things Amelia has forgotten about herself and her roots in the country seem endless.
- Her **loss of vernacular is merely a symbol of everything else she now lacks** because of her disregard for where she really comes from (such as a lack of character as seen in the plain responses and contrast to rural woman’s chatter.)



Caesura:

**And whence such fair garments, such prosperi-ty?" —
"O didn't you know I'd been ruined?" said she.** (lines 3-4)

- There are many examples of caesura in the poem.
- Caesura maintains the conversational aspect of the poem.
- Where **lines are broken by caesura puts greater emphasis on the ideas explored**. The question "ruined? Said she." first brings attention to the idea of ruination. The question mark inflicts a change in tone upon the word which further heightens its importance.
- In the line above, the comma causes a pause which puts more emphasis on the surprise of the speaker. Where and how has Amelia come across **"such prosperi-ty"**.

Enjambment:

**"And thik oon,' and theäs oon,' and t'other'; but now
Your talking quite fits 'ee for high compa-ny!" —** (lines 10-11)

- Enjambment here elongates the emphasis on "now", which emphasises the great differences between the city Amelia and the country Amelia.

Assonance:

**— "You left us in tatters, without shoes or socks,
Tired of digging potatoes, and **spudding up docks;**"** (lines 8-9)

- Hardy plays a lot with sound in this particular stanza, there are 2 groups of consonants in the first line; "s" and "z" sounds in **"us"** and **socks"** and then **"tatters"** and **"shoes"**.
- There are numerous consonants like the "t", "d", "p" sounds (explained under alliteration).
- The assonance is most prevalent in **"spudding up"** whose **heavy sound emphasises the difficulties of country life**.

Alliteration:

- Gives a sense of the **bubbly and chatty nature** of Amelia's friend. The reader is drawn to her and sympathises with her lowly position.
- Paired with the consistent metre, the **alliteration keeps the poem fast paced** as the rural woman engages enthusiastically in conversation.

**— "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!**" —** (lines 8-10)

- Repetition of harsh sounds t/ d/ k/ b make the rural woman the primary source of sound and interest. She seems to be **battering Amelia's facade**.



- In contrast, any alliteration in Amelia's speech is soft.

“**We never do work when we're ruined**” (line 16)

- This is contrasted with her final lines which make use of the alliterative “**Cannot quite**”, the “c” sound is harsh and seems to hold an anger towards the suggestion that the rural woman may become as fortunate as Amelia.

Refrain/ Repetition:

- The repetition of “**ruined said she**” at the end of each stanza creates a refrain which the reader constantly comes back to.
- The idea of “**ruin**” is inescapable.
- The irony is that Amelia seems unashamed of her social status. Instead, **being “ruined” is presented as a means of climbing the social ladder**, of being able to live a more luxurious life than in the country.
- The repetition makes “ruined” seem desirable, rather than isolating.
- This is reaffirmed by Amelia in the last stanza where she dismisses her friend, saying she will never be able to achieve the same social status. It is clear, Amelia has forgotten her past and lost touch with her origins.

Sibilance:

“**And you'd sigh, and you'd sock; but at present you seem**” (line 18)

- Sibilance in this instance in the poem notes a change in the rural woman's tone, she seems less impressed than she initially did with Amelia's advancements within society.
- The **subtle sound changes indicate a dislike for the woman** she has become, despite the woman's jealousy of Amelia's apparent luxurious life.

Metaphor:

“**— “You used to call home-life a hag-ridden dream,”** (line 17)

- The metaphor of life in the country as a “**hag-ridden dream**” illustrates the **nightmarish nature and harshness of rural labour**.
- “**hag-ridden**” also refers to sleep paralysis which indicates an **inability to escape**, to get away from the country. This idea is returned to at the end of the poem with Amelia slip of the tongue; “**ain't**” which suggests **her past is inescapable**.



Simile:

“— **Your hands were like paws then,**” (line 13)

- The simile brings to attention what Amelia used to suffer and increases the juxtaposition with her now daintily gloved hands.
- **“Like paws”** suggests the work was brutal and had physical effects on the women’s bodies.

Juxtaposition:

- The poem makes constant use of juxtaposition, opposing the two voices, the statuses of the two women, the town and the country as well as, more subtly, the difference in society’s treatment of men and women.

Irony:

- The greatest irony is Amelia’s refusal to remember her past and her compliance with being a **“ruined maid”**.
- It is deeply ironic that society disdained **“ruined maids”** and yet ruination is presented as more desirable than being a chaste, female rural labourer.

Critical Views

Stanley Renner in “William Acton, the Truth about Prostitution, and Hardy’s Not-So-Ruined-Maid”:

“Hardy **exploits the great well of moral and sexual feeling** bound up with the **idealisation of female purity** and the shock he could evoke by merely mentioning the word **“ruin”**.”

- Renner considers the irony of the poem, how it uses its title “The Ruined Maid” to counter the obviously not-ruined character of Amelia. She is **far removed from the damaged woman we expect** from the title.
- Her ruination affords her the luxuries and advantages of town life to the jealousy of her friend.
- Hardy contrasts the idea of **“ruin”** with Amelia’s character. The irony is in the fact her being **“ruined”** is her salvation and a comparison is drawn between what it is to be a **“ruined”** girl and a girl in **“ruin”**. The distinction between these is made in the characters of the two friends.

“Reveals that the poem dramaticises virtually point by point Acton’s exposure of a society that relished the poetic justice of its view of prostitution - that women rotted in disease and wretchedness for their sexual sins- instead of facing up to the social evils that urged women into prostitution”

- Renner makes a point that Hardy shows through his use of the “ruined maid” and her country friend, the **temptation there was for women to give up their bodies** for male satisfaction and how this sacrifice may afford them a better lifestyle than what they previously had.



- Renner uses William Acton's 1857 landmark book *Prostitution, Considered in its moral, social and sanitary aspects, in London and Other Large Cities, with a Proposal for the mitigation and prevention of its Attendant Evils*
- The book helped create discourse around a topic which was hardly spoken of and worked to dispel the Victorian tendency to ignore the social and moral problems of avoiding discussion of prostitution
- Renner draws upon Hardy's consideration of Amelia's sexual ruination and what this might mean for her and how she goes on to live.
- Committing sexual acts before marriage in the Victorian period was considered **morally wrong and scandalous** but Hardy challenges this view, suggesting that for some women, this was an **escape from a worse form of "ruin"**.

A feminist perspective

- The feminist perspective would consider the way gender inequality is explored within the poem. For example, the two girls are both in a state of **"ruin"**; Amelia because she has resorted to becoming a mistress in order to improve her standards of living, and the unnamed woman because her life in the country is difficult and physically destructive.
- The life of the Victorian woman is difficult and demanding and she is less valued than her male equivalent. Hardy shows her objectification in the way Amelia changes her appearance in order to be accepted by a male suitor and taken as a mistress.
- Hardy further explores how the **female aesthetic labour** has become **central to the Victorian idea of womanhood** and what makes a person a **"lady"**.
- The women are **oppressed in their gender roles** and **unable to escape and be self-sufficient**. The nameless woman wishes she could give up her life in the country like Amelia but she knows that she will have to **"ruin"** herself sexually in order to be able to live a more luxurious lifestyle. This brings into question feminine morals and what a woman is willing to do in order to climb the social ladder or to live a better life. We cannot blame Amelia for her ruination and for wanting to be part of a society which allows for an easier way of life. It is the patriarchal society within which the women live that forces them into the roles they are unhappy with.

Comparisons

'At an Inn' and 'The Ruined Maid'

1. Gender and sexuality

It is important to think about how Hardy presents gender and sexuality in his poems and where the **narrator's sympathies** lie. Although 'The Ruined Maid' challenges some ideas about the way women are defined by Victorian culture, the fact he writes from a male perspective means that many of society's ideas are endorsed even when they seem to be challenged. This is seen in the stereotypical representation of the women in 'The Ruined Maid', the way they uphold ideals of femininity and Amelia is presented as the woman with the more desirable life - a life more accented by the ideals of femininity and proper society. In 'At an Inn', Hardy's speaker is **unable to mask**



his desires to progress the relationship with his companion despite his awareness of moral and societal restrictions, implied in 'after hours'. A woman and a man should not have been together in a pub if they were not together.

Women in Hardy are predominantly weak and men much stronger. In 'The Ruined Maid', we are presented with a strong rural woman who appears to work just as hard as the men in the country. However, she is **susceptible to the ideals of femininity, fashion and life in high society**. Amelia's haughtiness and care for adornment perhaps make her seem fickle preoccupied with matters of appearance and social status; these are **stereotypical female traits**. Similarly, in 'At an Inn' the speaker's companion is **yoked to the expectations of society** and acts accordingly. Like the unnamed rural woman, the companion has no name and additionally, no voice. 'At an Ann' is dominated by masculine thought and desire.

2. Love and loss

"At an Inn" presents the tragedy of the **irretrievable loss of opportunity**. When the couple have access to each other, they appear to be in love, but when the situation changes and they are separated by land and sea, they find themselves actually in love. The conflict for the narrator is the exasperation of considering what could have been and what he has lost because opportunity has come and passed him by. He is left, in the final stanza, grappling with a love he cannot hold onto. In "The Ruined Maid", Amelia takes the opportunity to climb the social ladder but her persistence to elevate her status means that she has forgotten where she has come from. She has lost insight and the clarity of mind that her rural upbringing afforded her. This is made most obvious when she chastises her old friend for her aspirations to enter high society. Amelia has also lost her virginity and innocence (so prized in the Victorian era), and **not for love but for social acceptance**.

3. Social conventions and taboos

Women are often victims of love and society, for example, in "At an Inn" the restrictions of society prevent the pair from progressing their relationship further. If we are to interpret the poem from an autobiographical standpoint, both Hardy and Florence were married which prohibits any formation of affections. An unmarried woman and an unmarried man seen together in public raised eyebrows and was borderline socially unacceptable. The speaker in the poem seems frustrated by the limit he must abide by as **he wants more than friendship** from his companion. "The Ruined Maid" criticises social conventions more overtly, through the **deeply ironic discussion** between the two women. Social convention means that Amelia is ruined; despite her apparent success in climbing the social ladder, she risks being rejected by respectful society as a woman who has engaged in sexual activity outside marriage. The unnamed woman is ruined physically by her position as a labourer in the country.

4. Tragic mistakes

Tragic errors are central to tragedies and usually made by protagonists. In "At an Inn" the speaker seems to imply that he has made the mistake of letting opportunity pass. What once appeared true but was no, is in fact a reality but he did not act swiftly enough for the conclusions he so badly desires now. The **tragic mistake** in "The Ruined Maid" is obviously that Amelia has sacrificed her



purity and her innocence for social acceptance into the upper class, when the reality is that she will never be accepted, certainly not now that she has acted in such a scandalous way. The **tragedy lies in her ignorance of the situation** and also in the women's impression that life as a mistress is a most desirable life, more desirable than modest and honest farm work.

'Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae' and 'The Ruined Maid'

1. Romantic love of many kinds

Both poems consider a form of love that is less romantic. In the case of 'Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae', the speaker desires physical satisfaction found in the act of love making. On the other hand, 'The Ruined Maid' uses a relationship as a form of social gain. Both poems explore the idea of **prostitution**; where 'Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae', in its **decadent mode**, describes the speaker's sexual interaction with a **"bought red mouth"** (line 9), 'The Ruined Maid' **forgoes any explicit sexual language** but Hardy, in his repeated use of **"ruin"** strongly implies Amelia's sexual endeavours have enabled her new luxurious lifestyle. These poems consider a **less emotionally charged form of love**, ignoring the romantic ideals of love presented in many other poems in the collection, to lay bare the way in which relationships and **love can be manipulated** for means other than emotional satisfaction.

2. Love and loss

In 'Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae', the speaker's loss is evident as he is **unable to rid Cynara from his mind** and finds that despite engagement with other women, gorging himself on food and wine and enjoying a lavish lifestyle, he is still unsatisfied and unhappy. **Loss is grotesque**; it forces the speaker to go to extremes in order to attempt to overcome his loss and pain. The loss in 'The Ruined Maid' is in great contrast to this form of loss. The poem explores how Amelia has left her previous, more **morally sound** (according to Victorian standards) life behind in order to live a more lavish lifestyle. We see that in this process she has left behind a whole community of people and her friend, who remains unnamed. This is evident in the way the two interact and the friends point out the ways in which Amelia has changed, ostracizing herself. We question whether her aspirations for material things and a comfortable life are worth the loss in friendship and potential for other forms of love within the country community, as it stays in the back of the reader's mind that her position as a mistress is unstable and on the terms of rich man she works to satisfy.

3. Social conventions and taboos

Social conventions are challenged in both 'Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae' and 'The Ruined Maid' as **they engage with topics that were not openly discussed** by Victorian or late-Victorian society. Prostitution was taboo in the Victorian period because of its perceived scandalous and immoral nature.



4. Approval and disapproval

The question of approval, in both cases, is up to the reader; they must ask themselves whether they think Amelia's actions are justified. In the same way, they must also ask whether the speaker in 'Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae' is right in his justification of faithfulness when he **engages in sexual affairs with another woman** when he is so emotionally tied to Cynara. The general **contextual consensus** was that such activities (of both Amelia and the speaker in "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae") were wrong. As contemporary readers, we may bring a modern and potentially more forgiving perspective. Possibly, this is **simpler in the case of Amelia** where we, in the 21st century, are more accommodating to the female case and may understand a woman's desire to escape hard labour even if that involves engaging in an emotionally unsavoury relationship. We may, however, condemn the behaviour of the speaker in 'Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae' and dismiss his professions of faithfulness. Nevertheless, we can be accepting of his **mental turmoil**. Loss and grief are deeply painful experiences and the speaker is unguided in his methods of dealing with how he feels. Although the poems explore then-taboo subject matters, contemporary readers may have a **radically different reaction** to readers of the times.

