

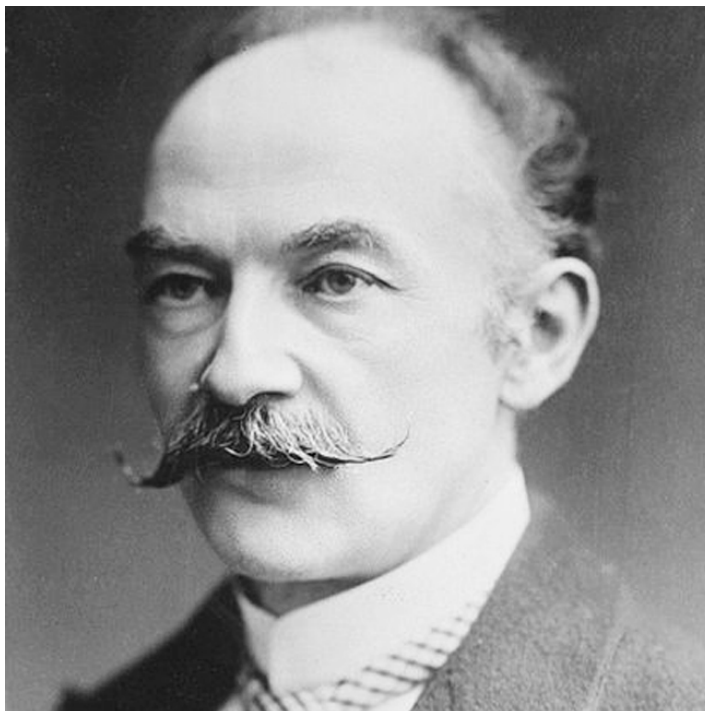
'You Ain't Ruined': How Thomas Hardy Took On Victorian-Era Purity Culture

The novelist and poet's writing pushed back against the idea that a woman's virtue is tied to her virginity.

KAREN SWALLOW PRIOR | MAY 28, 2013 | SEXES

Last week at *The Atlantic*, Abigail Rine described a [backlash](#) by some evangelical Christians against equating a woman's worth to her sexual purity, and against the common use of the "damaged goods" metaphor by abstinence advocates to describe a woman who loses her virginity outside of marriage.

Despite the poignant and compelling points made by some of these young women in the article, I'd argue that the case they're making is not new. A century and a half ago, the late-Victorian novelist and poet Thomas Hardy questioned the connection between virginity and virtue in a way that's still fresh



and relevant to today's discussion. Hardy challenged a number of his society's failings. In particular, he attacked the hypocritical sexual double standard that came to characterize Victorian morality and which unflinchingly equated a woman's moral character with her virgin status.

The first such challenge appears in a wicked little poem Hardy wrote in 1866 (not published until decades later) called "The Ruined Maid," which satirizes his society's deeming a woman who lost her virginity before marriage as "ruined" (the Victorians' version of "damaged goods"). The poem is a dialogue between two rustic girls who meet up after the long absence of one of the girls. The first girl hardly recognizes her friend, Amelia, who is now dressed in finery and putting on airs:

"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?" —

Amelia responds:

"O didn't you know I'd been ruined?" said she.

The jealous friend continues to admire Amelia's improved state and finally laments,

"I wish I had feathers, a fine sweeping gown,

And a delicate face, and could strut about Town!"

To which Amelia proudly replies in the closing lines of the poem,

"My dear — a raw country girl, such as you be,

Cannot quite expect that. You ain't ruined," said she.

Hardy's point is that in a culture that commodifies virginity as he did, the market value of virginity depends on the price it can fetch. In the case of the rustic girl who will never marry out of her class, her virginity will fetch far less than what Amelia gets in being "ruined." More broadly, the poem satirizes the valuation of virginity apart from a holistic view of the person who possesses it. Thus a person is not "ruined" by the loss of virginity *per se*, but by the society that views her as such as a result. This idea forms the central theme in Hardy's later masterpiece, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

Tess, a classically Aristotelian tragedy in novel form, tells the story of a naïve, innocent girl whose love and life are lost after she is seduced/raped (Hardy makes it less than clear, which is part of the point) and faces life in a state deemed by society—and her true love—as "ruined."

Hardy subtitled the novel, "a pure woman faithfully presented"—and therein arose the great controversy that surrounded the novel.

Considered scandalous for its frank treatment of sexuality as well as its empathetic treatment of a fallen woman, the novel underwent a long publication history marked by various deletions and revisions in order to accommodate the prevailing tastes. Even so, critics deemed the novel "unpleasant" and "full of faults and falsities." (*The Atlantic Monthly*, however, called it "Hardy's best novel yet.") Essentially, in choosing the word "pure" to describe such a heroine—pregnant and unmarried—and writing in England in 1891, Hardy was calling into question not merely the definition of the word "pure" but also the value system underpinning the Victorian age.

For the Victorians, virtue and virginity were synonymous. A woman who lost her virginity outside of marriage—regardless of the circumstances surrounding that loss--was ruined. For all intents and purposes, then, a woman's virtue resided in her hymen. Will—a *woman's* will at least—played little or no part in the business. The Victorians, certainly not the first or the last to do so, had confused virginity, a physical state, with virtue, a metaphysical condition.

But Hardy's view was that unlike virginity, virtue is located not in the hymen but in the soul: in one's spirit, one's desires, in one's thoughts, one's will. The virtue of the soul is expressed through the willful acts of the body. It involves one's whole being and thus is not surrendered by means of brute force or by singular acts. This understanding is the basis for Hardy's insistence upon Tess's purity. She had lost her virginity, yes, but had done so as a victim of, not only the man who took it from her, but also a culture characterized by sexual repression and hypocrisy.

In the novel, the narrator reveals how the man Tess truly loves and loses (who also is no virgin)

eventually understands this:

. . . he now began to discredit the old appraisements of morality. He thought they wanted readjusting. Who was the moral man? Still more pertinently, who was the moral woman? The beauty or ugliness of a character lay not only in its achievements, but in its aims and impulses; its true history lay, not among things done, but among things willed.

Here are the views of Hardy the man coming through in the words of the writer. Hardy was a man ahead of his time.

Today most people would disagree, alongside Hardy, with the Victorians' reduction of a woman's virtue to the state of her physical parts. Virginity fits into neat categories of "yes" or "no." Accordingly, Hardy titles the section of the novel before Tess's rape/seduction, "The Maiden," and the subsequent section, "Maiden No More." But Tess's virtue is not tied to her virginity. Unlike her virginity, Tess' virtue, the novel shows, is not a static state, but a practice, a process and habit (as Aristotle said) that develops over time, with dips and peaks and breaks and patches.

The sexual mores of my own conservative evangelical culture are often described as "Victorian" and sometimes justifiably so. The questions being raised from both within and [without](#) this community about the meaning and value of virginity and "purity" within a more holistic approach to healthy and virtuous sexuality are important ones. They aren't new—but they are always worth examination.

(Note: The passages about *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* are adapted from my book, *Booked: Literature in the Soul of Me*.)
