

RETHINKING CENSORSHIP

MY THESIS

My project seeks to rethink the negative perception of Victorian censorship. I argue that it created a climate where discourse around questions of public morality and its guardianship became the catalyst for important and productive literary developments which helped to shape the novels we know and love today!

What did the law say?

The Obscene Publications Act of 1857 made it a statutory offence to sell material considered obscene. The act gave no definition of obscenity, leaving it up to the courts to decide.

So how can censorship be positive and productive?

It galvanised writers, such as **Thomas Hardy**, to create literary techniques which could transcend boundaries of propriety. For example, Hardy's character **Tess Durbeyfield's** seduction is famously only hinted at rather than shown which requires a lot more artistic skill!

My word! This is a bit fruity!

Who was involved in censoring texts in the Victorian era?

The Circulating libraries
The National Vigilance Association (established 1855)
Writers themselves

What type of censorship existed?

- (1) Legal censorship which resulted in very few prosecutions.
- (2) Informal censorship through the libraries.

What impact did the circulating libraries have?

The Victorian circulating libraries presented a solution to the changes in both the economic and political climate. Rising literacy rates and the attendant need to regulate readership were satisfied by a subscription system which made reading accessible to greater numbers while being priced and overseen in such a way as to ensure it remained very firmly the preserve of the middle classes. For a guinea a year subscription rate, a patron of **Charles Mudie's Select Library** could borrow one volume of a novel per month. Mudie supported and maintained the distribution of novels in three volumes which made this a great business plan as it was cheaper to subscribe to Mudie's than to buy three volume novels outright at a price of a guinea and a half each. However, the libraries' philosophy of only selecting books they considered to be morally suitable for wholesome family entertainment actually amounted to a system of informal censorship.