

the son's veto

Literature



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Sophy works as a servant to rural vicar Reverend Twycott. One day she receives a proposal of marriage from gardener Sam Hobson, but she doesn't accept him. When she injures her foot in a fall down stairs, she thinks she will have to leave the vicarage, but Reverend Twycott (who is recently widowed) suddenly realises her worth and proposes to her, an offer which she accepts. Guilty from the feeling that he has committed 'social suicide' by marrying a servant, Twycott moves to a new 'life' in south London. Sophy and Twycott have a son, Randolph, who they send to a public school in preparation for Oxford or Cambridge, prior to taking up the ministry. When Twycott dies, Sophy lives in a small house he had the foresight to provide for her.

She is bored by the 'eventlessness' of her existence, and estrangement from her son, who has adopted a superior and critical attitude to his uneducated mother. Eventually she meets Sam again when he is transporting vegetables to Covent Garden market. She tells him she is unhappy and wishes she were living back in the countryside. Their relationship comes to life again, and Sam proposes marriage to her for a second time. She accepts, even though she knows that by doing so she would lose the home and the living Twycott has provided for her.

When she breaks the news of Sam's proposal to Randolph her son, he forbids her to marry Sam because he feels that it would downgrade him in the eyes of his friends. Faced by this dilemma, Sophy asks Sam to wait, and he does so for five years, after which he repeats his offer. Sophy renews her appeal to Randolph, who is now an undergraduate at Oxford. Unrelenting, Randolph

forces his mother to kneel down and swear that she will never marry Sam. He claims that he is doing this in honour of his father's memory.

Principal characters Reverend Twycott: - widowed vicar in Wessex Sophy Twycott: - Reverend Twycott's parlour maid, who later becomes his second wife Randolph Twycott: - their son, a public school boy Sam Hobson: - a gardener, then shopkeeper

Marriage and Social Status Failed marriages are a common feature of many of Hardy's work. It was a subject dear to his heart, since he felt that his own marriage were never successful. Sophy at nineteen has a proposal of marriage from Sam the gardener which she refuses, but thinks is reasonable. She explains to Twycott ' It would be a home for me', which illustrates her social vulnerability. However, Twycott then proposes to her. She does not love him, but respects him and is flattered by an offer from someone she considers ' august' – that is, of higher social status. But Twycott is twice her age; he dies first; and although he leaves provision for Sophy in his will, none of his financial affairs are made accessible to her. Upon, his son Randolph becomes his principal inheritor.

When Sophy (as a widow) receives a second proposal of marriage from Sam, she will have to forfeit her house if she accepts, and by implication her income as well. In other words, despite having moved upwards in the social class system on her marriage to Twycott, she becomes vulnerable to possible downward social mobility on his death. The fact that Sam makes a success of his fruit and vegetable business merely reinforces the sad irony in the story. Sophy would have been socially secure in accepting his offer of marriage, if she had not been emotionally bullied by her own son.

Education and Social Status To become a vicar in the Church of England is to join the upper echelons of the Establishment, even at a modest level. A home and an income are provided for a minister of the church, and in addition it is common for the fees of a private education to be paid for any children. Reverend Twycott has no children with his first wife, but when he marries Sophy they have a son Randolph, who is privately educated – first at a public school, then at Oxford University.

Thomas Hardy cast education together marriage to the ‘right’ person as a sure mechanism to upward social mobility. But Hardy also realised that absorbing the cultural values of an upper class institution such as a university might create social tensions. Randolph Twycott is upper middle class by birth, because his father is a vicar; but his mother remains an uneducated woman of humble origins, thus casting him as a person trapped between two social classes. Randolph chooses to adopt a snobbish sense of superiority (a common behaviour among the upper class) over his mother – illustrated in the story by her trivial lapses in English grammar, which he corrects.

But more seriously he maintains a completely groundless sense of emotional superiority over her by his tyrannical refusal to accept her proposed marriage to Sam. His formal education has done nothing to develop his sense of humanity or common decency. He might be clever enough to graduate from Oxford, but he has no common respect for his own mother.

Class On what is Randolph's claim to superiority based? For this we need to step back once again to the basis of his parent's marriage in class terms. Twycott marries his servant Sophy, and in doing so he knows he is ‘

committing social suicide'. That's because as a minister and a member of the upper middle class, he would be expected to choose a wife at a comparable level in class terms. He marries Sophy more or less in secret, then gets round the problem of social stigma by moving away from the rural community in which his ministry is located (in Aldbrickham) to a new living in an obscure part of south London (where probably no one will know his past history).

This illustrates another feature of social life of which Hardy was acutely aware – the differences between rural and urban life. Twycott knows that in a village or town everybody's social status will be known to other inhabitants, whereas he enjoys London for its 'freedom and domestic privacy' where the parishioners will not know his wife's origins. They were, however, away from every one who had known her former position; and also under less observation from without than they would have to put up with in any country parish. Randolph is privately educated and develops into a snob and prude. But he is Twycott's inheritor, and Sophy knows that she will lose all claims to her house and her income if she marries Sam. She does not like her isolated life in London and longs for the village life she left behind. When Randolph opposes her proposed marriage to a villager, Sam, Sophy finds herself condemned to a sort of living death.