

What does the son's
veto tell us about
attitudes towards
social class in the
nine...



Hardy uses the theme of social class in many of his novels and short stories and often details a character's movement; either up or down the social ladder and the problems which may ensue. 'The Son's Veto' was written in 1891 and tells the story of Sophy, a parlour maid who marries her respectable employer, the Reverend Twycott, and is faced with a life very different from her previous existence in the rural Wessex village of Gaymead. The story gives us a keen indication of the differences between members of the richer and poorer classes of nineteenth century society and also their attitudes towards each other. Hardy addresses attitudes towards social class through the marriage of Sophy to Reverend Twycott, through Randolph's character and treatment of his mother and through Sophy's relationship with her former sweetheart, Sam.

The reader is first introduced to Sophy via a detailed description of her hair. Hardy makes a lengthy comment about the intricacy of the style and through this is describing the elaborate fashions among society ladies of the time. He then reveals that despite the complicated nature of the style, she has to do her hair herself as "poor thing. She had no maid.

"At this early stage in the story, the idea that the reader should feel sorry for Sophy because of her social background and lack of education is introduced as the ability to style her hair "was almost the only accomplishment she could boast of. (1) Sophy struggles with her life in upper class society and as hard as she tries, often reveals her working class background through her words or actions and this has resulted in her never being fully integrated into respectable society and her having few friends; "but she still held confused ideas on the use of 'was' and 'were,' which did

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not beget a respect for her among the few acquaintances she made. "(3) The descriptions of the circumstances surrounding Sophy's marriage to Reverend Twycott give a great deal of information about how the issue of class was viewed in the nineteenth century. It is shown how the upper classes were held in high esteem by Sophy's unwillingness to turn down Twycott's proposal: " She hardly dared refuse a personage so reverend and august in her eyes.

"(3) They married at a private ceremony " which hardly a soul knew of" (3) because Twycott knew that to marry a person of such a lower social standing to himself would be " social suicide" (3) and would cause scandal in Gaymead. Their union would never have been accepted in the village, where everyone would be aware of their different backgrounds, therefore the newly married couple moved to London where they would be away from " everyone 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. "(3) Through the marriage of Sophy and Twycott, Hardy is showing that while it is possible to climb the social ladder, it is impossible to truly mask a person's origins. Twycott tried to educate Sophy in the refined ways of Society but " Sophy the lady had her deficiencies.

"(3) This is particularly evident through the relationship that Sophy has with her son, Randolph. Randolph is shown to be a privately educated young man with all the airs and graces of an aristocratic gentleman. From the outset, he is seen to treat his mother with disdain and disrespect when he corrects her grammar as if he were the parent and she were the child; " Has, dear mother " - not have! ' exclaimed the public-school boy, with an impatient
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fastidiousness that was almost harsh. (2) Randolph is ashamed of his mother's background and after his father's death he begins to distance himself from her, should his affectation as a gentleman be marred by association with " a mother whose mistakes and origin it was his painful lot as a gentleman to blush for. "(4) He shows himself to be unfeeling towards Sophy, caring nothing for her happiness and thinking only of how her marrying Sam would affect his social reputation. Had Sophy's suitor been from a higher social class, Randolph would not have been opposed to his mother's re marrying.

However, as Sam was a working class man, Randolph refused his permission as it would disgrace him; " a churl! a clown! It will degrade me in the eyes of all the gentlemen of England! "(7) Randolph's contempt for the working classes is of such a magnitude that he would rather sacrifice his mother's happiness rather than have a stepfather who is not a gentleman. Hardy gives a detailed portrayal of the lifestyle lived by the upper classes through his depiction of the cricket match that Randolph attends with Sophy. He shows it to be decadent and gluttonous describing the attendees of the match in " rows of great coaches under which was jumbled the debris of luxurious luncheons; bones, pie-crusts, champagne bottles, glasses, plates, napkins, and the family silver. "(7) Randolph only respects the wealth and power around him and feels nothing for the sacrifice that his mother makes for him even though she longs to return to the village in which she grew up and live a happy life with Samuel Hobsen. Randolph is so adamant that she will not marry that he forces her to swear an oath not to marry.

In contrast to Randolph, Hardy presents Sam as being much more respectful towards Sophy. Where Randolph cannot see past Sophy's working class background, Sam sees that through hard work, a person can climb the social ladder and aspires to do so himself by becoming a master greengrocer so that he can provide a respectable home for Sophy: " I'd keep you as genteel as ever I could, dear Sophy. (6)The great irony of Randolph's refusal to allow his mother to marry is Sam is that by the end of the story, Sam has attained the respectable position in society that would have negated Randolph's objections. Sadly it is too late for him to marry Sophy as she has pined away and died in loneliness.

Through the characters and narrative in ' The Son's Veto', the reader is shown that the upper classes were often disdainful towards the working classes, tolerating them only as employees such as maids and servants. Hardy shows that while members of the working classes may have social aspirations, it is often impossible for them to break down class boundaries as, like Sophy, they will never truly be accepted by those around them and they cannot escape their backgrounds. The tragedy of Sophy's life shows very clearly that, in the nineteenth century, social class had a significant impact on a person's opportunities and the attitudes of others towards them.