

Thomas Hardy's short story, 'the withered arm' essay



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Thomas Hardy's short story, 'The Withered Arm', written in the late nineteenth century is very different from *Dear Nobody* in that it talks about the same issues, but how these issues are dealt with - and what problems arise from them, differently. *The Withered Arm* is about a lady called Rhoda Brook, who is considered to be a witch because she had a child out of wedlock. -And there was a certain stigma attached to that during that time period. *Dear Nobody* (which was written in the late twentieth century) is about a teenage girl who becomes pregnant and has to make an important decision as to whether to keep her unborn child or not. *The Withered Arm* portrays the typical rural life living on or nearby a farm, working hard to earn a living, and being generally very close with your family, whereas *Dear Nobody* is set in the urban town of Sheffield.

The stories also bear some similarities, for e. g. , they both arouse controversy with the pregnancy out of wedlock/teenage pregnancy situations, one, totally unaccepted during its time period, and the other, still not approved of. Both stories have secrets not to be told. E.

g. , Gertrude isn't to know about Rhoda and Jamie being Farmer Lodge's ex-wife and son. Helen didn't know her mother was a 'bastard'. Both stories open in very different ways - though they both do this in an attempt to engage their readers. *Dear Nobody* opens in a very intimate way.

Firstly, it is written in the first person, this makes the story seem much more intimate to the reader. We straightaway understand something of Chris' feelings, in *Dear Nobody*. For e. g. , he talks about not wanting to leave for university.

As the setting is in his bedroom, you will immediately feel very involved in the story as a bedroom is very personal to a person, and you are inside it with him, sharing it. Chris receives a parcel full of letters in it. They are very personal to him, yet he shares them with the reader. Chris talks about his girlfriend, he states "once, me and her were the most important things in our world", this shows that he and his girlfriend are probably no longer together.

This immediately makes the reader want to read on and find out answers to questions such as "Why aren't they together anymore?" "Who are the letters from?" The story of *Dear Nobody* closes with the two main characters (Helen and Chris), miles away from each other. Chris is in a university room in Newcastle and Helen is at home with the baby. *The Withered Arm* begins on a farm, where some milkmaids are talking about Rhoda Brook. This is impersonal, unlike *Dear Nobody*.

The Withered Arm is written in the second person. From the beginning paragraph, you are under the impression Rhoda is an outcast. The other milkmaids are talking about her - saying things they maybe don't want her to hear. The milkmaids don't talk in detail about Rhoda but do make you suspicious of her - this makes you want to read on.

In *Dear Nobody*, the first scene where Chris is reading the letters sets you up for the rest of the story, as the *Dear Nobody* letters are an important part of the story. This differs to *The Withered Arm*, where there are many unanswered questions; this does not prepare you for the rest of the story. Hardy manages to involve his middle class female readers, by basing his story on a working class female; it shows to the middle class women, the

financial hardship and the struggle to get by. This may keep the readers' interest engaged; they will not have experienced this themselves, therefore feel like they are on a journey with Rhoda as she struggles to get by. In comparison, Berlie Doherty engages her reader, (presumably a teenage audience) by talking about something they can relate to..

. hat it's like to be a teenager in love, and also what it's like to be a pregnant teenager. The story is structured in months. This could make the reader want to read on, find out what happens the next month. I think this is a clever device used by the writer.

Young teenagers would find this interesting as they would find out just how hard it is to be a teenager, and be carrying a child. This book would be particularly appealing for that age group. Both stories deal with several themes, including family bonds, illegitimacy and rejection. In 'Dear Nobody', the family bonds are quite strong. For example, Helen and her dad are really close.

Chris and his dad are really close - maybe due to him not having a mother figure. As the story of 'Dear Nobody' progresses, you are under the impression that Helen wants a really close relationship with her baby - something she lacked with her own mother. A strong newfound bond is formed between Helen's mum and Helen's Grandma, when Helen's mum realizes what her own mum went through. I think that Chris's mum tries to form a new bond between her and her son, by giving money to Amy - something she missed out on with Chris. Another very important theme, which both stories deal

with, is illegitimacy. The stories show how society's attitudes towards illegitimate children changed as years went by.

In 'The Withered Arm', Rhoda Brook had a child out of wedlock. You have to take into account that in the late nineteenth century, this was greatly frowned upon, and there was a stigma attached to this - she was, therefore, branded a witch. Everyone disapproved, as this just wasn't heard of during the time period. In comparison, 'Dear Nobody' is written in the late twentieth century - almost a hundred years later, people became less religious, therefore, opinions changed. Helen becomes pregnant at the age of 18.

The close family around her has different opinions on the matter. Helen's mother was herself, born out of wedlock (a bastard). She knows how it feels to be taunted and teased at school, and that being the main reason she doesn't want Helen to have the baby. Helen's Grandma doesn't want her Grandchild to go through what she went through. The majority of people in the nineties, approve of children born out of wedlock.

Helen's Grandma understands what Helen has been through, having done it herself therefore cannot really disapprove of Helen or disown her. Teenage Pregnancy is very common nowadays - hence it not been really frowned upon in the story. Another theme dealt with in both stories is rejection. In 'Dear Nobody', their mother has rejected both Chris and Guy. Chris' dad had to be a mother figure as well as a father figure - which formed strong bonds between them.

Chris suffered more rejection when Helen told him she didn't want him in her life - Chris found it hard to deal with her rejecting him after all they had been

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through together. I think Helen wants to have the baby so that she can raise the child not to feel rejected like her own mother did as a child. In the withered arm, Farmer Lodge rejected everybody - Jamie the child he never really wanted..

. Rhoda, the woman who had the child, and Gertrude, as soon as she became less attractive, he didn't want to know her. Farmer Lodge became a lonely old man, proving that rejecting people can result in you being the one rejected. The main characters in both stories have to deal with life changing problems. In the Withered arm, Rhoda has several problems.

Rhoda's biggest problem is Gertrude, her ex-husband's new wife. Gertrude doesn't know that Rhoda and Farmer Lodge were once married, Gertrude tries to be friendly and just wants to help, she understands Rhoda's financial problems as well, she buys Jamie new boots as his old ones are worn. Rhoda is jealous of Gertrude; of her looks, her youth and her stable relationship. Rhoda has always been branded a witch, and during a dream one night, she marks Gertrude's arm with some subconscious power. This becomes a major problem for Rhoda as Gertrude is completely unaware of what or who caused the affliction.

Rhoda becomes fond of Gertrude and decides to help her, but Gertrude finds out that it was Rhoda who caused the affliction. To cure the 'withered arm', Gertrude needed to touch the neck of a freshly hung person, to 'turn her blood'. It turns out that the person being hung is Jamie, Rhoda's son. Another problem for Rhoda.

Whilst Gertrude's blood is being turned, Rhoda pulls her away, her blood turned too much and later on she died. Rhoda believes he has no control over her power, which is ultimately another problem she must deal with. In 'Dear Nobody', Helen was the main character. Helen has an unwanted pregnancy, which is a major problem for her. The child is unwanted and named a 'nobody' by Helen. Helen copes with the situation very maturely.

After her mother took her to the abortion clinic, she decided she wouldn't have an abortion - she wanted to raise the child, even after considering it may jeopardise her future. Another mature decision Helen makes is to shut Chris out of her life - a long term good decision - She sees he is clearly not ready to be a dad, therefore Chris doesn't understand at the time, but later on in life, he will realize it is the best for both of them. In writing 'The Withered Arm', Hardy clearly included authentic details from his own experiences. For example, Hardy actually knew a woman who had been taken to have her blood turned to cure a wasting disease - this formed the basis of 'The Withered Arm'. Even such detail as the rustling of Gertrude's dress in the church, is a childhood memory of Hardy's.

Another thing which makes his story clearly a product of the Victorian era is something as simple as a fact that they have milkmaids - Nowadays women do not milk cows it is done by machinery. Also, hanging does not take place now, it was abolished in 1964 and no one in Britain has been hung since. The attitudes of society also reflect the time of the story was written in basically, if you weren't married with a child, a perfect housewife, and beautifully clothed - you weren't really accepted. Rhoda had a child out of wedlock so

she wasn't exactly everyone's favorite person. The language used in 'The Withered Arm' is also typical of its time.

Old English is used as a pose to modern day slang. 'Dear Nobody' is clearly reflected of its time. The issues raised definitely help it to be; teenage pregnancies, going to university, getting a good education. The attitudes towards teenage pregnancies have eased off during this time period as well. It's slowly becoming more accepted. Such things as Helen's 'music school' would not have been around in Victorian times.

Also, Helen decided she was going to keep the baby. This would not have been thought of in previous years. The mother of the girl having the baby would have made her mind up for her. As I am a great believer in the supernatural, I found 'The Withered Arm' quite interesting. I thought that the length of the story was perfect. Not too long that boredom set in - but long enough for you to grasp the story.

I thought the story line was interesting as well, including aspects of life, (mostly problems) that don't usually occur all at once. I think it was interesting to see how the story would progress and how the characters would deal with these problems. In contrast I found 'Dear Nobody' very interesting. I found the story line did not appeal to me and didn't want to read the rest of the story after the first three chapters.

The writer failed to keep my interest. I found that the story was quite repetitive and a lot of the same things were re-occurring. I got quite sick of the 'Dear Nobody' letters. The book is quite long and I think there should have been more interesting events to keep the readers' interest engaged.

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I think that 'Dear Nobody' may appeal to someone who had been in a situation like the main character, or know someone who has. Otherwise, I would not recommend it. I would recommend 'The Withered Arm' to anyone who enjoys anything supernatural or witchcraft.