

Thomas Hardy: the withered arm



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This is the question both the authors are asking the reader in their stories. In connection with this the two authors are also trying to find out if people's emotions and attitudes can affect and influence relationships whether it is their own or another person's. In Hardy's story, "The Withered Arm", he focuses on the relationship between Rhoda Brook and Gertrude Lodge and how their emotions subconsciously affect what happens to other people and then how these consequences affect their relationships.

Casey however focuses on the relationship between the husband and the wife and how the rejection towards the wife and her emotions and attitudes toward the seagull could affect what happens to her husband. I intend to explore the issue of whether emotions and attitudes can in fact influence relationships in both the short stories, first with relation to Hardy's issues and then I shall write about *The Seagull*, in comparison to *The Withered Arm*. In *The Withered Arm*, Hardy begins his story by setting the scene so that the reader can imagine where the story is set.

From his descriptions we can deduce that this story is set in a rural, pastoral background, which is very remote. Their community seems very close knit and suffocating, as everybody seems to know everyone's business. We know this because everyone seems to know about the relationship between Rhoda Brooks and Farmer Lodge as in the first chapter when the milkmaids begin to talk about Farmer Lodge's new wife they occasionally throw a glance to the "other side of the Barton" where a "thin, fading woman of thirty milked somewhat apart from the rest.

And as they talk they seem to sporadically throw glances of “reflectiveness” in the same direction so we know that Farmer Lodge and this woman must have had some sort of relationship. This is again confirmed when about half way through the chapter they say “Tis hard for she, signifying the thin worn milkmaid aforesaid” and then we are given the name of the milkmaid they talk about, “He ha’n’t spoke to Rhoda Brook for years” which also tells us that something did happen but it is now in the past.

We next learn that Rhoda Brooks has a child, a son. We know this because when the milkmaids leave to go home Rhoda is joined “by a boy of twelve or thereabout” so this leads us to the conclusion that she had had a relationship with Farmer Lodge and that she had been his mistress and that they had had a child together; the “boy of twelve or thereabout”. However, it seems that Farmer Lodge seems to have now disregarded Rhoda and her son completely and moved on with his life and found himself a young wife.

By this Rhoda feels pushed aside by the farmer and his new wife and feels that she is not good enough for him. On numerous occasions Rhoda sent “the boy” to “give her a look” if he saw her and to report back to Rhoda and tell her what she is like. She also gave the boy specific details about what to look for, “if she’s dark or fair, and if she’s tall- as tall as I and shows the marks of a lady” all of these show us just how curious she is of Farmer Lodge’s new wife and how she will be looking out for any faults with her; like things Rhoda has and she does not.

With relation to all of the comparisons, Rhoda is wanting to make herself feel better as she feels jealous that Farmer Lodge should choose another woman

over her and so even though she has never met his new wife she feels resentment and hatred toward her as she has now also shattered any chance of her family ever being re-united back together.

There seems to be a lot of stress on the appearance of Farmer Lodge's new wife and so from this we can assume that he bases his personal feelings mainly on how women look and their social status as Rhoda is merely a milkmaid and so is of no high social standing, whereas, his new wife is a "lady" and so we can presume that she is of high social status. Then it is confirmed that Farmer Lodge does indeed think highly of appearance as in the second chapter he refers to his wife as "my pretty Gertrude" and thinks that she is a pretty piece that he can carry about and show off to people.

We also know that he likes her because Rhoda's son describes him as being "pleased" and that "his waistcoat stuck out, and his great golden seals hung like a lord's" because he was proud of her and very pleased with her physical appearance. Although, he will not be truthful to Gertrude in his marriage as he is playing ignorant towards his wife about his son.

Now with relation to Rhoda's attitudes and feelings towards Gertrude, she has in fact never actually met her but she makes assumptions about Gertrude based on what she has heard about her and how she feels towards her personally. Akin to when Rhoda's son went to church and Rhoda again asked him to observe Gertrude walking in and out of church and again asked him to see if she is "taller than I." Her son comes back saying that Gertrude is actually shorter than Rhoda and Rhoda then feels as if she has an element about her that Farmer Lodge's "pretty Gertrude" does not have.

Yet when her son then tells Rhoda what Gertrude wore to church he carried on to describe how her gown “ whewed and whistled so loud when it rubbed against the pews that the lady coloured up more than ever for shame at the noise, and pulled it in to keep it from touching;” and how even though Mr Lodge seemed pleased enough Gertrude “ seemed to wish her noisy gownd anywhere but on her” and at this Rhoda seemed shocked that Gertrude would not bask in the attention she was drawing to herself and that she actually didn’t want people to stare at her, but still, in spite of this Rhoda only ever thinks negative thoughts about her and is very much prejudice against her.

Now that she has all of the information from her son Rhoda can now form a mental image of Gertrude that was as “ realistic as a photograph”. Rhoda had been thinking about Gertrude so intently that the figure which had occupied her so much “ was not to be banished at night” Rhoda had a “ vision” while she was asleep that felt so realistic that she could not distinguish whether it was real or merely a dream.

She felt Gertrude “ sitting upon her chest as she lay” but when she looked at her face her features were “ shockingly distorted, and wrinkled as by age,” then as Gertrude’s person grew heavier her “ blue eyes peered cruelly into her face; and then the figure thrust forward it’s left hand mockingly” as if she was showing off to Rhoda that Farmer Lodge chose her over Rhoda and at this Rhoda feels rejected and this makes her face the fact of Farmer Lodges’ marriage. Gertrude is sat on Rhoda’s chest and she feels this and it is suffocating her plus this is also very distressing to Rhoda as she feels the pressure physically and this may be because the thoughts of Gertrude are

almost suffocating her mind and so here Hardy uses his authorial technique to create ambiguity about the ways in which Rhoda is being suffocated by Gertrude, physically and mentally.

Hardy refers to Gertrude as an “incubus”, something believed to haunt sleeping women, this is all part of Hardy’s authorial technique as he tries to make it seem as though it is Gertrude that is the person haunting Rhoda when it is in fact Rhoda obsessing over Gertrude. Then in a last desperate effort on Rhoda’s part to relieve the suffocating pressure of Gertrude from her chest she “swung out her right hand, seized the confronting spectre by its obtrusive left arm, and whirled it backward to the floor,” this sudden action not only relieved the pressure but it also woke her up and it was then that Rhoda realised that it “was not a dream” and that Gertrude had actually been there.

She came to this conclusion because she could “feel her antagonist’s arm within her grasp even now” however when she looked on the floor to where she had “whirled the spectre” there was nothing there so this then made her wonder whether what happened in her “vision” did actually happen or whether it was merely a bad dream. This is yet another side of Hardy’s authorial technique as he creates ambivalence to question what happened, it could be that the “vision” really did happen because she could “feel her antagonist’s arm within her grasp” and she could also physically feel the pressure of Gertrude’s weight when she was sat on her chest, in addition to this, the next morning her son asked her about a noise which he heard coming from her room that night and said, “you fell off the bed surely? and all of this implies that the “vision” was more than just a vision as when

Rhoda thought she threw Gertrude off her in her vision it sounded in reality telling us that someone did actually fall off the bed.

Then again the vision may have never happened and Rhoda may have just experienced a vivid nightmare of which Gertrude was what Hardy called the “incubus” or to be more precise she could have been the nightmarish. This could be because when Rhoda looked at the floor where she had “whirled the spectre” there was nothing there and so this was the only thing, which prevented the “vision” from being a reality, and this makes us think that maybe the “vision” was experienced on a metaphysical level which may explain how it sounded in reality but there was no evidence to prove it.

Hardy wrote this all as a pivotal point to create ambivalence and to tell the reader that it was not a dream and that Gertrude was really there. Soon after this “vision” Rhoda meets Gertrude as she visits her at her home while bringing some boots and other useful articles for them. Contrary to what Rhoda thought of Gertrude she was in fact a very kind and modest person whereas Rhoda had always thought of her as being cruel and arrogant and so here Hardy creates irony as when Rhoda meets her she is very kind and she has always seen her as her enemy but Gertrude is now her friend. So once Gertrude had left Rhoda’s heart “reproached her bitterly” and she felt guilty and said to herself, “this innocent should have her blessing not her curse.

Then on Gertrude’s next visit she showed Rhoda the “discolorations” on her left arm and there were “faint marks of an unhealthy colour, as if produced by a rough grasp” and when asked how and when it happened Gertrude

revealed that it was “one night while she was sound asleep” and she thought that maybe she had struck it during the day and then she went on to say that it occurred about “a fortnight ago on the morrow” and it was also when the clock struck two that she woke up and these were the exact times when Rhoda’s “vision” took place and so we now see that it was Hardy’s narrative technique to drop hints to the reader so that they pick up the clues and piece them together. S

o we can now deduce that Rhoda’s “vision” is some way interconnected with Gertrude’s arm. Now Rhoda feels very guilty at the fact that she could have and most likely did “exercise a malignant power over Gertrude against her own will” and wonders if any incidences like this had ever happened before.

As the reader we know that the arm and the “vision” are most likely to be interconnected because before her “vision” Rhoda had been directing all of her negative energy onto the image of Gertrude as she “contemplated her over the embers” and through her subconscious she must have inflicted a blight on her due to her negative emotions towards her. Here we see that Rhoda’s feelings and attitudes may be also interconnected to her subconscious, which resulted in the supernatural event of the blight on Gertrude’s arm.

After a while the arm does not seem to get better so they both go to see Conjuror Trendle who managed to show Gertrude the face of her inflictor and when she emerges from the room we know that it must have been Rhoda who she saw as she emerged “exceedingly pale and rigid” and did not care to talk about what she saw in the glass and this is another narrative

technique to drop hints to the reader which leads us to believe that it was Rhoda who Gertrude saw in the glass.

Over time Gertrude's arm does not seem to get better and so "in a last desperate effort from deliverance from this seeming curse" she again visited Conjuror Trendle in the hope that he might suggest a way in which she could at least "regain some of her personal beauty" in the hope that she could win back her husband's heart again as now "the farmer was usually gloomy and silent as the woman whom he had wooed for her grace and beauty was contorted" and again we can see how much men valued the appearance of their wives and this tells us how the attitudes towards women were then. Conjuror Trendle's suggestion was that in order for her to get rid of this "blight" she must "touch with the limb the neck of a man who's been hanged.

Before he's cold-just after he's cut down" this is so that it will "turn the blood and change the constitution". The time in between the day of the hanging and her second visit to Conjuror Trendle, more secrecy between Gertrude and Farmer Lodge is revealed as she has kept from him both the visits to Conjuror Trendle and the remedy he suggested as she had found by "delicate experiment that these smouldering village beliefs made him furious if mentioned". She also kept the fact that she was going to go to Casterbridge for this remedy. Then in her "unconscious" prayer one night she prayed for the lord to "hang some guilty or innocent person soon!" and this like Rhoda's vision could on some metaphysical level have a real effect.

Hardy then goes on to describe Gertrudes' journey to Casterbridge in detail and we are told that when she reaches Casterbridge she " beheld a crowd of boys standing at the door of a harness maker's shop" and when offered a piece of the rope she " hastily repudiated any such wish" as she had the curious creeping feeling that the " condemned wretch's destiny was being interwoven with her own" and this tells the reader that maybe there is a connection between her and the person that is going to be hanged the next day. Another insight as to how men viewed women's personal appearance is that when she thought about how she would gain access to the prison she remembers the word of the " cunning man" and how he had " implied that she should use her beauty, impaired though it was, as a pass-key" and this also shows us how society, and in this case men, can be fooled by appearance.

As she is conversing with the hangman he mentions the time of the hanging and how they always wait for the " London mail-coach" in case of a reprieve and at this Gertrude involuntarily exclaims, " O-a reprieve-I hope not! " and at this the hangman states that " if ever a young fellow deserved to be let off, this one does" as he was only " present by chance when the rick was fired" and again we as the reader can add up the clues which Hardy has again been dropping for us and come to the conclusion that Gertrude's " silent prayer" is interconnected with the fate of this young boy as she was so desperate that she prayed for any one to die, whether they were innocent or guilty, as long as it was soon. Hardy then in detail goes on to explain how Gertrude is to go about gaining access to the body after the hanging the next day.

However when it comes to the hanging the next day, Hardy does not describe the hanging itself as he has already described the hanging directly and indirectly as part of his authorial technique and so he wants to leave it to the reader's imagination. He leaves hints and indirect descriptions for the reader to pick up on and to draw their own conclusions. At this point he is telling the story through Gertrude's eyes and so as she has not been to the hanging he cannot describe it. Also Hardy deliberately does not describe it, as he wants to delay it for the climax of the story for the reader. Once the hanging is over, from the description of the carrying of the coffin, Hardy engages the reader's sympathy.

He tells us, "The corpse had been thrown into the coffin so hastily that the skirt of the smock frock was hanging over". The young man was innocent yet was being treated like a criminal just to make an example. Hardy has created pathos in his description and makes the image a pathetic one, drawing undeserved, deliberate suffering. The reader feels sympathetic at the pathos Hardy has created and also sympathy towards the innocent victim. He then ensures that the reader realises that Gertrude is in an almost dislocated state, "it was as though she had almost died, but was held up by a sort of galvanism".

Also it is made dramatic by describing her actions, "by a last strenuous effort she advanced. Because of her distance and dizziness she does not see the boy's face when her arm is placed on his neck by the hangman so does not recognise him, this is also partly due to the fact that she is also wearing a veil to hide her face so that no one recognises her.

The mere fact that the hangman had to place her arm on the youths neck tells us that she was in no fit state to be there and that if she was in her right state of mind, us the reader, would not believe that she did not recognise the body as it would not be credible. The actual deed takes place and then the “turn of the blood” and at this point Gertrude shrieks and then when a second shriek is heard Gertrude turns to see Rhoda behind her and Farmer Lodge and at this point we as the reader deduct that the body in the coffin is in fact Rhoda Brook and Farmer Lodges son and that they had come to claim the body.

Hardy involves the reader in Gertrude’s perspective so we as the reader are drawn into it as if we were Gertrude. Hardy has succeeded in withholding his climax from the reader as a deliberate purpose of creating a dramatic impact on the reader. At this point Rhoda now sees Gertrude as she did in her “vision” as she states, “this is what Satan showed me in the vision! You are like her at last!” and this shows that the “vision” is becoming true. Rhoda now sees Gertrude as the cruel and distorted Gertrude that she saw in her “vision” and understands that the meaning of the vision is now clear to her and believes Gertrude to originate from somewhere evil as she says that she believes “Satan” showed her the vision.

Then as part of Hardy’s authorial technique he describes repeated action as like from the night that Rhoda had her vision, she again grabs Gertrude’s arm and throws her back against the wall, “clutching the bare arm of the younger woman, she pulled her unresistingly back against the wall.” This sudden action caused the almost immediate death of Gertrude, as did the turning of the blood as it had in fact been turned too far, “her blood had

been turned indeed-too far. ” Here Hardy creates irony as the thing that is suppose to cure Gertrude’s blight does in fact kill her. These stream of events then saw a change in Farmer Lodge, “ a change for the better” as he sold up all of his farms since he had no heir to pass it on to anyway as his only son was now dead.

When he had died it was revealed that he had bequeathed the majority of his money to a “ reformatory for boys”, a place for juvenile delinquents, for boys who have been in trouble for criminal acts and in doing this he hoped to give other boys a second chance, the chance that his son never had. In doing this he may have hoped that in some way he could perhaps begin to make up for what happened to his son, as he had done nothing wrong yet was punished for it. Farmer Lodge had also left a small annuity to Rhoda Brook, “ if she could be found to claim it”, yet Rhoda doesn’t take the money because Farmer Lodge never paid attention top her when their son was alive so why should she take “ blood money”. From this we can see that she has not forgiven him for not being there when she needed him however we cannot tell what Rhoda is feeling and so we cannot make a sound judgement. Does she feel guilty? Glad? Sad?

In this short story Hardy has deliberately created ambivalence throughout the story as to whether the events, which took place, were due to a persons subconscious or conscious mind, for example Gertrude’s unconscious prayer for an innocent or guilty person to die soon and then as it happens the person who is hanged the day she goes to Casterbridge for the cure is completely innocent as he was only there by chance when “ the rick was fired” and this puts forward a psychological subconscious projection. We

know that Rhoda creates the vision from her subconscious mind however, how did the vision come about? Could the mere thought that Farmer Lodge could abandon her and her son for another woman trigger it off? Or could it have been all the resentment, jealousy and hatred that she felt towards Gertrude for now shattering any chance of her family ever being re-united? Or could it be both. We know that from Freud's pioneer work on the workings of the mind that all acts start in the mind but it is what people have deep in their hearts that are able to affect other people physically. Is Hardy, in his story, expanding this metaphysical dimension?

And can people's intentions bring about these physical events. However in the Seagull Juanita Casey does not set the scene of where her story is set but she jumps straight into the action of where the husband and the wife are fighting. This story is very much like the Withered arm in that Casey like Hardy also explores how people's emotions and attitudes can influence relationships and events. But Casey focuses more on the relationship between husband and wife. We understand that simply from the first paragraph that the husband and wife are fighting and that the wife must have done something wrong as the husband states, " I'm not coming back, I've told you.

I'd rather die. And then we are told that he would " never be beguiled again". Like The Withered Arm we can see how, in this case men, can be fooled by women as in The withered Arm Gertrude could use her looks to get her own way and in The Seagull the wife has managed to probably use her charm to make her husband stay despite what she has done to him although this time it did not seem to work. Although Casey does make the reader

wonder about the tone in which the husband says, “ I’m not coming back, I’ve told you. I’d rather die. ” As she tells us he says it “ almost in a tone of wonder” as if he thinks about the thought of him dying. When the husband says, “ next-time” we see that he reacts violently.

As part of Casey’s authorial technique she does not disclose any information about the quarrel, just like Hardy did not disclose any information about the hanging, but instead she, like Hardy, drops clues as to what happened. Just before the husband leaves we are told that “ he looked at her as you might look at a poisonous plant” which suggests that the wife may be dangerous and deceptive. Then when he carries on to say “ or a crushed animal” he states possible vulnerability or something that is innately wild and untameable. Here Casey shows us the feelings of the husband through his eyes just like Hardy showed us the hanging through Gertrude’s eyes.

When her husband leaves we are told that the wife then sees her husband as being the same as a dog in that he shares the same attitudes and views as a dog. This is all part of Casey’s authorial Technique, and in this case she uses personification, and so when she refers to the husband as a “ homeless dog” she is using this as an extended metaphor and by relating to him as a “ dog” is an indirect comparison. We are told that the dog is “ in a world contained in himself, friendly seemingly but aloof, alone” and this is how the wife sees the husband when he leaves her, she now knows that her husband is self contained like the dog, doesn’t need anyone, is quite self sufficient and very purposeful.

She knows that her husband belongs somewhere, like the dog, but she doesn't know where and now she also realises that he doesn't need her and this rejection hurts her, just like farmer Lodge's rejection hurt both Gertrude and Rhoda. We as the reader can now understand that both the stories are the same in that they are both interconnected by rejection seeing that in *The Withered Arm* Farmer Lodge rejects both Rhoda and her son, and Gertrude and then in *The Seagull* the husband rejects the wife. Over time her husband never returned and then the wife begins to wonder " would he be back? " and then at this point the seagull appears. Was the seagull a replacement for the husband or a manifestation of the woman's psyche?

Also we were told that he met with a deck accident and that that is how he died. Then Casey uses the technique of repeated action with violence just as Hardy used the technique of repeated action when Rhoda grabbed Gertrude's arm and flung her back when she was having her " vision" and then repeated this action when Gertrude had her withered arm on Rhoda's son's neck. The violence experienced firstly in *The Seagull* is when the wife and the husband are fighting at the beginning and then again repeated when the wife is bashing the seagull's head in with a poker and the violence between the seagull and wife could somehow be connected to the violence experienced between the husband and wife and the psyche of the wife.

Then almost immediately after she killed the seagull a telegram arrived informing her of her husband's death from a fractured skull and this was just after she had bashed in the head of the seagull and so here Casey has created irony. Could there be a connection between these two events? This was the first supernatural event in this story and then the wife noticed that

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the telegram was dated the next day this was the second. Yet for the telegram to be dated the next date was impossible. When she realises that the date of the telegram is tomorrow's date, almost immediately a second seagull appears "battering and flapping at the shut window" yet she had seen "that other broken one where she had flung it: where it now lay under the line of washing" this ending makes the reader think of the possibility of a metaphysical level upon which these events took place.

Both the stories are very much the same in that everything in both the stories are interconnected with each other. Mostly the subconscious of one person seems to be incontestably connected to the supernatural events which take place, like in *The Withered Arm* Rhoda's attitudes towards Gertrude and the emotions she is feeling is revealed in her subconscious and results in her vision and Gertrude's withered arm and all of this eventually affects the relationship between Gertrude and Farmer Lodge. Also in *The Withered Arm*, Gertrude's subconscious is connected to her ill wish upon "a guilty or innocent person to die soon" and this results in her unconscious prayer and the hanging of an innocent person.

Then in *The Seagull* the woman's feelings effects her attitude towards her husband and her psyche and her subconscious seem to both be connected to her relationship with her husband. Although we can narrow down the actions of their subconscious to the rejection that Rhoda, Gertrude, and the woman all experienced in each story; Farmer Lodge rejected both Rhoda and Gertrude and then the woman was rejected by her husband. Casey creates ambivalence at the end of her story; was the first seagull a warning of what

could happen? If so was the first seagull showing her the consequence of what will happen? If she kills the second seagull might her husband die?

Now we see that the two stories; *The Withered Arm* and *The Seagull*, have another similarity in that they both have supernatural events, which cannot seem to be fully explained; in *The Withered Arm* there is the Vision which is connected to the withered arm and then in *The Seagull* there is the telegram and the appearance of the second seagull. Casey has used a sequence of events to build up the story and shock the reader. It leads up to a possible connection at the end between the seagull and the husband and ends on a cliffhanger of what could happen and the consequence and so the story concludes with the possibility of a metaphysical level as the killing of the second seagull could kill the husband as the seagull and the husband are somehow connected. Casey leaves the reader to come to their own conclusion about if these events did take place on some metaphysical level and also about what the woman does do. The author therefore leaves the reader with an enigmatic ending.

The two authors authorial technique are alike in that they both intend to raise questions as without questions the stories would be very safe, predictable and boring and so this way the reader goes away with a disturbed mind. In my opinion I felt that both of the stories were equally as good as each other. I liked the way in which both of the stories managed to get me thinking and at the end left me to figure out for myself what was real and what wasn't as if anything was possible. The language, which each author used seemed to be suited to the time in which the stories were set, for example *The Withered Arm* is set pre 20th Century and Hardy seems to

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have mastered the language which they used and this helps us to understand the kind of background the story is set in and each individual character; " 'Tis hard for she", " He ha'n't spoke to Rhoda brook for years".

However in *The Seagull*, there does not seem to be much speech but from what we do read we can tell that it is set in the 20th Century as Casey uses words like " bitch" and the language seems to be more the kind that we are used to now. Although *The Withered Arm* seems so have made a slightly larger impact on me in the form of it's complexities, it seems to have more questions and possibilities to it than *The Seagull* and I have found that I could try to chase the source of the vision for a very long time and that it would still manage to bring me to numerous conclusions. In conclusion I do believe that the stories are presented exceptionally well and in answer to the question, Can an internal attitude affect a physical event? From reading these stories and from real life I do believe that our attitudes and our emotions can affect a physical event dramatically.