

Mystery and fear in the withered arm

[Life](#), [Emotions](#)



How does the social/ historical context add to the fear and mystery created?

In the *Withered Arm*, Hardy uses various literary techniques to create mystery and fear. Through crafting his characters' personalities, forming events and setting a tone for his story, Hardy treats the reader as if they were one of the characters. Through the story, information is drip fed to us as well as the characters which creates mystery, because we experience the consequences of the characters' actions along with them.

With the additional background knowledge of historical and social context, the reader is already in the loop, so they can gain a deeper understanding of the story. The modern reader knows that this information could often cause much more fear and mystery back then, due to the superstitious personalities of people living in the Victorian era. They would have been more easily influenced therefore, in a way, a better audience, as they would have interpreted Hardy's writing exactly the way he wanted them to- with a feeling of fear and in an atmosphere of mystery. In the first pages of *The Withered Arm* Hardy sets the tone for his story.

Hardy creates a dark tone in chapter one. The title 'A Loran Milkmaid' means that the story will be sad about someone who lives an isolated life and seems to blend into the background. This is because in the era it would be very common for women of a somewhat lower class to be milkmaids. The first sentence also creates mystery 'It was an 80 cow dairy... Troop of the millers, regular... Were all at work', this seems like a very casual setting, very normal and plain. This is the factor, which creates mystery, as the reader thinks that it is almost too normal.

The word 'regular' signifies no break from routine, so if these people have been working this way all their lives. Another quote is the title 'The Withered Arm' that coincides with pain, or a wound of some kind. This creates fear, as the person affected could be either dead or alive and it could be any of the characters. Hardy thus invites the reader to engage in his story. Although setting doesn't play a strong part in the story, it is still important. Take the description of Road's house for example; 'a rafter showed like a bone protruding through the skin'.

The reference to the bone creates a ghostly feeling for the reader, as it is described in quite a graphic manner. It will also cause fear, as the connotations of 'bone' include other gory images, like blood. This description allows the reader to empathize with Road's situation. The description of her house then goes on to say the walls were made of mud, this shows the reader just how working class Rhoda is and how life must be a struggle for her. We now know that Farmer Lodge, whom she fell pregnant with, was of a higher class, and when he abandoned Rhoda, he clearly left her with very little possessions.

In the 19th Century, no husband or an illegitimate child would immediately lower a woman's social status, as she would lack expensive material objects. Hardy also uses various personalities in 'The Withered Arm', to add detail to the story. As each character arrives in the plot, some information is slowly revealed. He has designed them for the sole purpose of creating mystery and fear for the reader. Gertrude, as a female character would have been

objectified in the Victorian times. Characters I. E. Farmer Lodge, causes us to consider what Gertrude purpose in Holystone is.

What with the age difference between her and Lodge, they would have title to discuss and this leads us to think that Lodge only wants her for her looks. For example, '... Married experience sank into proneness and worse', shows how through the decay of Gertrude limb along with her looks, Mr. and Mrs. Lodges' connections had slowly started to deteriorate. Mentions of Gertrude wishes to 'regain some at least of her personal beauty give us an idea of the immense stress put on women in Victorian times to look good for their men. This again creates mystery as we wonder what Lodge's intentions with Gertrude are.

The events, which follow the arrival of Gertrude Lodge in Holystone, create a sinister atmosphere. Although Rhoda had never met the new bride, she carried a strong grudge against her, apparently caused by her ever-growing Jealousy. One night Rhoda had a supernatural vision of the young Mrs. Lodge with '... Features shockingly distorted... ' and '... Wrinkled as by age... ' In addition, Gertrude flashes her new ring at Rhoda taunting her, the figure thrust forward its left hand mockingly. This shows the reader that Rhoda has not only taken an immediate dislike to Gertrude but also creates mystery because the reader yearns to find out why.

In the vision, Rhoda grabs Ghost Gertrude by the arm, which connects with a deeper emotion of envy. Road's seeming obsession with Gertrude, and finding out everything about her has led to this. Subconsciously, Rhoda may be so Jealous of Gertrude hands, which are so opposite to her own, that she

may want to ruin them in some way, to prevent Lodge from being attracted to her. This is why she grabbed Gertrude in her 'dream'. To cause her hands to Wither' and at the same time lose their youthfulness. By introducing Rhoda Brooks 'horrid fascination' with Gertrude limbs Hardy creates fear.

At first, the reader may think that her interest has something to do with Road's insecurities, which could be triggered by the fact, that she has over-worked her own hands, as she is a milkmaid. However, when Rhoda begins to inquire deeper, through the quote: "move never told me what sort of hands she has", it suggests that she wants even more knowledge. By calling Gertrude 'she', it's similar to fear or discomfort of using her name, as if it is taboo. As the quote is an implied question, we immediately want the answer.

The word 'sort' entails that there are many types of hands, which seems strange to the reader. Maybe Rhoda thinks that the 'quality of hands signifies Gertrude class. There is also already reference to the title 'Withered Arm'.

There is almost a sickening feeling of some kind of affection towards Gertrude, but Hardy also creates fear, by never fully explaining the two women's relationship. Thomas Hardy manages to create both mystery and fear, through the question asked in the aftermath of Road's late night encounter. "What was the noise in your chamber last night... You fell off the bed surely? Hardy gives the question to Road's son, who is already an inquisitive character; this gives IM an innocent incentive, to enquire without suspicion. The mystery is created for the reader because supposedly, Road's encounter was a dream, however if Road's son heard it too, we begin to question the likeliness of what we've been told. Hardy has created doubt for

the reader, and we are now suspicious of both Rhoda and Gertrude. Fear is created for Rhoda as she has already assumed that "it was not a dream", but now her uncertainties have been confirmed. The question comes directly and used it effectively.

As the reader, we are both surprised and fearful of this 'incubus' which is apparently haunting Rhoda. As the truth hits both reader and character at the same time, Hardy makes it easier for us to empathic with her. When Farmer Lodge, lies to Gertrude about Rhoda and her son, secrecy is introduced into the Withered Arm. The quote "I think he lives with his mother, a mile or two off" creates mystery, in the sense that, a son would not really be something to keep secret from one's new wife. As the reader, we know that the boy is in fact Farmer Lodge's son, so when we catch him in the lie, we wonder how trustworthy he may be.

In Victorian times, 'a mile or two off' would be a very long distance, and would usually mean, outside the village. Why would such a wealthy man, worry about a 3rd class worker from his farm, who probably lives quite a Journey away. Is Lodge ashamed of his ex-family, or is he simply trying to hide their ongoing contact from Gertrude? The reader once again asks questions, as does Gertrude, but Farmer Lodge seems to keep his answers vague in order to avoid confrontation. It is as if he is trying to conceal his old life from his new life, so we get the idea that he is living in constant fear of his two worlds colliding.

This mysterious factor not only make us question whether he loud be willing to sever his ties with his other family to prevent sabotaging his new 'sugar-

daddy profile but also whether he may be hiding other, more private secrets... During the women's Journey to visit Trundle, Hardy uses pathetic fallacy to create fear. The quote 'thick clouds made the atmosphere dark, though it was yet only early afternoon' shows how the weather sets a dampener on the mood, consequently creating tension between Gertrude and Rhoda.

It is common knowledge, that rain and dark clouds indicate bad weather, which can generate fear not only through setting the mood. To show that something strange is about to happen a connection between gloominess and the supernatural is established, as the quote goes on to say: 'The wind howled'. This not only personifies the wind, by giving it a voice of its own but also, howling can be linked to werewolves which are supernatural animals often used in stories to portray the supernatural, therefore creating a mysterious and unnerving feeling for the reader.

By slowly, introducing negative vocabulary in this section such as 'dismally Hardy has captivated our attention, as he prepares us for the event, which will quickly change the course of the story. This yet again shows his consideration of structure and language to create mystery and fear. The curse in this tale is the reason why Gertrude develops a Withered Arm'; however, it is not confirmed who cursed Gertrude until she visits Conjurer Trundle. In the sass's medicalscience was not half as advanced as it is today therefore people would turn to look for answers in the thing they knew best; superstition.

This is why Gertrude unfortunate incident is explained purely through magic; Conjuror Trundle would not have enough information in order to diagnose her with medical facts to back up his sections. Hardy's purpose for Trundle, as a character, is to incorporate fear in the story. From the very beginning, the reader has reason to be suspicious of the Conjuror. The quote " they say... He had powers other folks had not" spoken by Gertrude, means that he would have a unique ability to perform rituals and spells of the mystical sort in order to aid the village people in their issues.

The fact that Rhoda says they also adds mystery, as often the insecurity of the Victorian townspeople, would leave people with unanswered questions. It is indefinite where this information is coming from. The hesitation in Road's voice would show that people would have a wary attitude toward Conjuror Trundle. His name in itself has a mysterious sound as to conjure' could mean to summon'. Would this mysterious figure 'summon' some spirits to reveal Rhoda as Gertrude enemy?

Hardy has written in such detail to ensure that both reader and character are wary of his personality. Another quote, its the work of an enemy causes distrust towards Trundle from the readers and the characters view, as they wonder how Trundle could have possibly made such a quick diagnosis and thus makes the reader evaluate how reliable Trundle is. In addition, how the verdict is delivered in such a short and spunky sentence shows the reader what a solemn character he is, almost replying nationalistically as if he was preoccupied elsewhere.

The suddenness of it creates fear and the reader is almost frightened of reading on. When afterwards Gertrude attitude has changed so eerily in such a short amount of time the reader can be confident that the 'enemy' described is Rhoda herself. One of the scariest events is the death of Road's son, not a main character in the story but an event, which abruptly ends the story; thus making it more mysterious. When Gertrude visits the jail to fulfill her last spell in order to cure her arm, there is a shocking twist of fate.

The quote 'a second shriek rent the air of the enclosure' warns the reader that there have been consequences of the actions of a character. The word 'shriek' signifies pain, and as the same word is used to describe the feeling of relief coming from Gertrude to the horror-stricken Rhoda, more fear is created. How can these two women have anything more in common? The reader is afraid of what Rhoda will do next, as Hardy has already shown us her true colors so we know exactly what she is capable of. By changing the plot, Hardy creates even more mystery.

As the reader, we were sure that a happy ending would ensue, we now once again fear for Gertrude, as her 'enemy' has returned. This broadens the possibilities of what could happen next and creates both mystery and fear. Hardy has yet again induced a feeling of uncertainty for the reader, by leaving the story at such an ambiguous point. Throughout 'The Withered Arm' we have had to use our own judgment and instincts to try to predict the story, which is what has created a fair part of the mystery for the reader. We also fear our own opinion, of making a false accusation and surprising ourselves.

Hardy has pressured us into doing this and therefore induced fear from the very beginning, while withholding information, without us even reading too deep into the story. Through leaving certain questions unanswered, I empathetic with people from the Victorian era, who would also have been kept in the dark. I appreciate the way that Hardy has molded his story to create mystery and fear, through his individual writing style. He has kept the reader attentive, thinking through every detail carefully while making his story engaging and entertaining. Yet another successfully created literary piece by Thomas Hardy.