

To what extent is
feminist criticism
helpful in opening up
potential meanings
in ...



The short story, "The Withered Arm" explores the role of women in society, their submission to men as well as their independence while at all times retaining an understanding of their struggles. The author, Thomas Hardy reflects on the view of women in the late 19th Century sympathetically, through the use of language, structure and contrast and the exploration of a patriarchal society. Most would argue that Rhoda Brook's life can be seen as an example of patriarchal oppression, reflected further in Gertrude's submission to her husband and acceptance of being a trophy wife and the dominant idea restated by her that "Men think so much of personal appearance". Although completely rejected by society, it is Rhoda, the "thin, fading woman" that prevails in society and lives through the hardships, by not conforming to the rules of society. Thomas Hardy would have been able to experience the greatest political era for women which included the suffragette movement and thus his upbringing and political awareness of the issues of the time enabled him to write a short story which conveys his view that the women that were able to survive the brutality of the 19th Century, without relying on the power of men, should be those acclaimed, as seen by the sole survival of Rhoda.

To a modern feminist critical reader the emphasis on Rhoda's status and her apparent representation as "other", "lack" and "nature" is explicit in Hardy's telling of the story. It is emphasized throughout the story that Rhoda is on the "other side" of society, leaving her "lonely," and rejected even by those women who are of the same status as her, and who should be sympathetic to her cause - instead they separate themselves from the shamed women to the "other side of the barton", emphasizing the "

distance" in their separation. The " mud" cottage further represents her erosion, with none of its " original flat face visible", Rhoda's beauty is no longer visible there, and instead it has been worn away throughout the ages leaving only a " bone protruding through the skin". The motif of bones, hands and arms can also be seen throughout the novel, helping to contrast Rhoda and Gertrude's character from a Marxist, feminist point of view as Gertrude's hands are not those that " look as though she had ever done housework or are milker's hands" due to Rhoda taking up the men's role in society, by both being an only parent to her son and bearing the only income for her household, this hence means that her social status is lower than that of Gertrude's.

It may be explored that Thomas Hardy offers " The Withered Arm" as condemnation of women who conformed to the patriarchal society, instead of fighting against it. It can be seen that Rhoda is punished for her brief history with Farmer Lodge with the rejection by society, her low social class and loss of the beauty, that which made her desirable in the first place - these together caused her a multitude of suffering. Likewise, Gertrude suffers the same fate, her submission and acceptance of the patriarchal society eventually led to her death. Hence it can be seen that Thomas Hardy's intention is to reflect his criticism of the patriarchal society and its negative effect on women.

It can be argued that there is a prevalent theme of physiognomy reflected through the attitudes towards woman. It is common feminist understanding that women were considered as objects of pleasure due to the " relationship between sex and power in which the distribution of power over the male and <https://assignbuster.com/to-what-extent-is-feminist-criticism-helpful-in-opening-up-potential-meanings-in-thomas-hardys-the-withered-arm/>

female partners mirrored the distribution of power over males and females in society". Due to this, women were aware of their position in society and they often succumbed to this idea, hence explaining why the "thing, fading woman" was a "lorn milkmaid" in contrast to the "lady complete". The author himself seems to subconsciously sink into this trap, as the character of the "withered" Rhoda is presented as "sharp", "bitter" and anxious while Gertrude is "comely", "lovely" and "tender", thus, when adapting such a view on women it is no surprise that when Gertrude loses the use of her arm she becomes an "incubus", practicing selfish "cruelty". Gertrude's association with conjurers is further proof how far she had "turned", as in the 19th century, the associations with magic and witch craft were seen as a sin against God and a practice intended to usurp God's role. Hence it can be seen that through a feminist exploration of the text, it may be argued that Thomas Hardy does not fully take an objective view when exploring women but instead a current one.

When looking for meaning, meaning can be found in the names of characters, and when explored by a feminist critic it could develop the image of a character. The meaning of the name Gertrude is "strong spear" which implies, that Gertrude is an accessory to men as spears must be wielded by men. Spears, like women in the 19th century, strengthened the station of men - through their appearance, as emphasized by Farmer Lodge's need to exhibit the "pretty Gertrude" who should "expect to be started at", but her character is no longer a "strong" one when she loses her beauty, and being of no value to the Farmer, Gertrude was left to "stay at home" - hidden away from sight like the "madwoman in the attic". Instead of accepting this

fate of a housewife, Gertrude repeats with remorse “ Six years of marriage, and only a few month of love”, and hence she is destroyed and buried by (in) patriarchal definitions of sexuality; which she has lost. The idea that she only a few months of love, emphasizes that in a patriarchal society, men only love all that is beautiful and presented as good, in contrast to the “ irritable, superstitious woman” that has become of Gertrude. Rhoda’s name creates a harsh sound, much like her character and the hardships she has lived through. Her main attribute is her independence, possibly due to her circumstances forcing her into the position, but nonetheless she shows a clear refusal to depend on males in the patriarchal society by “ refusing...the provision made for her” after Farmer Lodge’s death. It could be argued that Thomas Hardy took his inspiration for her tough character from the two possible meanings associated with “ Rhoda”. Rhoda could either link to a Rose - more precisely a wilted and “ withered” rose, after being “ seduced” by the Farmer, or with the Island or “ Rhodes” which is famous for its independence. Moreover the character of Rhoda is also seen in the New Testament with a maid, servant character, also submissive to male characters. Hence it can be seen that the author, Thomas Hardy draws upon ideas for his characters to form clear view on them, and helps build up a feminist approach to women.

Consequently, Thomas Hardy seems to condemn the patriarchal society in which these women are found, and more so the submission to patriarchal society, hence criticizing women for not rising up against the males. It can be seen that to some extent, Rhoda rose up against Farmer Lorde, to a much

higher extent than Gertrude - which is proven by her survival, while Gertrude's subservient submission to the patriarchal society is fatal.