

Reading thomas
hardy's 'the withered
arm' transports you
back to england at
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Thomas Hardy was born in 1840 in a village known as Higher Bockhampton near Dorchester, which is in the county town of Dorset. This village was extremely small and consisted of about eight workers cottages and had a total population of about 50 people. Hardy lived with his two sisters, his brother, his mother and his father and grew up on the edge of a wild stretch of heath.

Hardy's mother who could read but could not write had sent him to a church funded school in Dorchester at the age of nine as she was determined that he would get a better education than she had got. His education continued at home where his ambitious mother insisted that he read a wide range of 'good' books. He left school at sixteen and then moved to London in 1862 where a go-ahead architect known as Arthur Blomfield employed him. While in London Hardy also studied painting and taught himself Greek and Latin every morning before he went to work.

Before Hardy returned to Dorchester in 1867, he had also begun writing novels. His first "Desperate Remedies", was published in 1871. He became famous for the serialised story, "Far From the Madding Crowd", which was printed first in a London magazine and then as a novel. From 1887 onwards, Hardy turned more to writing short stories based on his knowledge of Dorset life. Hardy's name became well known and his stories were collected and published in three volumes: "Wessex Tales" (1888), "A Group of Noble Dams" (1891), and "Life's Little Ironies" (1894). A fourth and final volume of short stories, "A Changed Man" was published in 1913. Hardy died in 1928

at the age of 88. His body was buried at Westminster Abbey however Hardy had always remained very close to his 'roots' in Dorset.

I agree with the statement that reading "The Withered Arm" transports you back to rural England at the turn of the 20th Century. When Hardy was born in 1840, Wessex was very deep country and was cut off from almost all other parts of England. There were cart tracks rather than roads and almost everyone travelled on foot. Many people lived in their village their whole lives without going further than the nearest market. Almost everyone belonged to the 'Labouring Class' and worked on the land. Sheep and dairy farming was wide spread with the farms being owned by the middle class farmers who then employed the local people to work on their land. The following passage illustrates this.

"I shall have to pay him nine pound a year for every one of these milchers, whatever his age or her. Get on with your work, or 'twill be dark afore we have done. The evening is pinking in a'ready." This speaker was the dairyman himself, by whom the milkmaids and men were employed."

These lines show that the dairyman pays Farmer Lodge for the rent of his cows. The dairyman then hires the local milkmaids to milk the cows by hand. In Hardy's time cows would be milked by hand into a bucket or pail, whereas nowadays a machine would milk them. The word "milchers" is no longer used today, but in Hardy's time it was used instead of the word "cow". This gives us one example of how language has changed over the years.

At the beginning of the second chapter Hardy describes Farmer Lodge and his new wife travelling home. The following lines show the type of transport that was used in the 20th century and it describes what the roads were like to travel on.

“ The road from Anglebury to Holmstoke is in general level; but there is one place where a sharp ascent breaks its monotony. Farmers homeward-bound from the former market-town, who trot all the rest of the way, walk their horses up this short incline.”

From reading these lines we can see that the roads are more like dirt tracks and are generally level with a few bumps and hills, whereas today roads are made of smooth tarmac and have roads markings and signs all over them. We also learn that the main type of transport other than walking is by horse and cart.

Hardy's use of dialect helps to transport you back to rural England because he uses words that are not heard of or used in today's modern language. Being so cut off, Wessex villages spoke a dialect which would have been barely understood in nineteenth-century London. Hardy's parents both spoke ' broad Dorset' which Hardy would have picked up and used in his stories. Throughout " The Withered Arm" we can see many examples of the ' broad Dorset' dialect. He uses the word " barton" to call the farmyard, he uses " chimmer" to mean bedroom and he uses the words " tisty-tosty" to describe someone as being as round as a ball. He uses word and phrases like these throughout the story which gives the reader a much more realistic

impression of what it was like live in Dorset at the time the story was written.
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In the story "The Withered Arm" magic plays a central part and Hardy claimed not to have invented the 'magical' details of the story but said they were all based on fact. Every village in Wessex was supposed to have its own witch who specialised in curses. Her services were often sought for casting evils spells on enemies. This was known as 'over-looking'. Once a victim had been over-looked, he or she would, it was believed, be blighted by injury. Limbs would slowly wither and in extreme cases drop off. We see this happening to Farmer Lodge's wife, Gertrude in "The Withered Arm" after the jealous Rhoda Brook casts an evil spell on her. This action causes her arm to start to wither and decay.

In Hardy's time, superstition and witchcraft was believed by many people, however in today's world it is believed in less because science has proved it to be false. Every village in Wessex was supposed to have its own witch who specialised in curses. In "The Withered Arm" magic plays a central part, and Hardy claimed not to have invented the 'magical' details of the story - they were all based on fact. In "The Withered Arm" it is believed that the injury on Gertrude's arm has been created by the spell of a witch. The following line shows that people believe that witchcraft is the only explanation.

"My husband says it is as if some witch, or the devil himself, had taken hold of me there, and blasted the flesh."

This line indicates that although the injury could have been due to a simple reason they all believe that a witch or evil spirits have something to do with it.

During Hardy's time it was believed that conjurors or white wizards controlled most of the witchcraft and evil spells. These conjurors could tell the future and help people who had been bewitched to get rid of their 'blight'. They could tell you who their enemy was by pouring egg white into a glass of water and they could remove your injuries by rubbing the infected limb over the corpse of a dead body. We see both these methods used in "The Withered Arm" to try and help Gertrude get rid of her withering arm.

We can tell from the following line that at the beginning of the 20th century medicine was not very good and they relied on curses and spells to cure their ailments.

" Medicine can't cure it," he said promptly. " This the work of an enemy"

This line also shows that their belief in superstition and magic was much greater than in today's, modern world. From reading " The Withered Arm" we can see how big a part superstition and magic played in the everyday lives of 20th century people. From reading Hardy's descriptive writing from this time we get a clear picture of what people believed in and what they thought to be fiction.

At the time of writing " The Withered Arm" the role of women was very different compared to today. Women worked mainly on the land like the men and they also worked in the dairies milking the cows. If a woman was married to a man of higher-class she would do no work and would go almost everywhere with her husband so he could show off her beauty. If she

became ill or lost her beauty a new and prettier wife could replace her. This is shown in the following line.

“ I shouldn't so much mind it,' said the younger, with hesitation. ' if - if I hadn't a notion that it makes my husband - dislike me - no, love me less.”

In this line Gertrude is telling Rhoda that she fears the blemish on her arm is causing her husband, Farmer Lodge to love her less. This shows that higher-class men only regard their wives are something to look pretty and nothing more.

During Hardy's boyhood it was not a crime for husbands to whip their wives, and in fact it was a crime to a disorderly female or a nuisance. This type of behaviour in today's 21st century world would not be tolerated. Women and men are treated the same, both get paid the same, and can have the some jobs or careers. From reading Hardy's work we can see how women were treated differently and can imagine what it would be like to be a woman in the 20th century.

Another difference between life in the 20th century and today's modern world is the importance of Sunday. In Hardy's time everyone would go to church on Sunday as religion was an important part of everyday life, however today in the 21st century, religion isn't as important and most people see Sunday as a day to relax and stay in bed longer than normal.

From reading Thomas Hardy's " The Withered Arm" a clear picture of country life is created. We have learnt that superstition and religion plays a big part in country life and that women in the 20th century were not treated as they

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are today. We have discovered that farming supplied most of the jobs for the local working-class people and that the upper class earns large sums of money by renting cows to the poor people. The rich also flaunt their wealth about a lot, which is show by the following line.

“ His great golden seals hung like a lord’s.”

This widens the gap between the rich and the poor even more so.

Hardy’s use of descriptive language and dialect helped to give a clear picture and his use of the old traditional words and phrases really brought this story to life. Overall we can see that country life then in the 20th century was very different to what it is like in todays modern world.