

# The withered arm by thomas hardy

Literature



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Over the past 150 years women's rights and roles in society have changed considerably and with this, society's attitudes towards women. The depiction of women in the stories I have studied varies greatly and in this essay I will be discussing whether or not the portrayal of women and their rights matches women's history and attitudes towards them both then and today.

The stories I have studied were all written between 1870 and today and include 'The Withered Arm' by Thomas Hardy, which although written in the 1870's was set in the 1830's, in a time when women had very few rights; they could not vote and it was extremely difficult for them to instigate divorce. This is reflected in the story as the two leading female characters have very limited freedom and are completely dominated by the male characters. 'The Story of an Hour', written in 1894 by Kate Chopin is more forward thinking than 'The Withered Arm'.

It illustrates how women were still restricted and had much fewer rights than men even though at the time laws had been passed to allow women to vote in local elections and to have control over their own properties. Roald Dahl wrote the next story I studied, 'Lamb to the Slaughter', in the 1950's when women had complete political equality with men but had fewer social and employment rights. It shows how dependent women are on men and how they are considered incapable. The final story I studied was 'Your Shoes' by Michele Roberts.

Written in the present day it tells the story of a teenage girl who has complete freedom, choosing to run away from home, use drugs and have underage sex. It is easy to see how much women's history has changed

between the 1800's, when women found it hard to divorce and could not vote, and the modern day, where women have total equality with men. As time has progressed, the author's writing styles have changed immensely with the portrayal of women. In 'The Withered Arm' Hardy uses an old fashioned writing style; his sentences are long and complex and he uses a wide vocabulary.

For example, " When the milking was done they washed their pails and hung them on a many-forked stand made as usual of the peeled limb of an oak-tree, set upright in the earth, and resembling a colossal antlered horn. " This was at the time, the style that would appeal to his audience: educated and upper class adults. This style is totally unlike that used by Michele Roberts in 'Your Shoes'. She uses many modern expressions and slang such as, " empty-headed blonde" and " slut" and rhetorical questions are written in a modern style, without a question mark. " How could you do that to us.

How could you. " Roberts uses short sentences that are nowhere near as complex as those used by Hardy, " That Vanessa for instance. I wouldn't be surprised to hear she's on drugs. She had that look. " Also, the piece is not structured, as it is a stream of consciousness written by the mother whose daughter has run away. As well as Hardy's writing style in 'The Withered Arm' the attitudes towards women are also old fashioned, whereas 'Your Shoes' has very modern ideas. In Hardy's story women are treated as if they are incapable and need protection from men.

For example, the Conjuror tells Gertrude that the spell she needs to relieve her of her wound " is hard to carry out, and especially for a woman. " Also,

men speak to women as if they are inferior; we are told that Farmer Lodge is "uncommunicative" and "cold" towards Gertrude, whilst he ignores Rhoda. This attitude is similar to that in 'Lamb to the Slaughter' where Mary Maloney is spoken to by her husband with very little effort and as if she is unimportant although to her, he is the most important thing and she does her utmost to please him.

For example, "'I'll get you some cheese and crackers first. 'I don't want it,' he said. " Or pork. Anything you want. Everything's in the freezer. 'Forget it,' he said. " She is treated by the police officers as if she is fragile and she is not considered a suspect in her husband's murder for one second, " she heard a few of the whispered phrases - '... acted quite normal... very cheerful... wanted to give him a good supper... peas... cheesecake... impossible that she... "' This is because at the time women were thought unable to carry out such an act.

However, this treatment of women is totally contrasted in 'Your Shoes', in which a teenage girl runs away from home at her own free will and is more than capable of making her own decisions; her mother is even suspicious that she may be using prostitution to make money to buy food with. The fact that a 15-year-old girl is living away from home and feeding herself clearly shows how women's capabilities has changed. In 'The Withered Arm' women are looked upon as if they needed the assistance of men for everyday life, but in 'Your Shoes' the girl is free to do as she pleases. You just went off, just ran out of the house in the middle of the night, and left me. "

Although Hardy portrays women as they would have been at the time, with very few rights and inferior to men, he shows a preference to strong women. Hardy kills off the weaker character of Gertrude, who spends her life trying to rid herself of the wound on her arm through various potions, at a fairly young age, whereas the stronger character, Rhoda Brook, who raised her son on her own after an affair with Farmer Lodge goes on to live a long life.

This is a general pattern in Hardy's stories, stronger women live and prevail while weaker and less dependant women die, or suffer poor lives. The freedom and choices women have compared to men in the stories are also very different. In 'The Withered Arm' the central female characters, Rhoda and Gertrude, are incredibly restricted. Gertrude must ask her husband's permission before leaving the house, " to make the journey... required her husband's assistance. She dared not tell him...

It was therefore necessary to wait for another opportunity", whereas he has total freedom, " the season was in summer... and in the leisure thus afforded him her husband had been holiday-taking away from home". Rhoda also has restricted freedom, as she has to look after Farmer Lodge's son on her own. Even her son, who is only a child, has more freedom than she has; he is allowed to go to church and out trapping rabbits while she stays inside. This is not at all like the freedom experienced by the teenage girl in 'Your Shoes'.

Even at the age of 15 she makes all of her own decisions, choosing to run away from home, " drink alcohol at parties", " smoke pot" and have underage sex; although it is shown that in her mother's relationship, her husband has a lot of the authority. " Of course your father was angry. After

all this is his house. " Both of these stories correlate with women's history: in the days when 'The Withered Arm' was set, women had no vote and had to prove two charges if they were to divorce, whereas men had to only prove one.

Today, when 'Your Shoes' was written, women have complete equality with men and unlike in 'The Withered Arm' the fact that a person is female has no effect on their rights or freedom. In 'Your Shoes', shoes are symbolic throughout the story and illustrate the woman who they belong to's freedom and lifestyle. The woman who is writing the letter talks about her mother and says she " never had much of an education" and was " vulgar", " always saying the wrong thing". She was " vain" and wore " high-heels, all of them too small for her", which " moulded to the shape of her poor feet" and left her with " bent over, misshapen toes".

This is used to show how her Grandma didn't particularly want to be a housewife and tried to be something she wasn't, forcing herself into a lifestyle that didn't suit her. The writer talks about her daughter's white trainers, which are comfy, modern and designed for running. This is a link to the way she has run away and has a very unrestricted and comfortable life. The two different shoes show how women's freedom has changed. The way the central women characters in the stories speak and behave also differs greatly. In 'The Withered Arm' Gertrude is very eager to please her husband.

This is similar to how Mary Maloney behaves in 'Lamb to the Slaughter', yet very different to the behaviour of the teenage girl in 'Your Shoes', in which the girl is rude and answers back to her father. Gertrude is very keen to get

rid of the disfigurement on her arm to please her husband, as she says " I shouldn't so much mind it if - if I hadn't a notion that it makes my husband - dislike me - no, love me less. " This shows she is very concerned about her husband's feelings towards her and Mary Maloney's relationship with her husband is very alike to this.

She eagerly waits for him to return from work as " for her, this was always a blissful time of day", serves him, " Darling, shall I get your slippers? " and in general acts in a way that shows how important he is to her. In these two stories women are incredibly polite to their husbands and would do very little without their permission, but even when Gertrude leaves the house while her husband away, this is so she can cure her affliction in order to please him. In 'Your Shoes' however, we are told how the teenage girl answers back and is rude to her father, and behaves in a way that is totally beyond his control.

He can't stand being answered back. He can't stand rudeness. Not from you, not from anybody. What did you expect, being brought home drunk at three in the morning? " This behaviour towards a male would be unheard of in the 1830's and these stories do draw parallels with women's history. In the days when 'The Withered Arm' and 'Lamb to the Slaughter' were written, men were very important to women as they provided their homes and money due to the scarcity of jobs for women.

Women had a respect for men, but nowadays, when women have complete equality, education and the choice of a job, there is no need to be so dependent on males. 'The Story of an Hour' shows how restricted women were due to men in 1894. Mrs. Mallard is described as very weak, " pressed

down by a physical exhaustion" and with a "dull stare" until the point at which she is told how her husband has passed away. She then senses a change, which she is powerless to as she becomes free. Her eyes are now "keen and bright", as "she would live for herself.

There would be no powerful will bending hers". This is a glance into a woman's life without men overruling their decisions and leaving them to lead a life at their own freewill, a life which women in the modern day can lead. In conclusion, I find that as expected, women's rights and freedom in the various stories are similar to the rights they would have at the relevant time in history. However, in my opinion Rhoda Brook is the strongest female character, as she is not dependent on anyone and lives her own life.

Although the teenage girl in 'Your Shoes' has a lot of freedom, she is dependent on alcohol and cannabis and is also financially dependent on her parents. The modern teenage girl leaves us with questions such as, "How do you feed yourself out there on the street?" and "What do you have to do to get money for food?" whereas the supposedly more old-fashioned character of Rhoda Brook lived a long and independent life. "Eventually she reappeared in her old parish, - absolutely refusing, however, to have anything to do with the provision made for her.

Her monotonous milking at the dairy was resumed, and followed for many long years. "I feel that as time continues to progress women's portrayal will follow the pattern of past stories and correlate with their rights and freedom at the time. There will be no looking back at society's attitudes in the past, as any difference in rights for men and women is no longer permitted in this



country. I would like to think that women will not be portrayed as anything other than what they are: men's equals.