

How does Hardy
interest and engage
the reader of the
Wessex Tales essay
sample



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The Wessex Tales is a collection of tales written by Thomas Hardy in 1888. Hardy uses numerous techniques throughout, both which engage and involve the reader in his controversial yet addictive plot lines. Hardy incorporates his many personal experiences and emotions within his tales, thus providing an overall original style of writing. The stories within The Wessex Tales often end tragically and usually incorporate female characters being wronged or faced with a situation that is deemed immoral. Hardy's characters are generally "everyday" and quite "common," but are often placed in difficult and bizarre situations.

Such situations are what captivated the imaginations of the Victorian public. Cliffhangers and unforeseen twists led the Victorian public to commend Hardy's work, despite his taboo plot lines. This was largely because Hardy's tales were considered new, exciting and pleased the Victorian Public. Hardy brought something new to the literary scene and was therefore highly praised. Most of Hardy's tales were originally written for publication in monthly magazines; this was an influential factor to Hardy's style of writing, as it meant that Hardy had to include regular cliffhangers to keep the Victorian public enticed.

Hardy also needed to be aware of what the Victorian public demanded. It was imperative for Hardy to maintain the right balance of scandal whilst ensuring the content was socially acceptable and did not offend readers. One of the many techniques that Hardy incorporates into his writing is cliffhangers. Hardy does well to develop his characters in the mind of the reader, which makes the reader care for the welfare and future of the characters. It is vital for a cliffhanger ending to be successful; since we care

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about the characters we feel compelled to read on when the next issue was available.

An example of a cliff-hanger used in Hardy's tales is clearly shown in *The Withered Arm*. Rhoda says: " O, can it be... that I exercise a malignant power over people against my own will? " This quotation leaves the reader under the impression that even Rhoda is questioning her own being of a witch; it also suggests that she has no control over the powers she possesses. The fact that even Rhoda herself questions her position as a witch, makes this an exemplary cliffhanger, as nobody knows the truth, not even Rhoda herself. This would entice the reader to continue in order to find out the truth.

In Hardy's time, this was key as readers would have had to wait for the next issue to be released before they could continue reading, and would thus need techniques like this to be enticed. Similarly In *The Melancholy Hussar*, mystery and suspense is created through cliffhangers. An example of this is taken from the end of a chapter: "... and she was braced to the obvious risks of the voyage by her confidence in him. " Phyllis is planning to escape with Matthaus, but the quotation questions this motion and whether Phyllis really would leave both her father and Humphrey Gould to take the risk with Matthaus.

This technique is also shown in *Fellow Townsmen*, where Barnet disappears and does not return: "... every vestige of him had disappeared from the precincts of his native place... " This makes the reader question whether Barnet has really gone, and in a sense makes them want to continue reading in hope of discovering the whereabouts of Barnet. Again, in *The Distracted*

preacher, this technique is used to convey suspense and mystery. An example of this is when Lizzy states: " I air and dust them sometimes," Stockdale is bewildered; however, Lizzy was referring to her husband's clothes.

This quotation can lead to two possibilities; either that Lizzy is mentally ill or that she is trying to hide and cover something up. When Stockdale replies, " Do dead men come out of their graves and walk in the mud? " this convinces the reader that there is something unjust going on, thus enticing them to read further. Another technique that Hardy uses is pathetic fallacy; this is where the weather portrayed in a scene is reflecting how a person feels. An example of this is from *The Melancholy Hussar* where it states "... er white raiment... showing conspicuously in the bright sunlight of this summer day. "

This suggests that the weather is reflecting Phyllis' feelings for Matthauss and that the two are so destined for each other that even the weather is agreeing. This technique is again shown in *The Melancholy Hussar*: " There came a morning which broke in fog and mist, behind which the dawn could be discerned in greenish grey... smoke from the canteen fires drooped heavily. " This quotation suggests that something ill natured is due to take place.

The fog and mist suggest that it already has taken place and when the mist clears, everyone will clearly see the damage that has happened. This description comes after Phyllis decides not to run away with Matthauss. She then thinks over the decision thoroughly and feel as if she has made a mistake. However, this description may also interpret as a character's

feelings; it may suggest that a character is feeling gloomy and misery. This is proportional to how Phyllis is feeling about the decision she made.

The technique of pathetic fallacy is also used within *The Withered Arm*, where it states: " thick clouds made the atmosphere dark... the wind howled dismally. " This atmosphere is described on the journey to Conjuror Trendle's house, and suggests that something ill natured is due to take place as the weather is not agreeing with Rhoda and is almost agreeing with her ' dark' side. This technique particularly engages the audience as the build up implies some sort of confrontation or revelation in which the truth is told.

Victorian audiences enjoyed melodrama hence why Hardy incorporated so many unexpected plot twists in his stories. These plot twists helped to interest and engage the reader as it showed the harsh reality of life. There are many examples of this in Hardy's tales. Firstly, in *The Withered Arm* when Gertrude looks to cure her arm, her personality immensely changes. She was seen to be a very mild and gentle character at the beginning of the story, but rapidly changes to an angry, preoccupied character.

This twist in character leaves the audience wondering of what happens next, as it emerges that ' anything can happen. In addition, when Gertrude approaches the neck of the hanged man, we soon find out that the hanged man is Rhoda's son: "' Hussy - to come between us and our child now! ' cried Rhoda. " Secondly, in *The Melancholy Hussar*, Humphrey Gould arrives on the day that Phyllis is to escape with Matthaas: " A passenger alighted, and she heard his voice. It was Humphrey Gould's. " This shows the options

that Phyllis has: she can either stay at home and marry Gould or run away with Matthauss to have a risky and unexpected future.

This entices the reader to continue to see what decision Phyllis has made. Fellow Townsmen also includes plot twists; this is particularly shown when Barnet receives a letter from Downe explaining that he and Lucy Savile are due to get married: " Lucy Savile and myself are going to be married this morning... " This comes at a time when Barnet was due to propose to Lucy. The reader is then involved in the story as they are eager to see what happens next. Finally, this technique is shown in Distracted Preacher, " You are a smuggler... Lizzy is part of a smuggling situation, which then leads to many questions on whether or not Stockdale will still marry her.

Thomas Hardy had a keen interest in the idea of chance and fate; he believed that a single small motion could have a catastrophic effect. In The Wessex Tales, Hardy creates many taboo plot lines. These include people suffering from a great line of misfortune. Hardy maintains the interest of the reader by emphasising the role of chance and fate in people's lives. He suggests that no matter what path/route people undergo, they will end up at the place they are intended.

This is the reason as to why Hardy's stories are so engaging; he creates numerous plot twists so the audience cannot predict what will happen. This all links in with Hardy's personal experiences, when he was born doctors assumed he was dead, as Hardy was not breathing. The doctor then left Hardy to the side and attended to Hardy's mother. However, minutes later a nurse noticed that Hardy was in fact breathing and alive. This moment

sparked the imagination of Hardy; he found that the chance of the nurse noticing him was extremely rare yet very interesting.

In the *Withered Arm*, Gertrude's marriage appears to be failing. Farmer Lodge loses interest in Gertrude because she had changed. She had a withered arm, which made her unappealing. She also became obsessed with finding a cure for her arm and as a result became very bitter and fanatical. Her character had immensely changed: "The once blithe-hearted and enlightened Gertrude was turning into an irritable, superstitious woman..." This unexpected change in character interests and engages the reader as no one knows the reason for why the withering of her arm had happened.

In *The Melancholy Hussar*, Gould arrives on the same day that Phyllis and Matthaus planned to escape. This then brings up the idea of chance and fate; maybe it was within Phyllis' fate that she was to marry Gould and not Matthaus, and nothing could prevent that. When Phyllis decides to "stay at home, and marry him, and suffer," it immediately engages the reader as they would be keen to find out whether or not Phyllis had made the correct decision, and what the future holds for the two. There are also many allusions present within Hardy's tales.

The inclusive references made to Desdemona in *The Melancholy Hussar* suggest to the reader that the story may end in tragedy: "Like Desdemona, she pitied him, and learnt his history..." This then makes the reader think that something unjust is due to take course Desdemona was a character in Shakespeare's play *Othello* who was murdered by her husband (Othello) as he was tricked into believing that his wife was an adulteress.

An allusion is also made in *The Withered Arm*. "... not improbably the same heath which had witnessed the agony of the Wessex King Ina, presented to after-ages as Lear... King Lear was also a character in Shakespeare's play; he was a character who misjudged his daughters thus bringing about his own downfall. The reader is again engaged and interested by this reference as it hints at a possible tragic event. Another way that Hardy interests and engages his audience is by creating sympathy for his characters. When a reader feels sympathetic towards a character, they feel emotively involved, and often feel obliged to read on. Hardy had sympathy for many of his female characters; this was largely because Hardy had a great respect for his mother who had a large impact on his life.

An example of sympathy being shown is in *The Withered Arm*, when Rhoda's son is going to be executed; this makes the reader feel sympathetic, as we know that the son has been wrongly accused. This is particularly shown when the hangman states: "... if ever a young fellow deserved to be let off this one does; only just turned eighteen..." This emphasises the sympathy we feel for Rhoda and her son as he 'only just turned eighteen.' Throughout *The Withered Arm*, the reader feels sympathetic towards Rhoda for many reasons. Firstly, the fact that Rhoda is a single parent and that the son has no father.

Secondly, the fact that the two are isolated from the town because people accuse Rhoda of being a witch. Finally, because of the living description described for Rhoda: "It was built of mud-walls, the surface of which had been washed by many rains into channels and depressions..." We can

imagine that Rhoda lives a very dark and secluded lifestyle. As the reader, <https://assignbuster.com/how-does-hardy-interest-and-engage-the-reader-of-the-wessex-tales-essay-sample/>

we feel more sympathetic for Rhoda. Especially when contrasting with the lifestyle of Farmer Lodge and Gertrude, who live fairly well-off and are described with a lavish accommodation.

Rhoda's living environment is very gloomy, and portrays ominous emotions, perhaps portraying that of Rhoda herself. The Melancholy Hussar, shows the reader feeling sympathetic towards Phyllis and Matthaus, especially when Matthaus is caught whilst trying to escape: "... they were perceived to be deserters and delivered up to the authorities..." The reader feels sorry for Matthaus as he got caught. The word 'percieved' implies that Matthaus is being wrongly accused and therefore further emphasises the sympathy we have for him.

When Phyllis sees this, she is "lying motionless against the wall," the reader is made to feel sympathetic towards Phyllis as her actions show the state of shock she is feeling. The word 'motionless' exaggerates this and further emphasises how lost and confused Phyllis must be feeling. She thought Humphrey Gould and her were to get married but they didn't and now the man that she really did love was shot for desertion. Thomas Hardy creates many controversial plot lines to engage the reader; these plot lines are highly unpredictable and will therefore interest the reader more so.

In Victorian society, events such a Rhoda having a son outside of marriage would be highly frowned upon. These taboo plot lines are what engage the Victorian public as Hardy was writing about something very taboo and controversial. Hardy demeans Victorian social status and shows that love is more important, and then suggests how trivial someone's wealth is by

making the poorer, simpler people come out on top. For example, in *The Withered Arm*, Rhoda has a son out of marriage.

This is seen to be bad as society in Victorian times did not accept such behaviour and so Rhoda is shown as an outcast, a lonely person: "...ading woman of thirty milked somewhat apart from the rest. " She also lives further away from everyone: " Their course lay apart from that of the others, to a lonely spot... " This shows the reader that the people in Rhoda's village have shunned her out. This interests and engages the reader as they would want to find out what happens to Rhoda because she already has a son out of marriage, the reader would want to read on to find out if someone ever marries Rhoda or if the father of her son will ever return.

The language used to describe Rhoda make her sound slightly unkempt and dishevelled, she is described as being ' fading' symbolising that her existence in the community is also fading. Hardy shows sympathy for numerous characters in his tales, he brings in his own personal views into his stories, which is the reason for why the rich always seem to suffer. Whilst we always feel sympathetic for the less well off. Hardy mocks and degrades the social hierarchy and suggests that it causes a lot of unnecessary grief.

An example of this is from *Fellow Townsmen*, where the character Barnet marries for class and status rather than love. This is opposite to what Humphrey Gould does. The reader would thus feel compelled to read on as Gould does something taboo for Victorian times so people would want to see what the outcome was. Hardy challenges the views of the time and provides something new and original for the reader. The relationships that are

portrayed to be based on status or looks in these tales are very shallow, false and contain no real substance.

The relationship between Gertrude and Lodge and the Barnets are prime examples of this. These relationships are not perceived well in Hardy's stories. This can be compared with the relationship of Matthaus and Phyllis, even though the relationship did not work, we feel sympathy for the characters because we know their love was genuine. This factor of marriage for status and not love interests readers as it was common practice in the Victorian times, and although it was rarely admitted it was a factor which may have been involved in many readers lives.

In conclusion, Thomas Hardy successfully uses a number of techniques to interest and engage the reader. Such techniques as: Cliffhangers, taboo plot lines and unexpected plot twists. All these techniques engage and interest the reader and thus encourage them to continue reading for answers to the many questions the tales bring up. Overall, Hardy gave the Victorian public what they wanted, he made sure that his tales were not predictable and classic, but instead bought something new to the literary scene.