

# Hardy's portrayal of women in the withered arm essay



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In *The Withered Arm*, Hardy portrays women in many ways, but principally both positively and negatively. In those times, in early Victorian England, women often were judged according to their beauty: thus, the prettier the girl (providing that she had a good family and breeding), the wealthier and more powerful man she would marry. This story was set in a rural English West Country area around 1850, when most women used to work under rough conditions and led a hard tiring life. If this short story were set in the 21st century, it would be very different because women's rights are respected more and women do not have to work under such hard conditions. In this story there are two women, Gertrude and Rhoda.

Mr. Lodge had a son with Rhoda but then he left her for Gertrude who is a young beautiful lady. There is the presence of negative stereotypical images portrayed in *The Withered Arm*. We feel badly for Rhoda because Mr.

Lodge left her for a prettier woman, and Rhoda had to look after and raise their son all by herself. Gertrude is a young beautiful lady. The milkmaids described her with the perhaps envious words: "They say that she is a rosy-cheeked, tisty tosty little body". Gertrude at first seemed "very very-pretty" according to Rhoda's son.

A stereotypical view of woman was one who was powerless compared to the decisions made by her husband. Females frequently were not respected, and were treated as objects, as when Mr. Lodge told Gertrude: "You should expect to be stared at". Another stereotypical image of a woman was that they had to be humble to their husbands or they would be regarded as unnaturally stubborn and outspoken.

"[They] took no notice of you?" Rhoda interrogates her son. Mr. Lodge treated Rhoda like a child-bearer, which led Rhoda to jealousy because Gertrude was prettier than her. But, of course, we know that women were more likely to be judged on the outside and not in the inside, even by other women. Women were mistrusted if they possessed witch-like qualities.

Conjurer Trendle told Gertrude that if she put her arm on the neck of a hanged man, the disease from which she suffers would go away. Gertrude was intrigued by this and that is why she did not tell her husband that she was going to visit Conjurer Trendle because Mr. Lodge would suspect that her wife were a witch. " O Lord, hang some guilty or innocent person soon!" a desperate Gertrude says. We can tell from this quotation that, when women are in desperation, they say and do things without thinking of the consequences of their actions.

She said this because she prefers her arm to get better than another person's life. Since the village in which this story took place was quite small (no more than 1000 inhabitants) gossip spreads very easily and very quickly, and eventually everybody would find out about a rumour. Probably the worst characteristic about women in this story is jealousy: we realize this when Rhoda asks her son to go and spy on Gertrude to see if she has " rough hands or soft white hands". Rhoda was very jealous because Gertrude essentially was her replacement. Life in those days was very boring and so, over generations, one can understand women and children inventing their own superstitions and witchcrafts. That is why Gertrude believed that she would be healed if she did what the Conjurer told her to do.

Also, some women were accessories for men because men gave their wives all the economic stability that they needed; therefore they had to obey their husbands because they had legal and moral authority over them. The single women had to do all the work themselves. Women lacked economic independence because generally men had more education - even if little - and they possessed higher paying jobs. The poor women probably wore ragged clothes, which were broken and torn. We can presume this because on pg.

3 it says that Rhoda went up to the cottage that was made of mud walls. The more fortunate women wore " A white bonnet and a silver-coloured gown", just how Rhoda's son described Gertrude. In addition, women are shown in positive images. Gertrude showed great determination when she was climbing up the steep hill to reach the wicket. Most women had to be friendly despite the harsh circumstances of daily life. Rhoda fakes friendliness, though.

" I hope your arm gets well again ma'am", says Rhoda to Gertrude, trying to sound polite when she really was jealous of her and didn't care about the health of her arm. Both of these women had positive hopes, Gertrude wanted for her arm to recuperate so that her love for Mr. Lodge would be restored. Rhoda's dream was to have emotional riches and for a man to look after her. Rhoda also shows her great responsibility by working hard to try and be a successful mother. Another good virtue that Gertrude was awarded with is patience.

Rhoda showed great independence and pride when she didn't accept the money that was left to her by Lodge. Also, both women showed their courage when they were walking through the thick clouds which made "the atmosphere dark". In other positive qualities, Gertrude showed her generosity and compassion when she kept her promises, like the time that she brought the pair of shoes and the other articles for Rhoda's son." I thought they meant some medical man. I shall not think no more of him," says Gertrude to Rhoda, describing what she had heard about Conjuror Trendle.

This demonstrates to us how they had their own opinions and independent thoughts. Interestingly, Hardy used pathetic fallacy in *The Withered Arm*. One example is when Gertrude was travelling to the wicket. She was tired and the day was horrible and the atmosphere around her reflected what she was feeling inside. The women are within and a part of their natural surroundings.

Hardy repeats many times that women were objects to men and that they possess their own sense of determination to live as they wish to live. This repetition is used so that the reader understands the emphasis, namely, a key idea which the author is trying to transmit through the story. Thus, in this context, it is very interesting how Hardy blends the contrasts and the similarities of the two women. We may conclude that the working class women in the world of Hardy's tale were seen as child-bearers, invariably accessories for men. It would have been very different had this story been set in the 21st century. We do feel sympathy for these women rather than empathy because we have not gone what they have gone through.  
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Not only that, life in those days was very different for women of different classes, and this economic distinction accentuates the different fates represented through their lives.