

An imaginative women and on the western circuit



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Thomas Hardy's presentation of women is quite highlights the typical Victorian attitude towards women . In particular, ' An Imaginative Women' and ' On the Western Circuit' produce some interesting comparisons. The two leading characters are women, Ella Marchmill (' An Imaginative Woman') and Edith Harnham (' On the Western Circuit'). The first and probably the most obvious similarity between the two women is the way Hardy has presented their marriage.

This was at a time when men still exerted their power over women, and a woman divorcing a man was unheard of. In both of these stories, Hardy has portrayed both of them as passionate, yet unhappy wives. William Marchmill, Ella's husband, is mention quite frequently in the story and plays an integral part, so we get a more accurate picture of him. However, Edith Harnham's husband only appears near the start, yet in that one glance, we get a good idea of the relationship between the two. " Oh? Horrid nuisance every year!

I wish it could be put a stop to. " " I like it. " " H'm. There's no accounting for taste. " Their relationship with each other has been portrayed powerfully in these three lines. Immediately, a lack of respect and common interest, perhaps even a sense of hostility between the two has become apparent.

Compare this short, snappy encounter with some of the more lengthy scenes between Ella and William Marchmill, and it is evident that although both women share an unfulfilled marriage, their relationship with their husbands are very different.

Despite William Marchmill often seeming ignorant of Ella's existence, he does show some courtesy and respect, though he doesn't share much

common ground with her either. Mr. Harnham on the other hand, from the small bit that is seen of him, appears to be quite upfront with Edith Harnham, and gives the impression to that he is a bit scorning in his approach to her interests. Another similarity that their marriage possesses is that both husbands have a prosperous trade. Mr Harnham is a ' rich wine merchant', whilst William Marchmill has a ' thriving trade'.

Both women, therefore, lived an upper-middle class lifestyle; so clearly, what they wanted was beyond material possession, as they would already have them. Instead, it becomes more noticeable as the stories progress, that both women are passionate, but unfulfilled sexually. Thomas Hardy starts of with subtle hints, expanding upon them as the story progresses. For example, in ' On the Western Circuit', a few pages in, the first glimpse of Mrs Harnham's sexual life is shown; ' He playfully slipped his two of his fingers inside her glove, against her palm. '

Yet despite this encroachment, Mrs Harnham does not withdraw her hand, in spite of the fact that it is meant for her maidservant, Anna, who Charles Raye had been tenderly wooing since first meeting her in the country fair. Furthermore, Mrs Harnham allows Raye to ' gently stroke' the palm of her hand under the glove. At the time of writing this would have been considered a very erotic and tense moment in the story, and this is perhaps a sign of deception that will later occur. As the story progresses, Mrs Harnham's erotic feelings develop, and Raye becomes the focus of her lustful desires.

Anna, her maidservant, is illiterate and so Mrs Harnham acts as her amanuensis. It starts of as a favour for Anna, with Mrs Harnham writing down

the majority of Anna's dictation, though due to her rural upbringing, Anna hadn't received proper schooling and as such her words were of rather informal and plain style. Due to this, Mrs Harnham 'embellishes' Anna's dictation, knowing that an unchanged letter would result in no reply, leaving Anna saddened, potentially heart-broken. By dressing up Anna's words, Mrs Harnham is unwittingly committing her first act of deception.

Anna, being of simple origin, was easily aroused and even though her confrontation with Raye only lasted a short amount of time, she immediately laid her trust with him. Raye, however, was not so easily drawn, and saw Anna as his 'summer love' and does not take it into any further consideration... until he receives the letter. The elegance of the letter astounds him, as it didn't possess any of the 'vulgarity' that he was expecting, though the reader knows that this is due to Mrs Harnham's literary skills more than anything.

In addition to this, the reader is told that, 'the few sentences occasionally added from Anna's lips made apparently no impression upon him' This confirms that it is indeed Mrs Harnham's graceful way of writing that intrigues and interests Raye. As the story progresses, Mrs Harnham becomes more and more attracted to Charles Raye, and the contents of the letters become more and more personal until finally, when Anna is away for a night or two with her cottage friends, Mrs Harnham takes the liberty of replying to Raye's letter 'from the depths of her heart'.

Her act of deception has grown, and Charles Raye still believes that it is the born and raised country girl that is behind the mastermind of creativity.

Women of her stature were expected to behave in the highest standards, and maintain that throughout the rest of their lives. This act of deception would be seen as undermining, and Mrs Harnham knew it. What started out as a three way correspondence was now a two-way connection, with Anna pushed out of the limelight. The consequences of the act of deception became severe when Anna became pregnant with Raye's child.

Still though, her infatuation with Raye continues; " I wish his child was mine-I wish it was! Yet how can I say such a wicked thing. " Eventually, Raye and Anna end up married, with Raye only finding out the truth when it is too late. A man of Raye's integrity and position was expected to marry a woman of similar status, not an ' illiterate peasant', so the marriage would have been very damaging to Raye's reputation and social position, and as a result, the final act of deception had been carried out and Mrs Harnham and seen it out to the bitter end.

Ella Marchmill, the protagonist in ' An Imaginative Woman', is also sexually unfulfilled by her husband William Marchmill. Due to his prosperous job in the gun trade, he is away for much of the time, and Ella ends up with an infatuation for a poet, Robert Trewe. Ella is described as having a lack of maternal instinct, which becomes evident within the first page. She is walking on the beach with her children ' considerably far ahead with the nurse'. At only one point throughout the story did she show some consideration towards the children, and that is as a result of her own misfortune, when Robert Trewe doesn't visit.

Instead, she has immersed herself in poetry, which appears to be her gateway out of reality and into her own world, this maybe explained by the lack of relationship with her husband and children, and that she leads quite a solitary and confined life. Today's readers may find Ella's lack of maternal instinct slightly shocking and appalling, which could result in a more unsympathetic view towards Ella and what later occurs. Both women, Ella Marchmill and Edith Harnham, are described as 'dark-eyed', a common term for passionate and mysterious women at the time.

Ella has a very vibrant imagination, which most probably led to her poetical ability. Her fascination with poetry may well be trying to deal with the void of passion in her life that becomes ever clearer as the story develops. Ella Marchmill and Edith Harnham both seek to fulfil their desires with another man, despite it being frowned upon very strongly during the Victorian era. They both also use deception as a way to reach out to the men at the centre of their attention.

Ella's deception takes the form of gaining Robert Trewe's (a poet that writes in a similar style to Ella, and as such, has gained her admiration) attention through a pseudonym. Edith Harnham also gained the attention of her potential lover through the pseudonym of Anna, her maidservant. The events leading up to her desire for Trewe are a series of coincidences. She is already more than familiar with his works, and the Bed and Breakfast she arrives at just happens to be where Robert Trewe resides. This presents a great opportunity for Ella to delve more deeply into Trewe's works and his general mindset, and slowly the obsession grows.

As her lustful desires grow, she decides to write to Trewe under her pseudonym of which she uses for publishing her poems, ' John Ivy'. Female writers were unheard of in the Victorian era, and women were not expected to act upon any literary ambitions they may have had, therefore many wrote under a pseudonym, ' John Ivy' was Ella's. She writes to Trewe from a poet to poet's perspective, which increases the likelihood of a reply. The two of them correspond, Ella maintaining her deliberate act of deception whilst Trewe, unaware of Ella's hopeful intentions and identity, continues in replying.

Eventually, he agrees to meet Ella at her house, though when he sees it in the flesh, he just passes on by, due to its ' moneyed' looks portraying exactly what he didn't like. Ironically, it was William Marchmill's prospering job that was the cause of this pain, and beforehand, there had been repeated cases of William Marchmill entering unexpectedly, just as Ella was delving in to more intimate thoughts and scenarios about Trewe. For example, earlier on in the story William Marchmill offers to take Ella out sailing, due to her complaining about her inactivity during the holiday, the previous day.

Yet this was the same day that Trewe was destined to visit. Furthermore, as she was putting on Trewe's clothes, William Marchmill returned home earlier than expected. All these small interventions were a constant reminder to both the reader and Ella, that she did indeed have a husband, and he was ever present. These sets of coincidences are summed up perfectly by Trewe's refusal to enter the house, as it was William's money that had paid for the house, and as such, it was that very thing that prevented his wife's potential lover from entering the house... another timely reminder.

All this deceit eventually led to another, arguably avoidable, tragedy. Robert Trewe committed suicide due to the fact he had no feminine figure in his life “ Perhaps had I been blessed with a mother, or a sister, or a female friend of another sort tenderly devoted to me, I might have thought it worth while to continue my present existence. ” This would have consequently been the worst possible scenario for Ella, knowing that if she told the truth from the very beginning, Trewe may well still be alive and they may have had a successful relationship together (granting outside circumstances go in their favour).

Mrs Harnham also felt similar regret, as if she told the truth from the very beginning, she may have found happiness. Ella later goes onto die from childbirth in what can only be assumed as unhappy circumstances. Both women in the stories felt a high level of guilt for their dishonesty, with Ella even admitting to her husband that she was ‘ wicked’, whilst Mrs Harnham broke down into tears. Despite the evidence that both women feel responsible and guilty for their crimes, it still doesn’t give them the extra bit of integrity needed for the reader to feel sympathetic towards them.

The weak relationship between husband and wife in both stories, builds up a certain degree of sympathy for the female protagonists; however, any respect that the reader may have held for them[, would most likely have vanished after their web of deceit and deception. Neither stories produce a clear-cut villain or heroine and despite the quite depressing ending, sympathy is more likely to be given to the potential lovers. The moral of the two stories is that deception, whether intended or not, inevitably leads to unhappiness for all concerned.