

The withered arm analysis essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Hardy is very successful and skilful in controlling the reader's response to "The Withered Arm". In the very first chapter, we can see how Hardy focuses our attention in order to control our response.

We can see that Rhoda Brooks is a lonely figure set aside, but Hardy's skills make us want to know more about her and why she is lonely when the other milkers refer to her. The first chapter is intriguing. We constantly want to find out more about the mysterious character of Rhoda Brooks, who we notice is sitting apart from the other workers, and later find out also lives apart from the other workers. By the end of the chapter, we assume that Rhoda is a rejected girlfriend of Farmer Lodge. We deduce this from the clues in the language used by Hardy.

At the time that Hardy was writing, the life of a poor woman was harsh. They were thought of as second-class citizens and had poorly paid jobs such as milkmaids and were dependant on their men, which Rhoda had lost. Most women married men such as Farmer Lodge for security and money, also most rich men married women because of their good looks so they could show them off. And that's exactly what Rhoda's first impressions were to Farmer Lodge's marriage with Gertrude. When Rhoda sends her son to spy on Gertrude, we begin to see how jealous and rejected Rhoda really feels, also how attached she has become over the past ten years, mostly due to the child they had together.

At the beginning Rhoda's speculations about the marriage seems to be true, Gertrude is a young, beautiful blooming new wife, " Her hair is lightish, and her face as comely as a doll's, her eyes are of a bluish tint, and her mouth is

very nice and red; and when she smiles, her teeth show white. ” But there are some bits of her son’s descriptions she does not want to acknowledge, “ A lady complete, a white bonnet and a silver-coloured gown. It whewed and whistled so loud when it rubbed against the pews that the lady coloured up more than ever for very shame at the noise, and pulled it in to keep it from touching; but when she pushed into her seat, it whewed even more than ever. Mr Lodge, he seemed pleased.

‘ ” all Rhoda heard was she was elaborately dressed and Farmer Lodge like it. By this point of the story it is thought Rhoda and Gertrude are rivals, as they have both have had a relationship with Farmer Lodge. They occupy traditional roles in the story; Rhoda is the neglected lover with her looks fading, Gertrude the younger, richer innocent lover. Age, beauty, status and social class divide them Rhoda’s jealousy is what leads to the first supernatural element in the story, which is her nightmare.

Stricken with jealousy, her subconscious thoughts surface in her sleep as she innocently dreams of grabbing Gertrude’s arm ‘ in a last desperate effort, swung out her right hand, seized the confronting spectre by its obtrusive left arm. ‘ Rhoda’s first reaction to Gertrude is of horror and fear. In her dream, she sees Mrs. Lodge as a figure ‘ with features shockingly distorted and wrinkled by old age. Hardy uses simple diction to convey the horror of the nightmare. He also uses emotive language like ‘ maddened’ and ‘ mockingly’.

Rhoda’s nightmare can be explained as coincidence, as a physical manifestation of the girl’s unconscious awareness of the situation. Rhoda’s

dream creates suspense and words such as phantom keep it going. The next morning we learn that the dream was real as her son asks: ‘ what was that noise in your chimmer, mother last night. Did you fall out of bed around two o’clock? ‘ The next day the two women meet each other for the first time as Gertrude brings the ‘ son’ some boots. This is where you see that she is not the stereotyped wife in view of her position as she is modest and considerate. The two women become friends and Rhoda is so overwhelmed by the sweetness of the young woman that she wishes she could give the ‘ innocent young thing should have her blessing and not her curse’ We feel the mystery and excitement when Gertrude comes to visit Rhoda the next morning.

We find Rhoda afraid and wanting to hide, the nightmare left a bad impression on her. She expects to see the same features as the ones she had formed on her mind, and is quite surprised when she meets her. We see that Rhoda begins to like Gertrude, but also suffers a conflict on emotions. Gertrude brings Rhoda’s son some boots which she had promised, lifting this stereotypical thought Rhoda had on her. Just as they were getting to like each other Gertrude revealed her arm, casting a cloud of guilt over Rhoda. Hardy makes us share Rhoda’s puzzlement at the coincidence of her dream and Gertrude’s afflicted limb.

This makes the nightmare become more frightening as we learn that Rhoda did conjure up an incubus, but the two rivals have become friends. At this point the tension mounts and the idea of the malignant powers worries us further. This tension is maintained because the arm does not better and we wonder about the outcome of all this. Rhoda often asks to see the wound,

and seems fascinated by the clear indication of the marks of four fingers which are increasingly visible. Gertrude relies on Rhoda for a sympathetic understanding of the growing estrangement between herself and her husband, who ' knows the disfigurement is there'. The choice of the word ' disfigurement' reveals his attitude to appearances. To start off with Gertrude is very calm about the injury, she and Farmer Lodge go to several doctors to get their diagnostics and cures.

Over time all the doctors failed to cure the arm and it seemed to get worse and worse by now Lodges interest in Gertrude had begun to fade. The more Gertrude's arm withered the more Farmer Lodges interests in her withered. . It was Rhoda's obsession that is responsible for Gertrude's affliction, which leads to paralysis as well as the loss of both her looks and her husbands love. The developing relationship between the two women has elements of the macabre.

There was only one other option for Gertrude and that was the supernatural one. The other milkers had directed Gertrude at Rhoda to take her to a wizard called Trendle, at first Gertrude ignored this option but in the end she became too desperate and would try anything. She turns to Rhoda to take her to see Trendle; much to her dismay. Rhoda fears for the loss of a good friendship. We see that Rhoda almost dreads meeting Gertrude again, when Gertrude suggests the visit to Trendle, we see how Rhoda reluctantly agrees to go, and how she dreads Trendle informing young Gertrude about the true cause of her withered arm.

We are able to share in Rhoda's feelings because of the skill Hardy employs in the use of his language. Trendle is a witch doctor and has powers other people don't, in the story many people believe in him, except Gertrude who says: 'o, how could my people be so superstitious.' She soon changes her mind and goes with Rhoda to visit him this is where it is revealed that Gertrude has an enemy: 'medicine can't cure it.'Tis the work of an enemy,' Trendle then reveals the face of her 'attacker' to her. Gertrude reacts calmly when she finds out who it is as she says she does not 'care to speak of it.

When she is talking to Rhoda and does not tell her what she saw. Rhoda feels convicted of a crime, a terrible guilt for withholding the dream from Gertrude. Now Gertrude knows it was Rhoda who did this all along but Rhoda does not want to take the blame now that they are, well were friends. Mr. Lodge has superficial love for Gertrude which was based on her beauty: 'the woman whom he had wooed for her beauty.' But as her arm is getting worst we see that he starts to disregard her.

She starts to age beyond her years: 'she was now five-and-twenty; but she seemed older'. She becomes desperate for a cure and tries all sorts of remedies. This makes us feel sympathetic towards her. As a last resort she visits Trendle and tries to take advantage of his 'white magic', this leads to fatal results and her superstition, combined with desperation, must be held accountable for this. He tells her she must 'touch with the limb the neck of a man who's been hanged.

'As time passed she considers this and wished: 'o lord, hang some guilty or innocent person soon!' This shows how desperate she was becoming.

Gertrude's meeting with the hangman reveals her obsession: she has in fact prayed each evening for some ' guilty or innocent' person to be hanged. Rhoda and the hangman having a discussion in which she says: ' o- a reprieve- I hope not! ' Here she is saying even if the person is innocent she hopes he will not be let off. Through out the story it is full of irony- you have farmer Lodge marrying to have a son, even though he has one which he does not recognise. Hardy chose not to give the illegitimate son a name; this may be because Lodge failed to recognise him, even though he wishes for a son: ' I once thought of adopting a boy! Gertrude befriends the boy but unknowingly wishes for his death, in which when she finds out the identity of the hanged man she dies from shock. The denouement of the final gruesome meeting between the two women brings all interaction to an end. The scene is highly dramatic and needs few words.

This is where we learn that it is Rhoda's son that has been hanged and due to this Gertrude's ' blood had been turned indeed- too far'. Rhoda and Gertrude had been running the same race just with a staggered start, Gertrude managed to overtake Rhoda but in the end Rhoda finished first.