

Who suffers the most  
in thomas hardy's  
prose 'the withered  
arm'



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Thomas Hardy's prose 'The Withered Arm,' was written in the nineteenth century illustrating norms and values of the society, which were present where he was living. The society had particular beliefs, which wouldn't be rebelled against, and if they were, then the public would see the rebellious as an outsider and eschew them. The society was sensitive to people of different classes marrying each other and they shared the belief that any one with supernatural powers was a witch, thus superstition was a norm at the time. It was a patriarchal society thus men were able to remain free from being blamed by others as they were seen as being superior beings compared to women. Those who were of a high status also shared such an opportunity to remain free of accusations and being looked down upon as they were people of society who were abiding by the norms and values of the time.

In Thomas Hardy's prose 'The Withered Arm' various characters suffer due to different circumstances. In the prose, the four main characters suffering are Farmer Lodge, Gertrude, Rhoda and her son. Farmer Lodge suffers, as he was involved in a relationship in the past with Rhoda. Gertrude suffers due to her getting a withered arm as a result of Rhoda Brooks dream. Rhoda suffers for a number of reasons which shall be discussed further on. The youngest of those suffering is the son due to him being accused of arson resulting in him being hanged.

Apart from those reasons listed above, there are also a number of other reasons, which I will discuss in turn further on. To summarise, Rhoda and Farmer Lodge had a relationship, which resulted in an illegitimate child, the son. However, the two weren't able to marry, as the society at the time,

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wouldn't have accepted people of different classes marrying each other.

Hence, Lodge went on to start a new relationship with Gertrude, who was of the same status and seen as a 'fine lady' by the society.

During this relationship, Rhoda would continuously envy Gertrude. The envy within Rhoda grew to the extent that she had a dream wherein Gertrude placed her wedding ring in front of Rhoda. As this happened, Rhoda then threw Gertrude off her by gripping her left arm and throwing her to the floor, which resulted in Gertrude acquiring a withered arm. When Rhoda returned home from milking, Gertrude visited Rhoda and her son and presented Rhoda her withered arm. A few days passed, then others in the local community informed Gertrude of Conjuror Trendle, who was said to be contacted via Rhoda. Rhoda and Gertrude then visited him and the cure given was to place the withered arm on a corpse.

The corpse Gertrude was cured by was that of her husband's son. He was hung as he was accused of arson. The cure took place, yet a few days later Gertrude died due to the blood having '.. ' turned' indeed - too far.

' Rhoda suffers throughout the prose. At the beginning of the prose we are told of how she was working, milking the cows, due to her not having any other way out to support herself and her son. This is the case because Farmer Lodge abandoned her as she was of a lower status compared to him; hence the two were not able to marry, as society would have disapproved. Hardy describes the condition of Rhoda's house using a lot of imagery, so the reader may comprehend the state they lived in, in an articulate manner - ' it was built of mud-walls, the surface of which had been washed by many rains

into channels and depressions that left none of the original flat face visible; while here and there in the thatch above a rafter showed like a bone protruding through the skin.

' The fact that it was built of ' mud walls' alone implies the way in which Rhoda was poverty-stricken and did not have the means to provide the basic shelter required. Hardy uses personification ' in the thatch above a rafter showed like a bone protruding through the skin.' Personification has been put to use so the reader can understand the way in which the main beam of the house was in a poor state. Hardy describes the state of the cottage with descriptive phrases so the reader gains insight allowing them to sympathise with Rhoda. Hardy mentions Rhoda's appearance ' the radiance lit her pale cheek, and made her dark eyes, that had once been handsome, seem handsome anew.' Imagery is effective here as the reader's able to picture the way Rhoda once looked and how it now differs.

This quote illustrates the way in which Rhoda's appearance had deteriorated as time went by. The reason behind this is because the suffering she had to undergo was so intense that it affected her appearance. Rhoda was a source of gossip for the society as we see the milkmaids discuss Rhoda's relationship, ' Tis hard for she,' and, ' He ha'n't spoke to Rhoda Brook for years.' The fact that everyone was aware of Rhoda being left a lone parent was something the public were able to despise. This in turn must have made her feel the urge to have to live away from others in a ' lonely spot'.

This suggests she would not have been able to converse freely with others as she probably felt intimidated in their presence due to them all looking

down upon her. Hardy allows the readers to see the way in which Farmer Lodge was free from being seen as a vagabond by society as he was the man in the relationship, however Rhoda was made to suffer as it was inevitable all due to her being the woman in the relationship and being of a low class in the society. The fact that Thomas Hardy allows the reader to realise only the woman in the relationship is suffering, portrays Rhoda as a character made to undergo hardships as a result of her not being able to reach the expectations of society. Rhoda compares herself with Gertrude whilst speaking to her son. The comparison consists of their age, appearance, and lifestyle and how they felt. When Rhoda compares herself to Gertrude she comes to see how she's the total opposite - as Rhoda's, tall, dark eyed, middle aged and has milker's hands.

Whereas Gertrude is a ' lady complete,' and doesn't have milker's hands as she was married hence there was no need for her to work. As Rhoda compares herself to Gertrude it must have made her feel inferior. The theme of poverty also comes in as the readers realise how she is poverty stricken although she does work which makes them sympathise a great deal with her. Rhoda thinks intently about Gertrude, which in turn makes her have a dream, whereby she sees Gertrude upon her chest, hence throws her to the floor whilst gripping her left arm. Though she didn't mean to do so in reality, it did in fact end up affecting Gertrude's arm, resulting in it being withered.

At the time, people thought others would be affected via thoughts they had about them, hence, society would have seen her as a witch with supernatural powers. Rhoda can't be blamed for Gertrude's withered arm, as she wasn't aware of the supernatural powers she had. She is tormented in her dream as <https://assignbuster.com/who-suffers-the-most-in-thomas-hardys-prose-the-withered-arm/>

well as by the public, which suggests she isn't able to keep away from the various forms of suffering she encounters. The fact that she had such a nightmare implies Rhoda is constantly struggling within her, as she isn't able to liberate herself from suffering. Rhoda was given the title of a 'witch' by society, yet couldn't comprehend why such a title was given to her.

This in turn makes her feel as though she's seen as a vagabond in society. The reader is made aware of Rhoda's feeling as though she is being looked down upon by society as Hardy says, 'She knew that she had been slyly called a witch since her fall.' The fact that the public had referred to Rhoda as a witch arouses sympathy within the reader as she is made to feel substandard and her being known as a witch is a reason the society uses to see her as being mediocre. On the way to visiting Conjuror Trendle, Hardy creates a rather apprehensive atmosphere of the landscape of Egdon Heath as Rhoda and Gertrude travel across it. The significance of such a mood is that Hardy creating a dismal one allows the reader to imagine the feeling apparent at the time and the way in which it was a reflection on Rhoda's thoughts. This in turn makes the reader sympathise with Rhoda as she was feeling uneasy deep within.

Rhoda feels anxious when speaking to Gertrude because she doesn't want to have to go to conjuror Trendle - 'well they say - they used to say he was - he had powers other folks have not.' Hardy uses hyphens to show a slight pause in Rhoda's speech, which illustrates her reluctance in her speech. This suggests Rhoda is made to remain within certain boundaries of speech as she can't speak the way she herself desires as she fears Gertrude may suspect her of being the one behind the suffering she is undergoing. Rhoda  
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doesn't only suffer financially but also psychologically, as we see she suffers sleepless nights due to the thoughts she has about the recent marriage, which took place between Gertrude and Rhoda.

Rhoda suffers the most because she had to undergo hardships whilst being shunned by society before her son's death. She also had to experience more remorse after his death, as she no longer has a son. Farmer Lodge suffers, yet his suffering isn't seen as vast. This is because he was a man in the society and one of great eminence - hence he wouldn't be looked down upon as men at the time were seen as superior beings in comparison to women.

Farmer Lodge being the man in the relationship and of a high status had the advantage of being able to maintain his honour in the society and remain innocent in the eyes of the public, due to him fitting into the category the society would admire rather than shun him. His suffering is limited as he was suffering less compared to Rhoda, after their relationship. As the son is attentively watching Gertrude and Lodge on his mother's command, Hardy describes Lodge as being 'annoyed at the boys persistent presence.' Although he may have been annoyed, it was only a short period of time within his life that this annoyance lasted for; consequently I wouldn't consider it to be a time of him suffering. Some may say the son was 'persistent' hence this word implies Farmer Lodge must have felt uneasy at the time-which could be seen as a form of suffering.

However, I wouldn't agree with this, as he was capable of telling the son to stop following them, yet he didn't. This alone suggests he didn't consider the boy to be a burden upon him, although he did feel exasperated. Due to

society at the time looking down upon those who were involved in illegitimate relationships, Farmer Lodge is made to prevent himself from treating his son as his son and thus neglect him. The fact that it was due to him having to abide by the norms of that time suggests he may have been keen on having contact with his son yet due to the society not approving, he was unable to do so. This makes the readers feel slight sympathy towards Farmer Lodge and also makes them question whether or not he was feeling remorseful within due to him not being able to have contact with his son.

Farmer Lodge also suffers when it comes to the bond of marriage between him and Gertrude as we are told in the text ' Mr and Mr's Lodge's married experience sank into prosiness, and worse.' This suggests Lodge wasn't able to take pleasure in married life. However, although this was the case, he was the one who had a relationship with Gertrude beforehand whereby he enjoyed her company. Furthermore he was displeased with Gertrude from his own will, he could have still put the withered arm aside and been grateful for her presence, yet he didn't. This suggests Hardy included such an issue so the reader will come to realise how the men at the time expected their women to be faultless in order for them to attain their love.

For these reasons, I feel Lodge himself doesn't suffer a great deal in comparison to the other characters - especially Rhoda. Due to him being a man of a high status and society at the time being patriarchy he wouldn't have been looked down upon or discriminated against. The next character is the son, who was the result of Rhoda and Farmer Lodge's relationship, hence being an unlawful child. I think the son suffers slightly more than Farmer Lodge himself for various reasons.

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The very first issue I have come across in the prose is that the son isn't given a name, rather is referred to as 'the boy' or 'the son'. This illustrates him being one of no connotation, mainly because his mother was looked down upon by society. The fact that the boy isn't given a name suggests Hardy wanted the reader to realise how an illegitimate child would be seen as insignificant by society at the time as any one born out of wedlock wouldn't be given the same treatment as others. The boy was aware from a young age that his father had left him and his mother and married someone else as he questions his mother with regards to his father by asking, 'Is father married then?' This quote implies the son may have felt as though his father had discarded him.

Hence the son would have felt sadness and pain throughout his life knowing he's left to be brought up in a family torn apart due to the society discriminating against a man of a high class marrying a woman of a low class. His mother ordered the son to see his father's new wife: 'You can give her a look, and tell me what she's like if you do see her.' This would have made the son feel as though he was being uncared for and inconsequential in his father's eyes, as he took no notice of him when he was present. The son was executed due to being in close proximity to the rick on fire.

He was executed as he was to be shown as an illustration to the crown that had come to watch the hanging. Although no solid proof was given for him being the culprit, he was hung without trial. This creates empathy in the reader, as he wasn't hung with any evidence. This was a norm at the time, as justice wasn't focused upon, rather it was that which pleased the society that was taken into consideration.

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On the whole I think the son is a character in the novel, Hardy aims to create sympathy for within the reader. This is because Hardy begins the novel with a negative view of the son, as he's illegitimate and concluded with him being executed and alongside this, throughout the prose the son has no name which illustrates the inferiority of the son. All of these build up the readers' sympathy. I feel that Gertrude suffers more than Farmer Lodge but less than Rhoda. Gertrude suffers because of a dream Rhoda has, resulting in Gertrude having a withered arm.

The withered arm causes frustration within Gertrude as she says to Rhoda, 'it pains me dreadfully sometimes.' Hardy has used the word 'dreadfully' instead of a subtle word such as 'a lot' to emphasise the suffering undergone by Gertrude and to arouse sympathy within the reader. This quote alone indicates Gertrude is made to suffer due to someone else's thoughts about her. She also suffers as her husband, no longer loves her as much as he used to: 'if I hadn't a notion that it makes my husband - dislike me no, love me less.' She becomes sad due to this, as Hardy says 'she tried to hide the tears that filled her eyes.' The tears alone suggest her misery causes grief, which she isn't able to express through many words, rather by expressions.

Gertrude doesn't approve of Conjuror Trendle being one with rare powers, 'he had powers other folks have not.' However, due to her desperation, she's geared towards obtaining a cure from him in order to relieve her withered arm so she may regain her husband's love as they have had 'six years of marriage, and only a few months of love.' This suggests her suffering was of a great burden upon her, in turn making her keen to relieve it by any means.

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Gertrude had strived extremely hard to cure her withered arm, yet - once it was cured she had hoped on regaining her husbands love, but that didn't happen. Her intentions weren't satisfied as the turning of the blood went too far resulting in her death. This creates sympathy within the reader towards Gertrude as her attempt to cure didn't go as expected and she was made to be a victim of someone else's envy.

On the whole, Gertrude suffers in attempting to cure her withered arm. Yet, her suffering comes to an end thus she doesn't have to suffer any longer, hence her suffering is less in comparison to Rhoda's. Rhoda suffers the most because her suffering is from the inauguration and remains as a ceaseless suffering. Farmer Lodge doesn't suffer more than Rhoda as he is a man hence society wouldn't look down upon him. Gertrude doesn't suffer more than Rhoda as her suffering isn't perpetual nor does the general public shun her.

The son doesn't suffer more than Rhoda as he wouldn't be spoken of much in society, rather his mothers name would be mentioned. The fact that Rhoda was poor, a woman, a lone parent, working for herself all made her oppose the norms of society, resulting in her being seen as an outcast. Some may say Rhoda is the cause of all that which occurs after her relationship with Lodge. Yet, I would disagree as her revenge against Gertrude wasn't that she was aware of nor was she aware of her supernatural powers.

Overall I believe Rhoda is the character suffering the most. Thomas Hardy portrays Rhoda as the one undergoing difficulties the most, thus the readers' sympathise with Rhoda far more than they do with Gertrude, the son and

Farmer Lodge. The main reason behind why Rhoda suffers the most is because Gertrude and the son's suffering comes to an end and Farmer Lodge doesn't suffer a great deal due to his position in society. On the other hand, Rhoda is suffering continuously throughout the prose, from the beginning to the end and her suffering is inevitable and perpetual.