

Who deserves our
sympathy: rhoda or
gertrude essay



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Throughout the “ Withered Arm” the main characters: Rhoda Brook and Gertrude Lodge experience lots of tragedy, and due to this, the book makes the audience empathise with the two of them. The following paragraphs will examine the lengths and extremes of these tragic events, and therefore conclude who deserves our sympathy. Rhoda Brook is a poor milkmaid and an abandoned single mother and Gertrude Lodge, is the rich and beautiful wife of Farmer Lodge. The pain and suffering endured by both characters is evident at different circumstances in the book, hence the book depicts sympathy for both characters.

In the opening chapter of the “ Withered Arm”, Thomas Hardy shows sympathy for Rhoda. He uses the chapter title to demonstrate this- “ The lorn milkmaid”. The word “ lorn” has connotations of sadness or loneliness; therefore, even before we begin to read the book, the title gives us the impression that the milkmaid is miserable and alone. As the chapter progresses, we learn that Rhoda works on a farm, owned by Farmer Lodge. We soon realise that Rhoda is isolated from the rest of workers on the farm.

She does not seem to join in with the general chatter of the other milk maids and is by herself most of the time. She is described as “ A thin, fading women of thirty that milked somewhat apart from the rest. ” The use of the word “ fading” implies that she is an outcast. She is constantly ignored and is not considered a part of society, as she is fading into the surroundings. The chapter then goes on to explain the relationship between Rhoda and Farmer Lodge. The audience discover that Farmer Lodge is the father to Rhoda’s son and that he abandoned Rhoda to fend for herself.

This immediately makes the audience feel sorry for Rhoda. The recent event of Farmer Lodge marrying a young woman increases our sympathy towards her. We notice that Rhoda is of a lower class, hence making it even more difficult to raise a son and make a stable living. Moreover, regardless of having a son with Rhoda, Farmer Lodge reveals no sympathy towards her or the caring of their son, ' He hadn't spoke to Rhoda Brook for years. ' By presenting Farmer Lodge as a nasty man, Hardy boosts the audience's pity towards Rhoda.

These incidents make us think of society at the time, and how people who were poor were immensely inferior to those who were wealthy. At the end of the chapter, we get a literal sense of how poor Rhoda really is. This is shown through Hardy's description of her home -" The surface of which had been washed away by many rains into channels and depressions that left none of the original flat face visible. " This portrayal creates sympathy for Rhoda, as we get the impression that she lives in an indecent and deprived home.

Gertrude is introduced as the rich, young and beautiful wife of Farmer Lodge. The descriptions of Gertrude illustrate that she is of a high class and very wealthy. For example, " A rosy cheeked tisty-tosty". This suggests that she is well off, as she is large lady. The significant contrast between Rhoda and Gertrude makes the audience feel sorry for Rhoda once again, as it is as if Gertrude is perfect. The audience console with Rhoda and her son when Farmer Lodge rudely ignores his illegitimate son, when he is watching the newlywed couple returning to Holmstoke.

We feel this when Lodge says “ I think he lives with his mother a mile or two off”. This offhand comment makes us think how Farmer Lodge doesn’t even pay attention to his own son and couldn’t care less about their relationship. Once again, by putting Farmer Lodge’s decency down, Hardy makes us feel all the more sympathy towards Rhoda. As the book continues, we get the sense that Rhoda is jealous of Gertrude. This is due to the fact that Gertrude is faultless and is loved by Farmer Lodge. Nevertheless, the audience understand this jealousy as Gertrude is the woman she never was.

Her envy is apparent in “ I see her! I wouldn’t look up at her if she was to pass my window this instant. ” Her words show frustration and disgust, suggesting that even though she is insulting her, at the same time she desires to be like her. However, Rhoda’s jealousy towards Gertrude soon evolves into an obsession, which results in Rhoda despising her to such extremes, that she cannot even bear the sight of her-“ could raise a mental image of the unconscious Mrs Lodge that was realistic as a photograph”. This phrase demonstrates that Rhoda constantly thinks about Gertrude.

Her disturbing infatuation with Gertrude soon ends in a ghastly and unpleasant dream about her, in which she is being suffocated and taunted by a hideous and monstrous Gertrude. During the dream, Rhoda tries to defend herself, and in doing so violently strikes Gertrude’s arm. As a result of Rhoda’s attack, Gertrude is peculiarly affected by it in reality. Her arm soon becomes disfigured in the same place Rhoda hurt the confronting spectre, in her dream. Hardy illustrates Gertrude as being humble and caring. This compassion is portrayed in Gertrude bringing new boots for Rhoda’s son.

Gertrude's gentle character makes the audience feel sorry for her. We feel as if she does not deserve a deformed arm, and hence the blame turns to Rhoda, as Gertrude's distorted arm is a consequence of Rhoda's spite. As Rhoda's and Gertrude's friendship grows, Rhoda feels guilty about thinking so wrong about Gertrude- " this innocent young thing should have her blessing and not her curse". As months pass, Gertrude's injury worsens, due to this, Farmer Lodge seems to think less of his wife, and begins to believe that along with her arm, her beauty also degrades. Six years of marriage and only a few months of love".

When Gertrude says this, the reader feels great sympathy towards her, as it is tragic that Farmer Lodge treats Gertrude as a mere possession and only cares about her beauty and appearance. It makes us think how Rhoda set off these horrible chains of events, and therefore we shift the blame to her. Furthermore, we also empathise with Gertrude because all of a sudden her life and marriage has been destroyed. If Rhoda had not been so ruthless and harsh to Gertrude in the first place, none of this would have happened.

The sixth chapter paints a picture of a completely different Gertrude: " The once blithe-hearted and enlightened Gertrude was changing into an irritable, superstitious woman". This depiction is a substantial contrast to the description given in the beginning of the book. We can tell that her whole personality has transformed and she has gone from being a modest, friendly young woman to a bitter old lady. In addition, she is also constantly attempting to cure her arm with remedies and herbs, symbolising that she has become obsessed with beauty and her appearance: " regaining some at least of her personal beauty".

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Yet again, we notice a difference in her personality. This alteration in her character reduces our sympathy for her, as she is not as innocent and delightful as she used to be. However, she is only making numerous endeavours to heal her arm, so that she can retrieve and salvage Farmer Lodge's love. This makes us feel sorry for her, because even after years of emptiness, their marriage is worthless. The audience empathise less with Gertrude as the book progresses. We find that Gertrude has become cold and callous.

She is prepared to go to extremes to get what she wants. It seems as if she has lost control of herself and does not care about anything else other than achieving her own selfish goal. This is represented in " O lord hang some guilty or innocent person soon! " She is not concerned about anyone else other than herself and is nasty enough to wish death upon someone. The hangman is a mere tool for her use. Despite being treated unjustly by Rhoda and Farmer Lodge, she has stooped down to their level of disgrace by her recent actions.

We also place the blame on Gertrude when the story reveals that Rhoda's son has been convicted and sentenced to death. Immediately, our condolences return to Rhoda. Her son was all she had, and we imagine the pain and grief Rhoda will endure as a result of her son's death. Rhoda is described as " her face drawn and her eyes red". This portrayal makes the reader feel sorry for Rhoda as she is terribly distraught. It makes us think about the perils and suffering she has experienced throughout her life, and how her life was incredibly demanding.

No one deserves to undergo so much disaster and pain, and get nothing in return. Rhoda is infuriated when she discovers Gertrude is present at the hanging and is using her dead son to cure her arm. At this instant, we feel even more sympathetic towards Rhoda as even her final moments with her son have been spoiled by Gertrude, and thus, she adds to the sorrow and anguish Rhoda is feeling. In conclusion, I think that Rhoda deserves most of the sympathy. This is because her difficulties in life considerably outweigh Gertrude's troubles.

Ever since the beginning of the book, Rhoda has been suffering. There is no point in the book where she is a happy woman. She spends all her life, making a comfortable world for her son, without the help of his father. It was only natural for her to feel jealous of Gertrude, hence her envy was justified. She did not intentionally hurt Gertrude, and so she is not the root cause of the Gertrude's misery. She may have been the trigger, but it was Gertrude's actions that brought distress in her life. Rhoda represents the lower class society. She is a victim of social classing and gender.