

Positive men,  
negative women?:  
unfortunate gender  
connotations in "a  
sunday morni...



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The poetry of the Victorian novelist Thomas Hardy contains some progressive ideals which challenge negative stereotypes associated with women in the Victorian era; notable here are poems such as 'A Sunday Morning Tragedy' and 'The Newcomer's Wife'. He challenged the Victorian sexual double standard, which 'upheld different standards of chastity for men and women' and marginalised unmarried women for sex outside of marriage. Nevertheless, Hardy also contradicts this progressive attitude in poems such as 'At an Inn' and 'A Trampwoman's Tragedy', by conveying a greater sense of empathy toward male characters than female characters, thus attributing negative connotations to a female gendering.

To a certain extent, Hardy could be seen as challenging the importance of Victorian society's rule and the extent to which they dictated the lives of Victorian women. In the poem 'A Sunday Morning Tragedy', Hardy writes from the viewpoint of a mother, whose daughter is seemingly jilted by her lover, as she lived in 'poverty', despite being pregnant. The mother is portrayed as a socially conscious individual, who responds to her daughter's apparent misfortune by acquiring a drug to 'balk ill-motherings', a phrase which leads to the mother postulating as to 'why should they' be considered 'ill-motherings'. The negative connotations of the adverb 'ill' infer that illegitimate children are somehow imperfect, whilst the plural form of the noun 'mothering' implies that the mother of the child should take sole responsibility for an illegitimate child. Hardy challenges the widely held Victorian societal belief that a mother who bore an illegitimate child should face 'condemnation from their community', simply for conceiving a child outside of wedlock, despite not being solely responsible for the conception of

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the child. Victorian society's attitude toward illegitimate children often culminated in the murder of these children. Hardy discovered one incident in 1885, which served as an inspiration for the poem, where women dropped their illegitimate children into the river below, to rid themselves of the shame that the children brought upon them. As Hawkins states, "it was these disfigurements and mutilations of the natural sexuality of women that aroused in Hardy a deep feminist sympathy." Through 'A Sunday Morning Tragedy', Hardy expresses his dislike toward the standards of Victorian society, mainly as a result of his own experience to the damage that these values had upon the lives of numerous young women. Thus, Hardy's poetry rejects the notion that a female gendering should evoke negative connotations, as it questions the lack of equality in the treatment of men and women, in regard to society's double standard of sex outside of marriage.

Hardy continues his remonstrance of Victorian society's ideals, thus promoting progressive feminist ideals, in his poem, 'The Newcomer's Wife'. According to Barry, the focus of feminist criticism 'is on the heroine's choice of marriage partner, which will decide her ultimate social position and exclusively determine her happiness and fulfilment in life, or lack of these'[1]. Conversely, in 'The Newcomer's Wife', it is the husband's fate and social position that is determined by his wife. Therefore, to some degree, the female character has some power, as her previous actions influence the fate of her husband. Nonetheless, one could argue that this portrayal of the female character evokes negative connotations. Hardy writes from the male perspective, which infers to the reader that he emphasises more with the husband than the female character, who is demonised for her sexuality. The <https://assignbuster.com/positive-men-negative-women-unfortunate-gender-notations-in-a-sunday-morning-tragedy-the-newcomers-wife-and-other-poems/>

husband ' knows nothing of [his wife's] past'. The use of the negative adverb ' nothing' evokes a sense of sadness and futility; the husband is completely unaware of the impact that such an embarrassment will have upon his life. Thus the reader is made to feel sorry for the husband, more so than for the wife. In addition to this, in the bar, the people refer to the newcomer's wife as having enjoyed ' many a love-campaign she had enjoyed before his reign'. Hardy reinforces the sexual double standard by ascribing positive connotations to a male character. Various legislation such as the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 enforced this double standard. By law, women could be divorced on the grounds of their adultery alone, while it had to be proved that men had made the adultery worse by committing other offences. By perpetuating the Victorian sexual double standard, Hardy cannot be said to be evoking positive feminine connotations, as he appears to advocate ' sexual inequality'[2]. In this poem, he appears to blame women for their ' love-campaigns', perpetuating the Victorian double standard against women, which therefore furthering the statement that a masculine gendering is supposed to evoke positive connotations whereas a feminine gendering evokes negative ones.

Whilst Hardy does reject some negative female stereotypes, at times he fails to challenge others. Written in 1898, before the death of his wife, ' At an Inn' follows the journey of two lovers to an inn; possibly to begin an affair. This poem may be written from personal experience as Hardy was known to have had an infatuation with Florence Henniker, a young novelist. However, this love was unrequited, ergo Hardy makes reference to ' love lingered numb'.

Such alliteration conveys the tragic circumstance, from Hardy's perspective, <https://assignbuster.com/positive-men-negative-women-unfortunate-gender-connotations-in-a-sunday-morning-tragedy-the-newcomers-wife-and-other-poems/>

of Henniker's rejection. The sombre, melancholic tone is further reinforced by the unusual rhythm and uneven stanza length. Nonetheless, at the time at which the poem was written, Hardy was still married to his wife, Emma Gifford, and the pair had become separated despite living in the same house. Florence Henniker, or whomever the poet is referring to in the poem, is used as a commodity for Hardy's needs. He clearly overlooks the woman's personal choice to remain friends because he is too blinded by his own desires. Feminist criticism examines the power relations between characters within narratives and poems. In this particular poem, Hardy, whilst he objectively does not appear to have any control of the situation, seems to be trying to force the woman in the poem into a relationship which she does not consent to. The feminist critic Millet states that 'the distribution of power between male and female characters often mirrors the distribution of power over males and females in society at large'. Thereupon, Hardy is preserving the Victorian social construct of male dominance by ensuring that the male characters within his poetry hold power over women to some extent. In 'At an Inn', the male character holds power by attempting to influence the emotions of the female character, which means that although Hardy might have some progressive ideals in regard to the Victorian sexual double standard and its effect on working class women, his attitude towards women he was romantically interested in suggests that Hardy presents women within some of his poetry in a negative light.

Similarly, in 'The Trampwoman's Tragedy', Hardy, as he does in 'At an Inn,' appears to empathise with the 'plight' of the male character. The poet

blames the female character for the misfortune of the male characters, as <https://assignbuster.com/positive-men-negative-women-unfortunate-gender-notations-in-a-sunday-morning-tragedy-the-newcomers-wife-and-other-poems/>

she ' teased [her] fancy-man in play and wanton idleness'. The adjective ' wanton' implies that the female character is sexually immodest and promiscuous and that her function within her relationship is purely sexual; this reinforces the anti-feminist ideals of the Victorian era as Hardy gives power to the male character within the poem. Moreover, the woman states that she ' would not bend my glances on my lover's dark distress'. The use of the noun ' dark distress' infers that the male character is in a great deal of emotional pain, which the woman does not perceive. This lack of emotional awareness conveys that the female character does not have the intelligence or capability to recognise emotional pain in others, appearing to be ignorant and nonchalant in the face of her partner's suffering. In both ' At an Inn' and ' The Trampwoman's Tragedy', Hardy has a bias toward the male character due to his own personal misfortune, which causes him to demonise female characters, who aren't necessarily at fault.

Charles Darwin dismissed the traits of women as ' characteristic of the lower races' and that ' man has ultimately become superior to women'. His views were a product of his Victorian society, and so are Hardy's. The poet fails to address the Victorian sexual double standard, as he favours the male characters in the poem, believing them to be victims of the woman's actions rather than the woman being a victim of Victorian society, who is forced to believe that she must use her sexuality in order to assert dominance.

Ultimately, the presentation of women in Hardy's poetry is too influenced by Victorian society, and consequently a female gendering evokes negative connotations, as his work is too prominently ingrained with the societal beliefs of the Victorian era.

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