

The withered arm by thomas hardy analysis



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It is set in Wessex, a fictional representation of the south western counties of England, such as Dorset, Cornwall and Somerset, as this was where Hardy spent most of his life and to this area he gave the fictional name of 'Wessex'. Wessex was the general name for which this particular part of England in Anglo-Saxon times, so we see that Hardy was a keen historian and through some of his novels we can note some references to famous figures such as the Wessex King Ina, whom King Lear was based on. Hardy concentrates on not one character but on four, Rhoda Brook, Gertrude Lodge, Farmer Lodge and the boy. Rhoda is Lodge's former lover who had his child and thus made herself socially unacceptable. He later chooses to marry the younger richer Gertrude.

Through the first few chapters Hardy establishes the characters, primarily Rhoda and we begin to see how isolated she is from the others. Our first view of her is at work in the dairy, 'where a thin fading woman of thirty milked somewhat apart from the rest'. We learn that Lodge 'hadn't spoke to Rhoda Brook for years'. Physical loneliness is an important theme that Hardy applies as it adds other dimensions to the novel, for example her status is highlighted through her being isolated and it indicates that she is of a lower class than people around her.

She 'milked somewhat apart from the rest'. If she were popular she would not look up to others and would be satisfied with her own looks, instead she is an outcast as she is an unmarried mother, due t her being of a lower social class to Lodge. Hardy creates drama and tension through sheer human interest of the relationship between Rhoda and Gertrude this expands the story and we get a greater insight into the two ladies personalities . Through

the force of her dream Rhoda loses farmer Lodge and her jealousy is so great that she inflicts blight on Gertrude; this is the first sign of the supernatural in the novel.

We know this because when Gertrude visits Conjuror Trendle he comments, 'Medicine can't cure it, Tis the work of an enemy' and when Gertrude looks at the egg in the basin of water, she visualises the face of Rhoda. Who has inflicted the blight. Six years then pass in section six and the affliction becomes worse and starts to affect the marriage. We know that Farmer Lodge is selfish and shallow and as Gertrude's young beautiful look disappears so does his love for her, ironically Gertrude is as desperate, hate filled and reliant on superstition as Rhoda by this point . Hardy then uses elements of suspense, physical tension and superstitious beliefs in the final chapters.

Gertrude intensifies her quest to treat her withered arm and visits Conjuror Trendle once again and he gives Gertrude a task to carry out to cure the curse, ' You must touch with the limb the neck of a man who's been hanged. ' Gertrude prays for someone to soon be hung for her own well-being, ' O Lord, hang some guilty or innocent person soon! ' Gertrude goes to the jail in search of the freshly hung man and she learns that someone who is innocent is soon to be hung, ' But still, if ever a young fellow deserved to be let off, this one does,' the hangman tells her. When Gertrude sees the coffin , it is poorly presented and disregarded, she touches the neck of the dead body with her limb and shrieks as the turn of blood is more than she expected. Ironically the body is Rhoda's son and she infact turns up with farmer Lodge and Rhoda screams so that Gertrude turns around, she says ' This is the <https://assignbuster.com/the-withered-arm-by-thomas-hardy-analysis/>

meaning of what Satan showed me in the vision! You are like her at last! ‘

Rhoda believes that Satan made her hurt Gertrude inadvertently.

Gertrude then ‘ slides down’ to the feet of her husband and dies three days later, the shock of being exposed , seeing the dead boy and seeing her husband with her husband with Rhoda is too much for her. Farmer Lodge gives up his house and belongings to charity and becomes a nicer man , but suffers death through a painless decline two years later. Hardy once again uses irony as Rhoda survives and continues her milking at the dairy, when she was the one who inflicted the evil on Gertrude. Rhoda ‘ s physical ability may be weak at this stage but her mind is extraordinary to the point of being dangerous. The supernatural theme is cleverly applied by Hardy in the Withered Arm, through setting, actions, history and speech. The setting for most of the story, Egdon Heath, derived from an isolated building on the edge of a tract of wild heath land near where Hardy lived.

Egdon Heath seems to have an eerie feeling to it and a character of its own. Egdon Heath whose dark countenance was visible in the distance as they drew nigh to their home’ and ‘ It was a long walk; thick clouds made the atmosphere dark, though it was as yet only early afternoon; and the wind howled dismally over the slopes of the heath- not improbably the same heath which had witnesses the agony of the Wessex King Ina, presented to after- ages as Lear. ‘ Here Hardy cleverly uses the mystical and dark feeling off the heath with historical content -King Lear could be compared to Gertrude or Rhoda as they are both very tragic figures, who are both afflicted by hatred which becomes a type of madness or obsession. The

description of the Heath is very mystical and it seems to be a place which only a few people cross on a pilgrimage to see Conjuror Trendle .

Conjuror Trendle is another example of the supernatural that Hardy has applied to the novel. Trendle is a magic man and the fact that Gertrude did not choose to go to a normal doctor is quite mysterious, she only turns to him when she is desperate. He treats various illnesses with strange remedies such as ' furze-roots' and his appearance again seems magical ' His head bowed nearly to the earth, and his form of a colour with it'. Hardy has added the Conjuror to the novel for many reasons, his background has influenced him greatly as when he was a boy he knew of a woman who had her blood turned by a convict's corpse to cure a wasting disease and he also knew of someone who helped people who had been bewitched and could make your enemy rise in a glass of water.

The time in which the story was set and also the location of the story is another reason why Hardy would have added the supernatural theme to the story, in the 19th century procedures such as hangings and witchcraft would be a common occurrence and anyone who was thought to have been a witch would have been dealt with harshly. As I said earlier Hardy knew conjurors and liked to use memories of his youth in his stories. The location of Thomas Hardy's town also meant that conventional methods would have been applied to earn a living as there was not much technology, people did not get remedies from doctors and instead used conjurors or fortune tellers to help them. The conjuror or wizard does also add superstition to the novel and this is great way for Hardy to play with some of the characters personalities. For Gertrude visiting Conjuror Trendle makes her a lot more

superstitious and eventually she comes to believe that 'The devil himself has taken hold of it', which is what her husband initially said about her arm, this essentially is the beginning of her down fall.

Her mind starts to play games with her and an example of this is when she sees the image of Rhoda in the water and egg, she probably thought that it was Rhoda in the first place and Hardy wants us to believe that magic is involved. Gertrude is deteriorating not only physically but mentally. Rhoda knows that she has inflicted the curse on Gertrude but says that the devil/Satan made her do it because she doesn't want to be exposed as a witch, she feels guilt towards Rhoda and is also afraid of seeing the Conjuror.

Rhoda is basically a witch in the novel,' She certainly has that reputation in the village and Trendle pronounces her work as the nature of blight, not of the nature of a wound.

Her appearance is also that of a stereotypical witch , pale, dark eyed , poverty stricken and mysterious, compared to the short , pretty, elaborate and ' rose petalled' face of Gertrude , it is obvious who is going to be perceived as the evil in the book. Another factor is class, Rhoda would be of a lower class, most probably uneducated, she can never marry again because she has a son and she is poor, whereas Gertrude is wealthier, wiser and does not have a son. It is ironic then that Gertrude dies and Rhoda lives on despite her emaciation and unhealthy looks. Superstition and the supernatural element control everyone's actions in the story , unfortunately for Gertrude her feelings of superstition lead to her death and farmer lodge's sons death, Rhoda's loss of and love for Farmer Lodge and her jealousy

towards Gertrude depresses her and causes Gertrude to receive a withered arm. I do not believe that Gertrude's or Rhoda's fate was deserved.

They were dragged into the situation by Farmer Lodge's selfishness, he gave up everything he wanted with Rhoda due to class difference and brought the son into the world who eventually became a victim. Farmer Lodge then married Gertrude and added to her downfall by disliking her because of her looks-disability, consequently killing her as she tried to find a cure for her arm. The son was the most innocent victim and was accused for a crime he didn't commit. Overall only Farmer Lodge deserved his death.

In conclusion I think there is enough evidence in the novel to suggest that the supernatural element is a major theme in the Withered Arm. The supernatural element adds controversy and provides excitement and a backbone to the story, what Hardy does well is to imply that the supernatural might be at work, he never directly states that it is . Therefore we can make up our own minds. I must also consider that there must have been a reason for Rhoda to want to put a curse on Gertrude and that is basically that she has been supplanted by a younger rival.

She wants to get revenge and sees this as a way to do so.