

‘absentmindedness in  
a parish choir’, ‘the  
withered arm’ and  
‘the son’s veto’ ess...



Thomas Hardy writes about the divisions between the upper and lower classes within three of his stories: 'Absentmindedness in a Parish Choir'; 'The Withered Arm'; and 'The Son's Veto'.

The upper class were wealthy having a good lifestyle, well educated and very concerned with behaving appropriately; the lower class were poor and spent the little money they had on necessities, uneducated and they provided labour for the upper class and other wealthy land owners. He explores different ideas that differentiate between the classes. These ideas include thoughts of superstitions and sacrificing ones job or well being to uphold moral behaviour. Thomas Hardy's stories were a reflection of any rural community or suburb of a town or city and its people that lived there. English society's lives were dictated by the rules and moral standards that the people lived by.

How you behaved was important to everybody in the 1800's no matter what class they were in. There were strict unwritten rules of how to behave and people would be disapproved of if they broke these conventions. One of these laws was not have a relationship of love out of your class. In 'The Withered Arm' we are told of a relationship - that resulted in a child - between Rhoda Brooks and Farmer Lodge. After the son was born the people in the village knew of this affair. Because Farmer Lodge was in the upper class and was male he did not suffer as much for his actions as Rhoda.

When Farmer Lodge marries Gertrude, Rhoda knows that he has truly made his desertion and never to be a part of her or her son's lives "Yes mother" said the boy "Is father married then?" She had to bring up the child alone

but was not ashamed as she told the son that Farmer Lodge was his father so he knew that both he and his mother had been abandoned by his father. " 'Tis hard for she" signifying the thin worn milkmaid aforesaid. " O, no...

. He hadn't spoke to Rhoda Brook for years. " Since the affair Rhoda had separated herself from the rest of the village and she was frequently gossiped about. Rhoda was also very poor as she had to bring up a son without any financial support from his father and only having a little income from only her milking the cows. The fact is known from the fact that her house is very basic and the boy's shoes are very old and worn.

" And she looked at my boots, and said that they would not keep my feet dry if it came on wet, because they were so cracked" The boy explained that his boots were so worn that his feet would get wet if it rained. If Rhoda had more money it would be a necessity to buy a new pair of boots for her son but they don't ever have enough money for essential things. Farmer Lodge also suffers for the affair but not in such a public way. When he is married his wife never produces a son as an heir to his land.

It could be said that this is a judgement and fate has stopped him from having a son as he has already had a son that he ignores and does not support. A relationship that is a success between two people, one from the upper class and one from the lower class, is of Mr Twycott, a parson, and Sophy, his parlour maid till he married her. In these times the lower class always respected the upper class when in public. In ' The Son's Veto' Sam Hobson, a lower class gardener, calls Sophy " Mrs Twycott", even though

they were good friends and knew each other well, when they meet again after she is married. I can't come down easily, Sam, or I would! “..

.. “ Well, Mrs Twycott” The opposite also applies when Sophy calls Sam only by his first name. This shows that the upper class valued the lower class as much lower than them in society which they were.

When the major rules of society were broken the person (or people) involved frequently moved away from the area to avoid confrontation and gossip from others who feel appalled by their behaviour. When Rhoda, in ' The Withered Arm', had an affair with Farmer Lodge she moved away to the edge of the parish boundaries. “ Their course home lay apart from the others, to a lonely spot” Thomas Hardy purposely uses the word “ apart” showing the extent of how she lives away from the others. He also constructs the phrase “ lonely spot” which is also a description of how Rhoda feels being apart from the others and the fact that their house would be lonely because it also is alone and isolated. As mentioned before, Mr Twycott and Sophy married between their two classes in ' The Son's Veto'. Because they had committed ' social suicide' and caused disgrace to themselves they had to move away from the area to avoid the consequences of their inappropriate behaviour.

Mr Twycott knew perfectly well that he had committed social suicide....

An exchange of livings had been arranged.... abandoning their pretty home..

.. and their fine peal of bells for the wretchedest one-tongued clangour that ever tortured mortal ears. ” Even though Mr Twycott had caused endless shame upon himself he still married Sophy because he loved her and he

found that this was more important to him. Another form of relationship between classes that people saw as unacceptable behaviour was different classes mixing as friends.

In 'The Withered Arm' Gertrude frequently met with Rhoda and had intermittent conversations. "The conversation became quite confidential as regarded their powers and weaknesses; and when Mrs Lodge was leaving, Rhoda said, "I hope you will find the air agree with you, ma'am, and not suffer from the damp of the water-meeds." Gertrude would meet with Rhoda at her house or Rhoda would purposely walk to where Gertrude would pass. The fact that they had "confidential" conversations showed that they were trusting friends.

Gertrude was willing to go against the social conventions because both she and Rhoda were lonely and they were good company for each other. Also so Farmer Lodge and the other villagers would not know of Gertrude's visits with Rhoda because her house was detached from the main part of the village so no person would know of her visits to Rhoda. Rhoda found that from her meeting with Gertrude that she forgave her for the marriage to Farmer Lodge and was sorry for envying her and cursing her with the disfigured arm. She was such a friend that she was concerned for her wellbeing. I hope you will find the air agree with you, ma'am, and not suffer from the damp of the water-meeds.

"This is also saying that she is respecting her class as she still refers to her as "ma'am" and not as Gertrude. Communities of upper and lower classes were both united in condemnation in their religious beliefs. An example of

this was in 'Absent-Mindedness in a Parish Choir' as both the classes were outraged by the band playing a blasphemous song in the church. A lower class response to this outrage was: "The boy Levi was so frightened that he bolted down the gallery stairs and out homeward like lightning" A similar response to this was the upper class (a member of the clergy was seen as being in a class between the upper and lower classes) response was: "The pa'son's hair stood on end when he heard the evil tune raging through the church, and thinking the choir had gone crazy." The congregation were offended by the tune as they believed that God would be wrathful because of the blasphemous tune as everyone found religion very important and didn't want to go to hell because of God being angered by the tune. Within the three stories Thomas Hardy shows how the upper classes are judgemental and hold prejudice against the lower class.

One reason why the upper classes were like this was because they were irritated by the lower classes lack of education and lazy and occasional blasphemous language that they spoke. In 'The Son's Veto', Randolph, Mr Twycott and Sophy's son, is irritated by Sophy's lack of grammatical understanding and use of incorrect words when speaking. "He have been so comfortable these last few hours that I am sure he cannot have missed us" she replied. "Has, dear mother - not have!" Randolph knows that Sophy was only married into the upper class so this angers him, as he wants to become an upper class gentleman. He notices Sophy's imperfections of her speech and feels that this is disgraceful behaviour for an upper class lady and that he will be showed up by her in public. He is ashamed of his

mother's roots and this is why he 'snaps' at her when pointing out her inaccuracy, " Exclaimed the public school boy.

... " Surely you should know by now" He does not subtly point out her mistake but he exclaims it and this shows how annoyed he is by her lack of education and how he finds that his reputation is more important than being kind to his mother. Another example of how Randolph sees his public reputation more important than his mother's happiness is when he objects to her marrying Sam many years after Mr Twycott had deceased.

" And finally taking her before a cross and altar he had erected in his bedroom for private denotations, there bade her kneel, and swear that she would not marry Samuel Hobson without his consent. " I owe this to my father! " Sophy had been considerate to what Randolph would think about her re-marrying back into the lower class so she asked Randolph for his consent for the marriage. This shows that she respected him and thought dearly of his feelings. The opposite of respecting each other is shown by Randolph not consenting to the marriage and again he feels that his reputation is more important than his mother's happiness and so he is being very selfish. Even though Randolph is being so selfish, Sophy does what he says, and swears to God that " she will not marry Sam Hobson without his consent" this shows that she still has respect for him because he is of a higher class than she is and that he is her son.

Randolph is not the only upper class person that Thomas Hardy writes about being selfish. In ' Absentmindedness is a Parish Choir" he writes about the Squire being very unforgiving, which many upper class people were, and

self-centred. When the band had played the blasphemous song the Squire is outraged that they had dared to do this before him. The Squire saw him-self as being the most important person in the church.

He even puts him-self before God in those who were disgraced by the tune, "insult to me, and my family, and my visitors, and God Almighty. The Squire would not forgive the band and would not even hear their reasons for their actions and he was to dismiss them from their jobs and appoint a new "respectful organ grinder" to play the music in the church. The lifestyle between the lower and upper class were very different with lower classes living a life of hard work and endless poverty: whereas the upper classes live in a life of luxury and little, if no, work. In 'The Son's Veto' Sophy was Mr Twycott's Parlour maid until she married him. This was a common job for a teenage girl to do in these times.

Also in 'The Withered Arm' Rhoda was a milkmaid and for what Thomas Hardy wrote she lived a life of poverty with not being able to have any form of luxuries in her or her son's life and having to live in a rather dilapidated house. "It was built from mud walls, which the surface had been washed by many rains into channels and depressions which had left none of the original flat face visible; while here and there the thatch above the rafter showed like a protruding bone through the skin." Rhoda's house was very basic and because of it being so old and its location on the heath it was starting to wear away. From the description given you can imagine that there would be leaks in the house and it would be very cold to live in and that Rhoda and her son would be suffering from their living conditions.



Upper class ladies would spend their time doing charity work within the parish for the lower class folks. This was because they didn't work but felt that it was their obligation to do something good for the community as they had the money and the status to do so. In 'The Withered Arm' Gertrude gave Rhoda's son a new pair of shoes after seeing that they were worn and cracked when seeing him walking on the road. "I'll bring you some better boots. Another past time that upper class ladies indulged in was to make themselves beautiful for their husbands and other people could admire their looks.

In 'The Son's Veto' we are introduced to Sophy as Thomas Hardy's description of her elaborate hairstyle and the great time that would have gone into doing such a design. "To the eyes of a man viewing it from behind, the nut brown hair was a wonder and a mystery. Under the black beaver hat surmounted by its tuft of black feathers, the long locks, braided and twisted and coiled like rushes of a basket, composed a rare, if somewhat barbaric, example of ingenious art. Once again, because upper class ladies did not work they could spend their time doing such a trivial thing as doing their hair and then going out for it to be admired.

In 'The Withered Arm' Gertrude was worried that Farmer Lodge would not love her anymore because of her disfigured arm. "She honestly attached to her husband, and was ever secretly hoping against hope to win back his heart again by regaining some at least of her personal beauty." For an upper class landowner, the most important thing to have achieved was to bear a son to pass down their land to. Farmer Lodge was not able to bear a son with Gertrude and so would not be able to pass the land down to a  
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family member. " She had brought him no child which rendered it likely that he would be the last of the family who had occupied that valley for some two hundred.

He thought of Rhoda Brook and her son; and feared it might be a judgement from heaven upon him. " He believed that not being able to have a son with Gertrude was a form of punishment because of having a son with Rhoda and not being a part of its life. When exploring the differences between the classes Thomas Hardy tend to show as a whole that no matter what class you were in you had your standereds to live to and if you broke the social rules you had to live with the cost that it had made. He also makes a point in show that both classes had an equal amount of troubles and hardship within their lives Thomas Hardy writes about the upper and lower classes not sticking to the social conventions, in these three stories, as being very pessimistic and that if you were to break these rules it was on your back to live with the consequences. Although it is know that Thomas Hardy himself crossed the divide between classes with his education and dreams to become a writer. He did this most successfully but even still he portrays crossing between the classes as very wrong and not a wise life change.

Also with in his stories he shows the upper class as being very selfish and self-centred showing them as a whole of being very intolerable people. It is clear that he is contradicting what he has done.