

"the woman in black"
and "the withered
arm" essay sample



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“ The Woman in Black” and “ The Withered arm” Essay Sample

Thomas Hardy’s “ The Withered arm and Susan Hill’s “ The Woman in Black” are both texts set around the turn of the century and share the theme of women in society. They explore the class systems and the differences in morals, attitudes, women’s rights and roles in society and how a person’s social status can completely change the outcome for two different people in the same situation. Both texts feature a woman and their struggle against society after having illegitimate children and being abandoned by their lovers.

The two women are Jennet from “ The Woman in Black” and Rhoda from “ The Withered Arm.” Through these characters the writers help the audience to understand the roles of women in the early century and late 19th century by providing a comparison. “ The Woman in Black” and “ The Withered Arm” explore class differences through Jennet who, born in to a rich family is upper/middle class and Rhoda who, born in to poverty is lower class.

Jennet was born in to the upper middle class and lives as a lady in the small rural village of Crythin Gifford. She was brought to her child she was up in a highly respected family of great prestige. When Jennet gave birth shunned by society and in fear of losing their social status and respect, her parents disowned her.

In the time that the texts were written having sex before marriage was immoral and to have a child out of marriage was shameful. All the morals Jennets family had had been violated, Jennet had brought disgrace on the

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family and to keep their social status they were forced to turn their backs on her and her new child. Jennet was forced to give her child away to her sister Alice who, being in a stable marriage could bring him up for her own.

She was offered no sympathy and her parents showed no repentance. The community could not forget her sin so she was forced to leave Crythin Gifford. Jennet eventually returned but her parents wouldn't see her and the father of her child was long gone. After eventually being reunited with her son he tragically died just before she was planning to take him away for good.

Devastated by the death of her son, Jennet suffered from a frightful wasting disease; " She died eventually, died in hatred and anger." She blamed society for keeping her and her son apart and she blamed them for his death, she took revenge by appearing as a ghost and killing many children in Crythin Gifford. Jennet wanted the community that had so cruelly dismissed her to feel her pain. Even though they weren't directly involved they were still upper middle class society Jennet needed to share her pain about and show them how much it hurt to lose a child; by separation and by death.

The character Rhoda, like Jennet had a child out of marriage by the owner of the land Farmer Lodge. Rhoda was lower class and because of this her outcome was quite different. Rhoda and Jennet had completely different financial and social status, Rhoda lives in poverty and as in that time a person's financial state defined their whole lives she is less moralistic or less concerned about living the " right" way and the society she lives in is more understanding and sympathetic. She was slightly isolated and lived in a "

Lonely spot high above the water- meads, and not far from the edge of Egdon Heath, whose dark countenance was visible in the distance" Egdon Heath being a dark, glowering presence like Rhoda's sin of her illegitimate child.

It wasn't that the lower class had any fewer morals than Jenet's community. They were less fixated on revolving their whole lives on being morally just. They didn't feel the need to exclude Rhoda to withhold their social positions so she was able to keep her child, job, home and although she did lose some respect from the villagers she was sympathised with and left alone. If Jenet had stayed in Crythin Gifford and kept her child she wouldn't have been able to forget about it all, her community wouldn't have any respect for her or her family.

Mr Lodge didn't acknowledge Rhoda's son as his own and spent many years ignoring her and his son. Mr Lodge married a young girl, Gertrude who Rhoda loathed for taking Mr Lodge from her.

Rhoda still loved Mr Lodge and I think she never lost faith in him and believed that they might be united to live together as a family. Gertrude had destroyed that and Rhoda blames her for keeping them apart. She gives Rhoda a hideous wound to her arm and Gertrude loses all her beauty and Mr Lodge's love: " Rhoda in a last desperate effort swung out her right arm, seized the confronting spectre [Gertrude] by it's left arm and whirled it backwards to the floor." All Rhoda's anger and hatred had been directed towards Gertrude and Desperately but unknowingly she had put a curse on her and taken the beauty Mr Lodge loved. "[Gertrude] was secretly hoping

against hope to win back his heart again by regaining some at least of her personal beauty."

Jennets and Rhoda's stories were only different because of their class difference. This quote from the Woman in Black gives evidence for this; " A girl from the servant class living in a closely bound community might perhaps have fared better...than this daughter of genteel parentage, who had been so coldly rejected and whose feelings were so totally left out of the count."

In the last century and early this, the class you were born in to decided your whole lives. Women had very little power and rights and they were inferior compared to the dominating men of society. In the upper classes the people were very judgmental and selfish and when someone sinned in society they hid it to protect their reputations. They were very hypocritical whereas in the lower class they were more understanding even though their moral standards were just as high.

Upper class women were companions for their husbands and child bearing devices. They didn't work and didn't bring up their children. They were ladies of leisure and lived sheltered and simple lives. They didn't have to make hard decisions or be independent as their lives were run for them. In the lower class life for women was different although the power, rights and respect they had was not. Women had to work for their living had to bring up their children and they couldn't afford to have someone to run their lives for them. They had to be independent and look after themselves.

Jennet had been brought up to be a woman of high class, her family were looked upon as good people therefore they had a high reputation at stake. When Jennet had her affair it brought disgrace on their family. Such an upper class family couldn't accept such a sin and doing the only thing they knew how to do drove Jennet away so it could all be forgotten and the family could regain its respect. Jennet couldn't bring up the child with no money or support as she wasn't brought up for it so she was forced to go through the pain of giving up her child and living apart from him.

Both the stories pick up on the superiority of the man in that time. In both texts the men are just as much to blame than the women but they do not have to suffer for it. "The Woman in Black" doesn't mention Jennet's lover at all as if he was nothing to do with it and doesn't need to take any responsibility for his son or Jennet. In "The Withered Arm" Farmer Lodge doesn't take any responsibility for his son or Rhoda either. This is because of his financial position. The only people that are aware of his and Rhoda's affair are the villagers and they cannot blame him because he is their land owner and has power over them.

Rhoda is justified in wanting her revenge because I think she thought that sleeping with Farmer Lodge was the right thing to do, perhaps she thought he would marry her. She definitely loved him so it must have been a shock for her to have him leave her and then make it official by marrying someone else. Seeing Farmer Lodge on a regular basis without him acknowledging her or her son must have also been hard for Rhoda. Every time she saw him it must have brought back painful memories for her.

Rhoda had to face Farmer Lodge regularly and have him ignore her and her child which must have brought back unhappy memories like a constant reminder of her mistake. Unlike Jennet, Rhoda was brought up to do all these things. The text doesn't mention Rhoda's family so it is probable that she had to bring up her child completely alone so she had to work long hard hours for a barely decent living.

Unlike Jennet, Rhoda had been brought up to be independent and look after herself. It was expected that she would have to work and look after her children and husband, she was prepared for a hard working life. Although Jennet didn't have to bring up her child she did have to carry it for nine months and then live completely alone and fend for herself. Jennet was brought up in the presumption that she would marry and be looked after all her life, it

Jessica Williams

wasn't expected that she would end up alone so was never taught to be self-sufficient. I think Jennet is more justified for revenge than Rhoda because Jennet was punished more severely than Rhoda was it would have been a lot harder for her to cope. The step from being completely looked after to being rejected must have been really hard to overcome.

I think Jennet's ordeal was much worse than Rhoda's was so her revenge is much more deserved than Rhoda's was. Both women's revenge is unfair though; Rhoda gets revenge on Gertrude even though she had no idea that Mr Lodge and Rhoda had a son together and Jennet punishes the modern

society though they would probably be a lot more understanding than the early century.

In "The Woman in Black" The story is told as if in the future (present day), after Jennet has died and her story isn't explained until very near the end. The author Susan Hill tells the story through a visitor to Crythin Clifford-Arthur Kipps. It is told in the first person through the character "Kipps" as he is terrorised by Jennet as a ghost- "The Woman in Black".

She is referred to throughout the book as an evil spirit making the lives of the characters a nightmare. Everyone in the story is petrified of her and Hill builds her up to be malicious making the reader be terrified of her; "Words seem helplessly inadequate to express what I saw- [The Woman in Black] as a desperate, yearning malevolence.... the purest evil and hatred and loathing."

Phrases like these do not evoke sympathy in the reader. At the end of the book when Jennet's story is unearthed, her pain and suffering discovered and the reader realises that she was justified in getting revenge they are already sympathetic towards Jennet's victims. This way of telling the story is different to "The Withered Arm" because it is told through Rhoda Brooks -on her side. Like Arthur in "The Woman in Black" the reader feels sympathetic towards Rhoda and wants her to get her revenge. Even though Rhoda's revenge is just as unfair as Jennet's the reader sympathises with Rhoda more because they already know her story and how much she deserves to get revenge even though it is unfair on Gertrude.

Hardy understands Rhoda's situation. He wants to make the reader emphasise with her so writes about her in a very sympathetic way, showing the readers how lonely and hard her life of loneliness and poverty is, making the reader feel compassionate towards her. He describes her house, picking up on all the bad points; " It was built of mud walls, the surface of which had been washed by many rains in to channels and depressions that left none of the original flat face visible." Hardy describes Rhoda's house like Rhoda herself; she is tired and haggard, lonely and depressed. Hardy uses these linguistic devices to help to understand Rhoda's feelings and situation like in " The Woman in Black" as in; " only the thinnest layer of skin was stretched and strained across her bones so it gleamed with a curious blue- white sheen, and her eyes seemed sunken back in to her head." Where Hill makes the reader frightened of Jennet as a ghost.

The reader's reaction would be different due to the books being written in different times. The time that the texts are set is round about the same but the time they were written was very different. " The Withered Arm" was written in the 19th century and the " Woman in Black was written in the 1980s. When The Withered Arm was read by the 19th century readers they would have been much more shocked than I was, In present day single parents and illegitimate children aren't as rare as then so aren't classed as a sin anymore. Hardy was most widely read by upper classes and they would have reacted to the book in the same kind of way that society reacted to Jennets pregnancy in The Woman in Black. The Withered Arm would have outraged but excited them which Hardy had a reputation for doing. As well as making them understand Rhoda's situation and the lower class ways it

was probably his intention to cause a stir which he did with many of his books

The Woman in Black was written in the 20th century and it is hard for the modern reader to empathise with Jennet, Hill had to include more drama than Hardy did. She had to make the horror bit of the story more substantial and sensationalised to excite and shock the reader in the same way Hardy's first readers were. The supernatural part of The Withered Arm can be more of a sub plot.