

'the withered arm and other wessex tales'

[Literature](#)



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'The Withered Arm and Other Wessex Tales' is set in Wessex, a fictional place in South West England, on Dorset. It is set in the mid 19th Century where there was a huge gulf between the rich and the poor and many people had begun to migrate to the city to find work. Farming traditions and families were dying out. Hardy began to question whether this was real progress or were we losing the community values and traditions upon which the society had been built. He especially focuses on the portrayal of women; they are seen to be beneath men and are restricted by the boundaries of class.

Hardy often highlights these prejudices by his choices of location; the women I have looked at are often isolated and are spectators watching their own life go past. Although they are not all weak they have all been restricted in one way or another by society's treatment of women. In 'The Withered Arm' Rhoda has a very skeletal appearance: 'A thin faced woman of thirty milked somewhat apart from the rest'. Hardy portrays her isolation in the story through aspects of her life.

For example she lives alone with her son in an isolated dwelling away from the rest of the community. She does not fit in with the other milkmaids. They call her a witch and the society in which she lives has condemned her for having Farmer Lodge's son out of marriage. She is haggard, her appearance marks that of her house. Both appear battered and worn out by life's experiences. She is portrayed as an independent and proud woman however like most of the female characters in Hardy's short stories she is not happy.

The appearance of the other female character in this story, Gertrude however is very different 'They say she's a rosy-cheeked, tisty-tosty little

body' Gertrude is very pretty, young and feeble and society places great value on her looks but once they begin to fade she loses her husband. 'She was honestly attached to her husband, and was ever secretly hoping against hope to win his heart back again by regaining some at least of her personal beauty. ' In Hardy's time great importance seems to have been placed on physical appearance. Rhoda is very jealous when she finds out that Farmer Lodge is to be getting married.

She is very conscious of the social divide between her and Farmer Lodge which is shown through her speculative comments about his new wife, 'If she seems like a woman who has ever worked for a living, or one that has always been well off. ' She will not go and see the wife for herself as she is too proud but instead sends the son, as she wants to know. I think that Hardy portrays Rhoda so that we admire her, although she is interested in farmer Lodge we see that she is a strong and proud women that ahs been put through a lot of hardships in her lie because of her society so we pity her as a pose to condemning her.

Rhoda is a victim of the rigid social system that was apparent at the time, she has become isolated from this relationship and society has condemned her. However men are portrayed as being treated better than women Farmer Lodge has got away with it. It does not matter if he has mistreated her. He is not blamed instead she is the one who receives all the blame and becomes a social outcast, she is an outsider that is part of the community. The fact she is a single mum who has had a baby outside marriage was frowned upon, even though it was common knowledge that the father was Farmer Lodge.

Rhoda is so desperate to know more about the new wife, she is always asking the son about her, interrogating him, 'I got to see her! I wouldn't look up at her if she were to pass this window right now'. This highlights her pride in the story. She tries to pretend she is not interested in Gertrude but we know she is because we can see it always on her mind. Hardy is showing that some women can still retain personal dignity. Gertrude starts to change when her arm becomes withered.

We start to see similarities between her and Rhoda, and she becomes desperate to fit in and win back his love, so desperate that she is obsessed with finding a cure for her withered arm. Once she has this deformation she feels that her husband no longer loves her. She feels she needs to be pretty so he loves her. This shows us that the man was in control of the relationship and the woman just had to try and please him. We start to feel sympathy for both of the characters in the story as Gertrude becomes paler and is unable to have a child, which is ironic because Rhoda had actually given farmer Lodge an illegitimate son.

By the end of the story Rhoda and Gertrude are together again, both women are haggard and are unhappy. Their unhappiness has been caused by social and class prejudice. We don't know which one to feel more sorry for, Rhoda because her son has just died and she is standing there at a moment of intense grief when Gertrude touches her son or Gertrude who has gone to such lengths to regain her beauty as to touch someone being executed. The story does not have a happy ending. In 'The Son's Veto' a key theme that Hardy again portrays society's treatment of women.

Sophy is a victim of class barriers and restrictions. The tone of the story is dialectic and condemnatory as Hardy criticises a class system that forces people to behave contrary to their instinctive desires, she is described as a 'poor thing', a pitiable character who appears powerless. Just like Gertrude and Rhoda she is not happy. In this story Hardy shows that he is rather critical of the society in which the people live. Sophy should have been able to follow her heart so she was happy.

Sophy is obliged to marry Twycott even though she does not love him as he is of a higher class 'She hardly dared refuse personage so reverend and august in her eyes. ' This language suggests that she sees him to be amazing and that because he is so great and above her how could she possibly refuse even if it means not following her heart. We are immediately aware of the difference in class between them, which is clearly conveyed in the tone of the text. Twycott is worried about social gossip so they move away.

Randolph treats her like a child and finds her a social embarrassment. He has been raised and educated to be a higher class than her 'has dear mother- not have! She hastily adopted the correction. ' Randolph seems to have become a carbon copy of his father who shows that the social prejudice exercised in this story is hereditary. As Randolph does not respect his mother there is a strong sense of foreboding about the way he behaves towards her. He may be educate about Hardy portrays that although educated he is not ensured good manner and a sympathetic approach to life.

Sophy really loves Sam, Twycott provides materialistic things but Sam provides her with happiness and vitality. 'The air and Sam's presence had revived her: her cheeks were quite pink- almost beautiful. ' Sam persuades Sophy to travel with him on his way to Covent Garden, she realises this is inappropriate but is tempted by the adventure. However she refuses to move back home and marry him because of the embarrassment it would cause her son, marrying someone of a lower social class.

Randolph however refuses to accept the idea, and eventually makes her swear not to do it. I am ashamed of you! It will ruin me! A miserable boor! A churl! A clown! It will degrade me in the eyes of all gentlemen of England! ' she dies wishing Randolph would relent. Hardy throughout the story continues to criticise the class system and its associated prejudice through his descriptions of Sophy's married life. Sophy's life treats her harshly, she is a good example of someone steadily destroyed by the unforgiving and snobbish society in which she lives. 'She soon lost the artificial tastes she had acquired from him. '

In making Sophy the defenceless victim of class prejudice, we see Hardy's thought on distinctions and divides between people is ruthless. The description of her funeral shows the desolation of her death. She had sacrificed her happiness, and hence her life, in order that her son may not be socially damaged by her marrying Sam. In Hardy's short stories I find him questioning the older tradition of the weaker women being more attractive and sees the way forward through stronger females. He wants our sympathy for women. He shows them with unnecessary hardships and it's not fair that these good people should have these lives.

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For example in 'The Distracted Preacher' Lizzy is the only truly independent character in all of the stories. There is a glimmer of hope in her situation as she is independent, thrill seeking and determined, in the end of the original version of the story she again ends up not happy as she marries the smuggler. However, in an alternative ending, he published later on she does not marry this man. This confirms Hardy's view that women deserve more. They should not be subservient to men. Hardy's view ties in with modern ideology- equality between the sexes.