

Thomas Hardy – Short Stories

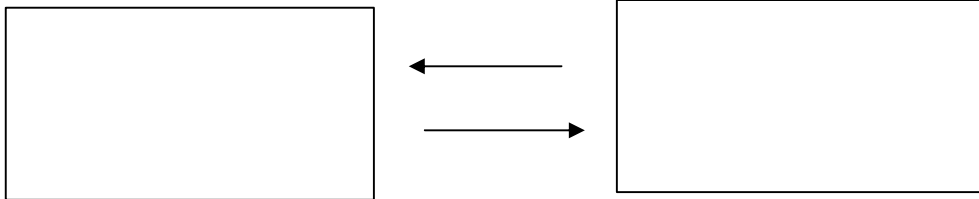
THE WITHERED ARM

It was an eighty-cow dairy, and the troop of milkers, regular and supernumerary, were all at work; for, though the time of year was as yet but early April, the feed lay entirely in water-meadows, and the cows were 'in full pail'. The hour was about six in the evening, and three-fourths of the large, red, rectangular animals having been finished off, there was opportunity for a little conversation.

1. What does this first paragraph suggest about the story? Think about the fact that the number of cows are mentioned before the people; the time of year is highlighted and the hour of the day. What is mentioned about the human activity, besides their work, is that they are about to gossip. What might this suggest about how Hardy feels about his environment?
2. Write down the description of Mr Lodge's bride that the milking woman gives and that of the woman the speaker looks at:

The bride

The woman the milkmaid looks at
'the other side of the barton'.



What contrasts can you see in their appearances?

3. Rhoda makes a number of comparisons between herself and Gertrude (the bride) through the story. Make a note of any further examples of this you find and consider why she does this.
4. The first time we, as readers, learn about Gertrude is through the gossip of the milkers. Note down any other examples of gossip you find in the story and explain its significance.
5. In what way does Hardy make Rhoda seem isolated, both in the barton and on her way home?
6. Throughout the story there are references to people looking at one another. On page 66 the speaker, 'turned her face so that she could glance past her cow's tail,' to look at Rhoda and later in the same chapter Rhoda tells her son, 'You can give her a look, and tell me what she's like,' (p.68) Make a note of all references you find to people looking either at others or through windows or doors. Why do you think Hardy draws attention to this behaviour throughout his story?

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7. Look at the descriptions below. The first is of Rhoda's cottage. The second is of Mr Lodge's gig as he returns home with his new wife.

They crept up the hill in the twilight and entered the cottage. It was built of mud-walls, the surface of which had been washed by many rains into channels and depressions that left none of the original flat face visible; while here and there in the thatch above a rafter showed like a bone protruding through the skin.

The next evening while the sun was yet bright a handsome new gig, with a lemon-coloured body and red wheels, was spinning westward along the level highway at the heels of a powerful mare. The driver was a yeoman in the prime of life, cleanly shaven like an actor, his face being toned to that bluish-vermilion hue which so often graces a thriving farmer's features when returning home after successful dealings in the town. Beside him sat a woman, many years his junior – almost, indeed, a girl. Her face too was fresh in colour, but it was of a totally different quality – soft and evanescent, like the light under a heap of rose-petals.

Compare the two descriptions and consider their significance. You might want to think about the time of day in which Hardy sets each event; the way the movement of the characters and the gig are described; the use of similes and their effect; the colours that are either mentioned or suggested.

8. Why do you think Rhoda's son uses so many colours to describe Gertrude and in what way does this fit with his simile about her face being, 'as comely as a live doll's.'? (p.71) Why is this comparison significant?
9. On page 73 Hardy writes, 'Rhoda Brook could raise a mental image of the unconscious Mrs Lodge that was as realistic as a photograph.' In what way do you think this adds to our impression of Gertrude?
10. Although Rhoda appears to wake from a dream in which she flings Gertrude to the floor what evidence is there that Rhoda believes it is more than that? Consider her son's comments about the night too.
11. From this point on in the story Rhoda is plagued by fears about her supernatural abilities. Make a note of any references you find to these in the story and of other people's beliefs in witchcraft and their reactions to it.
12. Gertrude confides in Rhoda that she thinks her husband might, 'dislike me – no, love me less. Men think so much of personal appearance,' because of her withered arm. What does this tell us about Lodge as well as about Gertrude?
13. When Gertrude and Rhoda go to visit Conjuror Trendle together Hardy writes, '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 witnessed the agony of the Wessex King Ina, presented to after-ages as Lear.' (p.83) This description, which includes an example of pathetic fallacy, seems to mirror the feelings of the characters; explain how it does this.

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14. Once Gertrude has been told the possible remedy by Conjuror Trendle she becomes increasingly desperate to access the means to the cure. On page 91 she is described as having an, 'unconscious prayer,' in which she prays, "'O Lord, hang some guilty or innocent person soon!'" How might this affect our impression of Gertrude or our feelings of sympathy? Think about the fact that her appeal is to God as well as her lack of care about whether the person has committed a crime.
15. There are two other instances where Gertrude shows her desperation and thoughtlessness about another human's life. Make a note of them when you find them, consider their importance and why Hardy might want to portray Gertrude in an increasingly negative way.
16. Look at the description of the corpse on page 100. What do you think is Hardy's intention in drawing attention to the working clothes of the young man and of the careless way his body has been put into the coffin?
17. At the end of the story, Gertrude dies and Lodge disappears from public view until his own death, at which point it is revealed he has left a small amount of money to Rhoda and the rest to a reformatory for boys. What do you think Hardy intends the moral of the couple's sad tale to be?
18. In the closing paragraph Hardy reveals that after vanishing for a while Rhoda, 'reappeared in her old parish, absolutely refusing, however, to have anything to do with the provision made for her. Her monotonous milking at the dairy was resumed, and followed for many long years, till her form became bent, and her once abundant dark hair white and worn away at the forehead.' (p.103) Bearing in mind that Hardy thought humans were not on the earth to be happy and he was in awe of nature and the power of the natural world, why do you think the story ends in this way? Think about what has happened in the story; what has been gained and what has changed from the beginning to the end.