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Trabajo Fin de Grado

Old Rural England vs. the Advent of Modernity
as Reflected in the Two Main Female
Characters of Thomas Hardy's "The Withered
Arm"

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Abstract

This dissertation will explore the importance of Wessex and the folk tradition in Thomas Hardy's *oeuvre* through the analysis of the tale "The Withered Arm," from his collection of short stories *Wessex Tales* (1888). The analysis of this tale will reveal the situation of an almost collapsed society, namely, that of the rural late Victorian England and its clash with the new emergent industrial society as represented in the characters of Rhoda Brook and Gertrude Lodge, respectively. In particular, I will establish comparisons between these two main female characters in the story to illustrate one of the main dichotomies around which Thomas Hardy's texts revolve: the clash between Wessex and the members of the folk vs. the strangers to that land. This dichotomy will be very important to understand the fate of each character and their individual evolution along the story. In conclusion, this story, deeply charged with symbolism, represents the importance of the land for Thomas Hardy, a post-Romantic *fin-de-siècle* writer, who wonderfully encapsulates the transition and clash between two different worlds, both in his own flesh and in his literature.

Resumen

Este trabajo estudia la importancia de Wessex y la tradición popular en la obra de Thomas Hardy a través del análisis del cuento "The Withered Arm", incluido en su colección de historias cortas *Wessex Tales* (1888). El análisis de este relato revela la situación de una sociedad al borde del colapso, a saber, la Inglaterra rural Victoriana tardía y su choque con la nueva sociedad industrial emergente, tal y como ambas son representadas por los personajes Rhoda Brook y Gertrude Lodge, respectivamente. En concreto, se establecen comparaciones entre estas dos protagonistas del relato para ilustrar una de las principales dicotomías en torno a la cual giran los textos de Thomas Hardy: el choque entre Wessex y los miembros del 'folk' y los foráneos con respecto a esa tierra y al mundo rural en general. Esta dicotomía es muy importante para entender el destino de cada personaje y su evolución personal a lo largo del relato. Para concluir, este cuento, lleno de simbolismo, representa la importancia de la tierra para Thomas Hardy, un escritor post-romántico de finales del siglo XIX, que representa maravillosamente la transición y el choque entre dos mundos diferentes, tanto en su propia vida personal como en sus textos.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction.....	4
2. The Wessex of Thomas Hardy.....	7
3. The Clash between the Wessex Folk and the Outsiders as Reflected in the Characters of Rhoda and Gertrude.....	13
4. Evolution and Similarities.....	19
5. Conclusion.....	25
6. Works cited.....	27

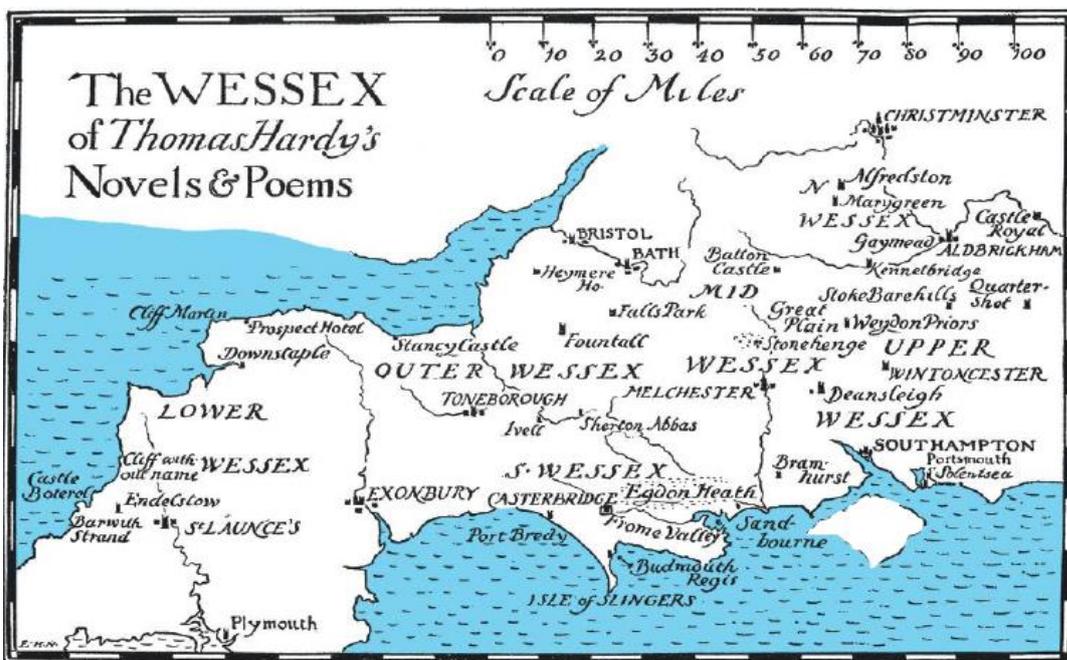


Illustration 1: Map of Thomas Hardy's fictional Wessex

1. Introduction

Thomas Hardy can be referred to as a Late Victorian writer, but also as a writer who wonderfully encapsulated the transition from the Victorian era to the advent of modernity, with all the drastic changes that this evolution inexorably entailed, both on a personal and on a social, political, cultural, and ideological scale. As Albert J. Guerard asserts: “Historically speaking, Hardy the novelist is a major transitional figure between the popular moralists and popular entertainers of Victorian fiction and the serious, visionary, often symbolizing novelists of today” (3). Hardy himself testifies to this feeling of in-betweenness and asserts that people are always due to evolve and change, and this is what he strives to show in his *oeuvre*. As Daleski argues in *Thomas Hardy and Paradoxes of Love* (1997):

If his approach to character would seem to be thoroughly traditional and based on the Victorian notion of consistency, it also incorporates elements that are opposed to this. [...] Toward the end of his career as a novelist, moreover, Hardy was taking a decidedly modernist view of character: “I am more than ever convinced,” he wrote, “that persons are successively various persons, according as each special strand in their characters is brought uppermost by circumstances”. (10)

These circumstances which Hardy mentions are those which make him feel in between two worlds: on the one hand, the traditional Victorian era which he knew from his birth and was fast disappearing; and on the other hand a modernist view of life which was drastically breaking with all past beliefs and traditions as followed by the community of

Dorset to which he belonged. This duality of thought is omnipresent in Thomas Hardy's texts, which bear witness to the anxiety and confusion that this transition brought about on people's minds. He was afraid to lose all the knowledge and memories of that rural past which the modern life and city were about to destroy. This desperate need to nostalgically cling to the past resulted in the creation of "Wessex," Hardy's literary universe par excellence, which was primarily related to the real Dorset in which Thomas Hardy was born, and which he systematically contrasted and compared to the rest of the world, both in positive and negative terms.

"The Withered Arm," like the rest of short stories from *Wessex Tales* (1888), is based on the traditional life of Dorset, as Kathryn R. King asserts in her notes on *Wessex Tales*:

The plots of these short stories are built of traditional materials native to Dorset: stories from the time when rumours of Napoleonic invasions terrorized the countryside; an actual military execution on the downs; legendary exploits of escaped convicts and local smugglers; superstitions about conjurors, witches, and the curative powers of a hanged man's flesh. (xi)

This critic also makes references to the harsh situation which Dorset was going through when Thomas Hardy wrote this short story, since this is the one and only way in which the story can be fully understood. To begin with, during the 1880s in England there was a big contrast between the emergent cities, the outcome of a great and unprecedented technological evolution, and the traditional countryside, threatened by the so-called "Great Depression," which affected the inhabitants of the land with enormous losses of food and money due to poor harvests from 1875 until 1884. The most affected part of rural England was Dorset, where Hardy lived for many years and saw the progressive

decline of rural life (King xi, xii). This situation reinforced Hardy's wish to write down and preserve the traditions of Dorset narrated to him by previous generations. He mainly wanted to keep them on the minds of people, since he knew that the end of the rural life and its traditions as he had known them so far were inevitably going to happen, while "play[ing] off the contemporary crisis as well" (King xiii).

It must also be noted that Hardy often played with chronology to bring to the fore his main recurrent themes and ideas. That is why Guerard asserts that "Hardy was both a serious man and a popular traditional story-teller; and that he was, moreover, simultaneously ancient and modern" (9). In particular, "The Withered Arm" represents Thomas Hardy's aim to reckon and preserve the customs and rituals of ancient Dorset within an atmosphere of mystery, while making no secret of the contradictory feelings that often take hold of the main characters in his works. The situation depicted in the story might thus be compared to the confused mind of the author, who feels trapped in between two eras at odds with each other, which resulted in a transitional period which triggered off a myriad of contradictory and unsolved questions.

2. The Wessex of Thomas Hardy

The Wessex in which Thomas Hardy situates his literary works is very difficult to define. It could be seen as the outcome of a mixture of historical references, personal experiences of the author himself, and his aim to create a world apart in order to represent the clash between two different social atmospheres: the land versus the city. The first issue to clarify is that “Wessex” is by no means a term coined by Hardy. Hardy was not the first writer to use Wessex as a literary reference. As Denys Kay-Robinson asserts in “Hardy’s Wessex” in *The Genius of Thomas Hardy* (Drabble 110), the concept of Wessex as a literary name was firstly used by William Barnes, who named Wessex as a historical reference in 1844, and then in a more literary sense in the preface to *Poems of Rural Life in Common English* (1868). However, William Barnes was not the creator of the name “Wessex” either, since this place name has its roots in the Anglo-Saxon period: Wessex was an important Kingdom which existed in England between the VI and IX centuries. More concretely, “according to the Saxon Chronicle, the kingdom was founded by the Prince Cerdic and Cynric his son, who landed in the year 494, and who, after some successful battles against the Welsh, became kings in 519” (Hermann xviii). Not only does Hardy take the name from this kingdom in order to create his own literary world, but he also uses the land in which Wessex existed, albeit with some modifications, as a projection of Dorset and the emplacement in which his characters “come to life”. As Hermann asserts in the book *Thomas Hardy's Wessex*:

There has been an impression current amongst some people that Thomas Hardy’s Wessex is limited to the county of Dorset, but we have it on his own

assurance that the Wessex of the novels and poems is practically identical with the Wessex of history, and includes the counties of Berkshire, Wilts, Somerset, Hampshire, Dorset, and Devon—either wholly or in part. (xvii)

Some references to the Wessex kingdom are sometimes introduced in Thomas Hardy's works, which endorses the idea that his stories usually have a historical background mixed with his own experiences and the product of his creative imagination. "The Withered Arm" is a good example: in this tale, Hardy creates a mysterious and tragic atmosphere, in which history and literature conflate as the two main characters walk through the same heath that King Ina, one of the real Kings of Wessex, might have crossed in the past:

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. (Hardy 70)

This quotation suggests a greater degree of complexity, since King Ina is compared to Shakespeare's literary figure King Lear, a tragic character that could be directly attached to the two main tragic characters in the story, Gertrude and Rhoda. Accordingly, readers find here the perfect combination of history, literature and the imaginative land which Hardy created in this short story in order to preserve a past that was becoming extinct and that he wanted to reclaim for its uniqueness. As Gilmartin and Mengham assert in *Thomas Hardy's Shorter Fiction: A Critical Study*, "The stories are inscribed by the separateness and independence of that ancient Wessex, the 'extinct Kingdom'" (49).

On the other hand, it is important to highlight the importance of Dorset and Thomas Hardy's rural past as depicted in this short story, which clearly evokes places which belonged to the real Dorset in which Hardy spent his childhood. As Philip V. Allingham asserts, "Hardy set his 'Novels of Character and Environment,' as he did most of his other novels, poems and short stories, around the market town of Dorchester ('Casterbridge'), near his boyhood home at Bockhampton, on the edge of 'Egdon' Heath" (Allingham). Apart from all of these references to real places from Dorset, Hardy also makes allusion to real events which happened there. Another example of this direct connection between reality and literary writing is the hanging of Rhoda's son. This tragic event described in the story testifies to a real experience told to Thomas Hardy by his father. This event haunted Hardy throughout his life, until he introduced it in "The Withered Arm" as an example of the cruelty of Dorset society at that time:

My father saw four men hung for being with some others who had set fire to a rick. Among them was a stripling of a boy of eighteen. Skinny. Half-starved... He had not fired the rick. But with a youth's excitement he had rushed to the scene to see the blaze.... Nothing my father ever said to me drove the tragedy of Life so deeply into my mind. (Flower 92)

This illustrates the great number of unfair murders taking place in those times. In order to denounce this situation and make it even more dramatic, Hardy decided to change the year of the event in the story: "Hardy realized Hardy senior's description related to 1830 but chose to time 'The Withered Arm' so as to avoid the complications of the 1830s unrest. A multiple hanging would have resulted in a rather crowded prison morgue and diluted the climactic focus on Rhoda's son" (Pinder).

In this short story, we see the importance of the past and the oral tradition for Hardy, together with his wish to depict them as something important and mystical. As he told his friend Sir Henry Newbolt: “To make a live historical study, breath and blood should be moving, a proportion of the material should be overheard as it were coming down by oral tradition, or picked out of private letters of the time. Better still if it could be dug for by cross-examination of ancestral ghosts” (Newbolt 185). Consequently, Hardy’s works could be read as some kind of recreation of history, but endowed with a mysterious tone coming from the folk tradition and a clear agenda that led the author to modify historical events according to his aims and preferences. According to Romey T. Keys “The Withered Arm” does explore the psychological ground of the supernatural and its roots in the rural folklore of Dorset” (107). The importance of rural folklore as closely linked to the land is pitted against the figure of the outsiders, that is, the characters that are not members of the folk, that come from outside Wessex. This is the main dichotomy around which Hardy’s short stories, and in particular the characters from “The Withered Arm,” revolve:

The earth exists here as a Final Cause, and its omnipresence affords constantly to Hardy the textures that excited his eye and care, but affords them wholly charged with dramatic, causational necessity; and the symbolic values of setting are constituted, in large part, by responses required of the characters themselves in their relationship with the earth. (Van Guent 203)

This quotation from Dorothy Van Guent’s book *The English Novel: Form and Function* clearly points to the symbolism of the land for Hardy. The folk tradition is a very important issue in Hardy’s literature, because he felt deeply attached to it and this in spite of the fact that this rural past was by no means idyllic, for pain and social

injustices abounded, and only those who were resilient enough thanks to their connection to the earth could have a chance to survive. Hardy found the inspiration for this dichotomy (members of the folk vs. outsiders) in the different kinds of people he observed from their childhood. As is noted in the bibliography of Thomas Hardy from the book *The Life of Thomas Hardy*, he reached this conclusion in 1887:

In August he was back again at Max Gate, and there remarks on the difference between children who grow up in solitary country places and those who grow up in towns, the former being imaginative, dreamy, and credulous of vague mysteries; giving as the reason that ‘The Unknown comes within so short a radius from themselves by comparison with the city-bred.’ (Irwin 208)

However, this does not mean that Hardy saw Dorset as a world of fantasy, in opposition to the harsh reality of the emergent modern cities; the implications of this dichotomy are rather more complex. The two main female characters from “The Withered Arm” wonderfully illustrate this. Rhoda is a member of the folk and, accordingly, is attached to the earth and mentally and physically stronger than Gertrude, who comes from outside Wessex. Both of them are intelligent women whose minds change as the mysterious events from the story unravel. At first, Rhoda is the more credulous and superstitious one, while Gertrude is rather more rational and skeptical. As the story develops, this situation changes to the point that many parallels can be drawn between both characters. However, the main difference between both is Rhoda’s capacity to survive, resulting from her deep attachment to the land. Gertrude’s lack of connection with Wessex will turn her into a tragically doomed character. This situation illustrates Hardy’s “desire to juxtapose plausible human beings and strange uncommon events, the real and the fantastic” (Guerard 4).

The evolution undergone by Rhoda and Gertrude discloses some similarities between them, and it is thanks to these analogies that Hardy endows his tale with a magic aura. As Van Guent explains: “Magical interpretation and prediction of events consist in seeing one event or thing as a ‘mimicry’ of another, a present happening, for instance, as a mimicry of some future happening; that is, magic makes a system out of analogies, the correlative forms of things” (207). According to this interpretation, magical events in the story may be attributed to a succession of strange happenings which link the present with the future and one character with another, thus evoking some kind of predicted end. Both Rhoda and Gertrude are depicted as tragic figures leading an increasingly difficult life, but these similarities are, at the beginning of the story, almost imperceptible, given the different worlds and social classes they belong to. However, this dividing line blurs at some point in the story, when both women become close to each other and experience a certain feeling of sisterhood; after all, both of them happen to be women and live in a patriarchal society which only allowed women to give in, or else pay the price and die.

3. The Clash between the Wessex Folk and the Outsiders as Reflected in the Characters of Rhoda and Gertrude

Comparisons between Gertrude and Rhoda start from the very beginning of the story, since they stand for the two different worlds which Hardy wanted to confront: Gertrude represents the advent of the modern era, which tried to conquer and do away with the folk culture to which Rhoda belongs and which she aims to preserve. On the opening page of the story, Gertrude is described by the folk milkers from Holmstoke as someone new and attractive who is about to enter Wessex, while Rhoda is depicted as a “fading woman,” which means that she is almost invisible for this society, and also that the folk tradition that she represents is about to disappear.

‘Though they say she’s a rosy-cheeked, tisty-tosty little body enough,’ she added; and as the milkmaid spoke she turned her face so that she could glance past her cow’s tail to the other side of the barton, where a thin, fading woman of thirty milked somewhat apart from the rest. (57)

The titles of the chapters in the story also contribute to comparing both women. As Johnson argues, “the story’s second chapter, entitled ‘The Young Wife,’ makes explicit the juxtaposition between ‘The Lorn Milkmaid’ and the newcomer, which had been implicit in the milkers’ gossip” (132). Another way to bring to the fore these two women’s personal differences is to associate them with dominant Victorian values. Susan E. Chase and Mary Frances Rogers assert that, at that time, becoming a mother meant the loss of youthfulness, and it therefore implied that these Victorian women were no longer attractive (32). This explanation might well apply to Rhoda, since it helps to understand her distant position as regards the rest of the society she lived in and her poor situation. However, she is not only a mother, but also a woman repudiated by

the father of her child, turning her into an even lower character in the Victorian strata: a “fallen woman” associated with obscurity and darkness. In contrast, Gertrude is linked to the advent of modern life, to the new, to light; she’s pure and innocent and, consequently, attractive, both for society and for her husband:

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.

(59)

The description of the couple made up by Mr. Lodge and Gertrude makes it clear that they are somehow superior and belong to an upper class. First of all, the sun symbolizes power and, as was suggested before, light is connected to the character of Gertrude. The mare that carries the gig is described as “powerful,” and Mr. Lodge as a sort of “actor” who seems to show his new wife as if she were a trophy instead of a person. This clearly shows, however, that Gertrude and her “evanescent face” are under Mr Lodge’s control. In the Victorian era, women occupied a lower position with regard to men, regardless of their social class. Men were considered to be the superior gender, which meant that they were often allowed to betray, cheat and even leave women whenever they lost interest in them.

In order to understand Rhoda Brook's close link with the land it is crucial to notice the way in which she is described when entering her cottage at night –as if two animals (Rhoda and her son) entered a lair (their house)– and also the way in which the cottage itself is depicted:

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. (58)

This description of the cottage in which Rhoda lives sets her aside from the rest of the community, while bringing her closer to the land. Rhoda is thus depicted as a member of the folk, to rely on Dorothy Van Guent's well-known definition: "the folk are the earth's pseudopodia, another fauna; and because they are so deeply rooted in the elemental life of the earth, like a sensitive animal extension of the earth itself, they share the authority of the natural" (205). This remarkable depiction of Rhoda and her cottage clashes with the majestic short description of the house in which Gertrude lives: "The wheels spun round, and particles flew from their periphery as before, till a white house of ample dimensions revealed itself, with farm-buildings and ricks at the back" (60). This quotation places the house of Mr. Lodge right in the centre of the village. As the couple approaches Holmstoke, the first thing they see is this big white house which, although majestic, is never described in detail. Behind the house are the farm-buildings and the ricks which, although so typical of the land and so quintessential for the life of the village community, are nonetheless relegated to the background as if there were of secondary importance. This image of the house as the central place in the village gives the impression of power and richness over the heath, and has nothing to do with

Rhoda's remote small cottage, which clearly belongs in the earth of Wessex and is close to the mysterious land of Egdon Heath, constantly connected to her: "Their course lay apart from that of the others, to a lonely spot high above the water-meads, and not far from the border of Egdon Heath, whose dark countenance was visible in the distance as they drew nigh to their home" (58).

Rhoda, however, is depicted as a strong and intelligent woman who is able to cope with her harsh life and condition. It is her obsessive fixation on the new wife of Mr. Lodge, who happens to be the father of her son, and her obsession to compare Gertrude with herself, that ultimately makes her feel more fragile, while turning her misery into something worse and deeper. Rhoda, driven by her mad obsession, sends her son to spy on this town girl. She wants him to "see if she is dark or fair, and if you can, notice if her hands be white; if not, see if they look as though she had ever done housework, or are milker's hands like mine" (58). Her tragic past, together with the information given to her by her child and the rest of the villagers, fill up Rhoda's mind with prejudices against Gertrude, to the point that, one night, Rhoda has a nightmare which will change these two women's lives forever. In this bad dream, the ghost of the new wife attacks and haunts Rhoda until she grabs the arm of the ghost and pulls her down.

Rhoda's bad concept of Gertrude starts to change when she actually meets her. It is then that she realizes that Gertrude is a good girl, full of light, in clear contrast to her dark dream: "At these proofs of a kindly feeling towards her and hers Rhoda's heart reproached her bitterly. This innocent young thing should have her blessing and not her curse. When she left them a light seemed gone from the dwelling" (65). Rhoda's new attitude towards Gertrude becomes a turning point in the evolution of this character, who is now able to feel sorry for this fragile creature. This also suggests a contrast between Gertrude, a Victorian lady, and Rhoda, who is conscious of her bad situation,

but also of her strength and resilience: “Rhoda said she was well enough; and, indeed, though the paler of the two, there was more of the strength that endures in her well-defined features and large frame than in the soft-cheeked young woman before her” (65). What this short story is somehow bringing to the fore is the Victorian double standard of morality, according to which Gertrude represents innocence and purity, but also fragility, whereas Rhoda stands for courage and determination, but also darkness and transgression. This double standard as regards women is clearly reflected in Swinburne’s poem “Dolores,” in which the figure of the pure woman is represented by the ‘white lily,’ whereas the femme fatale is encapsulated by the ‘red rose’:

Could you hurt me, sweet lips, though I hurt you?
Men touch them, and change in a trice
The lilies and languors of virtue
For the raptures and roses of vice;
Those lie where thy foot on the floor is,
These crown and caress thee and chain,
O splendid and sterile Dolores,
Our Lady of Pain.

(lines 65-72; 121)

In other words, Rhoda has the strength that characterizes the members of the Wessex folk, whereas Gertrude is totally helpless when confronting this world, so different from the urban one she comes from.

Another important contrast between the members of the folk and the outsiders as shown in the characters of Rhoda and Gertrude is that between the villagers’ belief in witchcraft and mystery and the modern rather more skeptical frame of mind. Rhoda is regarded as a witch by the rest of the villagers, mainly due to her condition of “fallen woman” and her defiant attitude: she accepts her lot and is determined to raise her child on her own. However, when her bad dream suddenly seems to come true she starts to ponder about her potential supernatural powers, and her new obsession will be to find

out if she is really a witch. As Suzanne R. Johnson asserts: “The ‘question without an answer’ at the center of Rhoda’s story is less about the external marking of Gertrude’s arm than it is about her own spiritual and imaginative powers” (134). The change in Rhoda’s mind is depicted as follows:

‘O, can it be,’ she said to herself, when her visitor had departed, ‘that I exercise a malignant power over people against my own will?’ She knew that she had been slyly called a witch since her fall; but never having understood why that particular stigma had been attached to her, it had passed disregarded. Could this be the explanation, and had such things as this ever happened before? (66)

Rhoda’s sudden credulous attitude toward the mysterious events in the story is characteristic of the members of the folk, whose closeness to nature is in turn related to magic powers and the realm of the imagination. To quote Dorothy Van Guent’s words:

Their philosophy and their skills in living, even their gestures of tragic violence, are instinctive adaptations to “the given”; and because they are indestructible, their attitudes toward events authoritatively urge a similar fatalism upon the reader, impelling him to an imaginative acceptance of the doom-wrought series of accidents in the foreground of the action. (205)

In contrast to Rhoda’s obsession with her supernatural powers, Gertrude firstly refuses to believe in superstitions and conjurors, and blames the other members of the folk for being so superstitious and sending her to a magician: “‘O, how could my people be so superstitious as to recommend a man of that sort! I thought they meant some medical man. I shall think no more of him’” (69). However, as her arm inexorably keeps on withering, Gertrude becomes less and less skeptical.

4. Evolution and Similarities

The change in the character of Gertrude is the outcome of her increasing pain as her arm keeps on withering. The more importance she gives to the fact that she is losing her beauty, the quicker her character changes. It is due to this that she now prefers to show herself in the afternoon sun, rather than in the morning light, which is much brighter and highlighted her beautiful figure at the beginning of the story. She is no more the beautiful lady; she is now described as a desperate shadow looking for some help: “Two days after, a shadow intruded into the window-pattern thrown on Rhoda Brook’s floor by the afternoon sun. The woman opened the door at once, almost breathlessly” (69). The fact that a lady such as Gertrude might break into a house was almost unimaginable at the beginning of the story, but now she seems to have the need to hide herself, just as Rhoda does in her hut. This fact establishes a link between both women, since it seems that both of them are just as alienated; they feel detached from the rest of society, although for different reasons. Moreover, both women agree to go to Egdon Heath (the magic land linked to Rhoda that has now become a place of interest for Gertrude as well) in order to find Conjuror Trendle, who could offer them some kind of cure for Gertrude’s withered arm, an idea much frowned upon by society. The trip to Egdon Heath is depicted as dangerous and forbidden: “It was agreed that, to escape suspicion of their mystic intent, they should meet at the edge of the heath at the corner of a plantation which was visible from the spot where they now stood” (70).

While the character of Gertrude becomes darker as a result of her ever-worsening condition, and she is described as “a slight figure, cloaked and veiled” (70), Rhoda aims to find out whether she actually has these supernatural powers, which will allow her, not only to know more about herself, but also to feel more deeply attached to the earth. Consequently, Rhoda now considers the possibility of becoming

“illuminated,” even if this implies some kind of dark knowledge and feelings: “Moreover, there was a horrid fascination at times in becoming instrumental in throwing such possible light on her own character as would reveal her to be something greater in the occult world than she had ever herself suspected” (70). As the story unravels and this ‘magic’ dimension takes over, Rhoda is endowed with more and more power, whereas Gertrude feels more and more exhausted, vulnerable and weak. The character of Rhoda recedes into the background while Gertrude becomes more and more superstitious, and her once enlightened character is now only concerned with folk casting spells that might heal her arm and help her to regain the love of her husband:

The once blithe-hearted and enlightened Gertrude was changing into an irritable, superstitious woman, whose whole time was given to experimenting upon her ailment with every quack remedy she came across. She was 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. Hence it arose that her closet was lined with bottles, packets, and ointment-pots of every description - nay, bunches of mystic herbs, charms, and books of necromancy, which in her schoolgirl time she would have ridiculed as folly. (73)

What is clear is that marriage does not guarantee love: Gertrude’s suffering increases as she becomes aware that her husband has lost interest in her, and this in spite of the fact that Rhoda, her main rival and obstacle so far, finally disappears from her life. It could therefore be asserted that, in this short story, Hardy questions “the happy-ever-after formula for marriage, he shows it is marriage itself that is the issue that becomes the locus of catastrophe” (Daleski 14). Moreover, the previous quotation shows yet another important analogy between both women: Rhoda’s obsessive belief in

supernatural powers eventually contaminates Gertrude, who clings to witchcraft in a desperate attempt to cure her withered arm. The only difference is that Gertrude tries to convince herself that her experiments have nothing to do with superstition; she tries to endow witchcraft with a scientific halo, even in the most drastic case, when she is told to touch a hanged man's flesh to experience the healing turn of blood:

Whenever her imagination pictured the act she shrank in terror from the possibility of it: then the words of the conjuror, 'It will turn your blood,' were seen to be capable of a scientific no less than ghastly interpretation; the mastering desire returned; and urged her on again. (75, 76)

Gertrude feels the need to rationally account for the supernatural. Unlike the Wessex folk, so used to living and coping with these extraneous situations, Gertrude cannot accommodate this supernatural dimension, simply because this does not come naturally to her. As Dorothy Van Guent argues when trying to explain Hardy's Wessex:

The magic is a knowledgeable model of dealing with the unknowledgeable, and it is adaptive to the dooms of existence where moral reason is not adaptive, for moral reason seeks congruence between human intention and effect and is therefore always inapropos (in Hardy's universe, tragically inapropos), whereas magic seeks only likenesses, correspondences, analogies, and these are everywhere. (207)

This obsession grows on Gertrude's mind as "April, May, June, passed; and it is no overstatement to say that by the end of the last-named month Gertrude well-nigh longed for the death of a fellow-creature" (76). Finally, her insistence bears fruit, and her strange prayer is answered. The outcome of Gertrude's obsession is just as bad as

that of Rhoda's dream, if not worse. As Johnson concludes, "the coincidence upon which the story's second crisis hinges –i.e., that the 'innocent person' hanged is Rhoda Brooks' son– is one of those 'satires of circumstance' which we expect to find in Hardy's works" (175). Gertrude's wish brings about the death of Rhoda's son, an innocent person whom Gertrude does not mean to harm, and whose tragic destiny will bring the story, and also her own life, to an end. The parallel that can be drawn when comparing the power of both women's minds, and the connection between Rhoda and the hanged boy, is something that Gertrude had somehow foreseen when she experienced "a curious creeping feeling that the condemned wretch's destiny was becoming interwoven with her own" (79).

According to Romey T. Keys, the main analogy in the story is the fact that the two women hurt each other unintentionally: Rhoda is obsessed with the new wife of Farmer Lodge until she finally dreams about her and hurts her; when Gertrude is obsessed with finding a cure for her withered arm, she prays to have someone hanged soon and her wish comes true, but it is only then that she realizes that the innocent victim is Rhoda and Mr. Lodge's son (110). The end of Gertrude is the consequence of having touched the boy's dead body. One death claims another. Not in vain is Gertrude described at that climactic moment as if she were someone almost dead: "By this time the young woman's state was such that a grey mist seemed to float before her eyes, on account of which, and the veil she wore, she could scarcely discern anything: it was as though she had nearly died, but was held up by a sort of galvanism" (83). Rhoda, in spite of her desperate situation, is able to remain alive, but cannot help taking Gertrude by the arm till she throws her deadly body to the floor:

'Hussy - to come between us and our child now!' cried Rhoda. 'This is the meaning of what Satan showed me in the vision! You are like her at last!' And

clutching the bare arm of the younger woman, she pulled her unresistingly back against the wall. Immediately Brook had loosened her hold the fragile young Gertrude slid down against the feet of her husband. When he lifted her up she was unconscious. (84)

Gertrude's tragic end only corroborates the belated Romantic influence on Hardy's writings: the outsiders to Wessex (or 'individuals' according to Van Ghent's terminology) cannot possibly survive in this harsh place, because they lack any kind of attachment to the land, the main source of strength and resilience for the members of the Wessex folk. The final destiny of the characters coming from the new emergent industrial world, when these are confronted with the old vanishing, but utterly resilient, rural world of Wessex can only be death:

Her delicate vitality, sapped perhaps by the paralyzed arm, collapsed under the double shock that followed the severe strain, physical and mental, to which she had subjected herself during the previous twenty-four hours. Her blood had been 'turned' indeed --too far. Her death took place in the town three days after. (84)

On the contrary, Rhoda is able to survive. However, she is alone now and getting old, which somehow means that, although the folk tradition is still alive, it will soon disappear: there is no future for it, since the young generations (as embodied by Rhoda's son) are no longer able to survive in old Wessex:

For some time she could not be found; but eventually she 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 - perhaps by long pressure against the cows. Here, sometimes, those who knew her experiences would stand and observe her, and wonder what sombre thoughts were beating inside that impassive, wrinkled brow, to the rhythm of the alternating milk-streams. (85)

Yet, the short story's ending also invites readers to feel that everything has come back to normal, that the story has come full circle. As Romey T. Keys asserts, "'The Withered Arm' begins and ends with an image of Rhoda Brook at her milking on the water meads of Holmstoke. This iconic image of quotidian, rustic life frames the remarkable occurrences of the story" (119). To put it differently, the tragic implications of the story are smoothed, and partly covered up, by the sharp force of the resilient image of Rhoda in the pastoral setting of Wessex, where everything began. Old rural England is about to disappear, but Hardy's post-Romantic story insists in wrapping it up with a nostalgic halo of immortality.

5. Conclusion

Thomas Hardy's Wessex is well depicted in "The Withered Arm" as a means to bring to the fore the importance of the folk tradition for the writer, both as a source of inspiration and as a historical reference point of his native Dorset and its link to literature. This short story illustrates the clash between the disintegrating Wessex and the deeply rooted folk tradition and manners as represented by Rhoda Brook, and the upcoming modern era as embodied by Gertrude. The evolution of both characters also brings to light the social and ideological changes undergone by a society which was trying to adapt to the new ways, but which still had strong roots in the folk tradition, very difficult to erase even if it had started to be frowned upon. This is why Gertrude's evolution ranges from a modern woman to a Victorian 'Angel in the House' to a superstitious figure, when she finally fails in her attempt to retain her husband's interest. However, since, unlike Rhoda, she lacks the strength and resilience that only the close contact with the land can give, she is finally doomed to fail. Rhoda's evolution could be said to be similar but in reverse: she is first described as a fallen woman, to then become a good friend of Gertrude's and then a resilient member of the folk able to put up with adversity, survive and keep closely attached to the earth, even if this rural world is about to disappear. What Hardy wants to show in this short story is his post-Romantic belief that a mechanized world is not the answer to humanity's anxiety and problems. As Beth S. Lois asserts, Hardy uses his characters to represent the upcoming transformation of a whole society:

He preserves many of his old ways, while embracing the new. Hardy is not against change. As Arnold Kettle points out, it is the actual process of historical change in its complex ramification upon the countryside and its people that

[Hardy] is most concerned to capture. Yet, Hardy's atypical families in the novels seem to point to a fundamental loss for both the rural working class and English society as a whole. (27)

At the end of the story we see the instability of a society which is about to disappear since it has no future: Rhoda's son dies and Gertrude collapses. Yet, the power that the close contact with the land gives to the people who live in old-time rural communities allows Rhoda to cling to life, thus reminding us of the Romantic belief that human beings should never lose contact with the natural world around them.

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