

# Undergraduate Dissertation

Trabajo Fin de Grado

Thomas Hardy's Sympathy towards the "Fallen Woman": A Literary Approach to "The Withered Arm"

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2017

**ABSTRACT:** The main purpose of the present essay is to analyse “The Withered Arm”, a short story written by Thomas Hardy in 1888. More specifically, I intend to explore a comparison in depth between the two sides of the Victorian dichotomy based on female archetypes. These two different parts can be reflected in the characters of Rhoda, who fits the stereotype of the “fallen woman”, and Gertrude, a woman embodying middle-class Victorian women as beautiful, innocent and devoted to their husbands and family. By drawing a comparison between these opposite binary terms, the analysis will reveal that Hardy’s sympathy towards the figure of the “fallen woman” becomes more convincing as he provides a unique portrayal of Rhoda, the outcast figure who manages to survive at the very end. In his attempt to do so, Hardy uses hybrid genres, such as the fantastic and some Gothic hints, which increase the suspense and tension within the plot. Not coincidentally, Hardy’s mastery of such hybrid elements provides this short story with an extraordinary taint, which is both unique in Hardy’s writings and a thoughtful technique in order to avoid criticism from Victorian society. Hardy’s defence and sympathy towards Rhoda attests to his honest commitment to fighting for women’s rights, regardless of their social class and marital status. My essay, then, concludes that such a task is carried out more convincingly by Hardy in the writing of “The Withered Arm”.

**RESUMEN:** El principal objetivo de este trabajo es analizar “The Withered Arm”, un relato breve escrito por Thomas Hardy en 1888. Más concretamente, me propongo llevar a cabo una comparación más minuciosa entre las dos partes de la dicotomía Victoriana que se basa en arquetipos femeninos. Así, se analizarán los personajes de Rhoda, quien responde al estereotipo de la “fallen woman” – i.e. mujer descarriada, a menudo usada y abusada por los hombres debido a su condición social -, y Gertrude, un mujer totalmente opuesta y que se ajusta claramente a los cánones Victorianos de las

mujeres de clase media como seres bellos, inocentes y dedicadas plenamente a sus maridos y su familia. Al realizar la comparación entre estas mujeres tan opuestas, mi análisis pretende demostrar la simpatía de Hardy hacia la figura de la “fallen woman”, puesto que el relato se muestra muy convincente en este sentido ya que ofrece una representación única de Rhoda como mujer repudiada quien, no obstante, consigue sobrevivir al final. Para lograr tal fin, Hardy hace uso de géneros híbridos como elementos fantásticos y góticos, que aumentan el suspense y la tensión del argumento. La maestría de Hardy para introducir estos elementos no es casual, pues se convierte en una técnica muy pensada con el fin de evitar críticas de la sociedad Victoriana. Su defensa y simpatía hacia Rhoda demuestra su compromiso honesto en la lucha de los derechos de la mujer, sin importar su clase social o el estado civil. Mi trabajo, por lo tanto, concluye que esta ardua tarea es llevada a cabo, de forma más convincente, en “The Withered Arm”.

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## I. Introduction

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) was a prolific Victorian writer of prose and poetry who was concerned about the double standard of morality in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and how women's rights and sexuality were a controversial issue at the time. He wrote about this topic and the woman question and his works echo the "New Woman Fiction": "a series of novels, mainly by women, which deliberately set out to attack marriage, to break bonds of censorship which tacitly forbade the treatment of sexuality in fiction, and above all to argue, from various points of view, the feminist case" (Cunningham, 178). Being the witness of important changes and improvements in the social and economic conditions of middle-class women, Hardy, nevertheless, focused his literary interest on the figure of the "fallen or ruined woman". By this concept he referred not only to poor industrious working-class women and prostitutes, but also to all those women who, somehow, were seduced, used and abused by men. Hardy portrayed the decay and the consequences of this use and abuse. However, Victorian realism did not allow him to express his sympathy to this kind of woman. Hardy's perspective was evidently reflected in his writings, and so Johnson corroborates that "he had always been acutely aware of how a woman's subordinate status leaves her vulnerable on both the sexual and social levels" (131). Hardy shed light on lost female innocence in poems such as "A Sunday Tragedy" (1865), "The Ballad of Love's Skeleton" (1890) and "The Ruined Maid" (1901); in short stories (or novellas) such as "The Romantic Adventures of a Milkmaid" (1883), "The Withered Arm" (1888), and most explicitly in his well-known novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented* (1891).

The main object of my analysis is "The Withered Arm", a short story included in *Wessex Tales* (1888), a collection of tales dealing with topics such as marriage,

repression of true emotions, and social constraints limiting the life of the female individual. The main reason why I have chosen this story is because, unlike others, it contains many elements such as the use of fantasy and the fact that the fallen woman is not finally killed, something very unusual in Hardy's fiction. Besides, not many male authors of this period were involved in the so-called woman question, and fewer of them had a positive attitude towards it. As Cunningham suggests: "all these writers present a picture of attempted emancipation which either through personal weakness or the force of social law is doomed to failure" (182).

However, although Hardy was even more specific, showing his empathy towards the figure of the ruined woman, he believed that "justice has never been done to such women in fiction" (Johnson 182). This empathy is exemplified by the lack of a harsh judgement on the narrator's view on Rhoda, the ruined woman in "The Withered Arm". Despite having an affair with Lodge, the male character, a transgression that Victorian morality would not have tolerated within the literary pattern of a realist domestic short story, Rhoda, most remarkably, is left alive at the very end, and this lack of punishment is something unusual for this kind of women. So, together with these unusual elements, the use of fantasy in this short story is of utmost importance in order to avoid harsh criticism and, in turn, portray the stereotype of the fallen or ruined maid differently. As I hope to demonstrate throughout this essay, approaching the figure of the fallen woman through a comparison between Gertrude and Rhoda will attest to the overt sympathy of the author towards Rhoda. Each of them embodies a different role of the Victorian dichotomy of femininity; namely, that of the angel of the house and the fallen woman. Moreover, fantastic elements allow Hardy to offer a different and more positive portrayal of this type of womanhood and femininity. This is clearly explained

by Johnson “Hardy uses the fantastic as a means of avoiding the domestic, and essentially bourgeois ideology of social realism” (131).

Another unusual element, which differs from the standards of the Victorian novel is that there is no final marriage which restores the domestic order. As Johnson summarizes, “no marriage is tacked on to re-establish domestic and social order. In fact, both the legitimate marriage of Lodge and Gertrude and the illegitimate union of Lodge and Rhoda have been shattered” (136). Drawing on Cunningham, it can be said that, “for her, a monogamous relationship was still the ideal, but her intelligence and independence were used to dispel the hypocrisy which surrounded the Victorian concept of marriage” (180). This idea is present in the short story because both women, Rhoda and Gertrude, despite their wrongness, continue believing in the institution of marriage. Additionally, it is remarkable to say that the position of men within the plot is completely secondary and in the background; there is neither a hero nor a villain, just an ordinary man who does not acknowledge his errors and problems until his last years. This text is also unique due to its style which is a mixture between horror stories and Victorian realist novels with some Romantic elements, so thanks to the use of fantasy, Hardy was able to show a portrayal of a ‘fallen’ woman without punishing her sins, as well as launching a critique on the male figure as perpetrator.

## II. “The Withered Arm”: Meaning and Form

After the introduction of the text and its context, this part of the essay will carry out the analysis of the formal features of “The Withered Arm” as well as thoroughly explore the comparison between the female characters. This story is about the conflict between Rhoda and Gertrude. Both women are connected to the same man, Farmer Lodge; Rhoda is depicted as a ruined woman who bears the consequences from their affair in

the past, having to rear their son alone. On the other hand, Gertrude is Lodge's new wife and the antithesis of Rhoda, both in terms of social class and moral values. The plot has a sudden twist with the appearance of the incubus and the subsequent search for a solution of Gertrude's withered arm. Moreover, this is a love triangle in which each character has his/her inner evolution, so they are round characters. The setting is located in the rural England of 1825 within a fictional county called Wessex. This place has an important role in the development of the plot because it establishes the contrast between rural and urban places, meadows and heath, which stands for the representation of the community and fantasy respectively. Scott describes Hardy as "the paradox of a man who often spoke out against credulity, yet remained eternally fascinated by the strange and the marvellous" (367), so the point of view is neutral, even sceptical about the supernatural events. In addition to this, there is a clear bias from the narrator towards Rhoda as can be seen throughout the narrative in its benevolent attitude with her.

Regarding the main themes, the story illustrates how two clearly opposite women must live on with a heavy burden. In the case of Rhoda, her condition as fallen woman or outcast and her son, in contrast to Gertrude who has a withered arm which is ruining her beauty and marriage. The common feature between them is that both women are strong and independent, in different degrees, from any dominant male figure. While Rhoda lives alone, working as a milkmaid and raising her son alone, Gertrude is able to make decisions independently from Lodge, especially when it comes to finding a solution for her withered arm and crosses the threshold, both physically and morally, as she visits Conjuror Trendle at Egdon Heath, a forbidden territory for a middle-class woman. Another difference between both women lies in their use of language: while Gertrude speaks in an accurate and normative English, Hardy introduced the way of speaking of rural England in those days through dialogues of the folk as "he ha'n't



spoke to Rhoda Brook for years” (Hardy 58). This makes clear the social differences between Rhoda and Gertrude and widens the gap between them. Another relevant element for the development of the plot is the structure resulting from the chapters and its titles. The pattern of the chapters can be divided into four sections; the division is clearly stated through different temporal gaps. The first section is formed by the first two chapters entitled “A Lorn Milkmaid” and “The Young Wife”. These chapters introduce the two main characters and the establishment of their continuous comparison; they also serve as an introduction of the setting and plot. The second and the third sections have a parallel pattern: two chapters called as an action and a third one referring to a mystic figure. The division between sections is made by a narrative ellipsis and, according to Keys, “this second narrative ellipsis transfers the story’s centre of consciousness, and the reader’s empathy, from Rhoda to Gertrude” (108).

In the second section the chapters are “A Vision”, “A Suggestion” and “Conjuror Trendle”. The titles perfectly summarize the events that take place within each particular chapter and the same actions lead to the conclusion and meeting of a mystic man. However, while a vision and a suggestion give the idea of a passive attitude, this makes a contrast with the third section where there is a change towards a more active and independent behaviour. The third section is formed by “A Second Attempt”, “A Ride” and “A Water-side Hermit”. The pattern mentioned above is repeated in this section with the only change from a passive attitude towards a more active one. The fourth section, entitled “A Reencounter”, consists in the resolution of the conflict and the conclusion of the short story; it also has a narrative ellipsis as a division. This structure of chapters is very relevant because it constitutes a useful aid for the reader in order to follow the different transitions that the main characters live and

the development of the main events and elements. In turn, it also allows for a shift in the focalization of the narrative, as the focus shifts from Rhoda to Gertrude and vice versa.

### III. Rhoda and Gertrude: The portrayal of different female roles

As mentioned above, Hardy aimed to highlight the virtuousness of a specific kind of woman, the fallen woman, through a striking comparison between different ideals of Victorian femininity. As Auerbach puts it, “a creature whose nature is to fall – the sexual trespass that produced her fall is almost always elided in British treatments – and whose identity defines itself only in that fall” (30). Therefore, the definition of the fallen woman is drawn from juxtaposing Rhoda and Gertrude, as they are opposite in some points such as their physical appearance, social class or nature. Rhoda stands for a working class woman with a rustic look. On the other hand, Gertrude belongs to an upper-middle class with a ladylike aspect, which provokes an immediate feeling of empathy from this Victorian reader, because she embodies the ideals of “the Angel in the House”. Apart from the initial presentation of both women, Keys suggests that “Rhoda and Gertrude are each presented with puzzles to unravel: the meaning of the vision and the problem of a cure. Like the reader, they try various solutions to arrive at an answer” (119). However, starting with the comparison of their physical appearance, the first two chapters are dedicated to building a very detailed opposition between both. The first picture that the reader can make about Rhoda is “a thin, fading woman of thirty” (57) with “her pale cheek, and made her dark eyes, that had once been handsome, seem handsome anew” (Hardy 59). As Johnson summarizes: “while Rhoda is tall with dark eyes and hair, the young wife is small and blue-eyed with light hair. Her refined manners and silk dress clearly indicate that she is a lady” (132). Gertrude, unlike Rhoda, fits the typical Victorian woman that belongs to “a world that made

relationships between women central to femininity, marriage and family life” (Marcus 261). This portrayal of Rhoda is far from the countenance that a Victorian reader would expect from the heroine, and it also brings to mind the ideas of decadence and the loss of youth. By contrast, Gertrude is closer to the idea of how a Victorian heroine should look like. She is described as “a rosy-cheeked, tisty-tosty little body enough” (Hardy 57) and “her face too was fresh in colour [...] soft and evanescent like the light under a heap of rose petals” (Hardy 59).

The narrator manages to make a parallel relation choosing the same elements, such as cheeks, with opposite adjectives (pale – rosy and dark eyes – skin like the light). However, there is a further description of Gertrude as a consequence of Rhoda’s obsession with having an idea of her as precise as a photograph; instead of seeing her at first hand, Rhoda sends her son for details until she is able to compare herself directly with Gertrude: “Rhoda said she was well enough [...] there was more of strength that endures in her well-defined features and large frame than in the soft-cheeked young woman before her” (Hardy 65). This also shows that both women have a different behaviour. On the one hand, the perception about Rhoda is that she is reserved, not very communicative and glum. On the other hand, Gertrude seems to be cheerful, virtuous and charitable. While Rhoda is only interested in her life and in the welfare of her loved ones, that is, her son, Gertrude is open and expresses her concern about others as she helps the community and unknown children (i.e. Rhoda’s son) by buying him a new pair of boots. Nevertheless, these portrayals, despite seeming to be unfavourable to Rhoda and corroborating the usual portrayal of the fallen woman, will experience an evolution as the short story unfolds.

Moreover, there is also a contrast in terms of their social class, as it points to the exposition of all the difficulties and rejection that Rhoda had to face in her life. Gertrude comes from a different environment than Farmer Lodge and Rhoda because “she has moved from the advanced world of the educated urban class to which she belongs towards the primitive world of the field workers and Egdon Heath” (Keys 118). She belongs to an urban middle class life, so she acknowledges that her value for Lodge is related to beauty and her capacity to bring children to him. Consequently, her marriage begins to crumble when her arm starts to wither: “If – if I hadn’t a notion that it [her arm] makes my husband dislike me – no, love me less. Men think so much of personal appearance” (Hardy 67). However, the complete collapse of the Lodge’s marriage is visible when Gertrude is unable to have any child: “Half a dozen years passed away and Mr and Mrs Lodge’s married experience sank into prosiness, and worse. [...]; moreover, she had brought him no child” (Hardy 72). So, her perfect portrayal as the angel in the house starts to crumble. Despite the fact that Gertrude would do anything to repair her marriage and arm, she thinks in terms of logic and religion, and this is the reason why she was so surprised by the suggestion of visiting conjuror Trendle: ““Well – they used to say he was a – he had powers other folks have not.’ ‘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’ ” (Hardy 69).

On the other hand, the reader finds Rhoda, from rural England and belonging to the working class. She has a complete different reality to live on and knows that her value is related to her capacity of working hard and surviving without the help of others, because of her condition as a fallen woman. In contrast to Gertrude, Rhoda has no marriage that secures her future; indeed, she has no possible access to marry her loved one due to her worsened social status. As a single and ruined woman, Rhoda suffers an

excessive exclusion from the community, despite their common rural low social class. As Johnson states: “Rhoda Brook and her son exist on the physical, social and economic margins of their small society; they serve as living proof of the disreputable past of a supposedly respectable male figure of authority” (132). This rejection is effective in different levels; for example, through economic, social and physical isolation. As for the economic limitation, Rhoda has to bring up her child alone working as a milkmaid. Moreover, she has had no support in her whole life, “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” (Hardy 85). Rhoda and her son live in miserable conditions as the description of their house reflects: “and entered the cottage. It was built of mud-walls [...] while here and there in the thatch above a rafter showed like a bone protruding through the skin. [...] She was kneeling down in the chimney-corner, before two pieces of turf together with the heather inwards” (Hardy 58-59). In order to have enough for surviving, Rhoda has no other option than letting her child to do illegal activities such as poaching and rick burning: “Now, spread the table-cloth. The hare you wired is very tender; but mind nobody catches you” (Hardy 62). These practices foresee what will be the downfall of the son as guilty of illegal activities. Also the maternal instinct of protecting her child is combined with some kind of supernatural instinct, which produces unease and worry to Rhoda.

There is also a highly marked physical isolation imposed upon Rhoda and her son, and this is exemplified by Rhoda’s distance from the others in the dairy, “she [a milkmaid] could glance past her cow’s tail to the other side of the barton, where a thin, fading woman of thirty [Rhoda] milked somewhat apart from the rest” (Hardy 57). In addition, this idea of being an outcast is highlighted with the location of Rhoda’s house,

as “their course lay apart from that of the others, to a lonely spot high above the water-meads” (Hardy 58). Besides, there is a social rejection towards Rhoda, nobody talks to her, with the exception of her son – “the thin woman who had not spoken was joined by a boy of twelve or thereabout, and the twain went away up the field also” (Hardy 58) – and of Gertrude, who went to give a new pair of boots to the boy due to her charitable nature: “she said then: ‘I’ll come and bring you some better boots, and see you mother. She gives away things to other folks in the meads besides us” (Hardy 64). However, despite all these troubles, Rhoda is able to endure this hard situation and to continue with her life stoically.

This social rejection points to the figure of the community, as these “folks” are almost animalised and counted as a single character, because these folks are always mentioned as “they”: “and the troop of milkers, regular and supernumerary, were all at work” (Hardy 57). They are considered even less relevant and more anonymous than animals: “the voice seemed to proceed from the belly of the cow called Cherry, but the speaker was a milking-woman” (Hardy 57), and they are portrayed as superstitious and gossiping people. This description fits with the mood produced by the industrial revolution, in which people were only considered work force rather than individuals. Nevertheless, despite this ominous presentation, Hardy gave them a great power because the rumours about Rhoda end making her doubt about her own personality: “from the moment she heard of her having been mentioned as reference for this man, that there must exist a sarcastic feeling among the work-folk that a sorceress would know the whereabouts of the exorcist. They suspected her, then” (Hardy 69); and, ultimately this community manages to expel Rhoda and her son from the neighbourhood due to Rhoda’s alleged and false witchcraft.

At this point, it is relevant to refer to the evolution of the relationship between Rhoda and Gertrude, because it shows how their fates are interwoven and how fatalism and determinism are more visible. The initial point is when the reader deduces the uncompleted love story between Rhoda and Farmer Lodge, and the appearance of a new female figure in between them carries out the impossibility of a conclusion for this love story. However, the narrator manages to shift the reader's sympathy from one woman to the other through a shift in focalization. Thus, the reader feels sympathy for this new woman despite being an intruder, due to her ladylike aspect and gentle nature. As a consequence of her negative feelings like jealousy or bitterness, Rhoda is unable to see Gertrude as an innocent human being, "she [Rhoda] contemplated so intently the new wife" (Hardy 63) and so, as Johnson states, "Hardy manages to evoke the utterly destructive power of repressed anger, desire, and envy without positing a clear cause and effect relationship between Rhoda's vision and Gertrude's affliction"(133). Significantly, the first meeting takes place through Rhoda's uncanny dream of an incubus and, for this reason, in their second meeting which is their first physical contact, Rhoda is so shocked because "the figure and action were those of the phantom, but her voice was so indescribably sweet, her glance so winning, her smile so tender, so unlike that of Rhoda's midnight visitant" (Hardy 65). From this unexpected visit, Gertrude and Rhoda become friends and their differences are somehow softened; even the skittish and cautious Rhoda surrenders to Gertrude's gentle nature and changes her opinion about Lodge's new wife, "and Rhoda Brook almost dreaded to meet Mrs Lodge again, notwithstanding that her feeling for the young wife amounted well-nigh to affection" (Hardy 66). Nevertheless, Rhoda continues having inner conflicts about her subconscious feelings and about being supplanted:

the sense of having been guilty of an act of malignity increased, affect as she might ridicule her superstition. In her secret heart Rhoda did not altogether object to a slight diminution of her successor's beauty by whatever means it had come about; but she did not wish to inflict upon her physical pain. (Hardy 68)

This idea is supported by Johnson's comment: "though she feels a 'sense of triumph' in having brought Gertrude into her world of suffering, her fear of not understanding the strength of her own thoughts is more than Rhoda can endure" (134). Moreover, Rhoda hides her feelings with a stoic pose, but her inner thoughts show that she still feels something for Lodge: "for though this pretty young woman had rendered impossible any reparation which Lodge might have made Rhoda for his past conduct" (Hardy 68). All these events show the human side of Rhoda, who is quite sensitive behind her stoicism and pride. Nevertheless, Gertrude asks Rhoda to accompany her to meet Conjuror Trendle, and this visit is the point of disruption of their friendship and the beginning of Gertrude's transformation into the incubus: "Trendle shut the door behind her, and they at once started homeward together. But Rhoda perceived that her companion had quite changed" (Hardy 72). This action attests to the deconstruction of the stereotype of the angel in the house.

The most striking transformation is to be found in Gertrude's physical and moral deterioration, despite the fact that the incubus foresees the final aspect she will have. Hardy is critical with this perfect portrayal of femininity, and starts to deconstruct it in order to show the unreliability and superficiality of this figure in the benefit of the fallen woman that is more natural and realistic. Gertrude is a pious and religious young girl who has a sensible mind and distrusts whatever is related to superstition and magic. As such, she tries to explain her problem through logic and dismisses any fantastic



explanation, looking for any kind of scientific remedy: “she replied that she had already seen a doctor. Her husband had insisted upon her going to one. But the surgeon had not seemed to understand the afflicted limb at all. [...] but the treatment had done no good” (Hardy 67). As it follows, science fails, because it is a problem related to strong emotions and the subconscious; so, logic has no role to play in this story. Moreover, there is a second confirmation of this failure, “ ‘medicine can’t cure it’ said he promptly ‘tis the work of an enemy’ ” (Hardy 71). As her condition aggravates, Gertrude begins to consider some fantastic explanation to her disability, “‘it looks like finger marks’ she said; adding a faint laugh ‘ my husband says it is as if some witch, or the devil himself, had taken hold of me there, and blasted the flesh’ [...] ‘I shouldn’t so much mind it’ said the younger with hesitation” (Hardy 67).

There is a sense in which Gertrude’s physical deterioration sets out the decay of her moral values, for she engages in superstitious practices that question her social status and decorous behaviour. In her desperate attempt to find a cure for her withered arm, and proving her worry about superficial matters like her beauty, she resorts to Conjuror Trendle and his magical powers to heal her arm. Gertrude’s entering into the magic not only means the rejection of her previous being, but also she starts to act in an independent way, despite hiding it to her husband. Gertrude resembles the image that Rhoda saw in the incubus: “the constraint in her manner was remarkable; her face, was so rigid as to wear an oldened aspect, faintly suggestive of the face in Rhoda’s bed-chamber” (Hardy 72), but also she resembles Rhoda’s overlooking: “her unconscious prayer was, ‘O Lord, hang some guilty or innocent person!’ Indeed, she may exert as strong an influence over the boy, overlooking him, as Rhoda has on her arm” (Keys 110). The final confirmation of her transformation is exemplified in “the once blithe-hearted and enlightened Gertrude was changing into an irritable, superstitious woman”

(Hardy 73) and in ““this is the meaning of what Satan showed me in the vision! You are like her [the incubus] at last!”” (Hardy 84). Despite all these evidences, Gertrude also suffers some inner conflicts and there is some kindness left in her, “her nature was rather a timid one; and probably of all remedies that the white wizard could have suggested there was not one which have filled her with so much aversion as this” (Hardy 75).

On the other hand, Rhoda suffers an evolution, which is marked by her progressive separation from the community. She belonged to the community until she was used and abused by farmer Lodge; consequently, she was rejected and made apart as the location of her house proves. The situation that Rhoda has to live up is of “uneasy equilibrium of pride, shame, and gossip might have continued indefinitely had not Farmer Lodge decided to marry” (Johnson 132). Moreover, “if Rhoda has not been ‘ruined’ by her liaison with Farmer Lodge in the same sense as the ‘fallen woman’ of Victorian morality tales, she has suffered socially and economically” (Johnson 132). The usual portrayal of fallen women was stereotyped as fleshly and aggressively sexual who always ended up dead. This is not case of Rhoda, who is portrayed as an honest and innocent woman. Her human side, meaning her preoccupation and sensibility are highlighted by her external appearance as a gloomy woman.

Since the setting is located in rural England, Hardy takes advantage of this for introducing superstition and the supernatural. For this reason, Rhoda changes from an outcast to a witch according to the folk: “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” (Hardy 66). For them, any kind of mistake was regarded as a sin or a rejection of the religious morality, so everyone who behaved

differently or made some mistake such as this one was related to the pagan and the magic and so, expelled from the community. However, Rhoda's strength is proved by her stoic pose towards the rejection and diminishing superstition: "Rhoda had ignored the superstitious suspicions of her neighbours, secure in her own identity, almost proud of her marginal position" (Johnson 134). The incubus is just a way of relief. As Johnson points out, "she must face the anger which she has not allowed herself to express for twelve years" (134). Despite this supernatural event, she does not doubt about her identity; however, it is "the visit to Trendle [what] summons Rhoda's repressed jealousy to the surface" (Keys 113). Moreover, her confusion is "not only about the nature of her dream, but about her own nature as well" (Johnson 133). Consequently, she eventually questions her own character: "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" (Hardy 70). Apart from this, Hardy depicts Rhoda as a kind of real virtuous woman, because she acknowledges her error or problem and endures the difficulties of raising a son alone with stoicism and a hard repression of her feelings. This attitude fits into the usual resignation related to fatalism, and probably together with Hardy's intention to do justice to the figure of the fallen woman: she is the only survivor at the end of the story, but not without an extreme suffering and endurance: the hanging of her son due to his illegal activities of poaching and rick burning corroborates the tragic vision of the world attached to the figure of the ruined woman. And yet, Rhoda endures.

As mentioned before, this short story is mainly focused on female characters, but there are a few male characters who are participants of the main actions. They are farmer Lodge, Rhoda's son, conjuror Trendle and the hangman, but they are more symbolic characters than full-rounded characters. None of them achieve to mirror what

was expected from men in the Victorian period, neither their appearance nor their ideals and moral. Famer Lodge is the first perpetrator of the whole story. Hardy punishes him because of his behaviour abandoning Rhoda and his duty as a parent. As Keys puts forward, “the father has denied his son, never acknowledging him in their meetings. The burden of the boy carries at his first encounter with the Lodges symbolizes his abandonment” (108). Rhoda’s son is more a symbol than a character, for this reason, he has no name. He has a role as intermediary between the different characters of the story, even he seems to be the scapegoat. He is the product of an illicit relationship and the constant reminder of it and together with the withered arm, this arm symbolizes Lodge’s impotency and Rhoda’s negation of a family to the new couple. As Keys explains “the dead son literally embodies the obstructed sexuality and family represented by the withered arm” (116). The symbolism of conjuror Trendle and the hangman lays in the fact that “both are members of the community and yet separate because of their trade in human fate, magic and death” (112). These male characters contribute to Hardy’s tragic vision of life, especially for those who did not comply with the dominant Victorian values.

#### IV. The use of the fantastic as subversion

Fantasy has always been understood as a way of escapism from reality. It has not been taken seriously, and just applied to any kind of genre whenever the text is slightly deviated from a realistic representation. However, it has a clear purpose or aim to fulfil. As Jackson suggests, “for fantasy characteristically attempts to compensate for a lack resulting from cultural constraints: it is a literature of desire which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss” (3). Hardy’s intention with this short story perfectly coincides with this search for the lost freedom of women due to cultural limitations

imposed by patriarchy. As Pykett comments: “the fantastic is an interrogator of established categories: not least those of sexuality, gender, and social class”(212). This can be transferred to the text because “little surprise was excited by her arrival; farmers’ wives rode on horseback then more than they do now” (Hardy 79). Indeed, “because of its ‘nonrealism’, Hardy could present a more subversive portrait of fallen womanhood than he had yet dared” (Johnson 136). Jackson even develops this idea further, and proposes a literature of desire, by providing a division of two kinds of expressing desire through fantasy. Firstly, “it can tell of, manifest or show desire (expression in the sense of portrayal), or it can expel desire as a disturbing element which threatens cultural order and continuity”(3). According to these two types, Hardy’s “The Withered Arm” fits in the second type because he used that disturbing element in order to highlight the subtle event which is actually threatening for the cultural order of continuity (i.e. the incubus or the withered arm) and Rhoda’s hidden desire of being with Lodge threatens cultural order and continuity, in addition to the figure of the son. Furthermore, Pykett interestingly claims that:

for many commentators sensation and the fantastic in fiction are forms of the personal and political unconscious; the return of the repressed [...] in which subjugated, silenced or invisible social groups or impulses rise up against the social institutions or forces which seek to deny or contain them. (212)

This concept adjusts to the internal conflict that Rhoda has about her feelings towards Lodge and her attempt to silence them in order to follow the laws of human society imposed upon her, while the incubus stands for the graphic form of tension due to Rhoda’s restriction of her unconscious emotions which need some kind of relief. Furthermore, the use of the fantastic during the nineteenth century was especially

peculiar. As Jackson argues, “the fantastic began to hollow out the ‘real’ world, making it strange, without providing any explanation for the strangeness” (25). Likewise, Pykett corroborates: “it [sensational and fantastic literature] is associated with excess, with the irrational, non-rational or supernatural and with carnival or misrule” (212). This quote clearly explains how “The Withered Arm” works, because Hardy makes a normal rural ‘reality’ into something strange through the introduction of supernatural elements such as the accuracy of Rhoda’s portrayal of Gertrude or the appearance of the incubus. All these events take place without any explanation provided by the narrator to the reader. Consequently, this gives enough room for the development of the uncanny. As Keys explains “the narrator’s refusal to formulate final and absolute statements creates a disparity between what we are told and what we think we are to infer from the information. A gap opens between sign and meaning, and the Uncanny takes form in this gap” (111).

It is important to put forward the combination between the Supernatural and the Uncanny. The supernatural was developed by the romantics, and it was a consequence of an act of imagination and creativity.. Indeed, they used the technique of the dream for introducing a new reality full of possibilities which paralleled the actual world. According to Pykett, “the meaning of supernatural, as in many later Victorian ghosts stories or tales of the supernatural, it is tantalizing indeterminate, and it is not so self-evidently part of a moral schema, nor so concerned with speculations about the source of selfhood” (216). Apart from the supernatural, Hardy also took some techniques from Gothic literature such as the use of supernatural phenomena for staging the uncanny. As Keys exposes: “Hardy deploys a panoply of supernatural elements: prophetic dream visions, threatening spectres, ‘over-looking’, stigma with no apparent physical cause, and white and black witches”(106). The uncanny was shaped by Freud and it is defined

as: “a threatening place of physical and psychological violence, a prison rather than (or as well as) a place of shelter” (Pykett 217). Keys explains clearly how it works in “The Withered Arm”: “Freud identifies repetition, ‘that which consists in a recurrence of the same situations, things and events,’ as one source of uncanny feelings” (111). This repetition can be seen in how the pattern of the events is repeated. Due to her negative emotions, Rhoda injures an innocent woman by overlooking; as a consequence of her frustration Gertrude also damages an innocent by overlooking, this time Rhoda’s son. Nevertheless, the first victim or innocent to be aggravated is Rhoda. It is from the untold story between Lodge and Rhoda that the reader does not know if Rhoda was willing to or abused, but it is clear that the first perpetrator is Lodge. Another uncanny element is “Rhoda’s ability to imagine a photographic likeness of Gertrude” (Keys 113)

Despite all these unbelievable elements contained in “The Withered Arm”, there is a mixture between realistic elements and fantastic ones. For example, the description of the rural routine of working and the magic surrounding Egdon Heath. According to Keys, “the supernatural exists as a gap in the everyday world, rupturing the smooth surface of life. However, it is not unnatural, but unseen, hidden by the ordinary” (118). Following this line of thought, the incubus is the fantastic manifestation of Rhoda’s feelings because they are hidden through her ordinary routine. On the other hand, Hardy’s effort to balance both elements must be considered since, as Scott mentions, “Hardy appreciates the necessity of modifying the preternatural to fit a realistic situation” (370). In addition, Hardy also uses location for making the gap more evident between the two worlds. The meadows correspond to the realistic world where religion prevails, so here features of Victorian realism are more obvious. Its counterpart is Egdon Heath, a place that stands for the fantastic world. When the plot is around this setting, there are more gothic elements and the uncanny feeling increases.

Consequently, in order to approach both realities, Hardy uses a well-known and wide spread element in rural zones, which is superstition. As Keys comments, “superstition bridges the gap between the orthodox Christianity of the Church and the pagan beliefs which remained vital in rural England” (107). Taking this idea of the two worlds to a further insight, it can be said that there is a transition from one to the other, not only the characters develop but also the settings. Firstly, Gertrude belongs to the religious realm with its logical explanations and moves to the magic with its fantastic events as she searches for a solution. Rhoda is located in the border; nevertheless, she is nearer to the magic than to religion. The nearer the plot gets to magic, the more logical are the fantastic events. Hardy moves away from a realistic world pursuing more freedom for providing different possible realities. The fantastic lets him display more autonomy for exploring other issues which Victorian realism and the oppressing religious atmosphere did not allow to do. An example of this is the feelings that a woman has when she is treated as an outcast or, as Johnson claims: “‘The Withered Arm’ demonstrates Hardy’s understanding of and interest in the ways in which sexual betrayal could haunt the relationships between not only lovers, but husband and wife, parent and child, and woman and woman” (137). Moreover, this adaptation goes beyond into structural or gender matters. As Scott states, “artfully, Hardy provides the groundless fancies of Gothic romance with a credible basis in regional customs and belief” (370). Even though this kind of duality is not the only one explored by Hardy, this short story can attest to a psychological reading and how the fantastic functions as a way of releasing internal struggles, thus leading to the concept of the incubus. Keys states that “‘The Withered Arm’ contains signals which encourage us to read it as an essay in the pathology of sexual jealousy, a story built around coincidence, and /or a psychological fable” (106). Putting it in Freudian terms, the incubus is a fantastic and external release



of Rhoda's id, which stands for her inner feelings of jealousy towards Lodge's new wife and the bitterness for being rejected by him and the community. Significantly, Hardy conveniently blurs the boundaries between reality and dream: "Hardy heightens the effect of the episode by shrouding it in enough obscurity to blur the distinction between illusion and reality" (Scott 371). From a Freudian perspective then, this id is greatly repressed by the superego and this can be seen in the stoic, even proud, attitude of Rhoda and her rejection to see Gertrude by her own.

On the other hand, this internal struggle against a fantastic release is repeated by Gertrude, but in this case there is no incubus. Gertrude's release of the id takes form as a fatalistic and melodramatic event which is the unfair death of Rhoda's son. Her repression is related to the frustration of not finding a solution for her arm and the increasing rejection of her husband. Conclusively, the relation between the fantastic and internal anxieties that these two women suffer is increasingly evident. This is the way that Hardy has for providing some relevance to women's preoccupations and some justice for the figure of the fallen woman or the decay of a respectable woman. Nevertheless, this incubus has another reading. As Pykett states: "ghosts stories are also, in many cases, about power, in which the seduced, betrayed, persecuted, wronged, or dispossessed return to right or avenge their wrongs or repossess what has been taken away" (216). It mirrors the evolution of Rhoda's life, and also serves as an explanation of why she is the only survivor at the end of the story.

Fatalism is almost a sign of identity in Hardy's works; it can take different roles such as a theme, in the description of characters and settings or in the narration itself. Fatalism consists in the realization that all events and actions are subjugated to fate, because this fate is a superior entity independent of human wills. There is no option to

change the future or our own actions and this leads to an attitude of resignation towards future events. This fits into Hardy's negative conception of freedom "all things are like puppets set in motion by an internal clockwork" (Diniejkó). In this text, fatalism is inheered to the timeline of the plot. It connects all characters and their fates through their actions, as this quote from the text exemplifies: "she did not altogether deplore that the young thing at her side should learn that their lives had been antagonized by other influences than their own" (Hardy 72). This fatalism functions as a kind of union between the female characters and a punishment for not acknowledging their inner emotions. It consists in producing pain and an emotional and physical sign in each other. The first is from Rhoda to Gertrude, while the second is from Gertrude to Rhoda; however and without doubt, the cruellest act of fatalism and the ultimate punishment is the dead of Rhoda's son:

like the reader, they [Rhoda and Gertrude] try various solutions to arrive at an answer [the meaning of the vision and the problem of a cure]. However, they both fail to understand their story, and the more they struggle to escape or evade their fates, the more solidly they become entangled in the web. (Keys 119)

However there is no cause and effect pattern, as Scott reminds us: "events succeed each other not according to any discernible cause and effect pattern but through the frightening, incongruous logic of a nightmare" (370). This structural freedom reinforces the course of events and also questions the often linear and logical pattern of most Victorian plots. Despite this lack of logic, there is a subtle pattern underneath the succession of events, because "story elements fall naturally into pairs" (Keys, 112). For example, in the first part Rhoda's son is poaching and also participates in rick burning, both illegal activities which were punished by death. Another example is the presence

of two mystic figures, conjuror Trendle and the hangman. This parallel is also produced through the different physical signs as consequence of overlooking: one is Gertrude's arm and the other the son's neck. Moreover, Scott provides an interesting connection between genres: "like the figures of Gothic romance, Hardy's protagonist are baffled and mocked by forces beyond their comprehension or control" (365).

### Conclusion

After the comparison in depth between Rhoda and Gertrude, it is easy to see how Hardy benefited Rhoda. She is depicted in good terms, meaning her capacity to survive and keep clear and logic her mind without considering all the rumours around her; in contrast to the evolution of Gertrude who is carried along by superstition. Due to Rhoda's endurance and stoic pose with all the fatalistic events that take place, Hardy praises her by leaving her free without further punishment. This does not mean that she does not have to suffer hard blows in order to get a peaceful ending and being alive, as it is proved by being rejected by her community and having to face the execution of her own son. This fact confirms Hardy's sympathy towards the "Fallen Woman" as well as his social commitment, which is mixed with his personal tendency towards fatalism. This mixture makes almost the whole of his fiction be described as obscure. In the case of "The Withered Arm", in order to pursue his aim of doing justice to this outcast figure, he uses fantastic elements in combination with the Uncanny. This piece of work shows Hardy's mastery in using Gothic influence and features. The purpose of this kind of fantastic writing is to challenge Victorian realism and criticism, and his stance provides, at least, the possibility of expressing freely this piety towards those women who were use sand abuse by a patriarchal and oppressing society.

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