The Withered Arm
Thomas Hardy

Introduction

The story
Rhoda Brook is a milkmaid. Many years ago she had a love affair with Mr Lodge, the farmer, and she had a son by him, now 12 years old. Rhoda and the farmer never meet. She lives with her son in a dilapidated house.

One day, Rhoda hears that the farmer has married. From her son’s description, she builds up a picture of his wife, the pretty, delicate Gertrude Lodge.

Rhoda dreams about Gertrude one night: the young woman is sitting on her, laughing cruelly and showing off her wedding-ring. Terrified, Rhoda grasps the phantom’s arm and pulls violently.

The next day Rhoda reluctantly meets Gertrude, when the young woman comes to her house with new shoes for the boy. Rhoda soon realises that she is good and kind. On another visit, Gertrude mentions some strange marks on her left arm. Rhoda realises, with horror, that the marks date back to the night of her dream.

Gertrude’s arm gets thinner, and she becomes unhappy, knowing that it makes her unattractive. She hears that Rhoda knows of a Wise Man with strange powers, and asks Rhoda to take her to him. The man, Mr Trendle, tells Gertrude that the withered arm is the work of an enemy, and reveals the enemy’s face. Soon afterwards, Rhoda leaves for the hills with her son.

Over the years, Gertrude’s arm gets worse. She also finds out the story of Rhoda and the boy. Her husband becomes distant and starts to think about his son, who has never lived with him. Gertrude returns to Mr Trendle, who tells her that the only cure is to put the arm on a hanged man’s neck. She finds the jail where executions take place, and arranges with the hangman to come to the jail immediately after a hanging. The man due to die is an 18-year-old convicted, on dubious evidence, of arson.

Gertrude arrives at the appointed time and Davies, the hangman, lets her into the jail. A few minutes later, the corpse is brought in. Gertrude is afraid to touch it, but Davies forces her arm onto the dead man’s neck. She screams in terror. Another scream comes from behind her. It is Rhoda: and behind her is farmer Lodge. The hanged man is their son, and they have come to take his body away. Overcome with shock, Gertrude collapses. Three days later, she is dead.

Farmer Lodge sells his farm and lives as a recluse. He dies two years later, leaving money to a children’s home and to Rhoda. Later, Rhoda comes back to her old house: but she does not accept the money, and carries on with her old job at the dairy.

Background to the story
The Withered Arm was written in 1888, when Hardy was 48 years old. Britain was at the heart of a vast Empire, and was a place of unstoppable social and technological progress. Hardy, however, was fascinated by rural life as it had been at the start of the century, before industrialisation, factories and railways. He was determined to record what he knew and remembered of this way of life, with its superstitions and folk tales, before it died out completely.

Hardy was also influenced by Greek tragedy, and his characters’ lives sometimes seem to be governed by fate rather than by their own free will.

The execution of Rhoda’s son is based on a true event. Hardy’s father described how an 18-year-old was hanged for being with a group of boys who had set fire to a haystack. Hardy never forgot the story: ‘Nothing my father ever said to me drove the tragedy of Life so deeply into my mind.’
The Withered Arm

Pre-reading activity

Match the words with the pictures

1. ‘Look down into the water. Look for a face.’
2. ‘Who are you?’ the man called out. ‘What do you want?’
3. Rhoda could see the tears in her eyes.
4. The boy took a good long look at the farmer’s wife.
5. They went away into the hills in the west.
6. Four men came into the room with a long box.
7. The boy ran to open the door.
8. ‘You think too much about your arm,’ Farmer Lodge said.

To the teacher

Aim: To familiarize students with the setting and introduce the main characters
Time: 10–20 minutes
Organization: Give one copy of the worksheet to each student or each group of students. Check through the words and explain any unknown meanings. Then ask students to match the words with the pictures. When everyone has finished, check the answers. Then, ask students to identify the characters in each picture (by name where possible), and ask for ideas about what might be happening.
Key: 1d, 2g, 3c, 4a, 5e, 6h, 7b, 8f.
The Withered Arm

While reading activity

What will happen next?

Which of these things do you think will happen in the story?

**RHODA BROOK**

- She will come back and work at the dairy.
- She will be rich.
- Her son will die young.
- She will marry Farmer Lodge.
- She will live to an old age.
- She will kill the Wise Man.

**GERTRUDE LODGE**

- She will have a baby.
- She will visit the Wise Man again.
- Her arm will get better.
- She will live to an old age.
- She will live to an old age.
- She will have a dream about Rhoda.

**FARMER LODGE**

- He will sell the farm.
- His son will come to live at the farm.
- He will lose all his money.
- He will marry again.
- He will die in a terrible accident.

**To the teacher**

Where: At the end of Chapter 3

Aim: To encourage students to predict the development of the story

Time: 10–15 minutes

Organization: Give each student, or group of students, a copy of the worksheet. Ask them to decide, without looking beyond the end of Chapter 3, what will happen to each of the three main characters. Explain that some of the statements are correct and some are not. Ask students to add a prediction of their own for each character. Correct answers are not important, although it may be interesting for students to keep their worksheets and see whether or not they were right.
### Who’s who?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Rhoda Brook</td>
<td>An old man with grey hair</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Visited his son in jail</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Had blue eyes</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Mr Lodge</td>
<td>Got presents from Gertrude</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Some people called him a Wise Man</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Had strange marks on her arm</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Gertrude Lodge</td>
<td>Sometimes a gardener</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Some people called her a witch</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lived alone on Egdon Heath</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Rhoda’s son</td>
<td>Had dark eyes</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Died in a small town by the sea</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lived in Casterbridge</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Mr Trendle</td>
<td>Saw a face in a glass</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Wanted money for helping Gertrude</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Heard a noise in the night</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Davies</td>
<td>Died in jail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A farmer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A milkmaid</td>
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**To the teacher**

**Aim:** To revise key characters and events of the story

**Time:** 20 minutes

**Organization:** Give each student, or group of students, a copy of the worksheet. Ask them to match up the names and the information. See how much they can do without referring back to the book.

**Key:** 1: 10, 15, 24; 2: 13, 16, 18; 3: 11, 19, 20; 4: 8, 12, 23; 5: 7, 14, 21; 6: 9, 17, 22.