

'The Son's Veto': Is Sophy a victim of society?

By most interpretations of the short story 'The Son's Veto' by the poet and novelist Thomas Hardy, Sophy was a victim. She suffered an injury that left her unable to 'walk and bustle about'; married a man that she 'did not exactly love'; moved to an environment with which she had no connexion; living on a road with 'sooty trees' and 'hazy air'; with 'her almost only companions the two servants of her own house'; raised a son for whom she had unlimited unreturned love but with whom she was not at all similar; and was denied by this very son for whom she had such love, the chance of an 'idyllic life' with Sam Hobson. Sophy was a victim of these events, but by what was she victimised? This is the question that I am attempting to address in this essay.

There are several possible answers to this question. She may have been a victim of her own character and choices, of the character and choices of those around her or of pure bad luck. On the other hand, she may have been the victim of the society in which she lived, although these things are not always clearly distinct from each other.

Sophy suffered from significant bad luck in the story. She became disabled through an accident, and this left her unable to continue her life in the manner in which she had thus far lived it.

But what were the consequences of this bad luck? This injury left the parson 'greatly moved' as the injury had been incurred 'on his account'. These quotes show us that the parson felt guilty and did not want Sophy's quality of life to be affected by this accident for which he felt responsible. He therefore asked Sophy to marry him. This in fact eventually left Sophy in a worse position than she would have been in. This shows us that to some extent Sophy can be seen as a victim of the Parsons character, but ironically it is the Parsons good natured attempts to help Sophy that contribute to her victimisation.

Sophy felt that she had little choice but to accept the vicar's offer, as although she 'did not exactly love' the parson, she had little choice but to accept his offer of marriage. Here we see an example of Sophy's lack of strong character. This shows us that not only was she too timid to refuse the parson, she was also too weak willed to even hold a strong opinion; she neither loved the parson nor detested him.

Despite her own character's contribution to her own victimisation, this is in fact also victimisation by society, as she had been trained to see herself as subordinate to the vicar 'she hardly dared refuse a parsonage so august and reverend in her eyes'. Hardy's use of the word 'dared' implies that Sophy is afraid of the vicar, and that to refuse him would have been being naughty. This is an example of Sophy being treated by society as a little girl.

Sophy was also a victim of her son, as he would not permit her to marry, but what was it that fuelled his refusal? When first informed of Sophy's desire to remarry, Randolph 'thought the idea a very reasonable one'. His view changed entirely when he discovered that the man that Sophy wanted to marry was not a 'gentleman'. Randolph felt that he would have been degraded 'in the eyes of all the gentlemen of England'. This shows us that Randolph was someone who cared more about his reputation and social status than he did about his mother's happiness. His cruel actions were sharply felt by Sophy, who spent her days 'pining her heart away' when she could have led such an 'idyllic life'. The verb 'pining' conveys vividly to the reader Sophy's great pain and desire.

Although these actions can be seen to represent Randolph's natural character, Hardy informs us strongly and deliberately that Randolph's 'education had by this time sufficiently ousted his humanity to keep him quite firm'. The emphasis put on social position in Victorian society and Randolph's upper class 'public school' education were as much to blame as Randolph's instinctive nature, and they also helped to form his character.

Randolph's education was not the only example of the way in which society contributed to Sophy's victimisation. Like the story, Hardy's life was set in the nineteenth century, where sexist views and classist opinions were not only commonplace but were considered right and proper. Most Victorians were deeply religious, and argument with the church was unacceptable and intolerable. Women were the possessions of firstly their fathers and then their husbands. The classes were considered to have been placed in their rightful social positions, and marriages between the classes were heavily frowned upon, and all of these viewpoints were part of Victorian society.

As a result of these social attitudes, remaining in their own village would have been 'social suicide' for the vicar and his wife. They therefore had to move to London, but Sophy felt out of place in the

'long, straight' road with 'sooty trees' and 'hazy air'. This shows us that Sophy had been victimised by her marriage, but this was not the fault of her husband but the fault of society's expectations. When referring to 'sooty trees' and 'hazy air', Hardy shows his own contempt for the cramped, industrial cities of the Victorian era, but by expressing these whilst referring to Sophy's home from a narrative view point that is sympathetic with Sophy, he implies that she found it a most unpleasant place to live

The metaphor 'social suicide' is used by Hardy both to show the seriousness of the marriage between a 'gentleman' and a 'servant' and to emphasise the vicar's kindness. The vicar's social position has been killed by this marriage, and this is a self inflicted death. Hardy is expressing in the strongest terms that he can that Victorian society considered man who had married out of his own class to be as good as socially dead.

Victorian attitudes towards class were not the only feature of Victorian society that victimised Sophy. Because of her gender, 'Sophy had been treated like the child she was in nature though not in years.' After her husband's death, 'She was left with no control over anything that had been her husband's beyond her modest personal income.' This is an interesting comment, as Hardy is making Sophy appear unfortunate in every aspect of her life, including her wealth, despite the fact that Sophy is very well off by the standards of a typical Victorian. When describing Sophy's boredom and lack of company, the narrator implies that Sophy's 'two servants' could not provide adequate company for a lady such as herself through the word 'only'. This is an example of Hardy's contempt for certain aspects of the narrative position, as the word 'only' implies ironically and humorously that these were people unworthy to keep a woman of Sophy's stature company, despite the fact that they were from the same class, because of a dead man (the Vicar).

The consequence of this treatment was boredom, loneliness and uselessness, as Sophy 'really had nothing to occupy her in the world but to eat and drink, and make a business of indolence, and go on weaving and coiling the nut-brown hair, merely keeping a home open for the son whenever he came to her during vacations'.

Sexism and social class attitudes combine to create the selfish and cruel figure of Randolph. The son feels that he has the right to control his mother. He ‘completely maintained his ascendancy’ over her by ‘indignation and contempt for her taste’. He is also disdainful of her lower class background and speech: Sophy was ‘a mother whose mistakes and origin it was (Randolph’s) painful lot as a gentleman to blush for.’

This quote regarding Randolph is very sneering, however the narrator of this highly moral tale is not immune from the restrictions of Victorian society and opinions, as the view expressed in this story of perfect happiness for Sophy is not any kind of personal achievement but an ‘idyllic’ marriage to a husband of her own class. Hardy is laughing at the narrator whom he has created, because the narrator feels sympathy for Sophy not because she could not be accepted by people of a higher class but because she was placed in a social position above her station at all. This is why Hardy, as well as using the narrator to create a disadvantaged image of Sophy, makes certain comments as the narrator that appear ridiculous even as they are read, such as the description of Sophy’s personal income as ‘modest’.

In conclusion, a combination of bad luck, her own weak character, her husband’s well intentioned kindness and her son’s cold hearted character all contributed to Sophy’s miserable ending. But despite this long list of reasons, it was the society in which she lived that made her so inferior and dependent. It is the education that society provided to its elite at ‘one of the most distinguished’ public schools in the country that makes a monster of her son, causing him to lose ‘those wide infantine sympathies, extending as far as to the sun and moon themselves, with which he, like other children, had been born’ and teaching him to care only about a population of a few thousand wealthy and titled people’, of which his mother was not one. This same society also provided Randolph with a right to forbid his mother to marry: ‘The Son’s Veto’. It also gave him the assumption of his own superiority that gave him the confidence and callousness to use it. It is this, the title, subject and crux of the story that is caused by society, and therefore in my opinion Sophy is entirely the victim of the society in which she lived.