The Son's Veto

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF THOMAS HARDY

Thomas Hardy was born in a rural village near Dorchester, England in 1840. He came from working-class roots: his mother was a former housemaid, and his father was a stonemason. Hardy's mother instilled a love for books and music in her son. He also had a close relationship with his strong-willed sister, who may have served as an inspiration for some of his female characters. In his youth, he was a successful student, learning Greek, French, Latin, and German, and he began to publish his writing when he was still a teenager. Like the protagonist of *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy was not able to attend college in spite of his intellectual successes, largely because of his class status. At the age of 21, Hardy moved to London, with virtually no wealth or possessions to his name, to find a job as an architectural apprentice. Even as he worked towards a career as an architect, he continued writing poetry and novel drafts. His experiences in this early period of his life—including the class discrimination that he faced, as well as the sexual discrimination faced by the women he was close to—strongly influenced the strain of social criticism that is found throughout his works. His first novel, *The Poor Man and the Lady*, was rejected by publishers because its critique of class inequality was too severe. In 1870, Hardy met Emma Gifford, a woman with intellectual and artistic aspirations who would later become his first wife. After a four-year relationship, Emma faked pregnancy to pressure Hardy into marrying her (similar to the character Arabella in *Jude the Obscure*). Their marriage was largely unhappy and filled with disappointment, until her death in 1912. Shortly after marrying Emma, Hardy experienced his major breakthrough as a novelist with the publication of *Far From the Madding Crowd* in 1874. Yet his success as a novelist came at a price: throughout the next two decades, he was constantly battling with publishers and critics, who disapproved of Hardy's tendency to subvert Victorian social and moral codes. His final two novels—*Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895)—were his most controversial; the harsh critical response to the latter novel prompted his abandonment of novel-writing altogether. However, this turn away from novel-writing was also an expression of his own preference for poetry and drama. He would spend the remainder of his writing career, up until his death in 1928, pursuing a productive writing career as a Modernist poet and a dramatist (the major work of his later career was *The Dynasts*, a Napoleonic drama). Two years after Emma's death, at the age of 72, Hardy remarried to Florence Dugdale, a writer of children's stories who was 39 years younger than Hardy. Until the end of his life, when he died of a heart attack, Hardy lived in the Dorset countryside, near his childhood home—the rural setting that, under the fictionalized name of "Wessex," had given him the inspiration for so many of his literary works.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Hardy's life coincided with a period of considerable social turmoil in Britain. The Industrial Revolution had brought about rapid urbanization and changes in the social class structure, including the formation of an industrial working class and the rise of the middle class. Old aristocratic distinctions were dissolving, but these were replaced by new forms of class division. Social discontent sparked some parliamentary reforms, such as the Reform Act of 1834, that eliminated some of the most anti-democratic vestiges of the English government. These reforms sparked movements for even more radical change, most prominently in the Chartist movement, which lasted from 1838 to 1857 and pushed for universal male suffrage among other democratic reforms. Working-class movements such as the Chartists often faced fierce repression from the government. At the same time that working-class activists were pushing for increased democratic representation and reforms to labor laws, early feminists were pushing for female suffrage and reforms to property and divorce laws. The tumultuous social changes and accompanying reform movements sparked by this period of industrialization in Britain provided the backdrop for the social critiques found in Hardy's prose fiction.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"The Son's Veto" explores similar themes as many of Hardy's other prose works: the constraints imposed by class inequality and social convention, the limiting nature of marriage, and the contrast between rural and urban life. In Thomas Hardy's later novels, such as *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, and *Jude the Obscure*, this critique of marriage becomes especially harsh—as in "The Son's Veto," marriage is portrayed as destructive of true love and freedom. Hardy's prose fiction shared much in common with other British Realist writers who preceded him, such as Charles Dickens and George Eliot, who shared Hardy's interest in social critique. Works such as Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* and *Middlemarch* are particularly akin to Hardy in their realistic depiction of provincial life. The basic storyline of "The Son's Veto," in which an upper-class man develops a romantic attraction to, and eventually marries, a virtuous female servant, is similar to the premise of the novel *Pamela* by the 18th-century English writer

Samuel Richardson, although Hardy's treatment of the characters and plot is considerably different from this earlier work.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Son's Veto
- **When Written:** 1891
- **Where Written:** London
- **When Published:** 1891
- **Literary Period:** Victorian Realism
- **Genre:** Realist
- **Setting:** London and the surrounding countryside (particularly the village of Gaymead)
- **Climax:** At Randolph's insistence, Sophy swears that she will not marry Sam.
- **Antagonist:** Randolph (Sophy's son)
- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient, but most often following Sophy's perspective

EXTRA CREDIT

Personal Best. In an 1896 letter to Rebekah Owen, Thomas Hardy identified "The Son's Veto" as his best short story. Hardy was a prolific short story writer, publishing almost 60 stories in his lifetime.

Close to Home. Thomas Hardy wrote "The Son's Veto" while living in London, where the story is largely set. The scene in which Sophy is reunited with Sam was partly inspired by the time he spent in a house facing Kensington High Street, where he could hear the market wagons traveling from the countryside to the Covent Garden marketplace early in the morning.

PLOT SUMMARY

"The Son's Veto" is the story of a working-class woman's marriage to a high-ranking Anglican church official, her widowhood, her fraught relationship with her son, and her unfulfilled romantic relationship with a youthful love interest. The story begins with the protagonist, Sophy, at an outdoor concert with her adolescent son Randolph. The author provides some initial hints of Sophy's backstory, including her use of a wheelchair, and her imperfect grammar, which sparks a stern rebuke from her son.

The story flashes back to the events leading up to Sophy's marriage to her current husband, Mr. Twycott. Sophy worked as a parlour-maid in Mr. Twycott's household, in a country village near London called Gaymead, along with a young man, Sam Hobson, who worked as a gardener. Soon after the death of Mr. Twycott's first wife, Sophy and Sam make plans to marry. Sophy tells Mr. Twycott she is planning to leave so she can marry Sam, but after having an argument with Sam, she changes her mind and stays. As she takes care of Mr. Twycott during an illness, Sophy falls down the stairs and permanently injures her foot. She tells Mr. Twycott that she must leave, but Mr. Twycott recognizes his affection for Sophy and asks her to marry him; she says yes, despite not truly loving him.

Mr. Twycott, aware that he is potentially destroying his social status by marrying Sophy, moves from the countryside to London and invests in Sophy's education, hoping to offset her working-class background. They have a son, Randolph, who is provided with the best possible schooling. After 14 years of marriage, Mr. Twycott dies of an illness. His will leaves Sophy with only a modest personal income and little control over the estate, and she becomes increasingly isolated and dissatisfied. Her relationship with her son grows more and more strained as he grows up and becomes increasingly contemptuous of her humbler origins.

One day, she encounters Sam as he transports produce to a market in the city, and the two revive their old relationship. They make plans to marry and live together in their home village of Gaymead, but Sophy hesitates, fearing Randolph's disapproval. When she works up the courage to tell her son, he refuses to accept it, fearful that Sophy's remarriage to a working-class man will damage his own social status. For four or five years, Sophy tries to persuade her son to let her marry Sam, but he makes her swear not to do so without his consent. Hoping that Randolph might one day change his mind, Sophy spends the next four years pining away, wondering why she shouldn't marry Sam. The story ends with a scene of Sophy's funeral procession in Gaymead; Sam, looking on from his grocery store, sobs in grief, while Randolph glares darkly at Sam.

CHARACTERS

Sophy Twycott – Sophy is the protagonist of "The Son's Veto." A working-class woman from the village of Gaymead, England, she starts out as a parlor-maid in the household of Mr. Twycott, alongside her friend Sam, the gardener. She almost marries Sam, but after they quarrel, she decides against it. While taking care of Mr. Twycott, she falls down the stairs and injures her foot for life. Soon after, Mr. Twycott asks her to marry him, and she accepts. However, Sophy struggles to fit into the upper-class London society to which her husband belongs. Her son, Randolph, becomes increasingly contemptuous of Sophy's lower-class mannerisms, such as her imperfect use of grammar. Sophy is troubled by her relationship with her son, and she feels isolated and unhappy in this social milieu, especially after her husband's death. As a widow, she starts up a relationship with her old friend Sam. She longs to marry him and establish a

simpler, more carefree lifestyle in their old hometown. But she is torn because of the disapproval of her son, who believes that having a father-in-law of such low social standing will destroy his own reputation. Ultimately, Sophy chooses obedience to her son's wishes over her own happiness and freedom, a choice that perhaps contributes to her premature death at the end of the story. Overall, Sophy is often a remarkably passive protagonist, with the other three male characters initiating all the major events of her life—her first near-marriage to Sam, her marriage to Mr. Twycott, her renewed relationship with Sam, and her final disappointment brought about by her son's harsh "veto." Throughout the story, her personality is depicted as simple and pure; she has no desire for social advancement and sees through the artificial pretensions of elite society, desiring only an honest, happy life. But because she never truly manages to break free from the constraints that have been imposed on her, always subsuming her own desires beneath the wishes of others, she never attains the simple happiness that she yearns for.

Randolph Twycott – Randolph is the son of Sophy and Mr. Twycott. He receives the best education that England has to offer and is destined to follow in his father's footsteps by becoming an ordained Anglican priest. As he grows older, he becomes more and more infatuated with the world of elite society and preoccupied with being perceived as a "gentleman." As a result, he becomes increasingly disdainful of his mother's humble origins and her inability to fully fit into the expectations of upper-class society. When Sophy tells Randolph that she wants to marry Sam, he rejects the possibility, believing that Sam's low social status will "degrade" his own status in the eyes of other "gentlemen." Randolph remains unrelenting in his sacrifice of his mother's happiness for the sake of his own social prestige. Throughout the story, he scarcely returns or even acknowledges the love that his mother has for him, caring only about his own social advancement. Even at his mother's funeral, he does not show the genuine grief that Sam displays, but rather seems preoccupied with his bitterness at Sam for presuming to want to marry his mother. Randolph's choices demonstrate the destructive consequences of valuing social prestige over human relationships and emotions such as happiness or love.

Sam Hobson – Sam is Sophy's love interest. When they were younger, both Sam and Sophy worked in the household of Mr. Twycott (Sam as a gardener, Sophy as a parlor-maid). On the day of Mr. Twycott's first wife's death, Sam casually, half-jokingly hints at the possibility of marriage with Sophy. Although Sophy dismisses the possibility at first, the two ultimately do make plans to marry. But after an argument, Sophy calls off the engagement and later marries Mr. Twycott instead. Sam loses contact with Sophy as she and Mr. Twycott move to London. In the years that follow, Sam continues to work as a gardener for other households, but he never quite forgets Sophy. When he sees the notice of Mr. Twycott's death in the newspaper, he is drawn to the area where Sophy lives in hopes of meeting her again, taking up a job as the manager of a market-garden in London. One day, Sophy sees him passing by, and the two characters quickly revive their relationship, with a much greater passion than before. Sam tells her of his hopes to become a greengrocer in their hometown and asks Sophy to marry him. When she hesitates, uncertain of whether her son Randolph would approve, Sam urges her to follow her heart instead of worrying what her son might think. Sam fulfills at least part of his dream, opening up his grocery store back in Gaymead, but years pass as Sophy vacillates and eventually swears to her son that she will not marry Sam. In the end, Sam is devastated by the sight of Sophy's funeral procession passing his store. Throughout the story, Sam is an embodiment of the simple, rural, working-class lifestyle that Sophy has left behind by marrying Mr. Twycott. Sam's occupation as a gardener, then as a greengrocer, not only determines his class status; it also situates him close to nature, in contrast to the highly spiritual nature of Mr. Twycott's and Randolph's calling. Sam is portrayed as a pure, kind-hearted character, much like Sophy herself. In sharp contrast to Randolph, Sam seems to genuinely care about Sophy's happiness, and to put it above his own interests, even when that means waiting many years as she tries to decide between Sam and her son.

Mr. Twycott – Mr. Twycott, often referred to simply as "the vicar" or "the parson," is Sophy's husband and Randolph's father. He is a high-ranking clergyman in the Anglican church and wealthy enough to possess multiple large homes, hire multiple servants, and secure a prestigious education for his son. When his first wife dies, he recognizes his affection for Sophy and asks her to marry him, even though he knows that by doing so he is committing "social suicide." But he still cares enough about his social image to take steps to limit the negative impact of his marriage to Sophy, including moving to London (to escape from everyone who knew that Sophy had once been his maid) and investing in Sophy's education in an effort to eliminate her working-class mannerisms. Despite their differing backgrounds, however, Sophy and Mr. Twycott seem to have a relatively happy marriage; it is only after Mr. Twycott dies, and as her son grows older, that Sophy's troubles begin. Mr. Twycott's major flaw is his tendency to treat Sophy as a "child" (he is 20 years older than her), which creates considerable problems for Sophy after his death, as she is left with virtually no control over the estate, her son's education, or even her own life. Even so, Mr. Twycott is, overall, a sympathetic character in the novel; his willingness to marry Sophy in spite of the potential damage to his social status stands in sharp contrast to his son's refusal to accept Sophy's desire to marry Sam.

THEMES

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SOCIAL CLASS VS. HUMAN FLOURISHING

The distinctions of social class—and the accompanying invisible rules that govern how people within each class are expected to act—shape the lives of each character within "The Son's Veto." Mr. Twycott, an Anglican parson, must uproot his life to avoid potential societal scorn for marrying Sophy, his former servant. After her marriage to Mr. Twycott, Sophy must confront a complex set of social expectations that she is unprepared to meet, making her isolated and miserable. Later, after Sophy is widowed, her relationship with her youthful love interest, Sam, cannot be fulfilled without violating the invisible yet unavoidable barriers of social class. Sophy's son Randolph eventually loses all his human feelings and sympathy for his own mother in his obsessive desire to be seen as a gentleman, sacrificing her happiness to his social ambition. Through its depiction of these three characters, "The Son's Veto" suggests that social class can serve as a limitation on human potential, and in some circumstances can even destroy the natural bonds of human relationships.

At first, Mr. Twycott's marriage to Sophy suggests that he has overcome some of the limitations of social expectations, yet he is ultimately quite constrained by them—even willing to uproot his entire life simply to escape from the possibility of social censure. He leaves behind his parish in **Gaymead** to move to London in an attempt to escape the scrutiny of everyone who knew Sophy had once been his maid. His willingness to "abandon their pretty country home […] for a narrow dusty house in a long, straight street" suggests that, because of the constraints imposed by social expectations, Sophy and Mr. Twycott's marriage will not thrive. Although Mr. Twycott has great affection for Sophy, he is not content to simply accept her as she is, with all her "deficiencies" in upper-class manners. He invests in her education, trying to erase the traces of her working-class roots and turn her into a proper lady. At some level, then, Mr. Twycott is anxious to fit his new wife into the mold of upper-class society, suggesting he is still self-conscious about having married a rural, working-class woman.

Unlike Mr. Twycott, Sophy seems relatively immune from concern over her social status—but because of her son's desire for social propriety, she is ultimately constrained by these expectations more than any other character. As a young woman, Sophy is content with her working-class lifestyle, marrying Mr. Twycott only because of her respect for him rather than a desire for social advancement. Although this marriage propels her upwards in English society, it scarcely seems to make her any happier. Unable to fully shed the traces of her humble origins (especially her working-class speech), she is disrespected by other members of her husband's social circle and—most painfully for her—even disdained by her own son for failing to fulfill their social expectations. This is evident from the beginning of the story, when Randolph rebukes her "with an impatient fastidiousness" when she makes a minor grammatical mistake. The trivial nature of Sophy's perceived "deficiencies" highlights the pettiness of the society that judges her so harshly for them, while ignoring all the positive aspects of her character. Later, in widowhood, Sophy rekindles her romantic interest in Sam, the man she once almost married, and their relationship comes to embody her hopes of regaining her lost happiness. Sophy does not truly care about how society would perceive her remarriage to Sam, but she *does* care about its effect on her relationship with her son; and Randolph, afraid of how the marriage would affect his own social standing, makes her swear not to marry Sam. Sophy's dilemma, caught between Sam and her son, suggests that she is sacrificing her happiness to a set of arbitrary social conventions.

Randolph, out of all the characters in the story, is most in bondage to the constraints imposed by social expectations, valuing his social status even above his relationship with his mother. By sacrificing her happiness to his social ambitions, he also damages his own humanity. Randolph adopts these social expectations out of his own desire for advancement and his preoccupation with the glamorous world of London high society. As he grows older, he limits his interests more and more narrowly to a "population of a few thousand wealthy and titled people." Randolph's lack of interest in the world outside of elite society causes him to "drift further and further away" from Sophy and, implicitly, from his humanity. The ultimate outcome of Randolph's single-minded desire for social advancement is his growing cruelty towards his mother, especially his refusal to let her marry Sam. He seems to scarcely notice the love that his mother has for him, focusing instead on the "infinitesimal sins" that have stemmed from her social origins. When Sophy tells him of her desire to remarry, he seemingly does not even consider her hopes for happiness, caring only about the social status of his prospective father-in-law. The narrator notes that "his education had by this time sufficiently ousted his humanity to keep him quite firm," suggesting that Sophy's happiness is not the only casualty of Randolph's obsession with social status; he has also given up some of his own humanity in the process, forever forgoing the possibility of a loving relationship with his mother.

Mr. Twycott, Sophy, and Randolph are all constrained in different ways by the expectations of class distinctions.

Sometimes, as with Mr. Twycott and Randolph, these expectations are internalized by the characters themselves, who are blind to the ways in which they are limiting their own happiness and human potential; and sometimes, as in Sophy's case, the expectations are imposed wholly from without, but are equally unavoidable and crushing in their effects. Through its depiction of these three storylines, "The Son's Veto" suggests that conformity to social conventions can limit our potential to achieve true happiness or develop fulfilling relationships with other human beings.

FAMILY DUTY VS. DESIRE

The primary conflict in "The Son's Veto" is between Sophy's desire for happiness, embodied in her relationship with Sam, and her sense of duty, embodied in her maternal relationship with her son Randolph. Sophy's revived romantic relationship with Sam, the man she almost married in her youth, offers her a glimpse of happiness and freedom that had seemed impossibly out of reach when she became widowed. But Randolph, who is obsessed with his social standing, refuses to accept the idea that his mother will remarry a man whose social class is as low as hers once was. Both her romantic relationship with Sam and her familial relationship with her son are genuine expressions of love, and the fact that Sophy is forced to choose between them makes her miserable. She ultimately chooses family obligations, in the form of obedience to her son's wishes, but retains a faint hope in the possibility of romantic fulfilment and the happiness she believes it will bring with it. Meanwhile, Randolph is faced with a potential conflict between his familial duty to his mother and his own desire for social advancement. Through its depiction of the choices of these two characters, "The Son's Veto" suggests that when family duty and personal desire conflict, it is impossible to satisfy both.

After she resumes her romantic relationship with Sam, Sophy feels torn between her desire to live a carefree married life with Sam in the countryside and her desire to salvage her relationship with her son. Sophy hesitates to imagine a happier future with Sam because she knows that this future would only bring about increased estrangement from her son. Early on in their renewed relationship, Sophy tells Sam: "I long for home—our home!" But she quickly catches herself and explains that this can only be a "momentary feeling," because she has a son. She tells Sam that though she is not a lady, Randolph is "a gentleman, and that—makes it—O how difficult for me!" With this lament, Sophy hints at the unhappiness that her son's disdain is causing her. Later, she asks Sam to wait as she tries to work up the courage to tell Randolph that she wants to marry Sam, hinting at the misery caused by her estrangement from her son, and her worry that fulfilling her desire would irreparably damage an already fragile relationship. When Sophy finally does tell Randolph, he bursts into tears, distraught by the prospect that his own social status will be lowered on account of the social class of his prospective father-in-law. Moved by her son's distress, Sophy says that she must be in the wrong. She even gives in when Randolph insists she swear not to marry Sam without his consent, "thinking he would soften as soon as he was ordained and in full swing of clerical work." She still naively believes that these two contradictory desires—to achieve happiness with Sam, and to maintain her duty to her son—can somehow be reconciled. But as the years drag on, and it becomes clearer that her son will not change his mind, she still honors her vow, showing that on some level she has chosen family duty over desire—although this is a choice she continues to second-guess, and until her dying day, she continues to ask herself why she shouldn't just marry Sam.

Randolph himself is faced with a potential conflict between family duty and his own desire for happiness, in the form of social prestige. However, he never faces the same degree of internal conflict that Sophy faces, seeming not even to recognize any duty he owes to his mother. At first, Randolph sees the prospect of Sophy's remarriage as a reasonable idea, until he realizes that she plans to marry someone of a low social status. His initial reaction to this news suggests that his foremost concern is his desire for social prestige: "It will ruin me!" he exclaims. Years later, when he makes Sophy swear not to marry Sam, Randolph casts his objection in terms of duty to his dead father. It is left ambiguous whether Randolph's primary motivation for making Sophy swear not to marry Sam really is his sense of duty to his father, or simply his own desire for social prestige. Although this ambiguity suggests that Randolph, like Sophy, may be acting out of a sense of family duty, it is ultimately clear that Randolph chooses the family duty that aligns most conveniently with his own personal desires. He does not even seem to entertain the possibility that he might owe a duty to his *mother*, perhaps because to admit this would force him to also recognize his selfish cruelty in sacrificing his mother's happiness. It is far more comforting to convince himself that, in fulfilling his own personal desire, he is also simply carrying out a duty to his late father.

Both Sophy and Randolph face conflicts between their desire for happiness and their family relationships, but while Randolph sidesteps this conflict by failing to recognize his duty to alleviate his mother's unhappiness, Sophy faces a prolonged internal conflict that she never manages to fully resolve. In both situations, however, the duty to one's family members, and the desire for personal fulfillment, are impossible to fully reconcile.

FREEDOM VS. IMMOBILITY

In "The Son's Veto," Sophy's life is starkly divided between two halves: her early life as a working-class maid, and her later life as a "lady," after marrying (and then being widowed by) Mr. Twycott. The dividing line between those two halves is her **foot injury**. Her

collapse on the stairs while taking care of Mr. Twycott, incapacitating her for life, is the event that first changes her life irrevocably, making it impossible for her to continue her old lifestyle as a maid and inspiring Mr. Twycott to ask for her hand in marriage. In this way, Sophy's social mobility, her entrance into a higher social class, is paradoxically accompanied by her physical *immobility*, a constraint on her freedom which she is never fully able to recover from. This loss of physical mobility parallels the limiting nature of Sophy's new social status; as she gains the status of a "lady," she loses the freedom to determine her own path in life.

Sophy's marriage to Mr. Twycott, paralleling the effects of her physical injury, forces her to give up her earlier freedom and independence. Sophy recognizes that her foot injury will prevent her from continuing her occupation as a parlor-maid, but she responds to this by planning to take on another job. Before Mr. Twycott proposes marriage to her, she hints that she will take up work as a seamstress, a job that will allow her to adapt to the limitations on her physical freedom of movement while maintaining her fundamental independence. But from the moment that Mr. Twycott proposes marriage to Sophy, she seems to lose much of her agency. Because she admires Mr. Twycott so much, she feels as if she has no choice but to accept his proposal. Then, it is Mr. Twycott who decides to move to **London** and to educate Sophy as a "lady," apparently leaving Sophy with little say in these decisions that shape her life for the next two decades.

After Mr. Twycott's death, Sophy's sense of confinement increases, owing both to her physical inability to walk, as well as the lack of freedom and control she is given over her dead husband's estate. In her late husband's will, Sophy is "treated like the child she was in nature though not in years"; she is left with no control over her husband's estate, owing to his fears that her "inexperience"—in other words, her working-class background—might cause her to manage it badly. Alone in the villa that Mr. Twycott leaves her, while her son Randolph continues his education, Sophy is left with nothing to occupy her time.

Wishing she could escape from the monotony of her life as a widow, Sophy starts to yearn for the freedom and independence of working-class life, even though she knows that it is impossible for her to return to this life, both on account of her injury as well as societal expectations and her duty to her son. In the years following her husband's death, Sophy develops a habit of looking out from the villa to the country roads leading into London, which become a symbol of the freedom that now seems impossibly out of her reach. Her life becomes "insupportably dreary," as she is unable to walk anywhere and has no interest in traveling anywhere. She simply sits and watches the country roads, thinking of how she'd like to go back and work in the fields of her old village. Sophy longs for the independence she had enjoyed in her youth, even if it means giving up the social status she's acquired through marriage; but the daydream is an impossible one on account of her injury, which makes it difficult for her to walk, much less work on a farm.

Sophy's romantic relationship with Sam gives her a taste of renewed mobility, and her desire to marry Sam hints that, ironically, giving up her status as a "lady" would grant her greater freedom in daily life. Soon after she renews her friendship with Sam, Sophy feels "sorrow [...] that she could not accompany her one old friend on foot a little way." Her physical injury, as well as social propriety, seem to limit her time with Sam to brief conversations as he passes by her house. When he invites her for a ride on his produce wagon, Sophy refuses Sam's invitation at first, perhaps indicating how accustomed she has become to the limitations imposed on her, both in terms of her physical immobility as well as social expectations. But she quickly changes her mind and, "trembling with excitement," she seems to suddenly regain some of her mobility, "sidling downstairs by the aid of the handrail," and Sam lifts her onto the wagon. Her ride with Sam through the city streets, and her renewed intimacy with him, makes her exclaim how happy she is, in contrast to the loneliness she feels in the villa. This brief moment of freedom with Sam suggests that there is nothing inevitable about the limitations imposed by Sophy's physical injury, and that she might overcome her immobility in some sense through Sam's care and companionship; but it is the social constraints, embodied in her son's refusal to allow her to remarry, that place a far greater burden upon her.

Through the apparently paradoxical relationship between physical immobility and social advancement, "The Son's Veto" suggests the way in which high social status, especially for women, can actually reduce rather than augment one's freedom.

REGRET

"The Son's Veto" is ultimately a story about the unfulfilled possibilities of Sophy's life. It is a story of "what ifs": what if Sophy had married Sam, as she had originally planned? What if she had chosen to keep working after her **foot injury**, rather than marrying Mr. Twycott? What if she had disregarded her son Randolph's wishes and married Sam after her husband's death? As her life becomes increasingly unhappy, Sophy is troubled by all of these lost possibilities, and tries, unsuccessfully, to find some way to recover them. Even her relationship with Sam is perhaps motivated not so much by her love for Sam himself—after all, she chose not to marry him in the first place because she did not truly love him—but rather by a desire to recover a certain kind of life that she has now lost. Through this depiction of Sophy's regrets about the choices she has made, the story suggests that no choice in life can be made without costs, since the opening of one door always leads to the closing of

another—and that one might not know which trade-off is the right one to make until it is already too late.

Even before the death of her husband, Sophy seems to feel some latent regret over her marriage, wondering about the alternate paths that her life might have taken. In the first scene at the concert, Randolph's cruelty in correcting his mother's grammar prompts her to wonder "if she had done wisely in shaping her life as she had shaped it, to bring out such a result as this"—hinting at her awareness that she could have made choices that would have set her life in a quite different direction. This reflection suggests that the distance between her and her son has prompted her to question her marriage to Mr. Twycott. Part of Sophy's regret may stem from the fact that she "did not exactly love" Mr. Twycott; she had agreed to marry him out of a "respect for him which almost amounted to veneration," rather than out of romantic desire. As a result, Sophy and Mr. Twycott's marriage is characterized more by friendly companionship than by true love—a circumstance that might naturally lead Sophy to wonder what might have happened if she had married someone she truly loved.

After her husband's death, Sophy's regret grows, sparked by her misery and isolation as a widow, her growing estrangement from her son, and her renewed relationship with Sam, which reminds her of how her life could have been different. In the loneliness of her life in the villa left to her by her dead husband, Sophy often finds herself looking out at the country roads leading into **London**, pining for her home village. Her desire to go back to Gaymead indicates a longing to retrace her life, undoing the past fourteen years and going back in time just as easily as one might travel from the city to the countryside. One day, staring out at the road like this, Sophy spots Sam, the man she almost married in her youth. Throughout her marriage Sophy had occasionally thought of Sam, and wondered if she might have been happier if she had married him; now, her interest in him has increased on account of her present misery. Sophy's renewed relationship with Sam is motivated, at least in part, by her desire to regain a possibility in her life that had been lost through her marriage to Mr. Twycott. The contrast between the misery of her present life and the carefree happiness she recalls from her youth causes her to love Sam far more passionately than she had loved him before. Sophy's regret for leaving behind the life she once led in her youth is accompanied by her regret over the distance between her and her son. She wishes that her son had been brought up in a different way, with a different set of values, a worldview that would not create such a rift between them: "If Randolph had not appertained to these," Sophy thinks, referring to the rich spectators at a cricket match, "has not centred all his interests in them, had not cared exclusively for the class they belonged to, how happy would things have been!" But of course, Randolph is simply adopting the values of the world he grew up into; if Sophy had married someone else, from a different social world, she might have had a son who loved her, instead of one who is ashamed of her.

The unfulfilled promise of Sophy's renewed relationship with Sam causes a new source of regret for her, and to the moment of her death, she is left wondering how her life might be different if she could bring herself to defy her son's wishes and marry Sam. After swearing not to marry Sam, Sophy spends the remaining years of her life "pining her heart away," thinking of alternate possibilities as she stares out at the country roads. She wonders to herself: "Why mayn't I say to Sam that I'll marry him? Why mayn't I?" Unlike her earlier regrets, which were about past choices she cannot undo, this regret is about a choice that she could still reverse, but she never quite works up the courage to do so. The ending of the story, with the scene of Sophy's funeral procession, represents the final cutting off of all her life's alternative possibilities. It implies that Sophy pined her life away until she died of regret.

In the end, it is impossible for Sophy to know whether she truly would have been happier if she had married Sam when she was younger; but it is precisely the fact that she will never know, will never be able to experience those alternate paths, that is the source of her tragedy.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

SOPHY'S BROKEN FOOT

Sophy's broken foot symbolizes the paralysis that takes hold of her life with her marriage to Mr. Twycott. She is injured while taking care of an ailing Mr. Twycott, slipping down the stairs while carrying a tray. This event changes her life in two ways: she is no longer able to continue her old occupation as a maid, as it requires strenuous physical movement; and it prompts Mr. Twycott to recognize his strong affection for Sophy, leading to his marriage proposal. As a result, Sophy's injury unexpectedly leads to an improvement in her social status. But Sophy's social mobility is soon accompanied by a sense of *immobility*—the inner counterpart to the immobility caused by her injured foot—that results from her isolation within an unfamiliar and hostile social circle, and her lack of freedom and control over her own family's affairs. She feels the double burden of her injured foot and the social constraints upon her especially strongly after Mr. Twycott's death, when she has no choice but to spend her days in dreary monotony, watching the country roads from her villa and wishing she could return to the village of her youth. Sophy's injury makes the prospect of her return to that idyllic, hard-working country life seem even more impossible. But her relationship with Sam does allow Sophy to experience, if only

briefly, some measure of freedom and mobility again, as they travel through London on Sam's wagon. This suggests that the limitations imposed by Sophy's injury are not inevitable, but rather the product of both societal structures and Sophy's own choices. Ultimately, in swearing to her son Randolph that she will not marry Sam, she acquiesces to these limitations, rather than seizing the possibility of freedom.

SOPHY'S BRAIDED HAIR

Sophy's braided hair symbolizes the useless monotony that characterizes her life as Mr. Twycott's wife and widow. It is the first detail given about Sophy, and at first, it appears as a symbol of intriguing beauty. It hints at some of Sophy's positive qualities, such as her self-sufficiency ("she had done it all herself") and even a latent creative streak (her hair is described as "ingenious art"). However, her braided hair is also presented as a symbol of wasted effort (the fact that it is "demolished regularly" at night makes the effort seem a "reckless waste") and even positions her as an object of pity (she is called a "poor thing," her braided hair "the only accomplishment she could boast of"). The braided hair is a useless decoration, beautiful but also temporary, ultimately a waste of effort. This interpretation is supported when the narrator states that Sophy "wasted hours in braiding her beautiful hair" once she moves to the city, at the same time that the signs of her youthful beauty and vigor (like her apple-colored cheeks) faded. The braids are a futile, wasted ornament, a reflection of the role that married women were supposed to play within upper-class society—to ultimately serve as a pleasing aesthetic object for others' enjoyment. This is a role that Sophy is never quite satisfied with, which is why her braids, a sign of her boredom and dissatisfaction, also mark her as an object of pity.

LONDON/GAYMEAD

The village of Gaymead symbolizes hard work and rural simplicity; London symbolizes the world of high society. "The Son's Veto" is divided between these two settings: the fictional country village of Gaymead, Sophy's birthplace and the location of Mr. Twycott's first parish, and the sprawling metropolis of London, where Sophy and Mr. Twycott move after their marriage. Gaymead is presented as a place full of life, closely associated with Sam and the plants he grows, while London is depicted as dull and lifeless, with overflowing cemeteries. For Sophy, London is a place of isolation and confinement, while she comes to see her home village of Gaymead as a symbol of freedom. Hardy uses the contrast between the two settings to vividly depict the contrast between the artificial constraints imposed by human society and the freedom that exists in nature.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Cambridge University Press edition of *Stories of Ourselves: Volume 1* published in 2018.

Part I Quotes

That question of grammar bore upon her history, and she fell into reverie, of a somewhat sad kind to all appearance. It might have been assumed that she was wondering if she had done wisely in shaping her life as she had shaped it, to bring out such a result as this.

Related Characters: Sophy Twycott, Randolph Twycott

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

Sophy's moment of "reverie" is prompted by her son Randolph's cruel rebuke in response to her simple grammatical mistake (saying "have" instead of "has"). At many moments in the story, Sophy's speech patterns serve as a marker of her class origins. Despite Mr. Twycott's best efforts to eliminate Sophy's working-class speech, she never truly masters the polished language of the upper class, and this "failure" becomes a key source of conflict between Sophy and her son Randolph, who perceives his mother's class origins as a source of shame. Already at the start of the story, Sophy hints that she may regret her decision to marry Mr. Twycott. The main source of Sophy's regret seems to be the strained relationship between her and her son—perhaps because if she had married someone belonging to her own social class, there would not have been the same kind of distance between her and her children.

Sophy did not exactly love him, but she had a respect for him which almost amounted to veneration. Even if she had wished to get away from him she hardly dared refuse a personage so reverend and august in her eyes, and she assented forthwith to be his wife.

Related Characters: Sophy Twycott, Mr. Twycott

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout "The Son's Veto," Sophy is often quite a passive protagonist: her major decisions tend to be shaped by the story's male characters. In this scene, the narrator makes it clear that Sophy never truly had a passionate love for Mr. Twycott, although she respects him greatly. Given this reverence, she feels almost as if she has no choice but to accept Mr. Twycott's offer of marriage. This lack of true love, along with the strained relationship with her son and her difficulty in adjusting to an upper-class lifestyle, may be a source of the regret that Sophy seems to feel about her marriage to Mr. Twycott. There is a parallel with Sophy's relationship with Sam, where she similarly felt that she did not truly want to marry Sam, but did so simply because it would provide a home for her. Later in the story, it seems that Sophy feels, for the first time, a true love for Sam— but here again she will let her own desires be subsumed beneath those of another male character, her son.

❝ Mr. Twycott knew perfectly well that he had committed social suicide by this step, despite Sophy's spotless character, and he had taken his measures accordingly.

Related Characters: Mr. Twycott , Sophy Twycott

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

At first, Mr. Twycott's marriage proposal to Sophy suggests that—in contrast to the actions that his own son will later take—he is relatively unconcerned with questions of social propriety. He does not seem to hesitate over his decision to marry Sophy due to concerns of her lower social status or the possibility of scandal; he is simply motivated by his affection for her. But once they're married, it becomes clear that Mr. Twycott is in fact quite concerned with his image among "high society." He takes steps to ensure that as few people within his circle know about Sophy's social origins as possible. He marries Sophy secretly, moves away from his country parish, and tries to educate Sophy as a proper "lady." The phrase "social suicide" indicates the potentially explosive nature of this kind of inter-class marriage—the punishment for breaking class barriers in this society is complete social ostracism. The moral hypocrisy of this social code is shown in the remark that Sophy's "spotless character" did not matter at all; she would still never be seen as respectable, simply because of her background. Although Mr. Twycott is aware of this hypocrisy, he nonetheless allows it to shape the choices he makes in his marriage to Sophy—showing that he is as limited in his ability to escape from the strictures of social class as the other characters in the story.

❝ Sophy the woman was as charming a partner as a man could possess, though Sophy the lady had her deficiencies. She showed a natural aptitude for little domestic refinements, so far as related to things and manners; but in what is called culture she was less intuitive. She had now been married more than fourteen years, and her husband had taken much trouble with her education; but she still held confused ideas on the use of 'was' and 'were,' which did not beget a respect for her among the few acquaintances she made. Her great grief in this relation was that her only child, on whose education no expense had been and would be spared, was now old enough to perceive these deficiencies in his mother, and not only to see them but to feel irritated at their existence.

Related Characters: Sophy Twycott, Mr. Twycott , Randolph Twycott

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

The difficulties that Sophy faces in her education to become a proper "lady" demonstrates the challenges that she faces in adapting to upper-class society. Again, her working-class speech—her tendency to confuse "was" and "were," or "has" and "have", as in the opening scene with her son—marks her as different from everyone else in her social circle, who shun her as a result. The fact that Sophy has only made "a few acquaintances" who do not even respect her, after 14 years of living in London high society, shows how painfully isolated she is within this social setting. However, these challenges are not truly caused by any "deficiency" of Sophy's, but again simply indicate the hypocrisy of upper-class society. Instead of recognizing her many virtues—for instance, her "natural aptitude for little domestic refinements," her "charming" character—the pettiness of high society latches onto the most insignificant errors as if they were unpardonable sins. However, it is not the general disdain of society that bothers Sophy; rather, her "great grief" is the disdain she faces from her own son, who has imbibed the shallow values of the society that surrounds him. Her son has internalized the pettiness of upper-class

society in overlooking everything that is good about his mother—for instance, her deep love for him—and focusing only on the slight "deficiencies," which he sees as an unforgivable source of shame.

Part II Quotes

❝ Throughout these changes Sophy had been treated like the child she was in nature though not in years. She was left with no control over anything that had been her husband's beyond her modest personal income. In his anxiety lest her inexperience should be overreached he had safeguarded with trustees all he possibly could. The completion of the boy's course at the public school, to be followed in due time by Oxford and ordination, had been all previsioned and arranged, and she 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.

Related Characters: Sophy Twycott, Mr. Twycott , Randolph Twycott

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

One of Mr. Twycott's major flaws as a character is his tendency to treat Sophy as a "child"—this is apparent in his earlier attempts to educate her and fit her into the mold of an upper-class wife, and it surfaces again in his decision to give her virtually no control over his estate in his will. This is rooted in Mr. Twycott's belief that Sophy is too "inexperienced"—that her social background has left her ill-equipped to deal with the complexities of estate management. Mr. Twycott's decision contributes to the growing distance between Sophy and her son, which is primarily a consequence of Randolph's prestigious education and his frequent absence from his mother's home. Mr. Twycott precisely arranges Randolph's life to make sure that his son follows in his footsteps without considering the impact on the relationship between Randolph and his mother. Meanwhile, Sophy is left with no control over her life, no independence, and nothing to occupy her time while her son is gone. The symbol of Sophy's braided hair resurfaces as a marker of the monotony that characterizes her life as a widow.

❝ Somehow, her boy, with his aristocratic school-knowledge, his grammars, and his aversions, was losing those wide infantine sympathies, extending as far as to the sun and moon themselves, with which he, like other children, had been born, and which his mother, a child of nature herself, had loved in him; he was reducing their compass to a population of a few thousand wealthy and titled people, the mere veneer of a thousand million or so of others who did not interest him at all. He drifted further and further away from her.

Related Characters: Randolph Twycott , Sophy Twycott

Related Themes:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

As Randolph grows older, he becomes increasingly preoccupied with the world of high society. In the process, he loses the childlike delight in the world which he seems to have had in common with Sophy and even to have inherited from her. The mature Randolph's education and his proper use of grammar—in stark contrast to his mother—mark him as belonging to the elite of British society. While Sophy preserves her pure and kind-hearted nature despite the pettiness of the society that surrounds her, Randolph's eager association with that society means that he gradually loses all of his good qualities as a person. His obsession with the "mere veneer" of high society means that he gradually even loses his natural love for his mother, who is not truly part of this charmed, elite circle. The deterioration of this mother-son relationship is a casualty of social class divisions and their distorting effects on human sympathies.

❝ Sophy's milieu being a suburb of minor tradesmen and under-clerks, and her almost only companions the two servants of her own house, it was not surprising that after her husband's death she soon lost the little artificial tastes she had acquired from him, and became—in her son's eyes—a mother whose mistakes and origin it was his painful lot as a gentleman to blush for. As yet he was far from being man enough—if he ever would be—to rate these sins of hers at their true infinitesimal value beside the yearning fondness that welled up and remained penned in her heart till it should be more fully accepted by him, or by some other person or thing. If he had lived at home with her he would have had all of it; but he seemed to require so very little in present circumstances, and it remained stored.

Related Characters: Randolph Twycott , Sophy Twycott

Related Themes:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

In sharp contrast to her son, Sophy never truly cares about the upper-class society to which her husband belongs. She has no real connections with anyone belonging to that class outside of her own family members, and her "education" as a "lady" proves to be short-lived as she reverts to her old working-class mannerisms after her husband's death. This deepens the rift between her and her son, who becomes increasingly ashamed of her "mistakes and origins" that stem from her social class. The narrator again hints at the distorting effect that Randolph's obsession with social prestige has had on his character by suggesting that he was "far from being man enough—if he would ever be" to ignore these trivial "mistakes" of his mother's and to focus instead on the immense love that she has for him. Randolph perhaps never truly understands his mother's love for him, because she keeps most of it "stored" up, seeing him infrequently and assuming he has no need for it.

❝ Her life became insupportably dreary; she could not take walks, and had no interest in going for drives, or, indeed, in travelling anywhere. Nearly two years passed without an event, and still she looked on that suburban road, thinking of the village in which she had been born, and whither she would have gone back—O how gladly!—even to work in the fields.

Related Characters: Sophy Twycott

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

After her husband's death, Sophy becomes increasingly isolated: she has no friends among her husband's social circle, is growing more and more distant from her own son, and is not easily able to leave her villa by herself on account of her injured foot. London high society becomes a kind of prison for her, in contrast to the freedom of life in her childhood village, Gaymead. She perhaps begins to regret her marriage to Mr. Twycott, wishing she could go back to the remembered simplicity of rural, working-class life. But it seems impossible for her to return to this: not only because of her injury, but also because of her obligations to her son. Soon, she will be presented with a choice to return to this village because of her relationship with Sam, but then she will have to choose between her family duties and her desire for a different, freer kind of life.

❝ "You are not happy, Mrs. Twycott, I'm afraid?" he said.

"O, of course not! I lost my husband only the year before last."

"Ah! I meant in another way. You'd like to be home again?"

"This is my home—for life. The house belongs to me. But I understand"—She let it out then. "Yes, Sam. I long for home—our home! I should like to be there, and never leave it, and die there." But she remembered herself. "That's only a momentary feeling. I have a son, you know, a dear boy. He's at school now."

Related Characters: Sam Hobson , Sophy Twycott (speaker), Randolph Twycott

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 49-50

Explanation and Analysis

Sophy's relationship with Sam gives her a glimpse of the freedom that she lacks in her current social position. Because Sam had once proposed marriage to Sophy, he becomes an embodiment of all the possibilities that her life might have had if she had not chosen to marry Mr. Twycott. After their reunion, Sam seems to be the only person who truly understands and cares about Sophy. He recognizes the fact that she is unhappy, and not simply because of her grief at her husband's death—that she is not entirely at "home" in the high society of London. This use of the word "home" recalls a remark that Sophy had made much earlier, before her marriage to Mr. Twycott, explaining why she had become engaged to Sam—"it would be a home for me." Now Sophy again searches for a "home" in her relationship with Sam—the possibilities of freedom and happiness that are denied to her as Mr. Twycott's widow. But she hesitates to fulfill her desire for a home with Sam because of her sense of duty to her son. She is clearly aware that Randolph, because of his obsession with social status, would disapprove of her marrying Sam. But she feels incapable of

disobeying her son's wishes, and so denies herself the possibility of happiness with Sam.

"I forgot, ma'am, that you've been a lady for so many years."
"No, I am not a lady," she said sadly. "I never shall be. But he's a gentleman, and that—makes it—O how difficult for me!"

Related Characters: Sam Hobson , Sophy Twycott (speaker), Randolph Twycott

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

Sophy and Sam's relationship has been altered since they last met because of the social differences that now separate them—the casual familiarity that Sam had shown towards Sophy when they were both working together in Mr. Twycott's household has been replaced by a more cautious respect befitting a woman of Sophy's social ranking. But Sophy insists that she is not a "lady," having never truly learned how to properly behave and act within this social circle, and never having been fully accepted by it. She admits this with some sadness because she knows that it is the source of the rift between her and her son. It is Randolph's obsession with high society—his desire to be considered a "gentleman"—that leads him to disregard and ultimately sacrifice his mother to his own ambition. Here, Sophy suggests that it is Randolph's obsession with being perceived as a "gentleman" that will make it impossible for him to accept the idea that she might marry Sam.

Part III Quotes

The air and Sam's presence had revived her: her cheeks were quite pink—almost beautiful. She had something to live for in addition to her son. A woman of pure instincts, she knew there had been nothing really wrong in the journey, but supposed it conventionally to be very wrong indeed.

Related Characters: Sophy Twycott, Sam Hobson , Randolph Twycott

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

Sophy's relationship with Sam gives her a brief glimpse of a freedom that she has not really experienced throughout her marriage to Mr. Twycott. Her life in London over the past 14 years had drained her youth; now, it seems to "revive" itself briefly, her cheeks turning "quite pink—almost beautiful." Since the death of her husband, Sophy has had nothing to live for besides her son—a relationship that has caused her more despair than happiness. For perhaps the first time, Sophy is now doing something simply for her own happiness, rather than out of a sense of duty or obligation to others. However, she is quite aware that her relationship with Sam would be met with social disapproval. It is not only the fact that Mr. Twycott has died recently, but also the social difference that now separates Sophy and Sam, that makes their relationship "conventionally [...] very wrong indeed." Sophy herself is not particularly concerned with social convention, but she *is* concerned about the opinion of her son, who will share society's view of Sophy and Sam's relationship as "wrong"—not from a moral standpoint, but rather from the standpoint of social respectability, which is what matters most to him.

"I have a son . . . I almost fancy when I am miserable sometimes that he is not really mine, but one I hold in trust for my late husband. He seems to belong so little to me personally, so entirely to his dead father. He is so much educated and I so little that I do not feel dignified enough to be his mother . . . Well, he would have to be told."

Related Characters: Sophy Twycott (speaker), Randolph Twycott , Sam Hobson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Sophy again hesitates to commit to Sam's proposal for marriage because she is afraid of how her son will react. She hints at the rift that has opened up between herself and her son because of the difference between her humble social origins and Randolph's upper-class education. Because of the differences in their social position, Sophy feels that Randolph is not truly "hers," but rather someone she is simply "holding in trust" for her dead husband—in other words, she is taking care of Randolph, but without Randolph truly belonging to her. Randolph has been raised to follow in his father's footsteps—he is to be highly educated, a "gentleman," and an ordained priest—but in the

process, his mother, with her quite different background, has been shunted aside. Although Sophy reacts to this situation by believing that she is "not dignified enough" to be Randolph's mother, Sophy is in fact the most dignified character; the story suggests that the cruelty of the social code that Randolph blindly follows constitutes a far greater indignity.

❝ They promenaded under the lurid July sun, this pair, so wide apart, yet so near, and Sophy saw the large proportion of boys like her own, in their broad white collars and dwarf hats, and all around the rows of great coaches under which was jumbled the debris of luxurious luncheons; bones, pie-crusts, champagne-bottles, glasses, plates, napkins, and the family silver; while on the coaches sat the proud fathers and mothers; but never a poor mother like her. If Randolph had not appertained to these, had not centred all his interests in them, had not cared exclusively for the class they belonged to, how happy would things have been!

Related Characters: Sophy Twycott, Randolph Twycott

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Sophy struggles to work up the courage to tell Randolph of her intention to marry Sam. She comes up with the idea of telling Randolph at a cricket match in hopes that he might be distracted enough by the excitement of the game to care too much about "domestic matters." But, surrounded by the fashionable, happy families at the cricket match, she loses her courage, worried that the contrast between her story and the glittering world of upper-class society would be too extreme. In this passage, the phrase "this pair, so wide apart, yet so near" represents the relationship between Sophy and Randolph—although they are "near" by virtue of their familial bond, they are "wide apart" owing to the differences in their social positions as well as their values and attitudes. The narrator describes the physical markers of a luxurious upper-class lifestyle—"broad white collars," "dwarf hats," "great coaches," "luxurious luncheons," "pie-crusts," "champagne-bottles," "the family silver"—as a way of heightening Sophy's sense of exclusion from this way of life. The sudden contrast between the "proud fathers and mothers" at the cricket match and the phrase "never a poor mother like her" shows Sophy's sense of painful isolation from this world that her son fits in with so easily. At the end of the passage, Sophy speculates about how happy she and Randolph would have been if only Randolph did not care so exclusively about high society. Yet again, the expectations of social class are portrayed as a barrier to meaningful human relationships and true happiness.

❝ As soon as he was ordained, she argued, he would have a home of his own, wherein she, with her bad grammar and her ignorance, would be an encumbrance to him. Better obliterate her as much as possible.

Related Characters: Sophy Twycott, Randolph Twycott

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

This scene captures the conflict that Sophy confronts between her love for Sam and her love for her son. She recognizes that her son's obsession with his social status will make it impossible for her to achieve both desires—she must choose between Sam or her son. While Sam offers her the possibility of happiness and freedom, she is tied to her son by bonds of family duty. In this scene, she seems to be on the verge of choosing Sam over her son, insisting that Randolph can simply "obliterate" her—erase all communication and social ties with his own mother—so that her decision will only minimally affect his own social status. The fact that she is willing to go to such an extreme measure—considering her love for Randolph—shows the difficulty of the internal conflict she faces. She has given up on the possibility that she might both maintain her relationship with her son and fulfill her desire for a married life with Sam. But Randolph is not willing to accept the possibility that he might "obliterate" his mother from his life—whether out of genuine love for her, or simply from a selfish calculation, is left ambiguous. The motif of Sophy's working-class speech and lack of education crops up again in this scene as a source of division between mother and son. Sophy's low social origin is seen as an "encumbrance" on her son's ambitions. In this passage, again, the conflict between the expectations of social class and the possibility of forming fulfilling human relationships comes to the fore.

But by indignation and contempt for her taste he completely maintained his ascendency; and finally taking her before a little cross and altar that he had erected in his bedroom for his private devotions, there bade her kneel, and swear that she would not wed Samuel Hobson without his consent. "I owe this to my father!" he said.

The poor woman swore, thinking he would soften as soon as he was ordained and in full swing of clerical work. But he did not. His education had by this time sufficiently ousted his humanity to keep him quite firm; though his mother might have led an idyllic life with her faithful fruiterer and greengrocer, and nobody have been anything the worse in the world.

Related Characters: Randolph Twycott (speaker), Sophy Twycott, Sam Hobson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 52-53

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Randolph forces his mother to choose between her desire for Sam and her duty to her son. He frames his refusal to let her marry Sam as a religious and familial duty, by making her kneel in front of his "little cross and altar" and exclaiming, "I owe this to my father!" Although Randolph frames his actions as a form of duty, the real motive, it seems, is his "contempt for her taste"—a dismissive reference to her desire for a relationship with Sam. Randolph lacks the self-awareness to ever doubt whether or not he is in the right. He is always assured of his "ascendancy" over his mother, even when his cruel actions clearly mark him as her moral inferior. In the final sentence of this passage, the narrator again points out the entirely unnecessary nature of Sophy's suffering—no one would have been harmed by her marriage to Sam, and it would have made her infinitely happier. The fact that Randolph cares more about a set of petty social norms than his mother's happiness shows the extent to which his adherence to upper-class values has diminished his own humanity.

Her lameness became more confirmed as time went on, and she seldom or never left the house in the long southern thoroughfare, where she seemed to be pining her heart away. "Why mayn't I say to Sam that I'll marry him? Why mayn't I?" she would murmur plaintively to herself when nobody was near.

Related Characters: Sophy Twycott (speaker), Sam Hobson , Randolph Twycott

Related Themes:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

To the moment of her death, Sophy is seized with doubt over whether she made the right choice in swearing not to marry Sam. She continually wonders why she shouldn't just marry Sam, showing that, unlike Randolph, she has not internalized the upper-class social norms that view this marriage as "wrong." But in the end, Sophy has chosen duty to her son over her desire for Sam. This was not simply a choice between her relationships with the two men, but also a choice between her own personal happiness on the one hand and her family duty on the other; and a choice, as well, between the freedom of a simple, rural life and the suffocating, isolating world of London high society. The fact that "her lameness became more confirmed as time went on" cements the connection between Sophy's physical immobility and the figurative immobility brought on by constricting social customs and the cruel actions of her son. She becomes increasingly confined within her own home as the possibility of a freer, more independent life with Sam closes off. Here, Sophy's regret over her decision not to remarry echoes her earlier, more implicit regret over not marrying Sam when she was younger. But this is a different kind of regret, because it is no longer about a past action she cannot change, but rather a choice that she could still change in the present moment, yet she never does. Still, what is most painful to her now, as was the case earlier in the story, is the thought of all the unfulfilled possibilities that she will never experience.

Some four years after this date a middle-aged man was standing at the door of the largest fruiterer's shop in Aldbrickham. He was the proprietor, but to-day, instead of his usual business attire, he wore a neat suit of black; and his window was partly shuttered. From the railway-station a funeral procession was seen approaching: it passed his door and went out of the town towards the village of Gaymead. The man, whose eyes were wet, held his hat in his hand as the vehicles moved by; while from the mourning coach a young smooth-shaven priest in a high waistcoat looked black as a cloud at the shopkeeper standing there.

Related Characters: Sam Hobson , Randolph Twycott , Sophy Twycott

Related Themes: 

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Explanation and Analysis

This short ending passage marks a sharp shift in perspective. Throughout the story, the perspective had been closely tied with Sophy's consciousness, with a few important exceptions: the opening scene, in which we see her through the eyes of the audience members at a concert, and some scenes from Mr. Twycott's perspective when he makes the decision to marry Sophy. Now, the perspective again shifts away from Sophy's consciousness, for a quite natural reason: she has just died. The omission of any character names emphasizes the distance of this new, third-person omniscient perspective: we are never explicitly told that this is *Sophy*'s funeral procession, and we are left to infer that the middle-aged grocery store owner and the "young smooth-shaven priest" are Sam and Randolph, respectively. This shift to a more distant perspective—seeing Sophy's funeral procession as if the reader were simply a bystander, knowing nothing of the stories of the people involved—paradoxically heightens the emotional impact of her death. Like a camera lens, the perspective captures the depth of Sam's grief ("whose eyes were wet") and the extent of Randolph's contempt for Sam ("looked black as a cloud") without having to delve into the consciousness of either character. The closing image of the story is of Randolph looking resentfully at Sam—almost as if he hates Sam simply for presuming to propose marriage to his mother. Sam shows far more grief at Sophy's death than her own son does, showing the unselfish nature of Sam's love for Sophy. In contrast, Randolph's relationship with his mother has been entirely self-centered, caring not about her desires or happiness and only about the potential impact of her decisions on his own life. It may also be that Randolph feels bitter at Sam for experiencing more grief at his mother's death than he himself does—a kind of irrational jealousy for the human emotions that Randolph's upper-class upbringing has deprived him of.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART I

At an outdoor concert, a young woman (Sophy) sits in a **wheelchair** beside her adolescent son (Randolph), who is wearing a uniform from a prestigious school. The audience members sitting behind the woman admire her **intricately-braided hair**. As she leaves with her son at the end of the recital, the curious audience members exchange information about her—she is the second wife of the vicar of a nearby parish, and she cannot walk. The others view her as a woman who must have an interesting story in her past.

The beginning of the story lets the reader see Sophy and her son Randolph as an outsider would, through the eyes of the other audience members. The narrator provides only minor, external details—Sophy's braided hair, her age and beauty, Randolph's prestigious school uniform—and the audience members' interpretations of those details, rather than providing any explicit biographical details, or any access to Sophy or Randolph's thoughts. This situates the reader within the world of social convention, where perceptions of social status matter more than character. The details that the narrator does provide, however, will later become important symbols within the narrative: the braided hair is a useless adornment that Sophy spends hours doing, a symbol of her isolation and unhappiness, although it is perceived by outsiders as a sign of refinement and beauty; the wheelchair stands in for the limitations that have been imposed on her by her marriage to the vicar; and the son's uniform shows his education (and its accompanying social status) that will drive such a wedge between him and his mother. This phase of the narration comes to a close when the audience members speculate that Sophy must have a story in her past, which anticipates the flashback in the following scene.

As Sophy goes home with her son Randolph, he becomes impatient with her when she makes a minor grammatical mistake. She accepts his criticism without complaint, but this incident prompts her to think about her past, as she wonders whether she has made the right choices to lead her to this point.

In this scene, and in the rest of the story, grammar is a proxy for social class. Randolph is more educated than his mother, who has never quite escaped from all markers of her low social origin. He is clearly ashamed of his mother's inability to conform to the expectations of her current social position, and he expresses this through irritation at her slightest mistakes. His cruelty towards his mother in this scene, and her passive acceptance of it, foreshadows his later treatment of her.

Sophy remembers her life as a parlor-maid in the house of her current husband, the vicar Mr. Twycott. She recalls the death of his first wife. On the night the vicar's wife died, Sophy had walked home with a young man, Sam Hobson, who worked as a gardener in the same household. In the flashback, Sam flirts with her and hints at the possibility that the two of them might marry in the future, but Sophy rebuffs him, telling him he is going too fast for her.

This flashback scene sets into motion two of the plot's main events: first, Mr. Twycott's marriage to Sophy (which is only possible once Mr. Twycott's first wife dies); and second, Sophy's unfulfilled relationship with Sam. The relationship between Sophy and Sam in this passage is quite different than the interactions between them later in the story. Here, Sam is overly forward with Sophy (telling her he will have a "try" at her, trying to kiss her), showing that they are on the same social level. Later on, when they reunite following Mr. Twycott's death, Sam will be much more respectful and indirect, perhaps owing to greater maturity as well the social distance that has opened up between them after Sophy's elevation to the status of "lady." Later in her life, this scene may become a source of regret for Sophy, as she wonders what her life might have been like if she had married Sam.

After his wife's death, the vicar, Mr. Twycott, goes on living more or less as he had before, with all the same servants: the cook, the housemaid, the parlor-maid (Sophy), and the gardener (Sam). But he soon realizes that he has too many servants now that his wife has died, and he decides to dismiss some of them.

Although this part of the narrative had started out as a flashback of Sophy's, the perspective shifts now to Mr. Twycott's point of view. For much of the scene that follows, the reader sees Sophy through the vicar's eyes. This technique parallels the opening scene in which the narrator first introduces Sophy through the eyes of the anonymous crowd of audience members. In both cases, the way that other characters perceive Sophy becomes more important than Sophy's own feelings and desires, again foreshadowing her tendency to subsume her desires beneath the wishes of other characters.

One day, Sophy tells Mr. Twycott that she wants to leave her job as a parlor-maid, explaining that the gardener, Sam, has asked her to marry him. When the vicar asks if Sophy really wants to marry Sam, she responds that she doesn't really, but it would "be a home" for her, and she knows that the vicar must dismiss one of the servants anyway.

In this exchange with Mr. Twycott, it seems almost as if Sophy's actual desires or romantic feelings are irrelevant to her decision about marrying Sam. Instead, she wants to marry Sam because of something else she desires—in this case, having a home. This foreshadows her later decision to marry Mr. Twycott, which she does not so much because she loves the vicar, but because she respects him too much to turn him down. In addition, her admission that she does not really want to marry Sam in this scene might cast some doubt on the question of whether her later desire to marry Sam after the vicar's death is really a product of her love for Sam, or simply a desire for what Sam represents to her (her old life that she has left behind).

A day or two later, Sophy tells Mr. Twycott that she does not want to leave after all, explaining that she and Sam have had an argument. Mr. Twycott reflects on his affection for Sophy and wonders what he would do if she were to leave. Sophy ends up staying, and one of the other servants leaves instead.

In this passage, the reader continues to see Sophy through Mr. Twycott's eyes. The reader gets no insight into the nature of the argument between Sophy and Sam that causes her to call off her marriage to him; instead, the narrator shows only the argument's impact on the relationship between Sophy and Mr. Twycott. Therefore, although we understand Mr. Twycott's motivation for proposing marriage to Sophy, it is impossible to fully understand Sophy's motivations for changing her original plan of marrying Sam and deciding to stay in Mr. Twycott's household instead.

Mr. Twycott falls ill and Sophy takes care of him. One day, she falls down the stairs while carrying a tray to his room. She badly **injures her foot**, and the surgeon tells her that she will never again be able to walk or stand for long periods of time. She tells Mr. Twycott that she must leave his household since she can no longer perform her work duties with her injured foot. She hints that she could work as a seamstress instead. Mr. Twycott, moved by what she has suffered on his account, exclaims that she must not leave him. He kisses her and asks her to marry him. Sophy is not quite in love with Mr. Twycott, but she feels that she cannot refuse someone she admires so much, and she agrees to marry him.

Sophy's injury is the pivotal event that changes her life. Her immobility makes it impossible for her to work as a parlor-maid. At first, she plans to continue working and simply change her occupation, showing how much she values her independence even when circumstances make this difficult. But Mr. Twycott, who has come to recognize how much he depends upon Sophy both practically and emotionally, is troubled by the possibility that she might leave his household, and also feels that her injured foot is a sacrifice she has made on his account, moving him to propose marriage to her. Therefore, Sophy's immobility on account of her injury coincides precisely with the start of her new life as a wife to Mr. Twycott. Sophy's physical immobility comes to symbolize the social immobility she feels in this new role, deprived of her independence and freedom to make her own choices, and trapped by a set of unfamiliar social norms. The fact that Sophy has no apparent romantic desire for Mr. Twycott, and simply goes along with the marriage proposal because she respects him too much to refuse, shows her tendency to put others' desires ahead of her own—a character trait that will resurface in her relationship with her son.

Sophy and Mr. Twycott have a small, secretive wedding with no guests. Mr. Twycott is aware that he is committing "social suicide" by marrying Sophy. They move from their country home to a small house in **London**, intending to escape from everyone who knew that Sophy had once been Mr. Twycott's maid.

Mr. Twycott's awareness that he has committed "social suicide" by marrying Sophy, and the steps he takes to mitigate the damage to his social reputation, shows that he is in fact quite concerned with the social conventions that he initially seems to flaunt in his marriage to Sophy. Their change in location from the country parish of Gaymead (symbolizing the carefree simplicity of rural life) to London (symbolizing the world of high society), which is undertaken to preserve Mr. Twycott's social reputation, also symbolizes the shift that is about to take place in Sophy's life on account of her marriage to Mr. Twycott.

Sophy and Mr. Twycott remain married for 14 years. Mr. Twycott tries to improve Sophy's education so that she can fit into the social role of a "lady." But Sophy still struggles with aspects of this role, including her inability to master proper grammar. This causes other people in their social circle to disrespect Sophy, including her own son (Randolph), who has been highly educated and begins to be irritated by his mother's "deficiencies."

Mr. Twycott's investments into Sophy's education, intended to fit her into the role of an upper-class wife, show that, despite his affection for her, he is not quite willing to accept her as she is, with all her lower-class mannerisms. Instead, he implicitly treats her use of language and her ignorance of upper-class culture as an object of shame, something that ought to be changed. Yet, unable to fully shed these traces of her upbringing, Sophy finds herself shunned and isolated from the rest of her husband's social circle. Her own son, absorbing the values of the society he is raised into, begins to reject his own mother, seeing her social origins as something to be ashamed of. This outcome demonstrates the pettiness of superficial social conventions, which damage human relationships.

Returning to the present moment, Sophy continues to live in **London**, with her **injured foot** and fading youth, and spends much time **braiding her hair**. Mr. Twycott, who is 20 years older than Sophy, has just caught a serious illness.

The narrator never describes Sophy's life as Mr. Twycott's wife in detail; fourteen years pass by in the course of two paragraphs. The reader is never given much insight into Sophy's feelings about her married life, besides the observation that her son's disdain was her "great grief." Instead, the passage of time and Sophy's emotions about the marriage are both expressed through these small details: her habit of "wast[ing] hours braiding her beautiful hair," her youth fading, and her worsening foot injury that leaves her unable to walk. All of these details express the monotony and isolation of her existence, and implicitly hint at her growing dissatisfaction.

PART II

Mr. Twycott soon dies of his illness. In her husband's will, Sophy is treated like a child: she is left with no control over the estate, or even over her son's education, only her own modest personal income. She is left with little to occupy her time, besides seeing her son on holidays, and she continues incessantly **braiding her hair**. Mr. Twycott had bought her a villa to live in after his death, where she now lives out her isolated existence.

After her husband's death, Sophy's life is further characterized by monotony and lack of freedom. Mr. Twycott's treatment of Sophy as a "child," with no control over the estate, demonstrates Mr. Twycott's social prejudices and deepens Sophy's lack of independence. Again, the symbol of braiding hair resurfaces to express the tedium and apparent superficiality of Sophy's life. The villa that her husband leaves to her after his death becomes almost a kind of prison in which she lives out a lonely, diminished existence.

As he grows older, Sophy's son Randolph grows more and more distant from his mother, with his aristocratic manners and his growing lack of interest in anything or anyone not belonging to elite society. Following her husband's death, Sophy soon loses the artificial upper-class tastes she had acquired from her marriage, and her son, seeing himself as a "gentleman," becomes increasingly ashamed of his mother's "mistakes" and humble origins. Two years pass. Sophy's life becomes dreary in its loneliness and idleness, and she even starts to wish that she could go back to the village where she was born and work in the fields.

As Randolph grows older, the relationship between Sophy and her son grows increasingly distant. He embraces the values of upper-class society far more fervently than even his own father, perhaps out of a sense of shame about his mother's origins. His natural human sympathies grow dull, and he is unable to see the love that his mother has for him—showing the distorting effect that social expectations can have upon human relationships. Sophy is the exact opposite of Randolph in that she values her relationships with other people over how she is perceived by society, as indicated by how quickly she sheds the few upper-class mannerisms she has managed to acquire. Sophy's lack of freedom and independence as a widow is owing to a combination of her foot injury (which makes her physically unable to walk) as well as the social expectations of how she should act as an upper-class widow and mother. She begins to dream of her old childhood village, Gaymead, which comes to symbolize the freedom that is denied to her now—a desire for freedom that perhaps indicates her regret over her decision to marry Mr. Twycott, and everything that has come along with that decision. It is not mainly her physical injury that keeps her from fulfilling this dream of freedom, but mostly, it seems, her sense of duty to her son—even though this relationship increasingly gives her far more grief than joy.

One day, rising early to watch country vehicles passing by with vegetables for the market, Sophy recognizes the driver of one of the wagons as Sam, the former gardener of her dead husband's estate, and the man she almost married. Although Sophy had never truly loved him, she had often wondered whether her life might have been happier had she married him. Now, she feels a "tender interest" in him and wonders when he will drive past her house again.

The country vehicles carrying vegetables hold a special significance for Sophy, as they serve as a reminder of the rural lifestyle she has left behind. London, for Sophy, is a place of imprisonment and death; the countryside, by contrast, is a place of youth and life, symbolized here by the teeming piles of vegetables. The vehicles are also associated with freedom because of their mobility, in contrast to the immobility that characterizes Sophy's life in London. It is significant that Sophy is reunited with Sam in this space at the edge of the city and the country, between the freedom of the road and the isolation of her villa: a symbol of the choice that her relationship with Sam presents to her, whether to stay in the prison that is her present life, or embrace that promise of freedom. When Sophy sees Sam on the country road, the narrator explicitly notes what has been implied, but never quite said, throughout the story up to this point: the fact that Sophy feels some regret over her decision to marry Mr. Twycott rather than Sam. Sophy is honest enough with herself to understand that what she feels towards Sam is not really love, but rather a sense of the possibilities that were lost when she gave up the opportunity to marry Sam. Even so, this feeling of regret is enough to awaken a genuine tenderness for Sam that will grow into something perhaps more akin to love.

For the rest of the morning, Sophy watches for Sam's carriage, and she calls out his name as he passes by again. Sam's face lights up as he recognizes her. Sophy asks him if he knew she lived in this area; he tells her that he did, and often looked around in hopes of seeing her. He explains that he has left his old gardening jobs to become a manager at a market-garden in London. He admits that he had moved to this area because he had seen the notice of Mr. Twycott's death in the newspaper, which had revived his interest in Sophy.

This scene marks the first time that Sam and Sophy have talked in 16 years, and the relationship between the two characters has changed considerably. While Sam's social status has improved (going from a hired gardener to a manager of a market-garden), it has not improved to nearly the same degree as Sophy's. As a result (and perhaps also as a result of his increased maturity), Sam's interactions with Sophy are no longer casual, easy-going, and forward, but rather quite respectful. The conversation between Sam and Sophy reveals that this reunion is not a coincidence, but rather occurred because Sam has never really forgotten his relationship with Sophy (much as Sophy herself still wonders what her life might have been like had she married Sam), and he has actively tried to seek her out since Mr. Twycott's death.

Despite her awareness of the difference in social status that now separates her from Sam, Sophy cannot keep herself from reminiscing with him about their childhood. Sam recognizes that she is unhappy, and he asks if she would like to return home. She admits that she wants the two of them to have a home together. But she immediately tells him that this can only be a momentary feeling, that she has a son to think about. She admits that she has never really been a lady, although her son is a gentleman—a discrepancy in their social positions that has made life difficult for her.

From the start, Sophy feels that there is something unconventional about her relationship with Sam, given the difference in social status. But she ignores this voice of social convention and immediately divulges her deepest-held desires and regrets to Sam: her grief over her son, and her desire for the simple kind of life that she had given up when she decided not to marry him. To Sophy, a relationship with Sam represents the possibility of returning to her childhood village, escaping from the constraints of social convention, and embracing a new kind of freedom and happiness. This vision of home is contrasted with the lifeless, imprisoning "home" of the villa in which she lives alone. But, immediately upon expressing her regrets and dreams to Sam, she is held back by the duty that she feels towards her son. Sophy expresses the fundamental nature of her conflict with her son when she tells Sam that she is not truly a "lady" while her son is a "gentleman"—the differences between Sophy and Randolph's social origins, manners, and values are too great for her to overcome.

PART III

After this encounter, Sophy and Sam become friends again, having conversations whenever Sam passes by the house in his wagon. One day, Sam invites her on a ride through the city. They talk together as they used to when they were young, and Sophy tells Sam how lonely she is and how happy she is with him. As she returns home after the ride, Sophy feels for once that she has something to live for besides her son. Although she feels that there was nothing truly wrong in her ride with Sam, she recognizes that, in terms of social convention, there was something quite wrong about it.

For Sophy, her relationship with Sam represents the freedom that has been denied to her throughout her marriage to Mr. Twycott and during the period of her widowhood. Her lack of independence is often linked with her physical immobility (e.g. the fact that she cannot take walks by herself), but this scene shows it is as much, if not more so, a product of social conventions. On Sam's country vehicle, she is able to experience a sense of freedom and independence that has never been available to her in her London villa. Sophy has, to some extent, internalized the social values that she is subject to, and so at first, she refuses Sam's invitation and experiences misgivings as she rides with him. But, ultimately, Sophy dismisses these concerns, because her ride with Sam has made her feel a happiness she has not felt in a long time, in sharp contrast to the loneliness she has felt throughout her widowhood. Still, she recognizes that there is something "conventionally quite wrong" in her ride with Sam, even if she does not believe there was anything truly wrong about it. In recognizing that her relationship with Sam has given her "something to live for in addition to her son," Sophy is recognizing the possibility of doing something that simply gives her happiness, rather than out of duty to others. Ultimately, however, she will be forced to choose between her desire and her duty.

Despite these misgivings, Sophy gives into the temptation to go on another ride with Sam. He tells her of his plan to become a greengrocer in their home county. But he isn't sure of the plan, because, as he admits to her, he isn't sure whether Sophy would join him. He fears that someone like her, who has been a lady for so long, couldn't be a wife to a man like him. Yet, he tells her hopefully, if they were to marry, she would only have to keep watch over the shop sometimes while he is gone, and he would allow her to live as respectable a life as ever.

Sam's indirect marriage proposal to Sophy is tempered by both characters' awareness of the social differences between them. At first, Sophy agrees with Sam's humble remark that a woman like Sophy, who has been a "lady" for many years, could never marry him—suggesting that she is well aware that it would result in rejection by upper-class society, including perhaps by her own son. Regardless of these barriers, however, Sam is hopeful that Sophy might accept his proposal and gives her a picture of an idyllic life together in the grocery store.

Sophy responds that if she only had herself to think about, she would marry him, even though it would mean losing everything from her first marriage. But it is her son who is holding her back from re-marrying. She feels that her son isn't really her own, considering how much more highly educated he is than her. She feels as if she is simply holding him "in trust" for her dead husband, whose son he truly is. Sam assures her that she has the right to remarry, and it is her son who is the child, not her; but Sophy asks him to give her time to think. Sam accepts this, but she remains deeply conflicted.

Although Sophy is well aware of the consequences if she marries Sam—including losing all the wealth and property left to her by Mr. Twycott—this is not truly what holds her back from accepting Sam's marriage proposal. Rather, she is more concerned with the effects on her relationship with her son, who she knows will disapprove of the remarriage. This shows, again, Sophy's relative lack of concern for material wealth or social status, and her tendency to value her relationships with other people above all. Now, she is presented with a choice between her relationship to her son, whom she is bound to by duty but who gives her nothing but grief, and her relationship to Sam, who holds out the promise of freedom and happiness. The fact that Sophy does not feel that her son is truly "hers" shows the gulf that has been created between the two characters by the barriers of social class.

Sophy feels unable to tell her son Randolph of her desire to marry Sam, doubting that he would ever tolerate the idea of the remarriage, or that she could ever defy his wishes. At a cricket match, she tries to work up the courage to tell him, but she loses her nerve—she worries that the contrast between the wealth and spectacle of the game and its audience, and the news she has to tell him, will be too severe. She reflects on how her son has grown to care only about elite society, and she thinks of how happy their life would be if he did not care exclusively about that world.

The scene at the cricket-match demonstrates the distance that Sophy feels between herself and the upper-class society that surrounds her. Randolph belongs to that world much more than she does, while she, a "poor mother," is excluded from it. She observes how much happier both she and Randolph would be if he had not cared so exclusively about that world of high society. This suggests the damaging effect that these upper-class social values have had on Randolph himself, as well as on the relationship between Sophy and Randolph. The difficulty that Sophy has in telling Randolph of her plans to marry Sam shows the extent of her internal conflict between her sense of duty to her son (and her fear of further rejection by him) and her desire for a happier life with Sam.

Later, when they are alone in their house, Sophy tells Randolph that she is thinking of marrying again. She assures him that the marriage would not take place for a while, after he is living independently of her. At first, Randolph thinks of this as a reasonable prospect and asks who she has in mind. Her hesitation stirs a doubt in his mind, and he asks her whether his new father-in-law will be a gentleman. Reluctantly, she tells him that he would not consider her new husband a gentleman; his social status is as hers was before she married Mr. Twycott. Then she tells him the whole story of her relationship with Sam.

Randolph's initial reaction—accepting the possibility of his mother's remarriage as a reasonable prospect—shows that the problem, as he sees it, with Sophy's relationship to Sam is not the mere fact that she is re-marrying after Mr. Twycott's death, but rather the fact that she would be marrying someone of a lower social class. This, again, demonstrates the superficiality of the social values that Randolph venerates.

After hearing his mother's story, Randolph bursts into tears. Sophy tries to comfort him, but he retreats to his room. When Sophy tries to talk to him through the bedroom door, he tells her he is ashamed of her, and that her second marriage would degrade him in the eyes of the entire elite society of England. Distraught by her son's words, Sophy tells him that she is perhaps in the wrong and will refuse the marriage.

Randolph's distraught reaction to Sophy's explanation of Sam's social class is fundamentally self-centered. He does not care at all about what Sam is like as a person, or about his mother's happiness, and only worries about the repercussions for his own social ambitions. His reaction also demonstrates the disdain he has for his own mother, whose social class was, after all, the same as Sam's. Randolph's identity is closely bound up with his social status as a "gentleman," and so having a mother as well as a stepfather belonging to a lower social class would be an insurmountable blow to his self-image—this is why he reacts so strongly to his mother's news. The fact that Sophy insists that she, rather than her son, must be in the wrong shows how much she cares about her son and how pained she is by his distress. It also demonstrates her tendency to subsume her own desires beneath those of other people, in this case her son's desire for social prestige.

Soon, Sophy receives a letter from Sam informing her that he has acquired the grocery store and asking if he can visit her. She meets with him, but tells him she cannot yet give him a final answer to his offer.

Sophy continues to put her own happiness, as well as Sam's, on hold as she tries to reach a resolution with her son.

Four or five years pass as Sophy tries to persuade Randolph to let her marry Sam. She tells her son that he can obliterate all connections with her once he is ordained as a minister. But Randolph remains adamant, making her swear before a cross not to marry Sam without his consent. He insists that he owes it to his dead father to prevent her from marrying Sam. Sophy swears to obey Randolph, but hopes that one day her son's heart might soften.

The fact that Sophy is willing to tell her own son that he can "obliterate" her—forget about her and cut all ties—shows how desperate she is for a happier life with Sam, and how close she is to choosing her own desires and happiness above her duty to her son. It also shows how she is perhaps starting to admit to herself that her relationship with her son is damaged beyond saving. Sophy's decision to comply with her son's wishes in swearing not to marry Sam shows both her futile hope that somehow her two contradictory desires—for a marriage to Sam, and a good relationship with her son—might still be reconciled, as well as her inability to put her own desires above those of her son's. In demanding that his mother swear not to marry Sam, Randolph draws upon the authority of religion as well as his duty to his dead father. It is unclear whether Randolph sincerely believes that his refusal to let his mother marry Sam is backed up by religion and family duty, or whether he is simply using these symbols to further manipulate her and shame her into making this promise. Even if he is sincere in his belief that he is simply fulfilling his duty to his father and to religion, he never acknowledges that he might also owe a duty to his mother and her happiness. Unlike Sophy, Randolph only ever recognizes the duties that happen to be convenient for his own desires.

But Randolph never changes his mind, his social refinement having "ousted his humanity." Sophy pines away, confined to her house on account of her **injured foot**, wondering why she shouldn't marry Sam.

The fact that Randolph never questions his decision to force his mother to swear not to marry Sam shows just how severely the false, petty values of upper-class society have destroyed his capacity for sympathy, including even his love for his own mother. He is as damaged, perhaps even more severely damaged, by this society than Sophy is. Sophy, after all, never truly buys into the false values of this society, even if she is a casualty of her son's identification with those values. By giving up the possibility of marriage to Sam, Sophy also gives up the possibility of freedom and independence that this relationship had promised, a reality that is expressed symbolically through her worsening foot injury. She feels a regret akin to her earlier regret about marrying Mr. Twycott rather than Sam—although now, instead of an action in the past that she can no longer change, her regret is about a choice in the present that she could change at any moment. It is ultimately not her son's choice, but her own choice that keeps her from fulfilling her desire for happiness with Sam.

Four years later, Sophy dies, and Sam, looking on from his grocery store, cries at her funeral procession. From the mourning coach, Randolph, now a priest, looks at Sam with an expression "black as a cloud."

In this final scene, the narrative perspective shifts, and the narrator describes the characters as if the readers knew nothing about their stories, not even using their names. The narrator never explains the causes of Sophy's death, but the reader could infer that the stress and sadness from her conflict with her son and her unfulfilled love for Sam were contributing factors. Sam, who looks on from his grocery store, is the only character who displays true grief for Sophy's passing, showing how sincerely he cared for her. In contrast, Randolph does not seem to be grieving for his mother at all, instead preoccupied by his irrational hatred for Sam. Perhaps Randolph hates Sam for what he sees as his presumption in proposing to marry his mother, and for the inconvenience that Sam has caused to Randolph in his quest for social prestige. Or perhaps Randolph feels an unconscious jealousy of Sam because of Sam's obvious, openly expressed love for Sophy—a love that Randolph no longer knows how to feel. The ending scene of Sophy's funeral procession is especially tragic in what it suggests about all the unfulfilled possibilities of Sophy's life—possibilities that, we now know, will never be achieved.

HOW TO CITE

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