

EBSCO Publishing Citation Format: MLA (Modern Language Assoc.):

NOTE: Review the instructions at http://support.ebsco.com/help/?int=ehost&lang=&feature_id=MLA and make any necessary corrections before using. **Pay special attention to personal names, capitalization, and dates.** Always consult your library resources for the exact formatting and punctuation guidelines.

Works Cited

Hurd, Mary. "The Mayor of Casterbridge." *Masterplots, Fourth Edition*, November 2010, pp. 1-4.
EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lkh&AN=103331MP422329320000196&site=lrc-plus.

<!--Additional Information:

Persistent link to this record (Permalink): <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lkh&AN=103331MP422329320000196&site=lrc-plus>

End of citation-->

The Mayor of Casterbridge**Thomas Hardy**

Born: June 2, 1840; Higher Bockhampton, Dorset, England

Died: January 11, 1928; Dorchester, Dorset, England

Quick Reference

First published: 1886

Type of work: Novel

Type of plot: Psychological realism

Time of plot: Nineteenth century

Locale: Wessex, England

Principal characters

Michael Henchard, the mayor of Casterbridge

Susan Henchard-Newson, his abandoned wife

Elizabeth-Jane Newson, his stepdaughter

Richard Newson, a sailor

Donald Farfrae, a grain merchant

Lucetta le Sueur, Henchard's beloved and later Farfrae's wife

The Story:

On a late summer afternoon in the early nineteenth century, a young farm couple with their baby arrives on foot at the village of Weydon-Priors. A fair is in progress. The couple, tired and dusty, enters a refreshment tent where the husband proceeds to get so drunk that he offers his wife and child for sale. A sailor, a stranger in the village, buys the wife, Susan, and the child, Elizabeth-Jane, for five guineas. The young woman tears off her wedding ring and throws it in her drunken husband's face; then, carrying her child, she follows the sailor out of the tent.

When he awakes sober the next morning, Michael Henchard, the young farmer, realizes what he has done. After taking an oath not to touch liquor for twenty years, he searches many months for his wife and child. In a western seaport, he is told that three persons answering his description emigrated a short time before. He gives up his search and wanders on until he comes to the town of Casterbridge. There, he decides to seek his fortune.

The sailor, Richard Newson, convinces Susan Henchard that she has no moral obligations to the husband who sold her and her child. He marries her and moves with his new family to Canada. Later, they return to England. Eventually, Susan learns that her marriage to Newson is illegal, but before she can remedy the situation Newson is lost at sea. Susan and her attractive eighteen-year-old daughter, Elizabeth-Jane, return to Weydon-Priors. There, they hear that Henchard has gone to Casterbridge.

Henchard has become a prosperous grain merchant and the mayor of Casterbridge. When Susan and her daughter arrive in the town, they hear that Henchard has sold some bad grain to bakers and that restitution is expected. Donald Farfrae, a young Scots corn expert who is passing through Casterbridge, hears of Henchard's predicament and tells him a method for partially restoring the grain. Farfrae so impresses Henchard and the people of the town that they prevail on him to remain. Farfrae becomes Henchard's manager.

When Susan and Henchard meet, they decide that Susan and Elizabeth-Jane should take lodgings and that Henchard will begin to pay court to Susan. Henchard admits to young Farfrae that he has been philandering with a young woman from Jersey named Lucetta le Sueur. He asks Farfrae to meet Lucetta and prevent her from coming to Casterbridge.

Henchard and Susan are married. Elizabeth-Jane develops into a beautiful young woman for

whom Donald Farfrae feels a growing attraction. Henchard wants Elizabeth-Jane to take his name, but Susan refuses his request, much to his mystification. He notices that Elizabeth-Jane does not possess any of his personal traits.

Henchard and Farfrae fall out over Henchard's harsh treatment of a simpleminded employee. Farfrae has surpassed Henchard in popularity in Casterbridge. The break between the two men becomes complete when a country dance sponsored by Farfrae draws all the town's populace, leaving Henchard's competing dance unattended. Anticipating his dismissal, Farfrae sets up his own establishment but refuses to take any of Henchard's business away from him. Henchard refuses to allow Elizabeth-Jane and Farfrae to see each other.

Henchard receives a letter from Lucetta saying she plans to pass through Casterbridge to pick up her love letters. When Lucetta fails to keep the appointment, Henchard puts the letters in his safe. Susan falls sick and writes a letter for Henchard, to be opened on the day that Elizabeth-Jane is married. Soon afterward, she dies, and Henchard tells the girl that he is her real father. Looking for some documents to corroborate his story, he finds the letter his wife had left in his keeping for Elizabeth-Jane. Unable to resist, Henchard reads Susan's letter; he learns that Elizabeth-Jane is really the daughter of Newson and Susan and that his own daughter died in infancy. His wife's reluctance to have the girl take his name is explained, and Henchard's attitude toward Elizabeth-Jane becomes distant and cold.

One day, Elizabeth-Jane meets a strange woman at the village graveyard. The woman is Lucetta Templeman, formerly Lucetta le Sueur, who has inherited property in Casterbridge from a rich aunt named Templeman. She employs Elizabeth-Jane to make it convenient for Henchard, her old lover, to call on her.

Young Farfrae comes to see Elizabeth-Jane, who is away at the time. He and Miss Templeman are immediately attracted to each other, and Lucetta refuses to see Henchard any more. Elizabeth-Jane overhears Henchard berate Lucetta under his breath for refusing to admit him to her house; she becomes even more uncomfortable when she sees that Farfrae has succumbed to Lucetta's charms.

Henchard is now determined to ruin Farfrae. Advised by a weather prophet that the weather will be bad during the harvest, he buys grain heavily. When the weather stays fair, Henchard is almost ruined by low grain prices. Farfrae is able to buy grain cheap, and, when the weather turns bad late in the harvest and prices go up, Farfrae becomes wealthy.

In the meantime, Farfrae has continued his courtship of Lucetta. When Henchard threatens to expose Lucetta's past unless she marries him, Lucetta agrees to his demand. However, an old woman discloses to the village that Henchard is the man who years earlier sold his wife and child. Lucetta is ashamed and leaves town. On the day of her return, Henchard rescues her and Elizabeth-Jane from an enraged bull. He asks Lucetta to give evidence of their engagement to a

creditor. Lucetta confesses that in her absence she and Farfrae have been married. Utterly frustrated, Henchard again threatens to expose her. When Elizabeth-Jane learns of the marriage, she leaves Lucetta's service.

The news that Henchard once sold his wife and child to a sailor spreads through the village. Henchard's creditors close in, and he becomes a recluse. Henchard and Elizabeth-Jane are reconciled during his illness. Upon his recovery, he hires out to Farfrae as a common laborer.

Henchard's oath expires, and he begins to drink heavily. Farfrae plans to set up Henchard and Elizabeth-Jane in a small seed shop, but the project does not materialize because of a misunderstanding. Despite Lucetta's desire to leave the village, Farfrae becomes mayor of Casterbridge.

Jopp, a former employee of Henchard, knows of Lucetta's past, because he lived in Jersey before coming to Casterbridge. He uses this information to blackmail his way into Farfrae's employ. Henchard finally takes pity on Lucetta and gives Jopp the love letters to return to her. Before delivering them, Jopp reads the letters aloud in an inn.

When royalty visits Casterbridge, Henchard wishes to regain his old stature in the village and forces himself among the receiving dignitaries. Farfrae pushes him aside. Later, during a fight in a warehouse loft, Henchard has Farfrae at his mercy, but the younger man shames Henchard by telling him to go ahead and kill him.

The townspeople are excited over the letters they have heard read and devise a mummery employing effigies of Henchard and Lucetta riding back to back on a donkey. Farfrae's friends arrange for him to be absent from the village during the mummers' parade, but Lucetta sees it and is horrified. She dies of a miscarriage that night.

Richard Newson turns out not to have been lost after all. He comes to Casterbridge in search of Susan and Elizabeth-Jane. There, he meets Henchard, who sends him away, telling him that both Susan and Elizabeth-Jane are dead.

Elizabeth-Jane joins Henchard in his poverty. They open a seed shop and begin to prosper again in a modest way. Farfrae, to Henchard's dismay, begins to pay court to Elizabeth-Jane again, and they plan to marry soon. Newson returns, having realized that he was duped. Henchard leaves town but returns for the marriage festivities, bringing with him a goldfinch as a wedding present. When he sees that Newson has completely replaced him as Elizabeth-Jane's father, he sadly goes away. Newson is restless and departs for the sea again after Farfrae and his daughter are settled. Henchard pines away and dies, ironically, in the secret care of the simpleminded old man whom he once mistreated.

Critical Evaluation:

The decline of Michael Henchard, which comprises the primary action in Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, is enacted against the backdrop of the agricultural and manufacturing upheavals of the Industrial Revolution. Henchard is committed to preindustrial methods and attempts to hold back the town's modernization. He insists upon using old agricultural methods, for example, and his trust of a "weather prophet" to predict harvest conditions results in a ruined grain crop that threatens the town's survival. Living in an area of southwest England that is littered with decaying artifacts of Roman power, Henchard ironically finds himself struggling to assert himself in a town destined for change beyond its own choosing. Henchard meets defeat in every encounter with newer ideas and procedures; his failure to understand and his lack of moderation in his desires incite him to brutal aggression followed by pain and regret, as he becomes more and more isolated from humanity.

The extreme guilt Henchard endures for years after selling his wife and infant daughter seems indicative of the intense emotions with which he responds to circumstances. As his status grows in Casterbridge, so does the importance to him of his own good name and character. Remarrying Susan soon after she and Elizabeth-Jane appear in town is not only a means of making amends but also an ill-advised attempt to protect his reputation. Henchard loses the esteem and respect of the town's citizens because of his crop blunder, initiating and shaping his tragic relationship with Farfrae: The young man's ability to repair damaged wheat benefits the town, but it causes him to usurp rather than repair the popularity that Henchard desperately wants to preserve. The fortunes of Farfrae, the novel's representative of new methods in agriculture, rise, while those of Henchard tumble.

Like many of Hardy's novels, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* prominently features elements of coincidence and chance, as each chapter introduces unlikely events and the timely appearances of major and minor characters. In fact, many scenes in each chapter are exquisitely crafted, incorporating coincidence into the narrative action and characterization with such skill that each scene seems a miniature of the entire novel. Hardy believed that chance was a force governing things over which people have no control. However, this force operates without conscious design, and, although it represents the will of the universe, it seems to produce consequences more malign than benign. Although Hardy received much criticism for his pessimism, he referred to himself as a "meliorist," or one who sees the world improving with human aid. The reappearance of Susan and Elizabeth-Jane forms the coil necessary to Henchard's decline, as Susan's death and the knowledge that Elizabeth-Jane is Newson's daughter and not his own prompts his estrangement from Elizabeth-Jane and a feeling of being deceived by Susan.

Henchard, who ends his relationship with Lucetta when Susan arrives in town, attempts, after Susan's death, to resume it. Lucetta, put off by Henchard's manner, refuses and marries Farfrae instead. Henchard's sense of betrayal by women increases dramatically when the "furmity woman," arrested and brought before Henchard as judge, relates the story of Henchard's sale of his wife and daughter nearly two decades earlier. Strangely, Henchard admits the deed and ruins

his reputation. The event brings to light Henchard's continuing feelings of shame at the deed, which coincide with Henchard's socioeconomic failure to hasten his end.

Numerous critics have found elements of Greek tragedy in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Reflecting Hardy's own tragic view of life and partially refuting Victorian optimism and sentimentality, the novel seems to represent a reinvention of ancient tragedy for the nineteenth century. As Greek tragedy emphasized the connection between character and fate, so Hardy's novel focuses upon character and fate; Henchard experiences conflicts with the town and with himself. Henchard's passionate, turbulent character directly affects his rise and fall within Casterbridge, as well as his inability to find any respite from shame and guilt. Much as in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos* (c. 429 b.c.e.; *Oedipus Tyrannus*, 1715), Henchard's initial error occurs prior to the time depicted in the novel proper. Oedipus unwittingly slays his own father, Laius, twenty years before the main events of Sophocles' play, in which he suffers the consequences of his action. Henchard's betrayal of his family similarly recedes to the background of his life, only to reappear eighteen years later, driving the events depicted in the novel. Hardy's rustics, or inhabitants of Casterbridge, function similarly to a Greek chorus, voicing traditional wisdom and reflecting the social changes occurring in the town.

Hardy's subtitle for this book, *The Life and Death of a Man of Character*, suggests his admiration for Henchard, who is the center of interest in the book. Despite his misdeeds early in the story, Henchard exhibits virtues that, in comparison with the traits of the novel's other characters, are exceptional. Henchard's rise to prominence in Casterbridge accentuates his authority in accordance with the strength and vitality he gains by becoming the town's leading businessman. Henchard's reliance on preindustrial agriculture, however, endangers the town's welfare and paves the way for its acceptance of Farfrae's new agricultural procedures and its eventual preference of Farfrae over Henchard to be mayor.

Next to the passionate Henchard, Farfrae seems mechanical and knowledgeable — a paler specimen of humanity. In the tests of strength between Henchard and Farfrae, Henchard proves the stronger when he beats Farfrae in a physical confrontation. By contrast, Farfrae's agricultural skills consistently prove superior to Henchard's, as do his interpersonal skills with townspeople and with women.

Henchard's actions — resulting from his own difficult temperament — have created the world he inhabits. In suffering from ill-advised actions and then defiantly standing up to forces arrayed against him, Henchard appears larger than life. He finally retreats, however, from his attempts to impose his will upon a world he has created but in which he no longer has a place. This retreat signals that he accepts his doom. Hardy's novel demonstrates that life can destroy essentially good individuals as well as bad.

Essay by: "Critical Evaluation" by Mary Hurd

Further Reading

Berger, Sheila. *Thomas Hardy and Visual Structures: Framing, Disruption, Process*. New York: New York University Press, 1991. Berger analyzes the narrative style of Hardy's novels, focusing on acts of storytelling, subjective points of view, and the construction of the omniscient narrator.

Daleski, H. M. *Thomas Hardy and Paradoxes of Love*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997. Reevaluates the treatment of gender in Hardy's novels, defending the author from charges of sexism and maintaining that some of Hardy's female characters are depicted sympathetically. Argues that Hardy is the premodern precursor of later depictions of sexual failures and catastrophic ends.

Enstice, Andrew. *Thomas Hardy: Landscapes of the Mind*. London: Macmillan, 1979. A good historical analysis of the novel; provides a thorough discussion of nineteenth century Dorset and its economic circumstances, using the town's history to interpret Hardy's rendition of Casterbridge.

Kramer, Dale, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999. Combines an introduction and general overview of all of Hardy's work with specific demonstrations of Hardy's ideas and literary skills. Individual essays explore Hardy's biography; his aesthetics; and the impact on his work of developments in science, religion, and philosophy in the late nineteenth century. Also contains a detailed chronology of Hardy's life and Jakob Lothe's essay "Variants on Genre: The Return of the Native, The Mayor of Casterbridge, The Hand of Ethelberta."

Mallett, Phillip, ed. *The Achievement of Thomas Hardy*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000. A collection of essays that analyze Hardy's representations of nature and of poets, the architecture of his work, and other topics. Includes bibliography and index.

Page, Norman, ed. *Oxford Reader's Companion to Hardy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. An encyclopedia containing three hundred alphabetically arranged entries that examine Hardy's work and discuss his family and friends, important places in his life and work, his influences, critical approaches to his writings, and a history of his works' publication. Also includes a chronology of his life, lists of places and characters in his fiction, a glossary, and a bibliography.

Tomalin, Claire. *Thomas Hardy*. New York: Penguin, 2007. This thorough and finely written biography by a respected Hardy scholar illuminates the novelist's efforts to indict the malice, neglect, and ignorance of his fellow human beings. Also discusses aspects of his life that are apparent in his literary works.

Widdowson, Peter. *Hardy in History: A Study in Literary Sociology*. New York: Routledge, 1989. An interesting analysis of traditional readings of Hardy's novels; argues that Hardy has been produced as a rural novelist in the literary imagination but that, in reality, his writing deploys an urban vision

of Wessex. Lends a new perspective to the relationships of Casterbridge to the countryside and to London, relationships central to Michael Henchard's fate.

Williams, Raymond. *The Country and the City*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973. A seminal book on the class relations and rural-urban dislocations that underlie Hardy's representation of Wessex and the lives and fortunes of his "rural" characters.

Wolfreys, Julian, ed. "The Mayor of Casterbridge": Thomas Hardy. Houndmills, England: Macmillan, 2000. Collection of essays analyzing the novel, including the fate of Michael Henchard's character, sexuality in the novel, and the novel as a bourgeois tragedy.

Copyright of this work is the property of Salem Press and its content may not be copied without the copyright holder's express written permission except for the print or download capabilities of the retrieval software used for access. This content is intended solely for the use of the individual user.

Source: Masterplots, Fourth Edition

Accession Number: 103331MP422329320000196