

## **The Mayor of Casterbridge**

Thomas Hardy

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Page One: In meticulous detail the narrator describes a man and a woman, the woman holding a young child, walking along a country road, nearing the small village of Weydon Priors. The reader, like the narrator, is looking on from a distance – imagine a bird’s eye view. The characters are not named, but their clothing is described in detail. The observer moves closer, and perceives that although they are physically close, and no doubt man and wife with a child, there is a remarkable silence between them. Closer, an observation of the inner mind of the woman – “When she plodded along in the shade of the hedge, she had the hard, half-apathetic expression of one who deems anything possible at the hands of Time and Chance except, perhaps, fair play.”

In this way Thomas Hardy sets the stage for his novel: everything follows from what happens in the first chapter. Uncommunicative, plodding, apathetic, fatalistic woman. The husband, whose name the reader will learn is Michael Henchard, is the principal driver of the novel’s narrative; his character and his actions determine the plot. As Andy related in his biography, The Mayor of Casterbridge was first published in serial form, in periodicals. I will be interested in your comments – did you detect anything in the narrative flow that made you think that the author was mindful of keeping the reader guessing about the next instalment? Personally, I found that I had to keep notes of the convoluted plot developments so that I could check back to figure out who did or said what, and when. For Novel Club readers who despaired of making sense at various points in the book, I will gloss over the head-scratching details and attempt to define some themes that overlay the action.

The family arrives in Weydon Priors, where a fair is taking place. Hungry, they patronize a booth where an old crone is selling furmity, a kind of porridge. BUT – the “furmity woman” will surreptitiously add rum to anyone’s bowl, given the wink of an eye. Henchard orders more and

more rum, gets thoroughly drunk, sells his wife, a stranger buys her and takes her and the child away, Henchard passes out, awakens the next morning, regretful, and goes to a church where he swears never to touch alcohol for another 21 years, his age at the time. As shocking as the sale of a wife may be to 21<sup>st</sup> century readers, it was not unknown in 19<sup>th</sup> century England. Hardy spends some time recounting Henchard's search for his wife and his progress, on foot, to Casterbridge, and then we read nothing more about the intervening eighteen years.

Several themes have emerged. When hungover Henchard awakens, Hardy describes the **environment**: "the difference between the peacefulness of inferior nature and the willful hostilities of mankind was very apparent at this place." The natural world endures while mankind goes to war with itself. **Walking**: Hardy's territory is circumscribed, all within walking distance, even for many days of walking – this was in the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, long before the industrial revolution, the distances were measured in terms of human locomotive capability. **The past**: Henchard immediately regrets selling his wife, but this act in his past will be inescapable. The furmity woman will resurface, older and more crone-like; she is a living reminder of a specific incident, and Hardy will describe many physical reminders of the past - not just Henchard's past but Roman roads, old churches, and ruins in the part of southern England that Hardy called Wessex. Despite Henchard's oath to forego alcohol, and to forge a new life – which he does, in the intervening years – his past deeds will continue to haunt him and to drive the actions of other characters. Likewise, the physical, visible past is always there, reminding the living of their transitory existence. Hardy merges the personal sense of the past with the physical setting as both Michael Henchard and Susan return to the scene of the crime at some point.

Eighteen years after the events described in the first two chapters, the woman returns with a grown daughter, walking along the same dusty road into Weydon Priors. It is Susan Henchard-Newson and Elizabeth Jane. Newson, the mariner who purchased Susan, married her and took her away, is presumed dead in a shipwreck off Newfoundland. She learns from the furmity woman that Henchard went to Casterbridge. Another theme, or narrative device, emerges: **concealing the truth**. Susan and her daughter proceed to Casterbridge, find that Henchard is

Mayor and a successful dealer in corn and hay, and Susan sends Elizabeth Jane on an errand to make contact with him. The truth, revealed much later in the novel, is that Elizabeth Jane is Newson's daughter, not Henchard's, and Newson is not dead but has been effectively banished by Susan because she has been made to feel guilty for going away with him. Susan wants Henchard to believe that Elizabeth Jane is his daughter, in the hope that he will take her in and provide her with material advantages.

Henchard arranges to meet Susan at the Ring, the ruins of a Roman amphitheater, and Hardy gives the reader a careful description of the physical ruin and the effect that reminders of the ancient past have on the folk who live with it. Together they agree to shield Elizabeth Jane from learning the facts of their marital history; both will conceal, but Susan is concealing even more from Henchard.

What the characters know or don't know about each other is a recurrent plot device in Hardy's novels. He will have characters make consequential decisions and take action based on what they want to keep hidden from another. Thus Henchard doesn't know that he is not Elizabeth Jane's father until he reads Susan's letter after her death. The change in his manner, from urging the girl to change her name from Newson to Henchard to rejecting her because she isn't his daughter after all, follows from that revelation – but Elizabeth Jane is unaware of it, and is puzzled and hurt by his changed treatment of her.

Lucetta marries Donald Farfrae with short notice, afraid that he will not want her if he knows the truth about her affair with Henchard. That truth will eventually come out in a collection of Lucetta's correspondence, revealed through a series of omissions and the malicious intervention of one who has a history of dislike for Henchard. Lucetta's letters are not the only example in Hardy's novels where the plot turns on the failed delivery of a handwritten letter.

Both Farfrae and Lucetta are pivotal but secondary characters in The Mayor of Casterbridge. The novel is focused on the arc of Michael Henchard's life from poverty to wealth and power to

poverty and disgrace, and his character is the most thoroughly explored. Lucetta is a figure from Henchard's past, the past that no person can fully escape. She shows up in Casterbridge after Susan's death, recently enriched through a bequest from a wealthy relative. Her appearance in the novel serves to entangle Henchard in more difficulty, as both are anxious to conceal the truth of their affair. Hardy could have omitted her. He didn't need to provide his readers with additional reasons for the Mayor's downfall, although Lucetta gave the late Victorian readers some extra instalments and the only hint of sex in the book.

Farfrae is a new figure, the young man who comes to town on his way from his native Scotland to America, and we learn very little about his past. He has a wonderful singing voice; his sentimental ballads about his home country charm his audience at the Three Mariners Tavern.

His arrival in Casterbridge coincides with the discovery that Henchard has sold spoiled wheat; bread has been ruined and townsfolk have become ill. It happens – as often “happens” in a Hardy novel – that Farfrae has some knowledge of a treatment that mitigates the problem with the “growed wheat,” and Henchard manages to convince him to stay in Casterbridge and work as his manager. Farfrae's abilities complement Henchard's shortcomings: Farfrae is competent in business, attentive to detail, good at bookkeeping, and fair in his treatment of workers. Henchard became wealthy and powerful despite his deficiencies in these respects, but his history is catching up with him. He takes no responsibility for the bad products, angrily telling those who confront him that he himself was taken in by the people who sold it to him.

Farfrae functions as an agent of change. His arrival marks a turning point in Henchard's fortunes, both material fortunes and reputation. The business improves, thanks to Farfrae's management, but Henchard's initial appreciation turns to jealousy, especially after a naïve young girl tells him what the townspeople really think of him. From that point on the reader knows what's coming: Henchard will fall, just as Rome, so ubiquitously evident in the roads and ruins around Casterbridge, fell from a pinnacle of wealth and power.

A curious incident is described in an early chapter. Almost immediately after Farfrae's arrival Henchard invites him to his grand house and, by the fire after dinner, recounts his whole sad personal history – without, however, providing any names. In a conversation that Henchard will later regret, he succumbs, in Hardy's words, to "that strange influence which sometimes prompts men to confide to the newfound friend what they will not tell the old." Guilt and regret have perhaps moved him to confess, but by concealing the names of the affected parties, Henchard has sown the seeds of more misfortune. Now Farfrae knows about the sale of the wife, the affair with Lucetta and the promises made to her, the return of the wife, the dilemma of his obligations to two women – all information that will ultimately strengthen Farfrae's leverage with Henchard, although he doesn't suspect that at first hearing.

In the tradition of Greek tragedy, the hero always has a fatal flaw. Farfrae is a comparatively flat character: honest, trusting, even-tempered, competent, with no glaring faults. His one weakness is his failure to consider possible motives for human behavior. He doesn't suspect that Henchard could have any reason to dislike him until his former partner lures him up to the hayloft and tries to murder him. He marries Lucetta after a short courtship, glossed over in Hardy's telling, and never suspects she might be motivated by something other than sincere devotion. He seems to be a true soulmate to Elizabeth Jane, and Hardy arranges a happy marriage for the two of them after Lucetta dies, undone by public shame after the revelation of her relationship with Henchard.

Henchard is a different matter, a complex character whose most consequential flaw is his belief that he can bury his past and forge a new life, and his belief that concealing the truth buries it. When he enters the church and swears his oath of abstinence at the altar he believes he has made a start in a new direction, and he has, but we see the ambiguity in his character, an ambiguity that persists to the end of his life. He regrets, but blames Susan for leading him into this disgrace. He claims to be satisfied to be rid of her, simple woman that she is, but thinks he ought to "seize" her, to reclaim her and the little maid, his daughter. He seems to be surprised that Susan would take the child with her – Elizabeth Jane was his, after all. As he walks away from Weyden Priors, he tries to remember if he said his name while he was there – would anyone

in the town know him as Michael Henchard? Concluding that he had not, he moves on to his new life, his new identity.

That new identity works well for him. He is successful, commercially, until he isn't. His downfall is swift. Some of his misfortunes are the consequence of his own action, or inaction, as in sloppy bookkeeping. He might have avoided the problem of the bad wheat if he had inspected the stuff carefully before he bought it, but perhaps not. Once Farfrae enters the picture his enterprise becomes more businesslike, but Farfrae ultimately gets the credit for that success, and Henchard grows increasingly angry and jealous with every step of the young man's ascendancy. Wealth is very important to him, until he loses it all and discovers that he has no human capital to hold him up. He has lost his wife, squandered the respect of the people of Casterbridge, alienated his trusted partner Farfrae, treated Elizabeth Jane with surly disregard, and never got a second chance with Lucetta. He is a bitter man, inclined to blame bad luck, bad weather, other people, even witchcraft. He persists in his habit of concealing the truth – when Newson travels to Casterbridge, finds Henchard and inquires about Elizabeth Jane, Henchard tells him she is dead, and Newson leaves town, disconsolate. With that deliberate lie he satisfies his uncharitable urge to infect another man with his own despair.

The concluding chapters are a tangle of misperceptions, misinformation, and lost opportunities. Henchard vacillates between depression and resolve. Depressed, he visits a bridge where the lowly failures of Casterbridge congregate. He stares down at the water, leading the reader to anticipate suicide. Then he musters a bit more resolve and the story continues. In the meantime Farfrae and Elizabeth Jane rediscover their attraction to each other, Farfrae somehow learns about Newson and brings him and his daughter together, and the wedding of Farfrae and Elizabeth Jane is a happily-ever-after celebration, with Newson in attendance.

The festivities are underway when Henchard appears, having learned by chance of his daughter's wedding. He cleans himself up and travels to Casterbridge with the intention of wishing his step-

daughter well and hoping to win her forgiveness. He buys a wedding gift, a caged goldfinch, and approaches the house by the kitchen door, where he leaves the cage under a bush while he slips in and tells the kitchen maid he wishes to speak to the bride. Elizabeth Jane is not forgiving; instead of reconciliation she castigates him for telling Newson she was dead. This is the last time they will meet. Henchard leaves, hopeless. Days later the happy couple figures out that the dead goldfinch by the kitchen door was left by the man who appeared the night of the wedding. The dead goldfinch is an apt metaphor for Michael Henchard's despair. Elizabeth Jane has a final change of heart and she and Farfrae go in search of him.

They are too late – Henchard has died in the humblest of humble cottages, attended by Abel Whittle, an illiterate laborer. Whittle tells them that Henchard had been kind to his mother, although rough with him: “he was kind-like to mother when she wer here below, sending her the best ship-coal, and hardly any ashes from it at all, and taties, and such-like that wer very needful to her.” Whittle saw Henchard on the street, looking low and faltering, and followed him despite being told to “Go back!...why do you follow me..?” Because Whittle saw that things were bad with him, but he'd been kind to his mother and now Whittle wanted to be kind to him. It is the simplest but most profound act of Christian charity and forgiveness in the book.

Henchard left a scrap of paper pinned to the bed, his Will. He does not wish to be remembered, or mourned, or buried in consecrated ground, and Elizabeth Jane Farfrae should not be told of his death. Hardy ends with Elizabeth Jane's reflections on her own life: in her present good fortune she does not forget the “persistence of the unforeseen, when the one to whom such unbroken tranquility had been accorded in the adult stage was she whose youth had seemed to teach that happiness was but the occasional episode in a general drama of pain.”

