

J.M.S. COLLEGE, MUNGER
(A Constituent Unit under Munger University, Munger)
Department of English
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Point of View and Style in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*

Hardy's narrative style is that of the omniscient or ubiquitous narrator. This gives him a point of view that allows him to comment upon the vagaries of nature, to place himself in the mind of a character in order to give us reasons and motives, and to philosophize or describe the background to clarify whatever point he wishes to make. In short, Hardy knows all and is everywhere in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, although we learn only what he wants us to know.

Hardy's actual writing style is usually clear and is often extremely well-wrought. If an occasional awkward sentence or overly long descriptive passage comes to light, perhaps we should reflect upon the conventions of the era in which he wrote. The comparative infrequency of his lapses from clarity and economy may serve as a lesson for the student in "blue-pencilling" or revision; delineates the personae, the background, and the circumstances from an omniscient narrator's point of view.

In the first two or three pages of the book we are treated to some excellent description, especially perhaps that of Susan's face. We also learn that the couple is unhappily married, the man is discontented, they are poor and somewhat shabby, and that Susan's philosophy toward life is rather pessimistic. Furthermore, the dry dust, the barren countryside, and the "blackened-green stage of colour" of the vegetation lend an oppressive air to the scene as a prelude to the dark events to come. Hardy reveals his sombre mastery of setting, mood, and character throughout the novel, and the reader rarely has to search for clarity. Hardy's ability with dialogue is evident on two levels. The dialogue reflects his characters' social position while it adds to our knowledge of their personalities. A passage from Chapter 9 will illustrate this:

Now I am not the man to let a cause be lost for want of a word. And before ye are gone for ever I'll speak. Once more, will ye stay? There it is, flat and plain. You can see that it isn't all selfishness that makes me press 'ee; for my business is not quite so scientific as to require an intellect entirely out of the common. Others would do for the place without doubt. Some selfishness perhaps there is, but there is more; it isn't

for me to repeat what. Come bide with me — and name your own terms. I'll agree to 'em willingly and 'ithout a word gainsaying; for, hang it, Farfrae, I like thee well!

This example shows Henchard's very blunt character. Not a word is wasted, and he comes directly to the point. He uses countrified expressions but does not speak like the lower-class townspeople. Furthermore, the impetuous nature of his character is shown in both speeches by his vehement attempt to hire Farfrae because he likes him and to press upon Donald his immediate friendship, without the normal preliminaries, by insisting that he come to breakfast.

Farfrae's kind and fair disposition is amply brought out by a number of his speeches, although he is almost never given a very long speech. Farfrae's reasonableness and sweetness become somewhat cloying in the light of the struggles and transformation which Henchard is undergoing. Nevertheless, his unwillingness to commit an act of blatant vengeance or meanness, and his Scottish economy of speech are distinctly brought forth in these passages from Chapter 34.

"About that little seedsman's shop," he said; "the shop overlooking the churchyard, which is to let. It is not for myself I want it, but for our unlucky fellow-townsmen Henchard. It would be a new beginning for him, if a small one; and I have told the Council that I would head a private subscription among them to set him up in it — that I would be fifty pounds, if they would make up the other fifty among them."

"But I cannot discharge a man who was once a good friend to me? How can I forget that when I came here 'twas he enabled me to make a footing for myself? No, no. As long as I've a day's work to offer he shall do it if he chooses. 'Tis not I who will deny him such a little as that. But I'll drop the idea of establishing him in a shop till I can think more about it."

The letters of Lucetta Templeman are quite as revealing as most of her speeches. The reader wonders why she would be so reckless as to write such candid letters to Henchard. Her candor bespeaks a certain naïveté or trust on her part, but it also shows an element of abandon which Hardy carefully traces to her French background. The letters and her bantering with Farfrae show a certain sophisticated ability to play with words in a teasing manner. To Hardy — though not to us today — this is enough to characterize Lucetta with what was to the English mind French sensuality or even licentiousness. The following passages from Chapter 23 catch her character brilliantly.

"I mean all you Scotchmen," she added in hasty correction. "So free from Southern extremes. We common people are all one way or the other — warm or cold, passionate or frigid. You have both temperatures going on in you at the same time."

"It is very hard," she said with strong feelings. "Lovers ought not to be parted like that! Oh, if I had my wish, I'd let people live and love at their pleasure!"

"It is kind-hearted of you, indeed," said Lucetta. "For my part I have resolved that all my servants shall have lovers if they want them! Do make the same resolve!"

Through her speech, Hardy shows the gradual change that takes place in Elizabeth-Jane through the years. At first she has a somewhat natural bent toward good times and playfulness, although she never appears giddy. As her sorrows increase, she turns more and more to study and reflection. At the end of the novel the reader finds Elizabeth-Jane characterized somewhat as a melancholy, kind, matronly woman whose speech seems highly studied and affected, even when her words are deeply emotional:

She flushed up, and gently drew her hand away. "I could have loved you always I would have, gladly," said she. "But how can I when I know you have deceived me so — so bitterly deceived me! You persuaded me that my father was not my father — allowed me to live on in ignorance of the truth for years; and then when he, my warm-hearted real father, came to find me, cruelly sent him away with a wicked invention of my death, which nearly broke his heart. O how can I love as I once did a man who has served us like this!"

As far as the lower-class types are concerned, Hardy has characterized them as mischievous knaves who often speak in vulgar terms. Yet, they have a vigorous life of their own, and Hardy has revealed with enormous skill the picturesque qualities that can only be found in authentic folk dialect.

Another aspect of Hardy's overall style is his fondness for Gothic atmosphere — that is, secret meetings or plots or incidents occurring in gloomy or melancholy surroundings. The opening chapter of the book has this quality to it, as does Henchard's meeting with Susan at the Ring, and his discovery of the "skimmity-ride" figure in the water. With little difficulty the student can probably recall at least two more incidents or surroundings that indicate a Gothic treatment.

In its wealth of realistic detail, Hardy's descriptive style created his Wessex world with such conviction and thoroughness that he became the model for dozens of other regional novelists.

His realism is not now appreciated as much as his more tragic, universal qualities, but it contributes substantially in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* to the total tragic effect. Henchard is considered by at least one critic to be the only genuinely successful attempt at a tragic hero in the modern novel. But Henchard is so embedded in the real world of grain dealing, firmity, seed lips, stout breakfasts, and hay bales as to have for the modern reader an affinity with his own experience that other romantic heroes, enveloped in myth and legend, do not. As tragic hero he is of a stature comparable with theirs, but he comes to us, as it were, in the homely corduroy of a hay-trusser rather than in cape or toga. In part because of Hardy's Wessex realism, Henchard is a tragic hero we can touch.

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