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Structure of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*

The Mayor of Casterbridge is one of Thomas Hardy's most unified works. Never for a moment is Michael Henchard out of our minds. Even when whole chapters are devoted to Donald Farfrae, Lucetta Templeman, Elizabeth-Jane, or some of the minor characters, Michael Henchard's strength of character lingers on each page like bass notes of impending doom. And indeed, this is how it should be, for Hardy subtitled his novel *A Story of a Man of Character*.

Hardy does not attempt to qualify Henchard's "character" as good or bad. His structure rests on the effect of Henchard's character upon his own life and the lives of others. It is certainly this element more than others that makes the novel stand out amidst the many Victorian novels whose important characters are less powerfully conceived than Henchard or all too easily disappear early and return from obscurity two hundred pages later. Susan's ruined life is a direct result of Henchard's rashness; by extension, Elizabeth-Jane owes her very existence to Henchard's folly; Donald Farfrae receives his start from Henchard, and indeed Henchard's wild speculations and superstitious nature only help to advance Farfrae; and Lucetta's death is a direct outcome of her past relationship with Henchard. Hardy did not require us to like Michael Henchard; however, he has so structured the novel that we cannot forget him. Henchard is the novel.

How is it, then, that the other characters in the novel keep our attention? In the case of Donald and Elizabeth-Jane, the reader knows they will marry before the end of the novel. Concerning Lucetta, the reader is thoroughly aware that she will not marry Henchard. It is only the pitfalls and vicissitudes of their lives that provide interest and suspense. Thus our interest in these characters is aroused in direct proportion to the catalytic effect that Henchard's character and behaviour have in motivating their actions.

Throughout the novel is felt the influence of King Lear, Shakespeare's massive tragedy. One recalls that Lear rashly disowns his true and loving daughter, falls from the heights of regality into suffering and madness, and is briefly reconciled with her before his death. The

realization of this structural parallel strengthens our knowledge that the unity of the work is predicated on Henchard's character. After all, his rashness precipitates the events which, once started, move unrelentingly on.

The first two chapters of the novel and the very last serve as a frame for the core of the novel's story. The opening chapters display the unhappy events that initiate the tale, and the last chapter rounds them off, thus bringing the plot full circle. That is, Henchard enters the novel impoverished and miserable, but young, vigorous, and still master of his own fate. In the last chapter he departs from the novel — and from this world — more impoverished, more wretched, barely in his middle-age, master of nothing. If the novel had begun with Henchard already established as mayor, the sale of his wife if pulled out of the closet of obscurity as an old family skeleton would make the story preposterous.

It was apparently not completely possible for Hardy to escape some of the seemingly melodramatic, and at times forced, incidents which abound in the fiction of his era. Henchard speculates wildly in order to destroy Farfrae, and the weather changes; the "furmity woman" shows up and causes Michael's complete downfall; Newson returns from the dead and destroys the ex-mayor's only chance for happiness. Nevertheless, though these untoward events may seem heavily weighted on the side of the novelist's plot development, none of them is really incredible. Even Henchard cannot control the weather. What person would not remember the face of the man who sold his wife to the highest bidder (and since the "furmity woman" is a vagabond type, she could easily turn up in Casterbridge as well as anywhere else)? Is it not natural for Newson to attempt to reclaim his own child in order to bestow his fortune upon her as his heir?

These events are justified, although the modern reader may be disturbed by the machinations behind them.

In this vein there are also at least four overheard conversations: Lucetta overhears Henchard reading her letters, and she naturally fears that Donald will surmise her past history; Henchard, earlier, hides behind a stack of wheat and listens to Donald and Lucetta's passionate conversation; Donald and Lucetta listen intently to the two parting lovers in the market, thus uniting their spirits in a romantic bond; and finally, Henchard, once again from hiding, overhears Donald addressing Elizabeth-Jane in tender words and knows the meeting has ended with a kiss. If the reader has assumed that these overheard conversations are melodramatic tricks, let him also note that such tricks are more melodramatic if the listener accidentally overhears. However, in these cases, each of the listeners purposely eavesdrops.

The comparative abundance of coincidences, returns from the past, secret letters, and the like, should not lead the reader to think that Hardy has mismanaged his realism. There are many realistic elements in the novel (modern critics tend to think that Hardy's realism of dialogue, precise descriptions of buildings and countryside, etc., are false criteria of his excellence), but the importance of The Mayor of Casterbridge is now generally assumed to lie outside its fidelity to the canons of painstaking realism, either of setting or incident. One critic sees in the sequence of events the working out of a scheme of retribution by an outraged moral order in the universe. Another sees in Henchard an astonishingly perceptive treatment of the character unconsciously bent on his destruction, in this anticipating the findings of modern psychology. In either event, mere plausibility of structure appears of negligible importance.

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