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## The Tragic Element in Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*

D. Prasad, M.A. M.Phil. Ph.D.



Thomas Hardy 1840-1928

Courtesy: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas\\_Hardy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Hardy)

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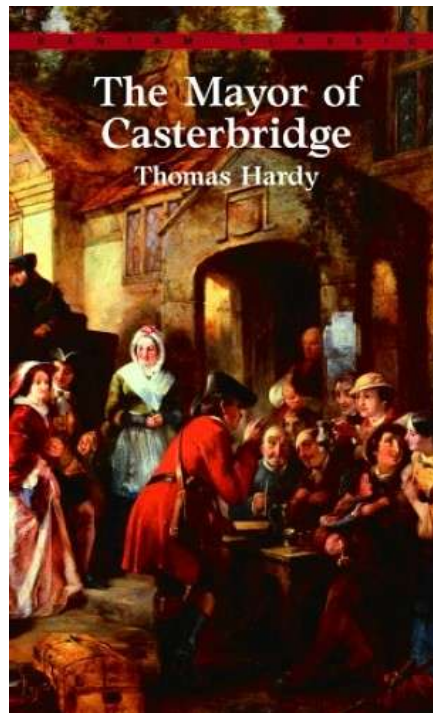
## Introduction

Hardy takes the foremost place among the tragic novelists of England. His novels depict clearly that he has a tragic view of life. According to him, life is the struggle of individual human will against some mysterious powers that rule the world. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, he presents a world of sorrow and tragic experiences.

His characters, rather than showing psychological development, are made of simple elements and experience a variety of emotions, as plot and situation act upon them.

(*History of English Literature*: 302)

## Darker Side of Human Nature



Hardy's novels project the darker side of human nature. His men and women are neither rewarded for their virtue, nor punished for their vices. In his novels, he shows that there is some

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power beyond human control that decides things. This power may be named 'fate' or 'destiny'. *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is one of the greatest novels expressing his attitude to life, depicting the struggle between man and man and between man and his fate.

The present study aims at analyzing the tragic element in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Hardy very artistically presents Henchard as a tragic hero. He becomes a man of high estate and the novel ends with his fall.

### **The Tragic Element in *The Mayor of Casterbridge***

Michael Henchard, the hero of the novel, begins his life as a hay-trusser. Henchard's family reaches Weydon-Priors and by chance enters the furmity shop. Henchard is drunk and sells his wife and daughter to Newson. When he returns to his senses, he realizes his mistake and swears never to touch wine. By his hard work and honesty, he rises as the Mayor of Casterbridge.

After eighteen years, his wife returns to him for Newson has been falsely reported dead. They are reunited. Soon his wife dies. Henchard again gets into the habit of drinking. Elizabeth, his step-daughter is his only comfort but she too is taken away by her father Newson who suddenly reappears. Henchard is left friendless and all alone and dies wretchedly in a hut. So, in this way, Henchard suffers very much through out his life and at last dies without any one as his relation. He is punished for his immoral act of selling his wife in a drunken state.

### **The Beginning of Suffering and Interim Redemption**

The foremost cause of his suffering is the selling of his wife Susan. The main action is presented in the first chapter itself and the remaining chapters are the consequence of it. Henchard succumbs to his own weakness and later pays for it.

After selling his wife in a drunken state, the next morning, he realizes his mistake. He is haunted by a sense of guilt. He makes an oath in a nearby church.

He says:

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I, Michael Henchard, on this morning of the sixteenth of September, do take an oath before God here in this solemn place that I will avoid all strong liquors for the space of twenty-one years to come being a year for every year that I have lived. And this I swear upon the book before me; and may I be strook dumb, blind and helpless, if I break my oath!

*(The Mayor of Casterbridge: 49)*

The oath shows Henchard's good soul in him.

### **Fate Dominates**

When he makes a sincere attempt to find out his wife, he is not able to trace her. From there on, fate takes his life in its hand. It makes the action of fate, which brings Susan back into the life of Henchard. Chance joins hands with fate which brings Susan and her daughter near to the King's Arms, where they come to know about Henchard, the Mayor of Casterbridge.

Irving Howe says about the return of Susan as,

The spring of Henchard's decline is personal in nature – the return of his wife Susan and her daughter Elizabeth Jane to Casterbridge, which makes impossible any further evasion of his youthful sin.

*(Thomas Hardy: 89)*

### **Consequence of Impulsive Nature**

Henchard is impulsive in nature. He does things in his impulsiveness and later repents for it. There are many such incidents in the novel. The first is the selling of his wife in a fair. The second can be the belief towards Farfrae, and accepting him as his manager at the first sight itself. He reveals his secrets to Farfrae for which Hardy says:

He was plainly under that influence which sometimes prompts men to confide to the New-found friend what they will not tell to the old.

*(The Mayor of Casterbridge: 81)*

Henchard is hospitable to Farfrae. He treats him as though he were his equal. He even confides in him matters that are strictly personal like his intention to marry Lucetta and the advent of Susan and seeks his advice. Henchard grows in his business with the help of Farfrae as his manager.

### **Sudden Developments**

Meanwhile, he is engaged to Lucetta, now his lost wife and daughter return and he does not know what to do. With the help of Farfrae, he writes a letter to Lucetta about his present situation and asks her to forgive him.

Henchard lodges his wife and daughter in a hired cottage. He visits Susan's cottage frequently. Then he marries Susan for the second time in a church. He feels happy as he marries Susan which is a compromise for his sin. Susan and Elizabeth Jane start a new life in the house of Henchard. Farfrae and Elizabeth Jane start liking each other.

The friendship between Henchard and Farfrae diminishes and one day Farfrae makes an elaborate arrangement for a public rejoicing to celebrate a national event. Henchard, on the other hand, makes arrangements for a rival celebration. On this occasion, bad weather destroys all the plans of Henchard whereas Farfrae succeeds in his show. Here, Nature also plays a part as villain to Henchard's plans. Nature creates some problems to Henchard here and there in the novel.

The failure of his own show shakes the confidence of Henchard.

Elizabeth Jane is worried about the departure of Donald Farfrae. Henchard forbids Elizabeth to have any association with Farfrae. The dismissal of Farfrae from his duty by Henchard is an action through which he induces him to start a separate trade same as his. Thus

he develops a rival for himself. Fate acts against him. Susan becomes sick and writes a confidential letter and gives it to Henchard. The letter contains a request on the cover that:

Mr. Michael Henchard, Not to be opened till Elizabeth Jane's  
wedding day

*(The Mayor of Casterbridge: 124)*

Susan dies after some days. Henchard reveals to Elizabeth Jane, some of the secrets of his past life and also that of his wife. Though she believes him to be her real father, she could not at all at once regard him in that light. Henchard once comes across the letter of Susan. He opens it and finds to his dismay that his own daughter died and the present one is actually the daughter of Newson. This is a fatal blow to him.

### **Fate and Chance**

Fate and chance play with Henchard's life whenever they get an opportunity. This blow can be considered the greatest punishment for Henchard's sin. Henchard is in the hands of fate and he is unable to reveal the real truth to Elizabeth Jane. He no longer has the real affection for her. But Elizabeth regards Henchard as her real father.

Henchard's happiness ends when he understands that Elizabeth Jane is actually the daughter of Newson. He utters lies to Newson and Elizabeth Jane for fear of losing her love. But his actions end in Elizabeth Jane going away from him. More than the loss of his property, the loss of her affection shatters Henchard. His fall is complete when the furmity woman reveals his past. As a magistrate, Henchard conducts the trial of the woman when she narrates the sale of Susan and says that Henchard who sold his wife has no right to judge her. He decides to bear the shame of the past.

Henchard leaves Casterbridge as a hay-trusser. Later Elizabeth Jane comes to know about Newson and hates Henchard very much.

After leaving Casterbridge, Henchard goes eastward and continues his journey on foot until he feels tired. He works there as a hay-trusser. He hears that the marriage of Elizabeth and Farfrae is going to take place on St. Martin's Day. He plans to attend the marriage. He buys a gold finch in a cage as a wedding gift and goes there. But when Elizabeth comes to meet him, she receives him coldly and does not want to talk to him. Henchard wants to explain everything but keeps mum. He leaves the place with a heavy heart.

After some days, Elizabeth finds the bird dead in the cage. She feels sorry. Elizabeth asks Farfrae to search for Henchard. They come to know about the death of Henchard. They also see a piece of paper, pinned upon the head of Henchard's bed. It contains the will of Henchard.

Michael Henchard's will;

that I be not bury'd in consecrated ground.

that no sexton be asked to toll the bell.

that nobody is wished to see my dead body.

that no mourners walk behind me at my funeral.

that no flowers be planted on my grave.

that no man remember me.

to this I put my name. (Michael Henchard)

*(The Mayor of Casterbridge: 353)*

On hearing this Elizabeth weeps for him. She decides to respect his will, thinking that it is a piece of the same stuff with which his whole life is made.

## **Conclusion**

*The Mayor of Casterbridge* shows Hardy's belief that man is nothing but the sport of an indifferent destiny. He contrives to achieve happiness but in vain. This novel shows that Hardy

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was influenced by the desire to have a striking episode. Hardy believes that nobody is spared from the sin that he commits. When a man commits any mistake or sin, he very well knows that he will receive punishment for it. Though he will not get it immediately, he will receive it in his lifetime. In this novel, Henchard commits an immoral mistake or sin, so, in his inner mind, he knows very well that one day or other he will receive punishment.

The tragic element in the novel is the downfall of Henchard which is due to his own mistake. The suffering he endures is the result of his actions. *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is a tragedy and Henchard is the tragic hero but not to the extent of Shakespearean tragic heroes. The tragic flaw in him causes his downfall. His jealousy and impulsive nature contribute to it. The novel is a real tragedy which teaches that a man of pride and impulsiveness ought to have a fall. Henchard's life and death teach Elizabeth many lessons. She realizes the life towards the end of the novel.

The tragic element in the novel is the downfall of Henchard which is due to his mistake. From a hay trusser, he rises to the position of Mayor and again he becomes a labourer. He dies after realizing his mistake.

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D. Prasad, M.A. M.Phil., Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor of English  
Jeppiaar Engineering College  
Chennai – 600 119  
Tamilnadu  
India  
[prasadlecturer@gmail.com](mailto:prasadlecturer@gmail.com)

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