

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Mayor of Casterbridge

by Thomas Hardy

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Notes

The Mayor of Casterbridge (1886) is one of Hardy's celebrated "Wessex novels," which also include *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, *The Return of the Native*, *Far From the Madding Crowd*, and *Jude the Obscure*. *Casterbridge* was originally published in serialized format, which accounts for its twisting plot, heavy use of coincidence, "chapter breaks with suspenseful endings, and a rough formulation of one or two major events per chapter. These conventions, which mark many Victorian novels, were all-but-required of the writer seeking to earn a living through publication in magazines.

All references come from the Bantam Classic Edition of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, published 1981.

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. identify the ways in which the novel's original publication in serialized format guided Hardy's method of telling the story.
2. discuss the role of coincidence in the novel.
3. present evidence from the text that Hardy both understood the need for industrialization and mourned the passing of simpler, traditional ways.
4. write paragraphs comparing and contrasting Henchard with Farfrae and Elizabeth-Jane with Lucetta.
5. discuss what makes Henchard, as the novel's subtitle puts it, "a man of character."
6. discuss the ways in which Henchard's character remains consistent throughout the course of the novel.
7. define symbolism, allusion, simile, foil, theme, irony, dialect, and foreshadowing and provide examples of each from the novel.
8. discuss Henchard as a tragic hero and identify his tragic flaw.
9. define the vocabulary words listed in the study guide.
10. discuss the benefits and drawbacks, as put forth in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, of living a life controlled by passion versus the benefits and drawbacks of living a life controlled by reason.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. The subtitle of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is *The Story of a Man of Character*. In what ways is Henchard a “man of character”? What are some of his most admirable qualities?
2. Discuss Hardy’s choice of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* as a title. Technically, the title could refer to either Henchard or Farfrae. Do you think Hardy intended it to have a double meaning?
3. After a drunken Henchard sells his wife at a fair, he gives up alcohol completely—yet, decades later, entirely sober, he continues to make choices that cause himself and others hurt and shame. If alcohol is not his downfall, what is? Support your opinion.
4. *The Mayor of Casterbridge* was originally published in serial form in a magazine. What aspects of both the plot and the points at which the chapters break might lead a reader to suspect that the book was published in that manner?
5. Discuss the role of coincidence in the novel. Does the high occurrence of coincidences detract from the story’s believability? Does your opinion of the book change if you see coincidences as the workings of fate instead?
6. What are some modern-day equivalents of the skimmity-ride? How are celebrities’ lives made objects of public ridicule?
7. What function do the members of working-class Casterbridge (such as Longways and Mother Cuxsom) play in the novel?
8. Discuss the significance of weather to the citizens of Casterbridge and its impact on multiple events in the novel.
9. Henchard is portrayed as a man ruled by his passions and Farfrae as a man ruled by reason. Discuss the benefits and drawbacks of each man’s approach to life. Which character do you think Hardy prefers?
10. When Henchard wakes up after the auction, his first concern is whether or not he told the onlookers his name. His efforts to retain and his dismay at losing his “good name” come up frequently throughout the novel; in addition, he tries to get Elizabeth-Jane to take his name. Why is his “good name” so important to Henchard?
11. In the novel, Casterbridge is slowly moving toward industrialization. What opinions do you think Hardy held about the introduction of new technology? Industrialization was happening at roughly the same time as the writing of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.
12. When you have read Henchard’s will, do you feel sympathy for him or feel like he has gotten what he deserves? What do you think Hardy intended his readers to feel?

The Mayor of Casterbridge

Chapters 1-3

VOCABULARY

abjure – firmly reject
alacrity – eager readiness
desultory – without purpose
ephemeral – short-lived
fustian – cotton and linen weave
imprudent – not well-thought-out
intrepid – having great endurance (here, a strong tolerance for alcohol)
levity – lightheartedness
nimbus – rain cloud
ochreous – yellowish
penuriousness – oppressive stinginess
phlegmatically – dully or apathetically
superciliousness – haughtiness
taciturnity – disinclination to talk

1. What, according to the text, is especially peculiar about the way Michael and Susan walk into Weydon-Priors?

2. What is Michael in search of in Weydon-Priors?

3. The sight of what makes the spectators in the furmity tent realize that Michael's offer is not a joke?

Chapters 13-15

VOCABULARY

amatory – sexual
castigate – to punish
deprecation – attempt to avert anger
enervated – unnerved
insidious – harmful, but enticing
inveterate – habitual
leonine – lion-like
Martinmas – November 11th, feast of St. Martin
piquancy – spiciness
preternatural – more than natural
purlieu – district
sotto voce – under one's breath
viva voce – by word of mouth

1. Hardy describes Susan's cottage as "past-marked" because of its proximity to the Roman ruins. In what other, figurative way is her cottage "past-marked"?

2. For what three reasons does Henchard want to renew his marriage with Susan?

3. Who in Casterbridge, aside from Henchard and Susan, knows the full story of their past together?

Chapters 25-27

VOCABULARY

calumniated – had one’s reputation unfairly smeared
lucubrations – nightly studies
Protean – diverse, versatile
refluent – backwards-flowing

1. Why do you think Henchard hires Jopp, of all possible people?

2. What larger conflict is symbolized by the clash between the two wagons?

3. Why does Lucetta agree to marry Henchard?

4. Was lying to Newson a premeditated act on Henchard's part?

5. What does Henchard see in the river that prevents him from jumping off the bridge?

6. Why does Henchard consider telling Farfrae that Elizabeth-Jane is not really his daughter?
