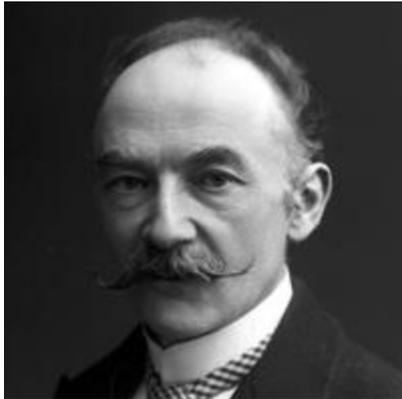


The Mayor of Casterbridge by Thomas Hardy: An Appreciation

The Mayor of Casterbridge is one of the major and most mature novels of Hardy. Written during an advanced stage of his novelistic career, it possesses certain qualities of plot-construction, characterization, story telling and description, that go to make it what Richard Carpenter calls "in construction and force, Hardy's finest novel" and "the most artistic of the major novels".



Thomas Hardy

Lionel Johnson admits that he knows "few histories more poignant than this; none which more perfectly fulfil the great demands of Aristotle upon the composers of the dramatic plot and the conceivers of dramatic character". Walter Allen regards this novel as Hardy's "simplest and most successful tragic novel". Despite certain weaknesses that have crept into it because of its being initially published as a weekly serial, which caused Hardy, as he himself tells us. "in his own judgment to add events to the narrative somewhat freely", *The Mayor of Casterbridge* remains a magnificent book, a highly finished work of novelistic art.

As its full title, *The Life and Death of the Mayor of Casterbridge: A Story of a Man of Character*, indicates, the novel is concerned with the depiction of the ups and downs, rise and fall, joys and sorrows, and triumph and defeat in the struggle some life of its central character, Michael Henchard, in which happiness appears as a rare oasis in the vast and dreary desert of sorrow and misfortune. With Fate and Chance playing their sadistic game, the end of such a life can hardly be expected to be joyful.

The novel is a tragedy of the most moving type. According to Earnest Baker, it embodies "a great and simple tragedy complicated with hackneyed and unnecessary corroboration". Fulfilling the Aristotelian requirement of the depiction of the downfall and death of the hero because of some tragic flaw in his character as well as the cruel workings of Fate, it conforms to the pattern of the Greek classical tragedy. Chance or Coincidence also have a significant part to play in this novel, such as in Henchard's handing over the parcel containing Lucetta's letters to Joshua Jopp for being delivered to her. However, the tragic content in the novel differs from that found in the works of several other writers of tragedy in that it transcends the local and the individual, and assumes a cosmic significance, and in that it depicts the sufferings of the hero only as symbolic of the suffering of all human beings in similar

circumstances. Moreover, the tragedy in it is caused not only by mere external factors or circumstances, but also by the conflicts and tensions going on in the mind of the hero.

One of the chief features of this tragic novel is its deft plot- construction. It is one of Hardy's most tightly-knit novels, even though it makes frequent use of coincidences that hardly fit into its normal structural pattern, such as are found in the arbitrary appearances and disappearances of various characters. Hardy manipulates the different sequences of time in an expert manner so as to present various events and situations - often incoherent and disconnected - in a proper perspective. The story is made more interesting by the use of the element of surprise, suspense and coincidental happenings as well as the presentation of ironical situations, such as when (in Chapter XXX) Elizabeth-Jane advise Lucetta to marry Henchard without knowing that she has already married Farfrae. The beauty of the structure of the novel is seen in the fact, that as Samuel C. Chew remarks: "It would be difficult to find an incident that is out of place or that has not its share in the outcome. The whole is thoroughly thought out and finely composed." In this respect, due credit ought to be given to Hardy's architectonic skill.

Hardy's novels reveal his mastery of the art of characterization. The tragic stories in them are told through the actions and interplay of characters who often serve to illustrate or expound his philosophy of life. *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is no exception to this, because it contains some of the most successfully and powerfully delineated of his characters - e.g. Henchard, Farfrae and Elizabeth-Jane who never fail to appeal to us. Of these, Henchard is the most significant and most thoroughly drawn. His energy, force, strength, dignity and the basic nobility of his character, are liable to make us overlook his weaknesses like haughtiness, rashness and vanity. Like a Greek tragic hero, he is neither too good nor very bad, and his misfortunes and suffering are brought about by the weaknesses inherent in his character as well as by the play of Fate and Chance in his life. According to S. Diana Neill, "Henchard is probably the greatest instance of masculine characterisation in Hardy's fiction". While the female characters dominate in other novels of Hardy, in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* the dominant role is played by a male character, Henchard. Walter Allen's remark about Hardy that "Henchard is his grandest hero as Tess is his most moving heroine," bears out this point. Other prominent characters in the novel are Donald Farfrae who, in his coolness of temperament, his sophistication, and his professional competence and integrity, seems to be a foil to Henchard as Horatio is to *Hamlet* in Shakespeare's great tragedy; and Elizabeth - Jane who is an innocent victim in the hands of Fate and circumstances, like Ophelia in *Hamlet* and Cordelia in *King Lear*, though her end is not tragic like theirs. Lucetta, Susan and Newson are important, but they are not as thoroughly portrayed as the three characters mentioned above. Hardy has shown great skill in handling the psychology of his chief characters.

Unlike several Hardy's novels, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is set against the background of a town, Casterbridge, which has seen much scientific advancement in the agricultural and other fields. Although Hardy has depicted the adjoining countryside too, he has presented most of his scenes, characters and events in Casterbridge, with the result that, as Earnest A. Baker remarks, "There are only a few touches of rural charm in the austere grandeur of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*." The descriptions of the country town of Dorchester (Casterbridge), of the village of Weydon Priors, and other neighboring places, bear ample testimony to Hardy's powers of minute observation and detailed depiction. Nature - comprising woods, rivers, moors and fields - makes frequent appearance in this as well as other novels, of his, and it is against the background of Nature that the tragic drama of human life is enacted. The act of selling his wife is performed by Henchard against this background, which is described by

Hardy thus: "The sun had recently set, and the west heaven was hung with rosy cloud, which seemed permanently yet slowly changed. To watch it was like looking at some grand feat of stagery from a darkened auditorium."

Hardy writes in a simple and straightforward manner, and employs colloquial and dialect words and phrases and also words and phrases borrowed from various European languages like Latin, German and French. Often the dialogues have a rustic touch as in this speech of Abel Whittle to Henchard: "There is summit wrong in my make, your worshipfulespecially in the inside, whereas my poor dumb brain gets as dead as a clot afore I've said my few crags of prayers." Such speeches lend a realistic touch to the novel.

The novel ends with the tragic death of its hero, Henchard; but Hardy tags a moral at the tail-end by showing Elizabeth-Jane's realization of the truth about life that "happiness was the occasional episode in a general drama of pain", and that it was proper not to expect too much from life and to be content with what little one gets without trying to be effusive or nurturing any unattainable dream. This moral seems to take the edge off the gloom caused by the tragedy that overtakes various characters in the novel, and to lower the emotional pitch on which the story would have closed otherwise.