



Revolution in Agriculture: A conflict between Pre-modernity and Modernity - Depicted in the novel "The Mayor of Casterbridge"

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ABSTRACT

Mid nineteenth century (around 1846) witnessed the transition that took place in agriculture, consequent to the repeal of the Corn Laws. This led to the import of grains to England, resulting in the alteration of entire structure and methods of agriculture in Britain. The novel, "The Mayor of Casterbridge" (1886), subtitled "The Life and Death of a Man of Character" is considered as one of Thomas Hardy's greatest works. Its theme is set in Casterbridge, a fictional town untouched by modernism, where the people earn their livelihood by farming in traditional ways. The novel opens with the dire straits of the citizens over a damaged crop. The main character of the novel, Henchard, was elevated to the position of Mayor from a hay-trusser, who rules the town in line with the traditional customs and superstitions. On the contrary, the trader, Farfrae, introduces modern implements and efficient systems of farming to enhance agricultural production. He brings in a new machine to the town of Casterbridge and started managing the entire grain market. Hardy unravels the transition of a quaint Casterbridge that was isolated from modernity, into a more industrialized and economically viable town. Eventually the people ignore Henchard and align with the successful new merchant Farfrae. Throughout the novel are traces of a world that once was and will never be again. The conflicts between modern and traditional approaches to farming and harvest are demonstrated through the contrasting ethics of Henchard and Farfrae.

Key words : Corn Law, Ethics.

English society made the difficult transition from a pre-industrial Britain to modern age during the first half of the 19th century while in agriculture; most of the changes took place in mid 19th century, in and around the year, 1846 with the repeal of the Corn Laws. Consequently foreign grains were imported to England, which greatly altered the entire structure and methods of agriculture in Britain. These changes are well portrayed in Thomas Hardy's novel 'The Mayor of Casterbridge'.

The Corn Laws, in force between 1815 and 1846, were designed to protect English landholders, in Great Britain and Ireland, by encouraging the export and limiting the import of corn, when prices fell below a fixed point. The law protected the cereal producers against competition from less expensive foreign imports, which favoured them to reap all the financial profits from farming. The laws were introduced by the Importation Act of 1815 and by the militant agitation of the Anti-Corn-Law-League, the Corn Laws were eventually abolished in 1846. This marked a significant triumph of the new political power of the English middle class.

The novel 'The Mayor of Casterbridge' narrates the conflicts between Michael Henchard, a man of traditional systems and Donald Farfrae, a man intrigued by modern ideas. Their opposing approaches to business, dissimilar attitudes toward modernization and their changing roles in Casterbridge society are described in the novel. The two characters take very different approaches to book-keeping and managing the employees of the business owned by Henchard. Henchard's unskilled penmanship, poor mathematics and lack of formal education forced him to follow older and more traditional method of maintaining business accounts. He was unable to maintain business accounts in registers. The novel says,

"Henchard himself was mentally and physically unfit for grabbing subtleties from solid paper; he had in a modern sense received the education of Achilles, and found penmanship a tantalizing art." (p.72)

The trader, Farfrae, is a hard working young man who approaches business with a modern attitude. His name itself unveils the fact that he is a free man from far away, bringing distant and free ideas into a tradition-locked area of England. He up-keeps the financial records accurately and correct any mistakes that Henchard might have had made previously. Methods of business followed by Henchard and Farfrae are very different; the former used skills that are no longer in continual use while the latter adopted modern technology in business management. Similarly, Henchard and Farfrae managed their employees differently. Henchard, takes stern steps while reprimanding employees and tried to instil respect into his employees through fear whereas, Farfrae, instilled respect out of justice.

As a result of technological progress, a new machine had been developed and introduced into the town of Casterbridge.

"It was the new-fashioned agricultural implement called a horse drill, till then unknown in its modern shape in this part of the country, where the venerable seed-lip was still used for sowing as in the days of the Heptarchy. Its arrival created about as much sensation in the corn market as a flying machine would create at Charing Cross." (p. 201)

Henchard ridiculed the new machine while Farfrae accurately predicted that the machine would greatly change agriculture output. He stated that the machine will revolutionize sowing. It will help to sow each grain straight to its intended place, which declines the need of sowers and the loss of grains due to manual sowing. His far-sighted vision and adoption of modern machinery, such as the horse drill, replaced the traditional use of manual labour for all agricultural activities. This clash of opinion between Henchard and Farfrae is representative of the conflict between tradition and the progression on modernism. Inevitably, a modern and progressing Britain, allowing for greater advancements in the future will overcome the traditional Britain.

The progression of modernization over tradition portrays the role of Donald Farfrae. Just as modernization overcomes tradition, Farfrae overcomes Henchard. This is illustrated through the role changes observed between Farfrae and Henchard regarding their stature in Casterbridge society. Eventually, Farfrae, takes over the corn business of Henchard.

Under Henchard's control, the corn business ran with difficulty. The flour was bad, and the people were compelled to eat bad bread. The reason presented by Henchard for bad flour as bad weather at harvest, made the people unsatisfied, and the town suffered nutritionally. Henchard had the apprehension that grown wheat could not be turned into flour and he enquired whether anybody could sort out this issue. Besides, his business empire was very large and could not manage all by himself. He searched for a manager for the Corn Department. Subsequently, Farfrae solved the issue and took up the managerial position in Henchard's business.

The young and energetic Farfrae having modern views discarded the old and crude system of Henchard, where everything depended upon his memory, and bargains were made by tongue alone. Letters and ledgers took the place of 'I'll do't' and 'you shall hae't'. The rugged picturesque of the old method disappeared with its inconveniences. Farfrae demonstrates that modern ways are more effective than the traditional ways that Henchard uses and as a result, Farfrae takes over

Henchard's corn business. Under Farfrae's guidance the corn business flourishes and all those involved, from the management to the villagers, benefit from the success of modernism. Likewise, the status of Henchard and Farfrae are illustrative of how modernism progresses over tradition. At one time, tradition was very popular; similarly, Michael Henchard was also very popular. However, it is inevitable that modernism will overcome tradition and so Farfrae changes roles with Henchard. Henchard is no longer the popular man in town and is seen as out-dated. Henchard, who had hitherto been the most admired man in his circle, was not admired any longer.

Price of corn is always influenced by the harvest weather; an excellent harvest brings down the price and a hike in price in bad harvest. Rains in the month of June foretell a very bad harvest and Henchard consulted Mr. Fall, a weather prophet to confirm the weather forecast. As per his predictions on harvest failure, Michael buys all the grains he can. However, soon the weather conditions improve leading to a good harvest, and Michael loses money selling the corn at lower prices. He loses so much money that he must mortgage much of his property.

Farfrae's role changes and he was elected as the new Mayor of Casterbridge. He assumes charge as Mayor ceremoniously. Farfrae's position as Mayor is representative of modernization being welcomed into Casterbridge. Henchard builds his whole life on traditional values and methods only to be left behind when Farfrae and his modern methods are accepted in Casterbridge. Just as England went through a change in agriculture due to industrialization, Thomas Hardy's Casterbridge society saw modernism progress over tradition; an unavoidable change that will continue to happen until we run out of things to learn.

The peasants, or rustics, serve two important functions in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. First, they provide commentary on the actions of the principal characters. In this respect, they act like the chorus in ancient Greek drama, in which bands of actors appeared onstage to comment on the play's events. With colourful dialect and untraditional manners, the rustics lend a bit of welcome comic relief to the novel, even though their second function is serious. Unlike a Greek chorus, which comments on the main action without participating in it, Hardy's rustics play a vital role in unfolding the drama. In many scenes, the peasants' commentary provides context for understanding the world of the novel. The rustics act as one of the uncontrollable and often malignant forces that bring about human suffering. The poverty-stricken inhabitants of Casterbridge portray Hardy's measure on the depth of human suffering.

The relationship between Henchard and Farfrae seems too finely plotted to be wholly credible. When they clash, their disagreement represents a conflict between age and youth, tradition and innovation, and emotion and reason. Henchard, for example, is the mayor of a town that has remained untouched by the scientific, philosophical, or technological advances of the age. Casterbridge exists in a sort of bubble, and Henchard rules it accordingly. He manages his books in his head, conducts business by word of mouth, and employs weather-prophets already obsolete in many parts of the country to determine the success of a harvest. When Farfrae arrives, he brings a new system of organization that revolutionizes Casterbridge's grain business, making it more efficient and dependent on developing agricultural technologies. In his proud display of the automatic seeder to a disdainful Henchard, there is clearly more at stake than the friendship between two men. Farfrae is everything Henchard would love to be, and loves to pretend that he is.

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