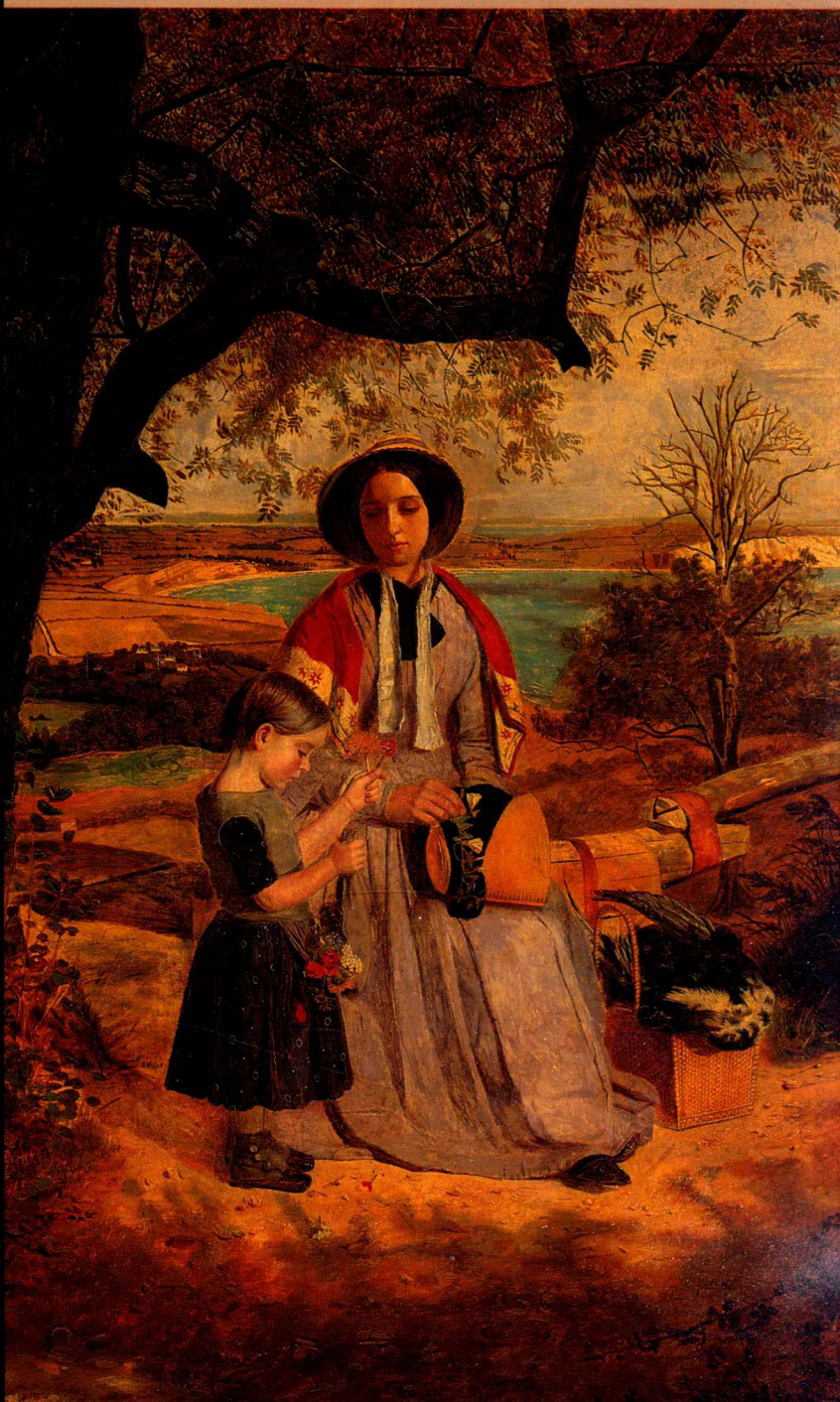
Modern Critical

INTERPRETATIONS

Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM

Thomas Hardy's
The Mayor of Casterbridge



Modern Critical Interpretations

Thomas Hardy's

The Mayor of Casterbridge

Edited and with an introduction by

Harold Bloom
Sterling Professor of the Humanities
Yale University

Chelsea House Publishers ◇ 1988
NEW YORK ◇ NEW HAVEN ◇ PHILADELPHIA

Printed and bound in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, Z39.48-1984.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Thomas Hardy's The Mayor of Casterbridge / edited and with an introduction by Harold Bloom.
p. cm.—(Modern critical interpretations)
Bibliography: p.
Includes index.
Summary: A collection of six critical essays on the Hardy novel, arranged in chronological order of their original publication.
ISBN 0-87754-742-4 (alk. paper): $24.50
1. Hardy, Thomas, 1840-1928. Mayor of Casterbridge. [1. Hardy, Thomas, 1840-1928. Mayor of Casterbridge. 2. English literature--History and criticism.] I. Bloom, Harold. II. Series.
PR4750.M3T48 1988 87-15900
823'.8—dc19 CIP
AC

Editor's Note

This book brings together a representative selection of the best modern critical interpretations of Thomas Hardy's tragic novel, *The Mayor of Casterbridge.* The critical essays are reprinted here in the chronological order of their original publication. I am grateful to Christina Büchmann for her assistance in editing this volume.

My introduction considers Michael Henchard as a tragic hero, in the ancient sense of *ethos* being the *daimon,* character being fate. Bert G. Hornback begins the chronological sequence of criticism with his estimate that *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is Hardy's masterpiece, particularly in its creation of a metaphoric atmosphere dominated by chance.

The separation between Henchard's public and private history, between work and love, is studied by Ian Gregor, after which the feminist critic Elaine Showalter finds in Henchard a remarkable fusion of male rebellion and female suffering.

George Levine sees realism as surviving in Hardy's *Mayor* not as a mode for writing fiction but as a hard discipline emerging from human self-thwarted energies in the hostile context of nature. Somewhat complementary is Bruce Johnson's vision of Hardy's cosmos in this novel as a kind of ontological spinning wheel.

In this volume's final essay, J. B. Bullen traces correspondences between Thomas Carlyle's clothes metaphor in *Sartor Resartus* and a similar metaphor that pervades *The Mayor of Casterbridge,* in order to suggest affinities in how Carlyle and Hardy bring together visual appearances and psychological realities.

Contents

Introduction

I

For Arthur Schopenhauer, the Will to Live was the true thing-in-itself, not an interpretation but a rapacious, active, universal, and ultimately indifferent drive or desire. Schopenhauer's great work, *The World as Will and Representation,* had the same relation to and influence upon many of the principal nineteenth- and early twentieth-century novelists that Freud's writings have in regard to many of this century's later, crucial masters of prose fiction. Zola, Maupassant, Turgenev, and Tolstoy join Thomas Hardy as Schopenhauer's nineteenth-century heirs, in a tradition that goes on through Proust, Conrad, and Thomas Mann to culminate in aspects of Borges and of Beckett, the most eminent living writer of narrative. Since Schopenhauer (despite Freud's denials) was one of Freud's prime precursors, one could argue that aspects of Freud's influence upon writers simply carry on from Schopenhauer's previous effect. Manifestly, the relation of Schopenhauer to Hardy is different in both kind and degree from the larger sense in which Schopenhauer was Freud's forerunner or Wittgenstein's. A poet-novelist like Hardy turns to a rhetorical speculator like Schopenhauer only because he finds something in his own temperament and sensibility confirmed and strengthened, and not at all as Lucretius turned to Epicurus, or as Whitman was inspired by Emerson.

The true precursor for Hardy was Shelley, whose visionary skepticism permeates the novels as well as the poems and *The Dynasts.* There is some technical debt to George Eliot in the early novels, but Hardy in his depths was little more moved by her than by Wilkie Collins, from whom he also learned elements of craft. Shelley's tragic sense of eros is pervasive throughout Hardy, and ultimately determines Hardy's understanding of his strongest heroines: Bathsheba Everdene, Eustacia Vye, Marty South, Tess Durbeyfield, Sue Bridehead. Between desire and

fulfillment in Shelley falls the shadow of the selfhood, a shadow that makes love and what might be called the means of love quite irreconcilable. What M. D. Zabel named as "the aesthetic of incongruity" in Hardy and ascribed to temperamental causes is in a profound way the result of attempting to transmute the procedures of *The Revolt of Islam* and *Epipsychidion* into the supposedly naturalistic novel.

J. Hillis Miller, when he worked more in the mode of a critic of consciousness like Georges Poulet than in the deconstruction of Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida, saw the fate of love in Hardy as being darkened always by a shadow cast by the lover's consciousness itself. Hugh Kenner, with a distaste for Hardy akin to (and perhaps derived from) T. S. Eliot's in *After Strange Gods,* suggested that Miller had created a kind of Proustian Hardy, who turns out to be a case rather than an artist. Hardy was certainly not an artist comparable to Henry James (who dismissed him as a mere imitator of George Eliot) or James Joyce, but the High Modernist shibboleths for testing the novel have now waned considerably, except for a few surviving high priests of Modernism like Kenner. A better guide to Hardy's permanent strength as a novelist was his heir D. H. Lawrence, whose *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* marvelously brought Hardy's legacy to an apotheosis. Lawrence, praising Hardy with a rebel son's ambivalence, associated him with Tolstoy as a tragic writer:

> And this is the quality Hardy shares with the great writers, Shakespeare or Sophocles or Tolstoi, this setting behind the small action of his protagonists the terrific action of unfathomed nature; setting a smaller system of morality, the one grasped and formulated by the human consciousness within the vast, uncomprehended and incomprehensible morality of nature or of life itself, surpassing human consciousness. The difference is, that whereas in Shakespeare or Sophocles the greater, uncomprehended morality, or fate, is actively transgressed and gives active punishment, in Hardy and Tolstoi the lesser, human morality, the mechanical system is actively transgressed, and holds, and punishes the protagonist, whilst the greater morality is only passively, negatively transgressed, it is represented merely as being present in background, in scenery, not taking any active part, having no direct connexion with the protagonist. Œdipus, Hamlet, Macbeth set themselves up against, or find themselves set

> up against, the unfathomed moral forces of nature, and out of this unfathomed force comes their death. Whereas Anna Karenina, Eustacia, Tess, Sue, and Jude find themselves up against the established system of human government and morality, they cannot detach themselves, and are brought down. Their real tragedy is that they are unfaithful to the greater unwritten morality, which would have bidden Anna Karenina be patient and wait until she, by virtue of greater right, could take what she needed from society; would have bidden Vronsky detach himself from the system, become an individual, creating a new colony of morality with Anna; would have bidden Eustacia fight Clym for his own soul, and Tess take and claim her Angel, since she had the greater light; would have bidden Jude and Sue endure for very honour's sake, since one must bide by the best that one has known, and not succumb to the lesser good.
>
> ("Study of Thomas Hardy")

This seems to me powerful and just, because it catches what is most surprising and enduring in Hardy's novels—the sublime stature and aesthetic dignity of his crucial protagonists—while exposing also his great limitation, his denial of freedom to his best personages. Lawrence's prescription for what would have saved Eustacia and Clym, Tess and Angel, Sue and Jude, is perhaps not as persuasive. He speaks of them as though they were Gudrun and Gerald, and thus have failed to be Ursula and Birkin. It is Hardy's genius that they are what they had to be: as imperfect as their creator and his vision, as impure as his language and his plotting, and finally painful and memorable to us:

> Note that, in this bitterness, delight,
> Since the imperfect is so hot in us,
> Lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds.

II

Of Hardy's major novels, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is the least flawed and clearly the closest to tragic convention in Western literary tradition. If one hesitates to prefer it to *The Return of the Native, Tess,* or *Jude,* that may be because it is the least original and eccentric work of the four. Henchard is certainly the best articulated and most consistent of Hardy's male personages, but Lucetta is no Eustacia, and the ami-

able Elizabeth-Jane does not compel much of the reader's interest. The book's glory, Henchard, is so massive a self-punisher that he can be said to leap over the psychic cosmos of Schopenhauer directly into that of Freud's great essay on the economics of masochism, with its grim new category of "moral masochism." In a surprising way, Hardy reverses, through Henchard, one of the principal *topoi* of Western tragedy, as set forth acutely by Northrop Frye:

> A strong element of demonic ritual in public punishments and similar mob amusements is exploited by tragic and ironic myth. Breaking on the wheel becomes Lear's wheel of fire; bear-baiting is an image for Gloucester and Macbeth, and for the crucified Prometheus the humiliation of exposure, the horror of being watched, is a greater misery than the pain. *Derkou theama* (behold the spectacle; get your staring over with) is his bitterest cry. The inability of Milton's blind Samson to stare back is his greatest torment, and one which forces him to scream at Delilah, in one of the most terrible passages of all tragic drama, that he will tear her to pieces if she touches him.

For Henchard "the humiliation of exposure" becomes a terrible passion, until at last he makes an exhibition of himself during a royal visit. Perhaps he can revert to what Frye calls "the horror of being watched" only when he knows that the gesture involved will be his last. Hence his Will, which may be the most powerful prose passage that Hardy ever wrote:

> They stood in silence while he ran into the cottage; returning in a moment with a crumpled scrap of paper. On it there was pencilled as follows:—
>
> "MICHAEL HENCHARD'S WILL
>
> "That Elizabeth-Jane Farfrae be not told of my death, or made to grieve on account of me.
>
> "& 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 murners walk behind me at my funeral.
>
> "& that no flours be planted on my grave.
>
> "& that no man remember me.
>
> "To this I put my name.
>
> "Michael Henchard."

That dark testament is the essence of Henchard. It is notorious that "tragedy" becomes a very problematical form in the European Enlightenment and afterwards. Romanticism, which has been our continuous Modernism from the mid-1740s to the present moment, did not return the tragic hero to us, though from Richardson's Clarissa Harlowe until now we have received many resurgences of the tragic heroine. Hardy and Ibsen can be judged to have come closest to reviving the tragic hero, in contradistinction to the hero-villain who, throughout Romantic tradition, limns his night-piece and judges it to have been his best. Henchard, despite his blind strength and his terrible errors, is no villain, and as readers we suffer with him, unrelievedly, because our sympathy for him is unimpeded.

Unfortunately, the suffering becomes altogether *too* unrelieved, as it does again with Jude Fawley. Rereading *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is less painful than rereading *Jude the Obscure,* since at least we do not have to contemplate little Father Time hanging the other urchins and himself, but it is still very painful indeed. Whether or not tragedy should possess some catharsis, we resent the imposition of too much pathos upon us, and we need some gesture of purification if only to keep us away from our own defensive ironies. Henchard, alas, *accomplishes nothing,* for himself or for others. Ahab, a great hero-villain, goes down fighting his implacable fate, the whiteness of the whale, but Henchard is a self-destroyer to no purpose. And yet we are vastly moved by him and know that we should be. Why?

The novel's full title is *The Life and Death of the Mayor of Casterbridge: A Story of a Man of Character.* As Robert Louis Stevenson said in a note to Hardy, "Henchard is a great fellow," which implies that he is a great personality rather than a man of character. This is, in fact, how Hardy represents Henchard, and the critic R. H. Hutton was right to be puzzled by Hardy's title, in a review published in *The Spectator* on June 5, 1886:

> Mr. Hardy has not given us any more powerful study than that of Michael Henchard. Why he should especially term his hero in his title-page a "man of character," we do not clearly understand. Properly speaking, character is the stamp graven on a man, and character therefore, like anything which can be graven, and which, when graven, remains, is a word much more applicable to that which has fixity and permanence, than to that which is fitful and changeful, and which impresses a totally different image of itself on the

wax of plastic circumstance at one time, from that which it impresses on a similarly plastic surface at another time. To keep strictly to the associations from which the word "character" is derived, a man of character ought to suggest a man of steady and unvarying character, a man who conveys very much the same conception of his own qualities under one set of circumstances, which he conveys under another. This is true of many men, and they might be called men of character *par excellence.* But the essence of Michael Henchard is that he is a man of large nature and depth of passion, who is yet subject to the most fitful influences, who can do in one mood acts of which he will never cease to repent in almost all his other moods, whose temper of heart changes many times even during the execution of the same purpose, though the same ardour, the same pride, the same wrathful magnanimity, the same inability to carry out in cool blood the angry resolve of the mood of revenge or scorn, the same hasty unreasonableness, and the same disposition to swing back to an equally hasty reasonableness, distinguish him throughout. In one very good sense, the great deficiency of Michael Henchard might be said to be in "character." It might well be said that with a little *more* character, with a little more fixity of mind, with a little more power of recovering *himself* when he was losing his balance, his would have been a nature of gigantic mould; whereas, as Mr. Hardy's novel is meant to show, it was a nature which ran mostly to waste. But, of course, in the larger and wider sense of the word "character," that sense which has less reference to the permanent definition of the stamp, and more reference to the confidence with which the varying moods may be anticipated, it is not inadmissible to call Michael Henchard a "man of character." Still, the words on the title-page rather mislead. One looks for the picture of a man of much more constancy of purpose, and much less tragic mobility of mood, than Michael Henchard. None the less, the picture is a very vivid one, and almost magnificent in its fullness of expression. The largeness of his nature, the unreasonable generosity and suddenness of his friendships, the depth of his self-humiliation for what was evil in him, the eagerness of his craving for sympathy, the vehemence of his impulses

> both for good and evil, the curious dash of stoicism in a nature so eager for sympathy, and of fortitude in one so moody and restless,—all these are lineaments which, mingled together as Mr. Hardy has mingled them, produce a curiously strong impression of reality, as well as of homely grandeur.

One can summarize Hutton's point by saying that Henchard is stronger in pathos than in ethos, and yet ethos is the daimon, character is fate, and Hardy specifically sets out to show that Henchard's character is his fate. The strength of Hardy's irony is that it is also life's irony, and will become Sigmund Freud's irony: Henchard's destiny demonstrates that there are no accidents, meaning that nothing happens to one that is not already oneself. Henchard stares out at the night as though he were staring at an adversary, but there is nothing out there. There is only the self turned against the self, only the drive, beyond the pleasure principle, to death.

The pre-Socratic aphorism that character is fate seems to have been picked up by Hardy from George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss,* where it is attributed to Novalis. But Hardy need not have gleaned it from anywhere in particular. Everyone in Hardy's novels is overdetermined by his or her past, because for Hardy, as for Freud, everything that is dreadful has already happened and there never can be anything absolutely new. Such a speculation belies the very word "novel," and certainly was no aid to Hardy's inventiveness. Nothing that happens to Henchard surprises us. His fate is redeemed from dreariness only by its aesthetic dignity, which returns us to the problematical question of Hardy's relation to tragedy as a literary form.

Henchard is burdened neither with wisdom nor with knowledge; he is a man of will and of action, with little capacity for reflection, but with a spirit perpetually open and generous towards others. J. Hillis Miller sees him as being governed erotically by mediated desire, but since Miller sees this as the iron law in Hardy's erotic universe, it loses any particular force as an observation upon Henchard. I would prefer to say that Henchard, more even than most men and like all women in Hardy, is hungry for love, desperate for some company in the void of existence. D. H. Lawrence read the tragedy of Hardy's figures not as the consequence of mediated desire, but as the fate of any desire that will not be bounded by convention and community.

> This is the tragedy of Hardy, always the same: the tragedy of those who, more or less pioneers, have died in the wilder-

> ness, whither they had escaped for free action, after having left the walled security, and the comparative imprisonment, of the established convention. This is the theme of novel after novel: remain quite within the convention, and you are good, safe, and happy in the long run, though you never have the vivid pang of sympathy on your side: or, on the other hand, be passionate, individual, wilful, you will find the security of the convention a walled prison, you will escape, and you will die, either of your own lack of strength to bear the isolation and the exposure, or by direct revenge from the community, or from both. This is the tragedy, and only this: it is nothing more metaphysical than the division of a man against himself in such a way: first, that he is a member of the community, and must, upon his honour, in no way move to disintegrate the community, either in its moral or its practical form; second, that the convention of the community is a prison to his natural, individual desire, a desire that compels him, whether he feel justified or not, to break the bounds of the community, lands him outside the pale, there to stand alone, and say: "I was right, my desire was real and inevitable; if I was to be myself I must fulfil it, convention or no convention," or else, there to stand alone, doubting, and saying: "Was I right, was I wrong? If I was wrong, oh, let me die!"—in which case he courts death.
>
> The growth and the development of this tragedy, the deeper and deeper realisation of this division and this problem, the coming towards some conclusion, is the one theme of the Wessex novels.
>
> ("Study of Thomas Hardy")

This is general enough to be just, but not quite specific enough for the self-destructive Henchard. Also not sufficiently specific is the sympathetic judgment of Irving Howe, who speaks of "Henchard's personal struggle—the struggle of a splendid animal trying to escape a trap and thereby entangling itself all the more." I find more precise the dark musings of Sigmund Freud, Hardy's contemporary, who might be thinking of Michael Henchard when he meditates upon "The Economic Problem in Masochism":

> The third form of masochism, the moral type, is chiefly remarkable for having loosened its connection with what we

> recognize to be sexuality. To all other masochistic sufferings there still clings the condition that it should be administered by the loved person; it is endured at his command; in the moral type of masochism this limitation has been dropped. It is the suffering itself that matters; whether the sentence is cast by a loved or by an indifferent person is of no importance; it may even be caused by impersonal forces or circumstances, but the true masochist always holds out his cheek wherever he sees a chance of receiving a blow.

The origins of "moral masochism" are in an unconscious sense of guilt, a need for punishment that transcends actual culpability. Even Henchard's original and grotesque "crime," his drunken exploit in wife-selling, does not so much engender in him remorse at the consciousness of wrongdoing, but rather helps engulf him in the "guilt" of the moral masochist. That means Henchard knows his guilt not as affect or emotion but as a negation, as the nullification of his desires and his ambitions. In a more than Freudian sense, Henchard's primal ambivalence is directed against himself, against the authority principle in his own self.

If *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is a less original book than *Tess* or *Jude,* it is also a more persuasive and universal vision than Hardy achieved elsewhere. Miguel de Unamuno, defining the tragic sense of life, remarked that: "The chiefest sanctity of a temple is that it is a place to which men go to weep in common. A *miserere* sung in common by a multitude tormented by destiny has as much value as a philosophy." That is not tragedy as Aristotle defined it, but it is tragedy as Thomas Hardy wrote it.

The Metaphor of Chance: *The Mayor of Casterbridge*

Bert G. Hornback

> *"Casterbridge is a old, hoary place o' wickedness, by all account. 'Tis recorded in history that we rebelled against the King one or two hundred years ago, in the time of the Romans."*
>
> *The Mayor of Casterbridge*

Hardy's 1895-1912 preface to *The Mayor of Casterbridge* notes that, "The incidents narrated arise mainly out of three events, which chanced to range themselves in the order and at or about the intervals of time here given, in the real history of the town called Casterbridge and in the neighbouring country. They were the sale of a wife by her husband, the uncertain harvests which immediately preceded the repeal of the Corn Laws, and the visit of a Royal personage to the aforesaid part of England." There are but five characters drawn in detail for the acting out of this seemingly simple story, and four of them serve primarily to involve and entangle the fifth. Hardy called the novel "more particularly a study of one man's deeds and character than, perhaps, any other of those included in my Exhibition of Wessex life." Michael Henchard, the one "Man of Character," is supported and crossed at every turn by Susan, Elizabeth-Jane, Farfrae, and Lucetta. And he is interfered with by the furmity-woman, by the local chorus of rustics, and by his own private Fedullah, Joshua Jopp. His career, thus involved and complicated, is the plot of the novel. He sells his wife, loses all he has misguessing the harvest, and is publicly disgraced at the visit of the Royal personage.

From *The Metaphor of Chance: Vision and Technique in the Works of Thomas Hardy.* ©1971 by Bert G. Hornback. Ohio University Press, 1971.

Hardy's problem is how to make Michael Henchard larger than he is as the mayor of a small country town. The novel belongs strictly and almost entirely to Henchard: its full title is *The Life and Death of The Mayor of Casterbridge: A Story of a Man of Character.* Though his term as mayor is over in chapter 27 and his title is taken soon thereafter by Donald Farfrae, still he remains mayor—as Lear remains King. But being mayor—or King—is not enough. Nor is it enough for Hardy that Henchard stands as symbol for the passing of an age in England's history, for this makes him neither Oedipan nor of a kind and size with Lear. Hardy's plot for Henchard stresses his tragic fault, as his one mistake keeps returning to haunt him throughout his life; but this alone does not make the story of his fall great drama, or tragedy, even if we call him always "a Man of Character." Henchard's existence is not an intellectual one, either, for the sensitive critical vision is given to Elizabeth-Jane. Henchard's awareness is limited to himself and that immediate world in which he strives, not only for survival, but for the dignity of a man free to meet his fate. It is in achieving this freedom that he becomes, legitimately, "a Man of Character," that he makes himself significantly "The Mayor," that he becomes the novel's hero.

Henchard grows always toward this size throughout the novel. In *The Return of the Native* a stage for universally representative action is constructed overtly at the beginning of the novel, and the stage almost outsizes the characters who are asked to live up to its demands. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge* Hardy is much more subtle, and takes his time about building both the stage and the character to fit it. He exercises what Albert Guerard would call his "tact" in the use of his material, and he controls his own imaginative response to it with patient care. It is only toward the end of the novel that we realize for sure the immensity of Henchard's pain and the intensity of his tragedy, and we can accept it there, because of the narrative and dramatic preparation Hardy has made earlier. He has constructed a world which expands in time, metaphorically, to accommodate first Henchard's specific past and then Henchard himself, as representative man. His fate is made slowly, cumulatively, though it is foreshadowed from the very beginning. Ironies accumulate, as events recur one after another from the past to buffet Henchard for his mistake. At each turn he is defeated, but he never surrenders. He blots out his dignity, but each time he returns to the struggle with a new determination. We are sure, finally, of his stature and its legitimacy as we see his resolution in the face of his fate, as that fate is fulfilled. He has left Elizabeth-Jane, knowing the physical