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*The Mayor of
Casterbridge*
THOMAS HARDY



COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE

A Story of a Man of Character

Thomas Hardy



WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write wide ranging, jargon-free introductions and to provide notes that would assist the understanding of our readers rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

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INTRODUCTION

The Mayor of Casterbridge can readily be described in terms of Greek or Elizabethan tragedy. Its hero, Michael Henchard, a man of (local) high position, is humbled and destroyed primarily as a result of his own defects. Hardy quotes Novalis: 'Character is fate' (p. 88). Henchard, like Oedipus, Hamlet or Lear, has been betrayed by personal weakness, or 'tragic flaw'. Indeed his final exile in a ruined hut, attended by a single loyal simpleton, is deliberately reminiscent of *King Lear*.

The novel invites this traditional tragic interpretation, and comes well out of it. Any first-time reader is likely to respond, instinctively, along such lines. But the fact is that Hardy does not usually endorse the familiar view of the workings of the world that such a reading would seem to imply. He is both traditionalist and modernist, a tragedian, certainly, but not merely of the established kind. To take the full measure of the work one must appreciate the traditional reading but also see beyond it.

I

Arguably this is the best organised of all Hardy's novels. His first two chapters – the wife-sale and its aftermath – constitute a narrative prologue, like the scene before the credit-titles in many a film. The sequence provides a brilliantly dramatic beginning: only *Great Expectations*, of major Victorian novels, starts as explosively. There follows the gap of some eighteen years within which (we are later told) Henchard rises from unemployed hay-trusser to mayor of Casterbridge. It says much for Hardy's initial projection of forcefulness and willpower that this off-stage advancement seems perfectly plausible. A man of this capacity could indeed have risen so far. But it is the extravagant opening episode that gives rise, directly or indirectly, to the essential action that is to follow. Henchard's selling of his wife is the cause; his subsequent downfall is a belated series of effects. His tragedy has a sustained, fatalistic logic.

It evolves through a central situation of unusual compactness and symmetry. Four main characters are concerned, Henchard, Farfrae, Lucetta and Elizabeth-Jane. Each is emotionally related, in one way or another, to each of the other three: what affects one must affect them all. The circumstances are such that they cannot all be happy. They take narrative precedence in turn, as the balance of power constantly shifts, almost as in a game. Each moves between desire, hope, fulfilment and disappointment. Their personalities and voices are so vividly combined and contrasted as to produce an effect akin to that of an operatic quartet. The complex interrelationships are brilliantly contrived and developed. Yet everything that transpires has been conditioned by Henchard's selling of his wife, twenty years before – an event at which none of the other three was present.

The novel is sub-titled '*A Story of a Man of Character*', and in his preface Hardy underlines the point, declaring that 'The story is more particularly a study of one man's deeds and character' than any of his other narratives. What is there in Henchard that makes him worthy of such attention? Certainly he has some rough and ready virtues, including energy, a sense of justice and a fitful generosity. But when first encountered he is no more than a farm labourer, an ill-educated man of limited talents and imagination. By 'normal' standards his conduct proves appalling: he shows himself to be impulsive, hot-tempered, violent, quarrelsome and stubborn. He drinks; sells his wife, lies, deceives, bullies, goes to the very brink of suicide and murder. By contrast Farfrae, his great rival, is intelligent, civilised and amiable. Why should not *he* be described as 'a man of character'?

All the early indications are in his favour. He helps Henchard with his 'grown' wheat though he stands to gain nothing from doing so. At the Three Mariners his courtesy and charm create an immediate favourable impression, not merely with the locals but with the thoughtful Elizabeth-Jane. He shows decency and courage in countermanding Henchard's punitive command that Abel Whittle must work without breeches. It is his idea that a public entertainment should be put on in the town: Henchard is merely an imitator. Farfrae's fair prospers, as later do his business dealings, because he shows forethought and leaves a margin for error. He sees from the first that agriculture must adapt, must mechanise, while Henchard clings blindly to traditional methods. Altogether Farfrae shows himself to be an accomplished and conscientious man. If Hardy hints at reservations they are minor ones. Certainly the Scotsman is canny with his money: we learn (p. 172) that Abel Whittle earns a shilling a week less when Farfrae takes over Henchard's business. But Whittle himself concedes that he is 'the richer man' for the change, since working conditions are more equable. Often quoted against Farfrae is a passage late in the novel when he and Elizabeth-Jane have been trying in vain to track down the missing Henchard. He advises her 'to give up the search in person and trust to other means' to find him:

They were now a score of miles at least from home, but, by resting the horse for a couple of hours at a village they had just traversed, it would be possible to get back to Casterbridge that same day; while to go much further afield would reduce them to the necessity of camping out for the night; 'and that will make a hole in a sovereign,' said Farfrae. [p. 257]

The comment can seem niggardly and mean-spirited in retrospect, once the reader learns that Henchard had died, in extremity, less than an hour before it was made. With his characteristic fairness, however, Hardy mitigates it in two ways. He tells us immediately that Elizabeth-Jane (whose good feelings are never questioned) 'pondered the position, and agreed'. A moment or two later they see ahead of them a man resembling Abel Whittle. Farfrae remarks:

'And it may be Whittle, for he's never been to the yard these three weeks, going away without saying any word at all; and I owing him for two days' work, without knowing who to pay it to.'

His calculating scrupulosity is seen to cut two ways: it is also an aspect of his fair-mindedness.

What it nevertheless precludes is the quality that, above all,

characterises his predecessor as mayor: whole-heartedness. What Henchard feels he feels intensely; what he does he does with all his might. Bored with his pallid young wife he longs to be rid of her altogether. When, more by chance than intention, he does indeed dispose of her, he is consumed with guilt for his drunken folly and swears an immediate oath – which he keeps – to give up drink for twenty years. Attracted by Farfrae's charm and intelligence he forthwith does everything in his power to persuade him to remain in Casterbridge as his assistant. When the younger man becomes a rival both in love and business he sets out to destroy him – even to kill him. Ashamed of being a debtor, following the failure of his business, he disposes of everything in his possession, right down to his watch, to make what restitution he can. He is capable of committing great wrongs, but is proportionately, self-laceratingly, remorseful. His pride prevents him from making excuses, even to himself. He takes full responsibility for his actions, stoically accepting misery as deserved retribution: ‘“I – Cain – go alone as I deserve – an outcast and a vagabond. But my punishment is *not* greater than I can bear!”’ (p. 243) Henchard is incapable of moderating his emotions or doing things by halves. His impetuosity and full-bloodedness make him a danger both to himself and to others, but even at his lowest he is his own man.

Lucetta offers an extreme contrast when she is debating which of two new dresses to buy:

‘But settling upon new clothes is so trying,’ said Lucetta. ‘You are that person’ (pointing to one of the arrangements), ‘or you are *that* totally different person’ (pointing to the other), ‘for the whole of the coming spring: and one of the two, you don’t know which, may turn out to be very objectionable.’

It was finally decided by Miss Templeman that she would be the cherry-coloured person at all hazards. [p. 129]

It would never occur to Henchard that such externalities could modify his essential personality to the smallest degree. He is always, inescapably and assertively, himself. His oath of sobriety begins, ‘I, Michael Henchard’ (p. 13). When he dies he leaves a message headed ‘Michael Henchard’s Will’. The bleak document, which bequeaths nothing, is a demand that he be buried without ceremony and then forgotten. Confronted with this bitter declaration Farfrae can only ask, weakly, ‘What are we to do?’ Elizabeth-Jane, despite her grief, has no doubt that she must respect Henchard’s wishes as far as she can. She knows ‘that the man who wrote them meant what he said’ and that the

directions are 'a piece of the same stuff that his whole life was made of' (p. 259). She recognises in her faulty stepfather a man of crude but powerful integrity.

II

If Hardy's concentration on 'one man's deeds and character' is atypical, the word 'Casterbridge' in his title signals a further departure from his usual fictional practice. He is very much a rural novelist, dealing in open terrain: heath, hills, farmland, woodland. His characters move and work in a natural setting that provides not merely a background but an explanatory perspective. They are shown to be stirred by the same energies and subject to the same risks as the birds and beasts and even plants around them. In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, for example, the heroine feels her spirits revive with the coming of a fine spring: 'it moved her, as it moved the wild animals...'; 'some spirit within her rose automatically as the sap in the twigs'. Yet if she shares the vitality of animals and twigs she shares their vulnerability. Eventually she is as much a victim of chance and cruelty as the horse killed in a collision, the pheasants shot by 'sportsmen', or the rabbits, rats and mice destroyed by harvesters. Man's inescapable involvement in natural processes is everywhere the central Hardy theme, reflecting the powerful influence upon him of Darwin's writings.

This preoccupation is less easily dramatised in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, since it is the only novel by Hardy to be located almost solely in a town. Nor is the setting merely nominal: he goes to great lengths to bring to imaginative life the streets, avenues, houses, shops and bridges of his thinly fictionalised Dorchester, the place where he had grown up and in which he had again taken up residence shortly before beginning the novel. Even today we can clearly discern where his characters lived, worked and met, and can walk confidently in their footsteps.

Hardy does find ways of moderating the urban emphasis. Casterbridge has no suburbs: 'Country and town met at a mathematical line' (p. 20). It can therefore come about that bees and butterflies drift along the High Street, and that the bleating of sheep can be heard from the courthouse. The shops are full of agricultural implements. In the busy market, cattle and farm produce are sold and labourers are hired. With the country so familiar a reference-point there is still scope for the characteristic Hardy metaphors which assimilate human beings with nature. When the sun shines on Elizabeth-Jane's hair 'the rays streamed into its depths as into a hazel copse' (p. 19). Guests at a public dinner are seen 'sniffing and grunting over their plates like sows

nuzzling for acorns' (p. 26). The fruit-trees in Henchard's garden 'had pulled their stakes out of the ground and stood distorted and writhing in vegetable agony, like leafy Laocoöns' (p. 59). Conversely when Henchard and Farfrae are fighting they are described as 'rocking and writhing like trees in a gale'. But the Darwinian context of growth, appetite, competition and destruction is much less strongly marked in this urban story than in most of the Wessex novels, where it has a dominant role. What Casterbridge offers in its place is another imaginative context vivid to Hardy. Everywhere there are reminders of times long past: Elizabethan buildings, 'a grizzled church', an ancient amphitheatre, the skeletons of Roman soldiers, a prehistoric fort. Hardy constantly recalls that this territory has been diversely occupied for century upon century. Henchard, Susan, Lucetta and others have their pains, but the descriptive sub-text hints that comparable, perhaps worse, tribulations have been endured by countless unknown fore-runners. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge* the characters are diminished less often by allusions to an endless latitude of co-existent fellow-creatures and fellow-species than by reminders of a longitude, stretching back into prehistory, of abandoned or decaying structures, dead men and vanished races.

III

It is largely by this means that Hardy steers the narrative away from the traditions of dramatic tragedy. The plight of the Shakespearean hero is typically brought about by a series of personal choices and is open to alternatives at least of a hypothetical kind. If Macbeth had resisted his wife's persuasions, if Othello had not been deceived by Iago, then they might have prospered, might have been great men. Such is the inference drawn by audiences or readers as they see the wrong decisions made, the wrong courses followed. Hardy shows only moderate interest in such might-have-beens, choosing rather to assert that, whatever choices we make, none of us, Roman soldier or Casterbridge merchant, is granted more than 'a brief transit through a sorry world' (p. 260). With greater self-command Henchard might have spared himself much misery, but could have guaranteed no rewards. Even the 'latitude of calm weather' (p. 259) eventually enjoyed by Farfrae and Elizabeth-Jane seems to offer no more than modest contentment. The great tragic dramatists deal first and foremost with heroic particular lives. Hardy, although sharing some of their preoccupations, is contrastingly a Modernist in his predominant concern rather with 'life' in general, and whether it is worth living.

This claim perhaps requires an explanatory gloss. Hardy has been

called a pessimist, partly because the highest hopes of his characters are usually dashed, partly because he so frequently emphasises that in the context of space and time *any* human-being is a mere 'speck' (a favourite Hardy word) with a life of infinitesimal brevity. Too often overlooked, however, is his regular escape from melancholy reflection on 'life' at large to a counter-balancing insistence on what can be the passionate excitement of *living*. Space and time are forces unimaginably vast, but they are figments devoid of identity and feeling – indeed figments apprehended solely by the mind of man, the one creature blessed, or cursed, with consciousness. Man alone can be happy, if only momentarily, and can *know* that he is happy. Some individuals, at least, perhaps all of us for a time, can live with an intensity which defies the transience to which we are condemned. Love, in particular, can transform us, as Hardy often shows:

A yellow flood of reflected sunlight filled the room for a few instants. It was produced by the passing of a load of newly trussed hay from the country, in a waggon marked with Farfrae's name. Beside it rode Farfrae himself on horseback. Lucetta's face became – as a woman's face becomes when the man she loves rises upon her gaze like an apparition. [p. 138]

The sudden flood of light is a metaphor for the shock of joy Lucetta experiences at the unexpected sight of her lover. Earlier in the novel Hardy has found a different metaphor to express romantic excitement, on this occasion Elizabeth-Jane's reaction on leaving Farfrae after he has all but proposed to her:

Without any consciousness of what she was doing she started running with all her might till she reached her father's door. 'Oh dear me – what am I at?' she thought as she pulled up breathless. [p. 85]

In all Hardy's novels there are such moments of exaltation. His so-called pessimism is in fact defined against his insistence on man's innate capacity for joy.

Joy itself, however, is presented as only one mode, if the commonest one, of being fully, vibrantly alive. The ultimate triumph of the Man of Character, the reason for Hardy's tribute to him, is that even in the face of death, even when penning a document of despair, he cannot help but conclude with one more last-ditch assertion of personality which involuntarily negates the attempted self-annihilation:

To this I put my name.

MICHAEL HENCHARD

Many of Hardy's major characters, including Tess, Jude, Giles Winterbourne (*The Woodlanders*) and Elfride Swanstun (*A Pair of Blue Eyes*) are victims above all, their course of life and their eventual death being determined by forces outside their control. Henchard, the Man of Character, perhaps experiences more than his share of misfortune, but his fate is what he makes it. He takes charge of his own destiny and accepts responsibility for it. In so doing he blazes with the self-defining energy of a human being fully and passionately alive.

IV

The Mayor of Casterbridge is also at variance with Shakespearian tragedy in the area of morality. Typically the Shakespearian tragic hero brings about his eventual downfall through an action, or actions, not merely ill-judged, but morally wrong. Some system of divine retribution is thereby implied, though it may be strongly questioned. Even in the bleak *King Lear*, Albany, hearing of Cornwall's deserved death, can exclaim:

This shows you are above,
You justicers, that these our nether crimes
So speedily can venge! [4, 2, 78 ff.]

Hardy would never draw such conclusions, because he sees no such system of justice at work. Punishment is not proportioned to crime. The episode of Henchard selling his wife is 'bad' enough, but not nearly so heinous as it might sound in a plot-summary. What takes place is a drunken joke gone drastically wrong rather than a serious attempt at a transaction: only in a surrealistic auction does the price of the goods rise despite a total absence of bids. The repercussions, however, are as disastrous as they would have been had Henchard been acting out of true malevolence. He is laid low not by moral retribution, divinely imposed, but by the practical consequences of his deeds and by further displays of the damaging characteristics which brought about the 'auction': irascibility, aggression, impulsiveness, obduracy and a taste for drink. In his case at least it would seem that character is indeed fate. No 'justicers' are at work.

To acknowledge this, however, is by no means to imply that Hardy disregards morality. On the contrary, as Lord David Cecil finely says of him: 'Hardy's moral taste is unerring, responding to every fine shade of chivalry, delicacy and magnanimity, and without a touch of sentimentality or self-admiration' (*Hardy the Novelist*, p. 154). Most of the major characters in the Wessex novels, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* included, display unobtrusive goodness, at least on occasion. For all his faults,

Henchard makes amends to Susan with unexceptionable kindness and even tact. When he confides to Farfrae the details of his conflicting obligations to Susan and to Lucetta, the Scotsman suggests that he should simply write to the latter, making his excuses. He can put it 'plain and honest that it turns out she cannot be your wife, the first having come back; that ye cannot see her more; and that – ye wish her weel'. Henchard immediately responds:

'That won't do. 'Od seize it, I must do a little more than that! I must . . . send a useful sum of money to her, I suppose – just as a little recompense, poor girl . . .'

[p. 61]

In that instance Farfrae's correctness looks pallid beside his friend's unthinking generosity; but he, too, can be magnanimous. When forced to start in business on his own account he refuses a potential customer who had previously dealt with Henchard:

'He was once my friend . . . and it's not for me to take business from him. I am sorry to disappoint you, but I cannot hurt the trade of a man who's been so kind to me.'

[p. 88]

Such decencies seem to be important to Hardy not because he sees them as an extension of a morality in the larger scheme of things, but precisely because he doesn't. The human race, for all that it is an anomalous aggregation of short-lived 'specks', has incongruously invented goodness – which none but a human-being could recognise as a noble creation.

This crucial aspect of his art, all too easily undervalued, shows to great advantage in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. In this novel, as in most of the Wessex Novels, there is a complex, plural ending which must be appreciated in its fullness if the scope of Hardy's enterprise is to be understood. Two strands in it have already been mentioned: Henchard's defiant 'will' and the guarded, careful coda concerning Elizabeth-Jane's subsequent, sufficiently contented, married life. There is a third element, as striking in its way as either of the others. When the Farfraes are searching for Henchard they drive through desolate territory and reach, eventually, a highway skirting Egdon Heath:

Into this road they directed the horse's head, and soon were bowling across that ancient country whose surface never had been stirred to a finger's depth, save by the scratchings of rabbits, since brushed by the feet of the earliest tribes.

[pp. 256–7]

In this huge, barren landscape 'a solitary human form' appears: 'The person was some labourer; his gait was shambling . . .' The formulation

is the obverse of the account of Henchard at the very beginning of the novel, when his walk is described as that of 'the skilled countryman as distinct from the desultory shamble of the general labourer'. The individual concerned proves to be Abel Whittle, who has played a small, ignominious role earlier in the narrative: 'a round-shouldered, blinking young man of nineteen or twenty, whose mouth fell ajar on the slightest provocation, seemingly because there was no chin to support it' (p. 74). This poor illiterate explains how he came to be with Henchard at the time of his death, having followed him from Casterbridge because 'he looked low and faltering':

'... But I followed, and he turned again, and said, "Do you hear, sir? Go back!" But I zeed that he was low, and I followed on still. Then 'a said, "Whittle, what do ye follow me for when I've told ye to go back all these times?" And I said, "Because, sir, I see things be bad with 'ee, and ye wer kind-like to mother if ye were rough to me, and I would fain be kind-like to you." Then he walked on, and I followed; and he never complained at me no more.' [p. 258]

The inscrutable landscape that dwarfs individual human lives in its size and antiquity is suddenly dwarfed itself by this simple articulation of instinctive goodness. There is nothing else in this 'wide country' to compare with the humble Whittle in kind or quality. Hardy does not speculate as to whether this unsought tenderness was of solace to the despairing Henchard – though there is the smallest of hints, in Whittle's account, that it may have been – but surely it is of solace to the reader. Our sense of Henchard's desolation is mollified by this show of pure charity from an unlikely source. The ending of the novel would be incomparably harsher without this moral palliative. In this fictional sketch of human possibilities, Whittle's loving-kindness is to be set alongside Henchard's passionate defiance and Elizabeth-Jane's thoughtful sensitivity. To be moved by Whittle is to share Hardy's humanism, to recognise that we are capable of greatness on our own terms, which are the only terms we can know, and possibly the only 'terms' which exist.

V

The textual history of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, spanning Hardy's original manuscript, the simultaneous British and American serial versions, and a series of hard-cover versions, is a complex record of experiment, evolution and emendation. Plot-lines were revised, episodes altered, stylistic changes made. Perhaps for this reason there is a certain raggedness in some aspects of the narration. The author himself later remarked, in his *Life*, that *The Mayor of Casterbridge*

... was a story which Hardy fancied he had damaged more recklessly as an artistic whole, in the interest of the newspaper in which it appeared serially, than perhaps any other of his novels, his aiming to get an incident into almost every week's part causing him in his own judgment to add events to the narrative somewhat too freely. *[Life and Work, p. 185]*

Although he pruned or reshaped a number of such scenes in his successive revisions, the self-criticism remains just. At the heart of the novel lies the sustained relationship, first of uneasy friendship and then of rivalry, between Henchard and Farfrae. The development and deterioration of the relationship has its own clear dynamic. Given this powerful mainspring the novel could have unwound at its own pace. Hardy prods along the process from the outside, so to speak, by inserting more episodes – some of them awkwardly contrived – than the case requires: the trial of the furmity-woman, the drinking scene, the runaway bull, the skimmity ride, the visit of the Royal Personage, the fight in the granary. He leaves himself very little scope for the indirect, psychologically complex narration that this slow-burning central situation might seem to require. There are times when the story lurches with awkward speed from event to event. The skimmity ride is suggested only for the plan to be thrust aside by the perfunctorily related royal visit, which in turn leads into the fight. Such awkward narrative haste blurs the sense of tragic inevitability latent in Henchard's story.

The general hurry also gives rise to loose ends and downright inconsistencies. It is perhaps understandable that Hardy should remain discreetly silent about the lack of correlation between Henchard's claim to be Elizabeth-Jane's father and her own likely assumptions about her age. But she would presumably have speculated further about his motives for (apparently) lying about her paternity. What could he have hoped to gain by such a deception? Farfrae's knowledge of the case, as gleaned directly from Henchard (in Chapter 12) should surely have come into play as he and Elizabeth discussed the matter with Newson. In Chapter 34, Farfrae initiates a plan to set up Henchard in a seed-shop. He is persuaded to give up the idea, and Henchard is mistakenly told that Farfrae has been responsible for destroying the scheme: 'And thus out of error enmity grew' (p. 187). Yet in Chapter 42, without further explanation, we are told that Henchard 'had fettered his pride sufficiently to accept the small seed and root business which some of the Town Council, headed by Farfrae, had purchased to afford him a new opening'. Newson remarks of Susan (p. 226) that, 'She could write her own name, and no more.' Alert readers will remember that in the course

of the novel she has written crucial messages to Elizabeth-Jane, Farfrae and Henchard. At one point Lucetta arranges to meet Elizabeth-Jane in the churchyard 'the first fine day next week' (p. 107), but we're later told that the 'day and the hour came; but a drizzling rain fell' (p. 111). One of the finest passages in the book is the last page or so of Chapter 18, consisting largely of Mother Cuxsom's beautiful little elegy for Mrs Henchard. Hardy, typically, will not let even the pallid Susan depart without having a kind word put in on her behalf. The passage also includes the blackly comic anecdote of the burial of the pennies which closed the dead woman's eyes, and their retrieval by Christopher Coney, who has spent them at the Three Mariners. When Hardy is in such fine form it seems odd that he fails to notice that he has prefaced the passage with the disabling information – easily removable – that Mrs Henchard was only 'just dead – that very hour'.

It wouldn't be difficult to add to this list of minor inconsistencies. They are mentioned here not to score points against Hardy, but because the superficial weakness sits so oddly with the underlying concern with cause and effect earlier mentioned. No doubt, as he conceded, serial publication could be a damaging influence in this area, but other factors could make him cavalier about the nuts and bolts of storytelling. In particular his Modernist tendencies often led him to develop an episode less as a contribution to plot than as a scene metaphorically expressive in its own right. A case in point is the rendezvous between Farfrae and Elizabeth-Jane which Susan brings about. Hardy is able to insinuate with extreme concision the mutual attraction in their largely silent meeting. Farfrae cannot but notice that the winnowing machine has sullied Elizabeth-Jane's clothes:

'There's husks and dust on you. Perhaps you don't know it?' he said, in tones of extreme delicacy. '... Let me help you – blowing is the best.'

As Elizabeth neither assented nor dissented, Donald Farfrae began blowing her back hair, and her side hair, and her neck, and the crown of her bonnet, and the fur of her victorine, Elizabeth saying, 'Oh, thank you,' at every puff. [p. 73]

At the narrative level the mere fact of the encounter would have sufficed to mark the beginning of a possible relationship. Hardy goes well beyond this. Though both characters behave with propriety and even bashfulness these few lines sensually display the erotic tension between them.

There is a magnificent scene, late in the novel, when Henchard goes to Ten Hatches weir to drown himself. He takes off his coat and hat

and is about to jump when he sees a human form 'stiff and stark' on the surface of the water below:

In the circular current imparted by the central flow the form was brought forward, till it passed under his eyes; and then he perceived with a sense of horror that it was *himself*. Not a man somewhat resembling him, but one in all respects his counterpart, his actual double, was floating as if dead in Ten Hatches Hole. [p. 231]

Seeing this vision as portentous, Henchard abandons his suicide attempt. From the point of view of plot the episode is literally inconsequential, a narrative loop: he decides not to kill himself only a page or so after setting out to do so. Its value is expressive. Henchard is later to be called a 'self-alienated man' (p. 256), and the term is true in several senses: he is a labourer who has been a wealthy civic leader, an outcast who once had a family, an emotional man who cannot give voice to his affections or his regrets. This split in his personality is imaged in quasi-literal terms: the drowned self Henchard sees could be a projection from his own mind.

Elsewhere in Hardy – particularly in the later novels – such expressive episodes are multiplied virtually to the point of usurping the orthodox narrative interest. The new Modernist medium he pioneers, in effect a sequence of dramatised metaphors, is essentially that to be later adopted by D. H. Lawrence. *The Mayor of Casterbridge* can indeed be seen as a last outpost of the traditional tragedy, the story of one man's deeds, character and destiny; but that outpost is already under siege from an emerging relativism. As a Man of Character, Henchard claims responsibility for his own destiny; but his personal tale is half-dissolved in a Darwinian vision of universal struggle. In the telling of it, various of the episodes do not so much display his autonomy in narrative action as reflect upon his helplessness through the medium of metaphor.

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An invaluable website is that of the Hardy Society of North America, to be found at <http://www.yale.edu/hardysoc/Welcome/welcomet.htm>

EXTRACT FROM AUTHOR'S PREFACE

Readers of the following story who have not yet arrived at middle age are asked to bear in mind that, in the days recalled by the tale, the home Corn Trade, on which so much of the action turns, had an importance that can hardly be realised by those accustomed to the sixpenny loaf of the present date (1895), and to the present indifference of the public to harvest weather.

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 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.

T. H.