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Thomas Hardy's THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE

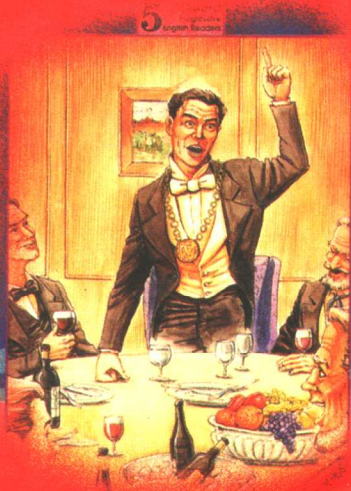
Ken Sobol

托马斯·哈代的

卡斯特桥市长

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INTRODUCTION

HARDY'S BACKGROUND: Thomas Hardy was born in 1840 just three years after Queen Victoria ascended the throne of Britain. Although he lived well into the twentieth century, dying in 1928 at the age of 88, he remained a Victorian to the end. This is particularly true of his career as a novelist. All of his major novels were written before the turn of the century and, therefore, it is exclusively as a Victorian figure that we must study Hardy.

He was born in Higher Brockhampton, an obscure village not far from Dorchester, in Dorset. His father was a mason and contractor. Until the age of 15, he attended school in Dorchester after which he was apprenticed to an architect for six years. When his apprenticeship was over, he went to London to work under Sir Arthur Blomfield, a restorer of old churches. While he was in London, he continued his studies in his spare time. He was particularly interested in classical languages and literature and attended lectures in those subjects at Kings College.

HIS EARLY CAREER: At the same time, he tried his hand at poetry but found he could get nothing accepted. This convinced him that he should write fiction instead. He became friendly with George Meredith, the novelist, who acted as a kind of unofficial literary advisor and tutor. After two unsuccessful novels, he wrote a romance, *Under the Greenwood Tree*, which achieved a measure of recognition.

Returning to Dorchester, he worked as an architect and continued writing when he could find the time. *Far From the Madding Crowd*, published in 1874, marked a turning point in his literary life. The novel was an overwhelming success and he was able to support himself solely by his writing from then on. He remained in Dorchester to the end of his life living in a house he himself designed on the outskirts of the town. He called it "Max Gate." It has long been a shrine for Hardy admirers.

HIS LATER LIFE: The second turning point in his career as a man of letters came in the middle '90s. The final two Wessex novels, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1896), raised a storm of controversy because of their "indecent" subject matter. Today, their subjects would be considered harmless, even dull, but the Victorians were outraged by his gloomy outlook and lack of sweetness. As a reaction to this, Hardy returned to poetry. With the exception of a few short stories, he wrote only poetry from that time. His greatest work as a poet, or at least his most ambitious, is *The Dynasts*, a long epic poem about the Napoleonic wars.

With minor exceptions, his life at Max Gate was without excitement. He married his first wife, Emma Gifford, in 1874, the year of his first great success. Their marriage was long, but apparently somewhat difficult for Hardy. "Em" proved to be a woman of great stubbornness with considerable regard for propriety. Two years after her death in 1912, he married Florence Dugdale who survived him and became his literary executor.

INTELLECTUAL INTERESTS: Hardy's opinions and philosophy were formed long before the twentieth century. They did not change in the later years of his life except perhaps to become more rigid. In

his personal affairs, he can legitimately be called reactionary. He had little use for the modern world, did not understand it, and did his best to shut it out of his life. He read very little contemporary literature, even when he was young, and less as he grew older. From the first, he mistrusted London and big city sophistication. Once having reestablished himself back in Dorchester, he never evinced any desire to return to the literary circles of the capital.

His concerns, both privately and in his work, were almost entirely involved with his native West Country. The Wessex of his great novels is in many ways the limit of his interests. Geographically, it is an area which corresponds exactly to the old Saxon kingdom of Wessex before the Norman invasions. It extends from North Devon in the West to Hampshire in the East; a rather large expanse. For the most part, however, Hardy's Wessex can be said to cover primarily the area of the modern county of Dorset.

Dorset was an extremely rural and somewhat wild area in Hardy's youth and, even today, is far less industrialized than most other sections of England. There were very few large towns, especially in the interior. Even the towns were very much dependent upon agriculture for their subsistence as is true of the Casterbridge in this novel. Town or country, everyone was intimately involved with nature and natural processes, the weather, the harvest and planting, and so on. These, in Hardy's opinion, were the basic elements of life and such natural phenomena play a vital role in his work.

HIS CONCERN WITH NATURE: For Hardy, nature was the primary fact in life. He felt that nature was good because it represented free, spontaneous life in its most honest, basic form. Nature was also harsh and demanding, punishing those who did not live in tune with

it. For most of his major characters, life is a struggle to regain the simplicity and truth of natural living. It is a struggle that most of them lose, often because they have been corrupted by the city or by sophisticated foreigners who do not appreciate the laws of nature. Such figures, more often than not sensual women like "Lucetta" in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, are the common villains in Hardy's novels. Along with this, Hardy customarily draws a distinction between the old, pre-industrial, country England and modern Victorian society. As one would expect, he prefers the former and looks back to it longingly although he knows it is gone forever.

THE WESSEX NOVELS: In most of the Wessex novels, the country itself virtually becomes a character. This is particularly true of *The Return of the Native* in which Egdon Heath is a major force. In all of them, Hardy employs a group of local characters to comment on the action of the leading figures. These are people, usually field hands, who are close to nature and therefore unspoiled. They serve as a kind of Greek chorus, explaining and presenting the author's viewpoint. They also add local color and comic relief to the essentially sober stories. They are not fully-drawn characters but rather part of the natural background of Wessex.

The Wessex novels are similar in many other ways. All of them rely heavily on sensational incidents and their plots are overloaded with exciting climaxes. This is not surprising since most of his books appeared in serial form. It took five months of weekly installments in *Graphic* magazine to publish *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, for example. Despite the fact that Hardy had refused to be hurried into completing it, he was still forced to invent exciting endings for each week's installment. If he and the other novelists of the time had failed to do so, the readers would have lost interest from one week to

the next, or so the publishers believed. It is easy to see how such a framework can upset the greatest of writers. Hardy was no exception. *The Mayor of Casterbridge* often shows signs of excessive plotting as do all his other serialized novels.

THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE: Of all the Wessex novels, however, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, published in 1886, is the least typical. It makes much less use of the physical environment than do the others although of course it does not ignore it. Undoubtedly, the fact that it takes place primarily in a town accounts for this. Casterbridge, which is modelled very closely on Dorchester, while still dependent on farming, is somewhat more sophisticated than the surrounding countryside. It has a clearly defined social structure, symbolized by the three inns which the different classes frequent. In addition, it is a main stopping point along the Great West Road and on a main north-south artery as well. This gives Casterbridge a certain eminence in Wessex.

Partly because of the relative importance of Casterbridge, much of the regional color found in the other novels is lacking. Some is still present but the chorus, for example, really has little to do in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. There is also little emphasis placed upon manual labor, in contrast to the other novels. Most of the important characters are townbred, and all live on their inherited wealth or business acumen. Of all of them, Henchard is the only one who knows what it is to work in the fields.

ITS OUTSTANDING FEATURE: These are all minor differences however. By far the outstanding feature that makes *The Mayor of Casterbridge* unique is its single-minded concentration upon one central character. The other figures in the book hardly matter. Only

Elizabeth-Jane seems to have any independent life outside of her association with Henchard, and she not very much. Henchard dominates the action at every turn. We learn about the town mainly in relation to his activities in it. There is a minimum of extra description and comment, at least for Hardy.

BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE PLOT

The novel begins with the most sensational incident in the entire story: Henchard's drunken sale of his wife Susan and their infant daughter to a passing sailor. As in a Greek tragedy, this first crime sets off a series of others. We know that this pattern will eventually end in disaster for the original perpetrator. Henchard has sealed his fate in the first two chapters. The remainder of the novel relates the inevitable unfolding of that fate.

His downfall begins almost twenty years after his crime. In the interim, Henchard has reached great heights of fortune. He has risen from a fieldhand to Mayor of Casterbridge. We learn that it is precisely because of his misdeed, because of the lesson it taught him about disciplining himself, that he has made his way in the world. He no longer drinks and he controls his temper so that his natural abilities have come out.

Susan's return with Elizabeth-Jane, after the reported shipwreck of the sailor, coincides with the arrival of Donald Farfrae. Farfrae does Henchard a great favor which helps him in his grain dealing business. Henchard is so impressed that he prevails upon the young Scot to remain in Casterbridge as his manager. At the same time, driven by guilt feelings, he "remarries" Susan and brings her and Elizabeth-Jane, now a young woman, into his house. These two acts set in motion the inevitable workings of fate. It is noteworthy that Henchard himself brings them about. "Character is fate," Hardy says. We begin to see that it is Henchard's fate to be destroyed by his own impulsive, prideful character.

Farfrae proves himself an excellent businessman. He is so good, in fact, that Henchard becomes resentful. After a series of incidents, culminating in a too-successful party given by Farfrae, Henchard fires him. To Henchard's annoyance, Farfrae sets up a grain business of his own. Shortly afterwards, Susan dies leaving a letter to be opened on her daughter's marriage day. Henchard opens it anyway and discovers to his horror that Elizabeth-Jane is not his daughter but the sailor's. His daughter had died soon after the sale. He becomes very cold toward her, making her life miserable.

A woman with whom he had an affair sometime before comes to reside in Casterbridge. Her name is "Lucetta Le Sueur." As her names indicates, she is foreign, seductive and somewhat immoral. She intends to marry Henchard. He has no objections since he had ruined her reputation and now feels he should make amends. Lucetta meets Elizabeth-Jane soon after her arrival, realizes that she is unhappy, and invites her to come to live in the house she has taken. She assumes that it is a good way to make Henchard's visits to her appear innocent to the townspeople.

Farfrae comes to court Elizabeth-Jane but meets Lucetta instead and is swept off his feet. They fall in love and Lucetta refuses to see Henchard although he is now anxious to marry her. He becomes furious and decides to crush Farfrae. In his blind determination, he makes a ruinous business deal and is bankrupted. He loses his house, his business, and all of his money. Almost at the same time, a woman who had witnessed the sale of his wife comes to the town. She is only too happy to reveal Henchard's past. He is immediately ruined socially as well.

Lucetta offers to help him financially but he discovers that she has

secretly married Farfrae and refuses. She asks him to return some love letters she had written during their affair, of which Farfrae knows nothing. Henchard chivalrously agrees, giving them to his former manager to deliver. The manager, an unpleasant, vengeful man, bears a grudge against Lucetta, unknown to Henchard. He takes the letters to a dive where he and some of the town riff-raff open and read them for a joke. The next morning, he delivers them and Lucetta burns the package at once.

The local drifters and petty criminals decide to hold a skimmity-ride. This was a crude custom designed to humiliate a woman who had been unfaithful to her husband. An effigy of the adulterous pair is made and paraded around the town. Although Farfrae is sent out of town by some friends, Lucetta is wildly upset by the prank. She has an epileptic fit. Henchard, by accident, is the only person in town who knows where Farfrae has gone. He rushes to find him but, when he does, Farfrae will not trust his word and goes on his way. By the time he returns, Lucetta is near death. The next morning she is gone.

Henchard and Elizabeth-Jane become reconciled. Then, the sailor comes to Casterbridge looking for Susan and his daughter. He explains that he was not drowned after all. Stunned, Henchard impulsively tells him they are both dead. The sailor departs immediately. Henchard is ashamed of his actions and chases after him but it is too late.

In the months that follow, Henchard finds some happiness living with Elizabeth-Jane in a small shop the town has set up for them. Soon, however, the sailor returns having learned the truth. Henchard leaves Casterbridge at once, miserable and ashamed, intending

to go far away and subsist by hay-trussing in the fields, his original occupation. His love for Elizabeth-Jane makes it impossible for him to leave the region. Working about 50 miles away, he hears that she and Farfrae are getting married. He resolves to go to the wedding reception, offers his apologies, and beg for forgiveness. She spurns him when he appears, however. He leaves for good without a further word. Soon afterward, he dies of a broken heart, alone and attended only by a feeble-minded former employe. Elizabeth-Jane relents and comes to find him, but by then it is too late.

His tragedy has been certain since the opening chapters. Its working out is the essence of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. But, if Henchard had not done such and such, one might object, he would have been saved. But what makes *The Mayor of Casterbridge* a great novel is precisely that Henchard's character is so constructed that he cannot react any way other than he does. Anyone else could and would have, but not Henchard. Nothing is really inevitable and yet everything is. This is the final conclusion of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.

THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE

CHAPTER I

It is a warm, pleasant evening in the late summer of the year 1826. A young man and his wife, dusty from long travel, are walking along a country road toward the village of Weydon-Priors, in Upper Wessex, England. The woman is carrying their infant daughter. Although they are walking side by side, the two adults do not speak to each other. The man, in particular, seems disdainfully determined to ignore his traveling companions.

He walks proudly, holding himself firmly erect, never looking at the others. He is tall and impressively handsome with a stern, angular face. His complexion is dark from years of working in the fields.

His wife, on the other hand, is as ordinary looking as he is distinctive. Although she is somewhat pretty, in a tired way, her expression is dull and apathetic, as if she were resigned to a hard, oppressive life and no longer even cared what the future held for her.

Walking silently along the road, they encounter no one for quite a while. Finally, when they are already within sight of the outlying houses of Weydon-Priors, they meet a turnip-hoer returning home after the day's work. The young man stops him and asks if he knows of any work in the area for a hay trusser. The hoer points out with a sneer that it is the wrong time of year for such work. He goes on to say that Weydon-Priors is going through hard times and the hay trusser won't even be able to find a cottage for his family to live in. But, isn't there something going on today, the trusser asks, and the hoer informs him that today is Fair Day in Weydon-Priors, al-

though he himself isn't fool enough to attend.

The trusser and his family continue on and soon come to the fair field. It is crowded with local people, some traders buying and selling livestock, but mostly holiday makers out for a good time at the peep-shows, toy stands, wax works, freak exhibits, and all the other common features of a fair. The travelers, however, are tired and only interested in finding a refreshment tent. As they look around, they see two close at hand. One advertises "Good, Home-brewed Beer, Ale and Cyder." The other has a placard in front reading "Good Furmity Sold Hear".

The man inclines to the beer tent, but his wife begs that they have furmity (see Glossary) instead and he gives in. The furmity tent is jammed. An old hag-like woman presides behind the counter and from her they order basins of hot furmity. The man soon discovers that, for an extra fee, the old hag will lace the furmity with rum. He guiltily tries to conceal the addition from his wife but she notices. However, she says nothing.

He finishes the first basin and orders another with an even larger proportion of rum. His wife protests but he does not listen. Becoming more and more drunk, he begins to argue vociferously with those around him. After his fourth basin, the discussion turns to the ruin of good men by bad wives and he remarks bitterly, "I married at eighteen like the fool I was; and this is the consequence o't." He points resentfully to his family blaming them for his impoverished state.

Just then, an auctioneer outside shouts his spiel trying to sell off his last horse. He gives the hay trusser an idea. He claims that he

thinks men who don't want their wives should be allowed to sell them, too. "Why, begad, I'd sell mine this minute if somebody would buy her," he announces. The men look her over and agree that she would be worth something. If that is the case, the trusser says, he is open to an offer.

His wife begs him to stop joking but he insists that he is serious. Finally, after more rum, he makes her stand up to show herself to the crowd and calls for an auctioneer. The woman stands, remaining calm by a supreme effort of will. Someone volunteers to act as auctioneer. He'll take a guinea, the trusser says. When no one bids, he becomes incensed and gradually raises the price to five guineas. "The last time," cries the auctioneer, "Yes or no?"

"Yes," says a loud voice from the doorway where an unknown sailor stands. The hay trusser is confused. He calls for the money expecting the sailor to back out. The sailor gives it to him. Now the game is suddenly in earnest. The tension builds. Everyone becomes silent waiting to see who is bluffing.

The woman breaks in desperately, "Michael, listen to me. If you touch that money, I and the girl go with the man. Mind, it is a joke no longer." "A joke? Of course it is not a joke," Michael cries. The bargain is struck. The trusser takes the money and puts it in his pocket. His wife looks at him once, takes the baby, and begins to leave with the sailor. At the door, she turns and flings her wedding ring in his face. She is sobbing bitterly as the sailor helps her from the tent.

When she has left, Michael walks to the entrance looking out at the peaceful valley and woods. A group of horses, waiting to be taken to

pasture, crosses in front of him. He staggers back into the tent, muttering that he'll not go after her. Soon, he falls into a drunken sleep on a table. The old hag leaves him there for the night.

CHAPTER II

Early the following morning, the hay trusser awakes to find himself alone in the furmity tent. As he looks around, trying to recover his wits, he comes across his wife's wedding ring on the floor. Seeing it, he vaguely begins to remember what had taken place the night before. Finding the sailor's money in his pocket proves conclusively that he has not dreamed the whole thing. He has sold his wife, Susan, and his daughter, Elizabeth-Jane, to a passing stranger.

He leaves the tent at once emerging onto the fair grounds. No one is stirring yet. He picks his way quickly through the maze of tents and booths, past the sleeping showmen and gypsies, and away from the fair. Then, he stops to reflect, leaning against a gate.

First, he wonders if he has told anyone his name; he concludes with relief that he has not. Next, he becomes angry at his wife for being such a fool and taking him so literally. He curses her simplicity of character and becomes furious at her idiotic meekness; meekness that has done him more harm than the bitterest temper, he shouts.

When he calms down, however, he realizes that he must try to find her and put up with the shame as best he can. He is a superstitious person however and, before he begins the search, he resolves to swear the greatest oath he has ever uttered; an oath so important he has to swear it in a church. He walks on. Some miles further, he comes to another village, finds the village church, and enters it.