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The Unforgettable Past and Note of Pessimism in Hardy's The Mayor Of Casterbridge

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Abstract:

Hardy's The Mayer of Casterbridge is basically made on the concept of unjust pessimism, and is absolutely framed on the past events of Michel Henchard. The note of pessimism is strongly prevailed throughout the novel and that in The Mayor of Casterbridge Hardy's own perspective on the events seem remote and detached. Hardy's actual writing style is usually clear and is often extremely well wrought. With the actions of a primal and unchanging world working against the weak human, life becomes a series of pains, punctuated only by flashes of happiness. He succeeds only in making more grievous mistakes, but he never fails to acknowledge that the past cannot be buried or denied. Irony works upon the people who are already there, creating the best laid plans go away. A note of post modern discourse of strong dejection and hatredness is tuned nonverbally with humanistic sparks. This paper will centralise our vision of boredomness through the lens of Hardian aspect.

Key words: Unjust pessimism, actions of a primal and unchanging world, grievous mistakes, weak human, flashes of happiness.

Introduction:

Hardy's The Mayer of Casterbridge is a kind of pessimistic story of its protagonist Michel Henchard. He is the main character who has become a puppet of his own luck though he is laborious man. He tries to do good and becomes a better human being but everywhere he gets frustrated, disillusionment, alienation and disorder in his life. Thomas Hardy's The Mayor of Casterbridge (1886) brings to light the harsh reality of Victorian society's treatment of women. This aspect of the novel may be illustrated by comparing present-day society's conditions for and attitudes towards women with how characters in the story treat Susan Henchard, Lucetta Templeman, and Elizabeth-Jane Newson. In June of 1883, Thomas Hardy and his wife Emma settled into their new home in Dorchester. The Hardys had spent the last few years travelling about England, although they wanted to settle down and perhaps begin a family. Finally, Hardy and Emma decided to return to Dorchester. This town, located only a few miles from his birthplace of Upper Bockhampton, was important to Hardy. His whole life is a tragic one. His very crucial and unforgivable mistake is selling his wife and daughter being in drunkard mood. But even here to reader's sympathy goes towards Henchard because everything had become unconscious. But after that Henchard tried to do good all the time. He searched his wife and daughter. He promised not to drink even a drop of wine for a long time. He got economic success, He reached at the top of his power. He undoubtedly welcomed his previous wife and his so-called own daughter. He tried his best to take care of his daughter, wife, friends, believers. If an occasional awkward sentence or overly long descriptive passage comes to light, perhaps we should reflect upon the conventions of the era in which he wrote. The comparative infrequency of his lapses from clarity and economy may serve as a lesson for the student in "blue-penciling" or revision. After spending several weeks immersed in research, Hardy began to write the novel that would become The Mayor of Casterbridge in the summer of 1884. He wrote it in bursts, constantly writing and putting it aside until he finally completed the novel on April 17, 1885. The literary magazine Graphic agreed to publish the novel serially, although with misgivings. The publishers wanted to see everything before it was published, since Hardy was known for his ability to offend everyone, even atheists. Hardy felt so constrained by the Graphic's demands that he alluded to their heavy-handed treatment in the courtroom scene: Stubberd substitutes all the curse words with

letters, to the annoyance of the court. Nevertheless, Hardy's novel eventually began its serialization on January 2, 1886. On May 10 of the same year, The Mayor of Casterbridge was published in two volumes. Although the critics loved Hardy's realism and poetic style, most agreed that the novel was too improbable and too shocking--opinions that would only increase as Hardy continued to write novels.

The Mayor of Casterbridge is in basic ways an unusual novel. Its protagonist, Michael Henchard, has personality traits and motivational dispositions that are more typical of antagonists than of protagonists, thus discouraging the reader's own emotional involvement in the story. Because of these peculiar features, Mayor constitutes an especially difficult challenge to interpretive criticism, and it is a challenge that previous criticism has been only partially successful in meeting. The main interpretive models that have been made available for Mayor presuppose a strong involvement with a protagonist and seek resolution in some kind of affirmation embodied in the protagonist's own experience—an affirmation of ethical order, grandeur, freedom, dignity, human amelioration, or a more complete humanity. The opening pages of the novel display Hardy's ability to write admirable prose which delineates the personae, the background, and the circumstances from an omniscient narrator's point of view. The Mayor of Casterbridge is set in the county of Wessex, a land that has relied on the beliefs of the farming folk for centuries. Because the farmers are more connected to the land, they follow a more primal religion, based on the changing of the seasons and the forces of Nature. One of the forces of nature is cruel Fate, that "sinister intelligence bent upon punishing" which stops at nothing to keep things from being "as you wish it." This fate usually works through two channels: chance and irony. Chance often brings chraracters: Donald Farfrae and Lucetta Templeman are brought to Casterbridge quite unexpectedly, but their arrivals ruin the lives of the Henchards. Just as Michael convinces Elizabeth-Jane that she is his daughter, he finds the note from Susan that tells the truth. Nature also serves to depict Fate--the harvest weather is bad until Michael buys all the ruined grain at high prices and cannot sell it back.

Discussion:

To give the reader an adequate orientation to references in the interpretive history of the novel, we shall begin by concisely summarizing the plot. The actions in the plot of Mayor are like a roller coaster ride of wildly changing fortunes—especially the fortunes of Henchard, Susan, and Lucetta. In the opening chapter, Henchard is 21 years old. Embittered at being held back and burdened by family responsibilities, he gets drunk at a country fair and sells his wife and baby daughter. Within the next twenty years, he becomes a wealthy and respected corn merchant and is elected mayor of the market town Casterbridge. Meanwhile, his wife, Susan, has lived with Newson, the man who bought her. Her child from the marriage with Henchard has died, but she has had another child with Newson. Both children are named Elizabeth-Jane. Newson is lost at sea, and Susan returns to Henchard, deceiving him by telling him that Newson's child, now grown, is his child. He remarries her, but she dies soon after. Shortly after her death, Henchard tells Elizabeth-Jane that she is his daughter and asks her to take his name, but, almost immediately after that, he discovers that Elizabeth-Jane is not, in fact, his daughter. He does not tell her that he had been deceived in believing himself her father, but he becomes cold and hostile toward her. Since her arrival in Casterbridge, Elizabeth-Jane has been romantically interested in Henchard's young protégé, Farfrae, who had come to Casterbridge without place or prospect, but Farfrae loses interest in ElizabethJane and takes up instead with Lucetta, who previously, unbeknownst to him, was Henchard's mistress. Henchard began his relationship with Farfrae by being overbearingly friendly, but he becomes jealous of Farfrae's popularity. Henchard becomes bitterly antagonistic to Farfrae, and they become competitors in business. After Susan's death, Henchard also becomes Farfrae's rival for Lucetta, and her preference for Farfrae embitters Henchard still further. Farfrae and Lucetta marry. In the period of just a few years after Susan's return, Henchard's fortunes have declined drastically, and Farfrae's fortunes have steadily risen. Henchard eventually loses both his wealth and his social position and is compelled to work as a lowly employee for Farfrae, who now dominates the corn trade and also becomes the new mayor of Casterbridge. Henchard attempts to kill Farfrae by throwing him out of a hay loft but relents and breaks down in remorse. Lucetta has become pregnant with Farfrae's child, but her past with Henchard is made public. She becomes hysterical, has a seizure, and dies through complications with the pregnancy. Having lost his worldly position, Henchard seeks solace in establishing a bond with Elizabeth Jane. They live

together companionably for a while, but Elizabeth-Jane secretly renews her romantic relations with Farfrae, and then her biological father, Newson, reappears. Fearing to lose her, Henchard tells Newson that Elizabeth-Jane is dead. When his lie is about to be discovered, Henchard leaves Casterbridge to take up laboring work in a far district. He returns for Elizabeth-Jane's wedding, but she rejects him. He falls into despair, declines to eat, and dies.

The Mayor of Casterbridge is a tragedy in the tradition of the Greek tragedies. However, the novel still ends with a hope for humanity. The belief that fate is to blame is a tool of the past, of the superstitious farmers such as the townspeople. When Michael believes that fate is destroying him, his problems continue. Only when Michael looks into the future by casting off old beliefs is he able to change. When he sacrifices duty for love of Elizabeth-Jane, he becomes more aware of his feelings as an individual. That is humaity's only way to escape the pain of life: by relying on present instead of past, character instead of fate, the individual instead of the multitude. The Mayor of Casterbridge is a novel haunted by the past. Henchard's fateful decision to sell his wife and child at Weydon-Priors continues to shape his life eighteen years later, while the town itself rests upon its former incarnation: every farmer who tills a field turns up the remains of long-dead Roman soldiers. The Ring, the ancient Roman amphitheater that dominates Casterbridge and provides a forum for the secret meetings of its citizens, stands as a potent symbol of the indeli-bility of a past that cannot be escaped. The terrible events that once occurred here as entertainment for the citizens of Casterbridge have, in a certain sense, determined the town's present state. The brutality of public executions has given way to the miseries of thwarted lovers. Henchard's past proves no less indomitable. Indeed, he spends the entirety of the novel attempting to right the wrongs of long ago. He succeeds only in making more grievous mistakes, but he never fails to acknowledge that the past cannot be buried or denied. Only Lucetta is guilty of such folly. She dismisses her history with Henchard and the promises that she made to him in order to pursue Farfrae, a decision for which she pays with her reputation and, eventually, her life.

The decline of Michael Henchard, which comprises the primary action in Thomas Hardy's The Mayor of Casterbridge, is enacted against the backdrop of the agricultural and manufacturing upheavals of the Industrial Revolution. Henchard is committed to preindustrial methods and attempts to hold back the town's modernization. He insists upon using old

agricultural methods, for example, and his trust of a "weather prophet" to predict harvest conditions results in a ruined grain crop that threatens the town's survival. Living in an area of southwest England that is littered with decaying artifacts of Roman power, Henchard ironically finds himself struggling to assert himself in a town destined for change beyond its own choosing. Henchard meets defeat in every encounter with newer ideas and procedures; his failure to understand and his lack of moderation in his desires incite him to brutal aggression followed by pain and regret, as he becomes more and more isolated from humanity. Eighteen years later, when Susan returns to Henchard destitute after Richard Newson's being reported lost at sea off the coast of Newfoundland, Henchard attempts to make amends. Although he may have been signalling his desire to be forgiven, he encloses with a note to his former wife five pound notes and five shillings, in total the same amount for which he had sold her:

> He sat down at the table and wrote a few lines; next taking from his pocket-book a five-pound note, which he put in the envelope with the letter, adding to it, as by an after-thought, five shillings. [Ch. 10, p. 78]

Although conducted in his library rather than in his business office, this act looks suspiciously like another cash transaction on the part of a merchant who makes his living by buying and selling commodities, and knows to a penny what it will take to make a purchase. Even the narrator notes that Henchard's gesture of enclosing the bank-notes and coins "may tacitly have said to her [Susan] that he bought her back again" (Ch. 10, p. 79).

The remarriage of Michael and Susan Henchard is the product of what Hardy terms "business-like determination" (Ch. 13, p. 93) and "strict mechanical rightness" (93) in Henchard's conscientious thinking. Henchard courts Susan as if he were going to work or performing a civic duty: "The visit was repeated again and again with business-like determination by the mayor" (93). Outside the church on their wedding day the common people's reaction to the event is negative; the average Casterbridger feels that the Mayor is degrading himself. In the eyes of the townsfolk he is "lowering his dignity by marrying so comparatively humble a woman" (95). To extrapolate from this statement, women were (and still are) regarded as status symbols, just as the right make of car is today. For many people

even today, female currency remains beauty; in these terms, Susan is regarded as "bankrupt." People in Casterbridge are mystified at Henchard's choice, for Susan has neither the social status, nor physical attractiveness, nor money necessary for one who wishes to marry a merchant-prince. When the women arrive in Casterbridge, they learn that Michael has become extremely influential as a prosperous merchant and as the mayor of the town. The night they arrive, the townspeople are discussing Michael's bad business deals in selling sprouted grain. A young Scotsman, Donald Farfrae, overhears the discussion and gives Michael some suggestions for making the grain usable. Farfrae also engages in a light flirtation with Elizabeth-Jane.

Henchard is the pessimistic protagonist of the novel because he couldn't get happiness at any time. His success has become the antithesis of his happiness. His small error groups all kinds of happiness and ordered life patterns. If there is anything that is very responsible to give the pessimistic tone of the novel, it is only coincidences. Coincidences have played the very crucial role to take the pessimistic vision in the entire life journey of Michael Henchard through the whole novel. Eventually Michael and Susan meet secretly. They decide to keep their past relationship a secret from Elizabeth-Jane. In fact, Michael suggests that they begin their relationship again. Susan should rent a cottage and allow Michael to court her in a respectable manner. Susan complies, and soon after they marry. Michael hopes that someday he can openly acknowledge Elizabeth-Jane as his daughter. At the same time, Michael has success in business as well by choosing Farfrae as his general manager and confidant. Farfrae's charm impresses all the townspeople and gains the attentions of Elizabeth-Jane once again. Michael has taken the young man under his wing and regards him almost as a brother. The only enemy Farfrae has is Joshua Jopp, a man who wanted the position of general manager. When Susan and Michael remarry, Michael has another period of prosperity thanks to Farfrae's skills. The new wealth to which Elizabeth-Jane has been introduced produces a new beauty in her. Michael becomes fond of her and wants her to take his name legally. Susan, however, is reluctant to agree. Farfrae also takes an interest in Elizabeth-Jane. However, Elizabeth-Jane's shyness and discord between Farfrae and Michael have stopped any hope of a romance. Farfrae and Michael first have a disagreement over the punishment for the habitually late worker, Abel Whittle. Next, during a public celebration, Farfrae's

diversions are a success while Michael's are a complete failure. The townspeople openly praise Farfrae, which leads Michael to remark that Farfrae's term as general manger is ending. Farfrae resigns and opens up his own corn and hay store.

One of Hardy's most perceptive critics, Lord David Cecil, observes that while Hardy had rejected Christian beliefs, his ethos remained deeply imbued with Christian values: "The Christian virtues—fidelity, compassion, humility—were the most beautiful to him" (222). In Mayor, those qualities are most fully exemplified by Elizabeth-Jane, but the qualities are not gender-specific. In other Hardy novels, they are exemplified by both male and female characters—for instance, by Gabriel Oak in Far from the Madding Crowd, Diggory Venn in The Return of the Native, John Loveday in The Trumpet Major, Giles Winterborne in The Woodlanders, and Tess in Tess of the d'Urbervilles. Hardy, himself, regards all of these characters with affectionate respect, but, in his more developed powers of reflective contemplation, he also stands apart from them, and above them. In the final chapter of Mayor, Hardy evokes Elizabeth-Jane's widest views in her mature life, and, in that evocation, her perspective intermingles indistinguishably with Hardy's own:

Her strong sense that neither she nor any human being deserved less than was given, did not blind her to the fact that there were others receiving less who had deserved much more. And in being forced to class herself among the fortunate she did not cease to wonder at the persistence of the unforeseen, when the one to whom such unbroken tranquility had been accorded in the adult stage was she whose youth had seemed to teach that happiness was but the occasional episode in a general drama of pain.

Much has been written concerning Hardy's famous pessimism. However, in The Mayor of Casterbridge, despite the workings of blind fare, the occurrences of chance, and the vagaries of a hostile natural environment, Michael Henchard is still responsible for his own fate. If he had not sold his wife in a fit of drunken self-pity, the painful events would not have ensued. If he had not overspeculated in order to ruin Farfrae, it would not have mattered if it rained, or snowed, or hailed. Certainly in his many years as corn-factor and leading businessman he had come through other natural disasters. It is only in this one case that he lets his keen sense of rivalry and lust for revenge cause him to speculate recklessly. The sense

of pessimism in Hardy's The Mayor of Casterbridge has been presented in a bit different way. No doubt the protagonist of the novel is a pessimistic character, but the whole credit of his pessimism has not been given to his own flaw only. But the pessimism has been broadly caused by the luck, fate, conscience of human beings. Life has been presented there as pessimistic in the hand of luck or chances. Our pessimistic life is a kind of truth, but the very cause behind it is beyond our control. This sort of pessimism is there is Henchard's life too. The theme of The Mayor of Casterbridge appears to be the arbitrary and almost always malign workings of the universe and blind chance upon the destinies of men. Such evil, unrelenting machinations bring pain and suffering upon the characters in the novel, and there is no escape except in a day-to-day acceptance of life.

The extreme guilt Henchard endures for years after selling his wife and infant daughter seems indicative of the intense emotions with which he responds to circumstances. As his status grows in Casterbridge, so does the importance to him of his own good name and character. Remarrying Susan soon after she and Elizabeth-Jane appear in town is not only a means of making amends but also an ill-advised attempt to protect his reputation. Henchard loses the esteem and respect of the town's citizens because of his crop blunder, initiating and shaping his tragic relationship with Farfrae: The young man's ability to repair damaged wheat benefits the town, but it causes him to usurp rather than repair the popularity that Henchard desperately wants to preserve. The fortunes of Farfrae, the novel's representative of new methods in agriculture, rise, while those of Henchard tumble. As Bert G. Hornback of the University of Michigan remarks, "there are striking parallels" (25) between Susan and the second woman from Henchard's past, Lucetta. "She tries to break from the bonds of her past, and this destroys her" (25). What destroys Lucetta are the attitudes of society. For much of the duration of Lucetta's existence in the novel she is the subject of ridicule. When word is circulated throughout her native Jersey about her intimacy with Henchard, it is she and not Henchard who suffers opprobrium. This intimacy, when revealed in Casterbridge, leads to her social downfall (signalled by the Skimmington), a miscarriage, and subsequently her death. The whole world has crashed around Michael. Michael tells him that Elizabeth-Jane is dead, and the sailor accepts this, then leaves. Although Michael and Elizabeth-Jane soon settle into a peaceful life, Michael constantly worries about Newson's return. Later,

Elizabeth-Jane realizes that Michael wanted to make peace with her, and she sets out to find him. If Elizabeth-Jane were male, Henchard would not have been as domineering in his request since a man's name is "sacred." The next idiosyncratic imposition of Henchard upon Elizabeth-Jane involves her style of handwriting; "Henchard's creed was that proper young girls wrote ladies'-hand". He makes her feel ashamed at not having written "a line of chain-shot and sand-bags" (the narrator is reading Henchard's mind here) rather than a proper Lady's Hand. Henchard naturally assumes that, since Elizabeth is female, her writing will reflect her relation to him. This, however, was not the case. Essentially, she had been raised as a fisherman's daughter; Henchard somehow expected that his marrying her mother would transform her into a well-bred lady.

Conclusion:

There is nobility in Henchard because he willingly takes upon himself suffering as an expiation for the sins of his life. He carries his suffering and his love for Elizabeth-Jane in silence. And when man can rise to stature and nobility as Henchard does at the end of The Mayor of Casterbridge, then the dominant chord Hardy has struck swells to a bold theme of hope for humanity. Hardy is saying that wickedness and evil will return to the perpetrator in full cycle, in like measure. In The Mayor of Casterbridge, Thomas Hardy attempted to make Victorian society more aware of its treatment of and attitudes towards women. This object he effected through the chief female characters of the novel, as well as through such minor figures as Mrs. Goodenough, Nance Mockridge, Mother Cuxsom, and Mrs. Stannidge, the genial publican of the Three Mariners Inn. Whether of high or low estate, women are consistently revealed either as insignificant workers or as pawns in male power-games in this late Victorian novel.

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