

The mayor of casterbridge by thomas hardy: rooted in early-19th century england

[Sociology](#), [Feminism](#)



I. Introduction Thomas Hardy's 1886 novel, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, is an awesome drama rooted in early-nineteenth-century England. The story opens with an astonishing scene in which a drunken Michael Henchard sells his wife and daughter to a sailor at a local fair. The story eventually builds into a tale of guilt and revenge centered on Michael Henchard's rise and subsequent fall from a position of power in Casterbridge. *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, however, plots not only the course of one man's character, but also the evolution of a small, agricultural village into a more modern town. In this novel, Thomas Hardy explores the cultural and economic evolution of England during his lifetime, and he also explores the unraveling of traditional moral codes in a society marked by increasing levels of industrialization and urbanization. Though Thomas Hardy abandoned Christianity himself during a portion of his lifetime, he uses *The Mayor of Casterbridge* to reveal to readers the decreasing moral and religious standards in the world they lived in. Hardy realizes the potential harm that could result from movements of industrialization and urbanization, and he uses this novel to reveal to readers the negative potential that these generally positive movements contain. Hardy reveals this negativity towards modernization through the use of Michael Henchard. Hardy leads Henchard through a series of shocking discoveries and personality changes, leaving Henchard unhappy and alone at the end. Thomas Hardy's setting for this novel, an area called Wessex, is actually a fictional region created just for his novels, but the setting is reflective of traditional English towns. While Hardy does not actually criticize particular English villages or groups, he uses Wessex and its inhabitants to reveal his attitudes toward English society and landscape. Hardy's writings in

The Mayor of Casterbridge and other famous novels such as *Jude the Obscure* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* dramatize his sense of "the inevitable tragedy of life" (Hardy 1). Hardy seems to focus more on the negativity of life rather than the positive aspects gained from experience. In the end, Hardy uses *The Mayor of Casterbridge* as a means of expression and also as a way to caution readers against the dangers of industrialization and urbanization efforts which were taking place in England during the period of publication.

II. Scholarly Article In Shannon Rogers' 1996 article entitled "The Medievalist Impulse of Thomas Hardy," she claims that Thomas Hardy is a largely medievalist poet who "maintained an interest in the period throughout his career" (Rogers, 1). Rogers goes on to explain that Hardy's view of this medieval period "takes on an urgency and somber tone expressive of the 'ache of modernism'" (Rogers, 1). Rogers, however, states that while almost all of Hardy's work contains medievalist aspects, his final two novels, *Tess of the d'Urberville's* and *Jude the Obscure*, are more representative of his medievalist views than any of his other works. Even still, in all of Hardy's works, including *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Hardy clearly expresses his fascination with the medieval period. Although Rogers acknowledges that Hardy's last two novels are his most medievalist works, she does state that all of Hardy's works contains at least a hint of medievalist society. In most of his works, however, Hardy's medieval interest "can be summed up in his architectural background" (Rogers, 1). Early in his adulthood, Hardy often participated in restoration projects. Later in his life, however, Thomas Hardy held these restoration and conservation efforts in contempt. Hardy believed that by restoring this medieval architecture, England was losing a rich part of

its history that could never be regained. He believed that by restoring the medieval buildings to modern standards, the citizens of England were being robbed of their past. Despite this belief, Hardy realized that "the natural order is toward progress" (Rogers, 6). Hardy's interest in the medieval architecture is clearly illustrated in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. All of the buildings in the town of Casterbridge seem to be of medievalist architecture, and Hardy's contempt of restoration is evident in the fact that these buildings appear to still be representative of the period in which they were erected. From the Roman amphitheater where Henchard meets Susan again to Henchard's own house and farm, medieval architecture is everywhere. All of these buildings are perfect representations of Hardy's contempt for modern restoration efforts because of their pristine condition. Had Hardy been a supporter of the restoration movements popular in England during his time, he probably would have made the buildings in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* a little bit more run down. By making these buildings run down, Hardy would have been able to have the buildings restored by some of the major characters of the novel. Hardy, however, does not take this approach, and instead makes the buildings in the novel as amazing representations of the medieval period.

III. Author's Style IV. Theme In the world of literature, only a handful of universal themes exist. Though variations of these universal themes exist, only a handful of actual themes exist. Though several themes are present in Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, three main topics describe the most important themes. These topics include the importance of character, the value of a good name, and the endurance of the past. Character is generally thought of as dealing with such values as honor and

moral righteousness. However, Thomas Hardy characterizes Michael Henchard in a different way. Michael Henchard could be considered to be Thomas Hardy's only true tragic hero, yet Henchard lacks in honor and moral righteousness. That said, Henchard's heroic character arises from different traits. Henchard is a hero not for his honor, but for his ability to endure great pain. Henchard is a hero not for his morality, but for his determination to suffer. Henchard bears the burden of his own mistakes, and he takes responsibility for his actions instead of making cowardly excuses. Michael Henchard is truly a heroic character, but his character arises from his defiant endurance. Though Henchard is not a traditional hero, he is a perfect illustration of the fact that heroes and characters are not all the same, and, in fact, some heroes can even appear evil at first glance. In many societies throughout the world, the value of a good name is everything. This belief is evident in the first few chapters of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* when Henchard awakens to find that the sell of his wife and daughter was not a dream. However, instead of attempting to get his wife and daughter back, Henchard's first concern is to find out if he told anyone his name. Furthermore, though we never know exactly how Henchard assumes to a position of power in Casterbridge, Henchard's position in the town now depends on his good name. Once Henchard engages in petty jealousy with Farfrae and loses everything, including his position, his business, and his love, Henchard also loses his good name. Once Henchard loses his good name in the town, he has no chance to regain his high status. He has lost his reputation as a worthy and honorable citizen, and now has no power in the town. This fall from power is a perfect example of the importance of having a

good and honorable name in a society where success or failure in politics and economic activities is often based on this good name. The Mayor of Casterbridge is truly a novel rooted in and influenced by the past. The ancient Roman amphitheater known as the Ring dominates Casterbridge and stands as an everlasting symbol of the past. The decision of Michael Henchard to sell his wife and daughter at the very beginning of the novel influences his life for the next eighteen years. Despite the gap of time and Henchard's efforts, he cannot overcome the mistakes of his past. Henchard spends the entirety of the novel trying to right the wrongs of his past, but he actually ends up only making more mistakes. Despite it all, Henchard never fails to recognize that the past cannot be buried or covered up by anything. The past is always with us, and nothing can be done to reverse past actions.

V. Research on Historical Issue The women of the world have always been treated unfairly by their male counterparts. This harsh treatment, however, was perhaps at its worst during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. During this period of history, women were often viewed as subservient to men, but up to this point in time, very little had been done to make this treatment any better. Change, however, would come soon! The Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution in England provided the perfect opportunity for change. These movements had large social ramifications, and both these English movements created "a favorable climate for the rise of feminism" (Women's Rights, 2). From the beginning of time, women have been treated as inferior to men. Even in early societies, when the help of every person in a village was needed to guarantee the survival of the village, women were thought of mainly as a medium for reproduction. Women during

this time primarily " bore and raised children, cared for the home," and occasionally helped the family's economic production (Women's Rights, 1). In most of these societies, the education of women was " limited to learning domestic skills, and they had no access to positions of power" (Women's Rights, 1). In fact, women were so mistreated at times that husbands even sold their wives if the marriage became boring. This treatment continued for a very long time, and change did not begin to come until the early part of the nineteenth century. The Enlightenment movement throughout Europe provided the perfect opportunity for women to begin a movement towards greater equality with men. In France, women's republican clubs were formed during the French Revolution; these clubs " pleaded that the goals of liberty, equality, and fraternity should apply to all, regardless of sex" (Women's Rights, 2). Female authors began to gain courage during this time also, and Mary Wollstonecraft in 1792 created the first modern feminist work, *A Vindication on the Rights of Women*. In this novel, Wollstonecraft argued that women " were naturally rational but their inferior education often taught them to be silly and emotional" (MSN, 2). Wollstonecraft believed that the only way to cultivate the natural reasoning capacity in girls was through the use of education. Furthermore, in her novel, Wollstonecraft claimed that " the best marriages were marriages of equals" (MSN, 2) However, the most important event for women was the Industrial Revolution. The Industrial Revolution, by transforming most labor from handwork to machine-powered, gave some women the opportunity to become wage earners in factories. This work, though often harmful to the health of the workers, was the beginning of greater independence for females. The feminist movement was most

successful in the rapidly industrializing nations of Great Britain and the United States. The leaders of the movement in these countries were "primarily educated, leisured, reform-minded women of the middle class" (Women's rights, 2). In fact, the women of these countries held the first women's rights convention in 1848. Held in Seneca Falls, New York, this meeting was led by Lucetta Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. The women of this convention demanded "equal rights, including the right to vote, and an end to the double standard" (Women's rights, 2). The women of Great Britain first convened in 1855 "behind the limited goal of property rights" (Women's rights, 2). The cause of these women became more widespread when John Stuart published his novel, *The Subjection of Women*, in 1869. In Hardy's *Mayor of Casterbridge*, the female characters are treated identical in comparison to the women of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These female characters, including Susan and Elizabeth-Jane Henchard, are victims of the time period in which they live. Society during the time this novel is set held a very cruel view towards women, and this view is carried throughout Hardy's novel. From Michael Henchard's act of selling his wife and daughter in the first chapter to his treatment of women throughout the novel, evidence of a male-dominated society is everywhere. At the same time, however, the women seem to gain more and more status as the novel progresses. This gradual progression of Hardy's female characters could be considered to symbolize the increase of status that women were achieving in England and all over the world during the time period. Whatever the case may be, Hardy does an excellent job in *Mayor of Casterbridge* of creating his feminine characters to be mirror images of the women who lived during the

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. VII. Poem Bereft Robert Frost Where had I hear this wind before Change like this to a deeper roar? What would it take my standing there for, Holding open a restive door, Looking down hill to a frothy shore? Summer was past and day was past. Sombre clouds in the west were massed. Out in the porch's sagging floor, Leaves got up in a coil and hissed, Blindly struck at my knee and missed. Something sinister in the tone Told me my secret must be known: Word I was in the house along Somehow must have gotten abroad, Word I was in my life alone, Word I had no one left but God. Robert Frost's "Bereft" is reminiscent of the feeling of loneliness which Michael Henchard experiences towards the end of the novel in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Henchard is left alone after his daughter marries his former apprentice and the couple takes up residence in Henchard's former home. Elizabeth-Jane, Henchard's daughter, soon finds out that Henchard has been lying to her for several years and Henchard is cast out of his daughter's life. Henchard is forced to the country cottage of a man named Able Whittle, and Michael dies thinking that he is loved or wanted by nobody. "Bereft" perfectly describes the situation Michael Henchard experiences in his last few days of life. The diction throughout the poem creates a feeling of isolation and cruelty which goes hand-in-hand with Henchard's situations in his final days. Frost uses words such as "restive," "sombre," "sagging," "sinister," and "alone" to create a feeling of solitude which mirrors the solitude felt by Michael Henchard right before he dies. Michael Henchard has nobody left in his life except Able Whittle, and Henchard now has "no one left but God" (16). Henchard now feels that his life has relatively little purpose and he is now "holding open a restive door"

(4). The speaker in Frost's "Bereft" truly seems to be experiencing a situation similar to Michael Henchard. Both the