

Representation of michael henchard in the mayor of casterbridge

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Status and reputation are common themes in Victorian literature.

Maintaining one's good name was considered a large factor in society, as it is unable to be restored once tarnished. In Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, the life of Michael Henchard delves into a man's troubling obsession with not only working to be respectable in the eyes of others, but more so to find a way to respect himself. Henchard's unpredictable and passionate impulsivity leads him into a life of deep guilt and becoming a self-proclaimed victim of deserved suffering. His endurance throughout his self-destruction makes him the tragic hero in his own downfall.

Michael Henchard embodies more than just one flaw. As mayor of the quaint and archaic town of Casterbridge, Henchard's past is hidden from the townspeople. His reputable position temporarily protects him from any suspicion of being unsavory. Yet, his inherent knowledge of his former mistakes haunt his existence. At the young age of 21, Henchard drunkenly sold his wife and newborn child to a stranger. In this extreme act against his marital problems, Henchard rashly accepted an offer of money to take the burden away from him. It is hardly the expected behavior of a heroic figure and largely determines a portion of his troubled and emotional nature. He is consistently lacking a rational means of consideration of his actions and their consequences on others. In a reaction to his despicable behavior as a failed husband and father, Henchard vows to maintain sobriety for 21 years as a punishment for his undying guilt. Eighteen years later, he gained the status of mayor through determination and self-will but lives a life of agony in his inability to move on from the past.

Much of Henchard's characterization is formed through the juxtaposition of him and a fellow businessman named Donald Farfrae. Their relationship started as a positive source of friendship and professional consideration, but the gradual deterioration of their connection was provoked by Henchard's declining fortune and refusal to embrace a more modern way of life for Casterbridge. Suddenly deemed a threat to his traditional lifestyle, Henchard creates a competitive dynamic between him and Farfrae, eventually losing to the calm and rational demeanor of his opponent. Farfrae symbolizes an age of modernity and youth, embracing new forms of technology to contribute to the town's success. His future is bright and his rising popularity in the community as an outsider is due to his likeable nature and intelligent business decisions. Compared to Henchard, Farfrae is described as "years younger than the mayor...fair, fresh, and slenderly handsome" (Ch. 23). Living his life through professionalism and intellect, Farfrae is a contrast to the melodramatic nature of Henchard. While the younger of the two is promoting the positive development for the future, the other is stuck in the past. Henchard's life is overshadowed by Farfrae's success, and their feud is one sided. Eventually, the emotional disposition of Henchard's feelings of jealousy and hatred guide him into a spiral of failure.

The depth of Henchard's character offers a variety of moments that redeem his past behavior. Although he never fully changes or grows out of his own grueling psyche, he does contain some admirable qualities. When faced with the public announcement of his past sins, he fully acknowledges the truth to the story. Henchard does not abuse his position of power to keep his name in

good graces in the eyes of the community and does not protect his false reputation. He faces it willingly, succumbing to the fate he believes he deserves. Arguably masochistic, his confrontation with his indelible past sets him apart from others. His value of reputation was thwarted by freeing himself from the burden of feeling disgrace towards his own actions. Henchard's strong convictions of accountability are both his fatal flaw and a prime example of his humanity. Truly an example of the tragic hero, Henchard's "restless and self-accusing soul" determined much of his suffering as a man so committed to righteous redemption.