

# Love and relationship in the mayor of casterbridge

[Literature](#), [Books](#)



Michael Henchard's attitudes to women and to social class are typical of Victorian times and, therefore, should not cause us to react negatively towards the character.

With reference to appropriately selected parts of the first 12 Chapters of the novel and relevant external contextual information on Victorian attitudes to woman and to social class, give your response to the view expressed above.

In the Victorian Era, attitudes to women and social class were vastly different to the attitudes held by the 21st Century reader. Women were considered to be the inferior sex, and property of their husbands or fathers. Similarly, social class held a much greater weighing in the lives of people in the Victorian era than it does in our lives today. There was much less social mobility, with social standing dictating the opportunities afforded to someone to a much greater extent than what we as the readers experience today. Thomas Hardy's 1886 novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge* focuses on the character of Michael Henchard, who drunkenly sells his wife and child in the first Chapter of the novel. While his actions were well within his right, that does not mean they were socially or morally acceptable. In this essay I will analyse Henchard's attitudes towards women and social class and whether or not they are typical of the Victorian Era, thus determining whether or not we should react negatively towards the character.

In Chapter One, as Henchard is drinking in the furmity tent, he complains that his ambitions have been thwarted by his early marriage:

" The conversation took a high turn, as it often does on such occasions. The ruin of good men by bad wives, and, more particularly, the frustration of

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many a promising youth's high aims and hopes, and the extinction of his energies by an early imprudent marriage."

Susan and the child are a financial burden to Henchard, as in the Victorian era, men were expected to provide financially for their wives. Women were not educated and did not have careers so could not earn for themselves, meaning they were completely reliant of their fathers or husbands in order to survive. Henchard's intoxicated complaining would have been typical in Victorian times amongst men who resented the burden placed upon them by their wives and families.

In Victorian times marriage was not wholly based upon romantic love. Since women had little control over wealth, they married for financial security, to have a home, and for social status. The bystander at Haydon Priors feels that Susan has paid dearly for her husband's provision of food and a home:

" Ah what a cruelty is the poor soul married to! Bed and board is dear at some figures, ' pon my ' vation ' tis!"

Victorian women aimed to marry someone of a similar or higher social class. The families of young people would have had a great deal of influence of the person whom the young person married. If they made their own choice or married someone of lower social class, their family sometimes disowned or disinherited them. Marriage became like a commercial contract and often commentators refer to the " Victorian marriage market". There was also a stigma attached to being single in this patriarchal society and women were under pressure to conform to the expected role of becoming a wife and

mother. Henchard's lack of warmth and affection towards his wife would have been typical of the time, as couples rarely married for love.

The main event of Chapter One is Henchard drunkenly selling his wife and child to the sailor in the furmity tent. The Mayor of Casterbridge begins around the year 1830, but a woman's liberty legally belonged to her husband until 1891, so Henchard was well within his rights to sell Susan and Elizabeth-Jane. Wife selling happened occasionally in the Victorian Era, but it was far from common and generally frowned upon. We see evidence of this in Chapter One after Susan and Elizabeth-Jane have been sold:

“ Perhaps from some little sense of having countenanced an indefensible proceeding, perhaps because it was late, the customers thinned away from the tent shortly after this episode.”

The bystanders in the furmity tent regard wife-selling as inexcusable and immoral, even in their inebriated state. This shows us that Henchard's actions were not typical of the time, and that we are justified in thinking negatively towards his character after the events of Chapter One.

In Chapter Two we see Henchard try to find the wife and child he sold the previous evening. Instead of taking responsibility and admitting that what he had done was wrong, he places the blame on Susan. He criticises her for her “ simplicity”, her lack of intelligence and also her “ meekness”, a lack of assertiveness and her failure to stand up for herself. His attitude towards Susan would have been typical in the Victorian Era. Women were considered to be weaker physically, emotionally and mentally, and to certain extent, this

was true. They were not afforded the opportunity of an education, and would not have ever experienced physical labour. An adequate 'education' for a girl in Victorian times was believed to include things such as playing the piano, sewing, and making polite conversation.

Henchard's concern for social standing is shown in Chapter Two when he refuses to tell people that he actually sold his wife, making it more difficult to track Susan and Elizabeth Jane down:

"The truth was that a certain shyness of revealing his conduct prevented Michael Henchard from following up the investigation with the loud hue-and-cry such a pursuit demanded to render it effectual; and it was probably for this reason that he obtained no clue, though everything was done by him that did not involve an explanation of the circumstances under which he had lost her."

His pride and arrogance are also evident, as he values his own public image above his wife and child. Telling others would have resulted in making himself look bad in the eyes of strangers, something that was a huge concern to people in Victorian times. People were massively concerned with their standing in society, and anything that was seen as "improper" was frowned upon. There was a great emphasis placed on being seen as "respectable". For Victorians this meant behaving politely and with self-control in public. There should be no suggestion of drunkenness or sexual promiscuity. In this respect, therefore, Henchard's attitude to social class would have been typical of the time.

In the Victorian Era, sharp class distinctions were typical and accepted, which often led to antagonism and resentment between the classes. This antagonism is evident in the words of the bystander who complains about the lack of good corn and thus good bread. She comments on the council members having “roaring dinners” and seems to imply that even though they held power they, in particular the corn merchant and mayor, Henchard, have not dealt fairly with the ordinary people of Casterbridge. She refers to “unprincipled bread”, implying that the provider, Michael Henchard, is unprincipled in not compensating the people for their loss. Henchard’s response to enquiries about the growed wheat is typically brusque and harsh. His refusal to reimburse the townsfolk for the growed wheat would have been typical in the Victorian Era, as lower classes were often treated unfairly by those with wealth and power.

However, readers may still think negatively of Henchard, as he himself used to be a common hay-trusser, but now seems to have forgotten his humble beginnings. By refusing to repay the townsfolk for the growed wheat, he is mistreating the common working people who are of the same class as he was eighteen years ago. In Victorian times it was difficult to ‘rise’ in society but more possible than in previous decades. Henchard is an example of this, as he has ‘worked his way up’ from being a poor hay-trusser to being a successful businessman and the mayor of the town.

**In Chapter Ten Henchard sends Susan a note:**

“ 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 afterthought, five shillings.”

The five pounds, five shillings Henchard sends to Susan is equal to five guineas he sold her for. Sending this exact amount suggests that he wants to make amends by buying Susan back. This reinforces the idea that Victorian society was patriarchal. Henchard's attitude towards women would have been typical of the Victorian Era. Women were considered to be 'property' of their husbands, who legally owned their wives' liberty at the time of the novel. Henchard considered Susan to be his possession, and just as he sold her, so he can buy her back. While this attitude may seem shocking to the modern reader, it was a 'consensus gentium' of the Victorian Era.

Henchard's pride is evident in the fact that he prefers Elizabeth Jane remains "to be in ignorance" of his past shameful behaviour, especially as he is now of a higher class and a well-respected figure in Casterbridge. He also wants to keep from her the fact that her mother had been living 'in sin' for the past eighteen years, living with a man who was not her husband, and not Elizabeth-Jane's father. In Victorian times, a man and woman living together out of marriage would have been considered shameful and resulted in a scandal. Henchard's concern for his and Susan's reputations, which causes him to keep the truth from Elizabeth-Jane would have been common amongst people in the 1800's and therefore should not cause us to react negatively towards the character.

Henchard's pride and concern for his social standing also leads him to choose the amphitheatre as the setting of his meeting with Susan in Chapter Eleven. He does not invite her to his house out of concern for his own status

within the town, as in the Victorian Era it would have been considered to be inappropriate:

“ As Mayor of the town, with a reputation to keep up, he could not invite her to come to his house till some definite course had been decided on.”

Instead, Henchard chooses the amphitheatre for of its secrecy, as he doesn't want anyone to see his meeting with Susan:

“ Henchard had chosen this spot as being safest from observation”

In Victorian times it was a social taboo for an unmarried man and woman to meet on their own without a chaperone. A chaperone was a third person, usually an older woman, who would supervise the couple. Henchard's fear of being seen alone with Susan would have been typical of people in the Victorian Era, as it would have resulted in a scandal.

In Chapter Eleven when Henchard and Susan meet at the amphitheatre, Henchard treats his wife with the same lack of respect as he did eighteen years previously:

**“ How could you be so simple?”**

This insensitive comment to Susan demonstrates Henchard's patronising, superior attitude towards her. It also highlights his failure to acknowledge his own mistakes, instead placing the blame on Susan. Henchard's attitude was widely accepted in the Victorian Era. Women were not treated as equals as they mostly are today, instead being regarded as the inferior sex. On top of this, women were not encouraged to think for themselves or try and



compete alongside men. Instead, they were expected to find fulfilment in meeting the needs of others within the domestic realm.

In Chapter Twelve, Henchard confides his shameful past in Donald Farfrae, his new Scottish corn manager about his history and personal life. During this confession, we learn of Henchard's affair with a young woman in Jersey. Henchard's attitude towards his young lover, Lucetta, is typical of people in the Victorian Era:

“ There arose a terrible scandal, which did me no harm, but was of course ruin to her... When I was gone she suffered much on my account.”

In the Victorian Era, there was very much a double standard when it came to sexual promiscuity. Unlike men, women were expected to come to marriage sexually ignorant. As a consequence of this, illegitimacy was stigmatised. Having an affair or having a child outside of wedlock would be 'ruin' for a girl and she would find herself shunned by society.

In conclusion, Henchard's attitudes towards women and to social class are typical of the Victorian Era. Like most Victorian men he holds his own social standing and reputation in higher regard than his own wife. However, while Henchard's attitudes may be typical, his actions are not. The selling of his wife in Chapter One is regarded by the bystanders in the firmity tent as “ indefensible”, even in their inebriated state. This shows us that Henchard's actions were not typical of the time, and that we may be justified in thinking negatively towards his character, as one unforgivable action in Chapter One taints the reader's opinion of him for the rest of the novel.