

An aristotelian tragedy in the mayor of casterbridge



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The Major of Casterbridge Aristotle was one of the greatest philosophers of Ancient Greece. His analysis of the ideal form of tragic plays has become a guideline for later playwrights in Western Civilization. The most important element of Aristotelian tragedy is the experience of catharsis or the arousing of pity and fear in the audience. The effect that catharsis has on its audience depends on the effective concurrence of a complicated plot and a tragic hero. The plot, in Aristotelian tragedy, consists of the reversal, recognition and final suffering. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge* Thomas Hardy satisfies the requirements of an Aristotelian tragedy by combining the elements of plot and the presence of a tragic hero to induce a cathartic ending of the novel.

An Aristotelian tragedy must contain the presence of a tragic hero. A tragic hero is “ a leader in his society who mistakenly brings about his own downfall because of some error in judgment or innate flaw” (Banks IX). This novel follows the rise and fall of Michael Henchard, an impulsive hay-trusser who rises to prideful mayor only to have his own guilty acts fuel his downfall and demise. Early in the novel, Henchard is at the peak of prosperity, as the mayor of the town of Casterbridge he is highly esteemed by the townspeople. However, Henchard’s biggest flaw or hamartia is his pride and compulsive nature. His pride cannot bear that an employee and good friend, Farfrae, has become more popular than he among the town of Casterbridge. Henchard’s insistence on creating a competition between the two eventually strips him of his personal possessions, his public favor as mayor, and the two women in his life. Michael Henchard’s excessive pride not only ruins his relationship with Farfrae but also causes him to alienate Elizabeth-Jane. Upon discovery that Elizabeth-Jane is not his daughter, his fatherly pride is hurt

and as a result, he becomes very cold to her. “ Henchard showed a positive distaste for the presence of this girl not his own, whenever he encountered her” (Hardy 203). Jane moves in with Lucetta to separate herself from an already strained relationship with Henchard.

Once more, his pride prevents him from visiting Lucetta which disheartens her and makes for her to “ no longer bare Henchard all that warm allegiance” (Hardy 226). The downfall of Michael Henchard, brought on by his excessive pride, allows the reader to characterize him as a tragic hero. Hardy’s use of coincidence shares Aristotle’s belief that the plot is important in the creation of tragedy. Like Aristotle, Hardy believes in the importance of the three elements of plot in a tragedy: reversal, recognition and final suffering. He unites the events in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* with these three elements to portray the rise and fall of Michael Henchard. At the point of his Susan and Elizabeth-Jane’s arrival, Henchard is the most influential man in Casterbridge.

However, the town’s revelation of him selling his wife not only destroys Henchard’s public reputation but he loses the position to his ex-friend Farfrae and becomes him a social outcast. He recognizes his true circumstances occurs after the visit of the Prince to Casterbridge. During this visit, Henchard’s behaves in an eccentric manner as a desperate attempt to regain some of his dignity. However, during the confrontation between Farfrae and himself, he fully recognizes the loss of his status. This recognition of his current circumstances sets into action his final suffering.

Henchard suffers more than just one death in the novel. Along with the death of both Susan and Lucetta, he suffers his own death. Long before his physical
<https://assignbuster.com/an-aristotelian-tragedy-in-the-mayor-of-casterbridge/>

death, Henchard dies in reputation when he is no longer a man of wealth, power or esteem. The moment of his final suffering, however, occurs after he experiences the loss of his step-daughter, Elizabeth-Jane. The appearance of Richard Newson in Casterbridge destroys any hope Henchard has of a future with Elizabeth-Jane.

Upon Newson's arrival, "Henchard's face and eyes seemed to die" (Hardy 366). Trying to avoid losing her, he lied to Newson about Elizabeth-Jane's death. This deception, however, betrays Elizabeth-Jane's trust and destroys their relationship. After this Henchard accepts death because he sees no reason to live, for he lost the last person whom he loved. In Aristotelian tragedy, catharsis holds the importance of emotional effect upon the audience in a literary work. Thomas Hardy evokes the feeling of pity and sympathy in response to Michael Henchard's suffering. Henchard is a man, willingly and fully accepting the blame for everything that unexpectedly happens to him and those around him. He seeks out his own punishment because he is determined to take on the burden of his own mistakes. Even in death, he punishes himself for his flaws. In the closing lines of his will, he asks "that no man remember" (Hardy 408) him.

Throughout the novel, the more Henchard condemns and punishes himself, the more pity the reader feels for him. While his death at the end of the novel is tragic, it also alleviates the reader's anxieties and, subsequently, is successful in creating a cathartic experience.

Although *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is not a drama, it satisfies the requirements for an Aristotelian tragedy. Hardy dramatizes the rise and fall

in the fortune of a tragic hero through the operation of some innate character flaw. Throughout the novel, Henchard makes many mistakes: he fails to maintain his social position, wealth, and relationships with his loved ones. However, these unfortunate coincidences that occur in the plot of Henchard's life, as a result of his quest for satisfaction and reconciliation, are necessary to build up the emotions of readers, so that there may be a release of tension at the end of the novel with the inevitable demise of a beloved, tragic hero.