

Character at the helm



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The idea that character determines one's fate is displayed beautifully in three works: *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, by Thomas Hardy, *The Awakening*, by Kate Chopin, and *The Scarlet Letter*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Michael Henchard (Hardy's protagonist) is a man whose character is polar: he is either passionate and adamant or completely uninterested.

This not only backfires on him but also continues to snowball until his destiny is met. Edna Pontellier, central character of *The Awakening*, is a woman of independence and defiance- that is, up to a certain point. She seems not to have strong wings, for she is "not thinking of any extraordinary flight" (138), and will eventually fall "bruised, exhausted, and fluttering" (138) from her world and meet her fate. Hester Prynne (protagonist of *The Scarlet Letter*), however, meets a different kind of fate. Whereas Michael and Edna stay consistent of character throughout the novel and eventually die due to this fact, Hester changes her character and evolves from status as an evil woman to one with some respectability.

Edna and Michael's characters, due to their actions and behavior, have little control over their fates, whereas Hester, due to her penitence and good deeds, has more control over her fate. The character of Michael Henchard is of an all or nothing, either "careless" or "intense" sort and displays that having no moderation or middle ground on any subject can be devastating. Although seemingly unimportant and too minute of a sequence to pay heavy attention to, there is one quotation that Hardy gives us in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* that seems to illustrate his entire character perfectly in just a few lines: Henchard looked at (the letter) carelessly, unfolded it with one hand, and glanced it through. Thereupon it was curious to note an

unexpected effect. The nettled, clouded aspect which had held possession of his face since the subject of his corn-dealings had been broached, chanced itself into one of arrested attention. He read the note slowly and fell into thought, not moody, but fitfully intense, as that of a man who has been captured by an idea.

(38) Michael knows no moderation. He drinks to get drunk before he quits drinking and after the time he has vowed is up. Before he quit drinking: (Henchard) finished his first basin, and called for another, the rum being signaled for in yet stronger proportions...

At the end of the first basin, the man had risen to serenity. At the second he was jovial; at the third argumentative. At the fourth... he was overbearing, even brilliantly quarrelsome.

(8) “ The flush upon his face proclaimed at once that his vow of 20 years had lapsed, and the era of recklessness had begun anew. ” After his vow of sobriety ends, he sometimes “ primed himself in the morning with... rum” (261). It is also his drinking problem from the very beginning that creates the snowball effect in his destruction, for he sells his wife to a sailor while drunk at a fair.

For years the only pain he suffers was her loss- but he finds a new woman to satisfy him, assuming that his wife is dead. By the end of the novel, which reads like a 19th century soap opera, Michael falls from his admirable status as the Mayor of Casterbridge to the level of the town drunk, all rooting back to his mistake of loving alcohol too much. He truly goes from rags to riches and back. Although he does change his way of life as far as becoming sober

for 21 years, he still remains too obsessive, too rash, and yet too ignorant at the same time. Had he not been obsessed with protecting Elizabeth Jane from Farfrae, he may have never lost his business.

Yet, had he not been so ignorant of the power in technology (he shuns a new, more efficient and innovative agricultural invention) he may have been able to strengthen his failing company. He could have changed his ways and changed his fate yet he was too hard headed to do so, and so his life ends in agony. Because of harboring a personality solely composed of extreme highs and lows, his life ends with pure tragedy. So miserable is his fate that he wishes the following to be so upon his death: “ That Elizabeth-Jane Farfrae be not told of my death, or made to grieve on account of me.

.. that I be not bury'd [sic] in consecrated ground..

. that no sexton be asked to toll the bell... that nobody is wished to see my dead body.

.. that no murners [sic] walk behind me at my funeral...

that no flours be planted on (his) grave... that no man remembers me.

.. to this I put my name. (321)The character of Edna is one of complete moderation.

Defiant and independent, she has a pair of “ wings” to call her own. She isn't the typical Creole woman- obedient of her husband or maternal figure. She does away with typical practices of Creole homes, like the one of les convenances, which is the practice of staying home one day out of the week

to entertain guests. When asked once by her husband why she was out on one such day, she replies “ I (have) no excuses. I told (the servant to tell the guests) that I was out, that was all” (101). She thinks her friend, a typical Creole named Adele, to have a “ colorless existence” which she pities, and believes that such a life has “ never uplifted it’s possessor beyond the region of blind contentment.

.. (and never has a) moment of anguish... visited her soul, in which she would never have the taste of life’s delirium” (107).

To add even more spice to her life, she becomes affectionate with two men other than her husband, Robert Lebrun and the Don Juan figure of New Orleans: Alcee Arobin. Her independence mentor, so to speak, is Mademoiselle Reisz. Speaking of a defiant woman in general of this time, she says, “ the bird that will soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings...

it is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth” (138). This statement is prophetic. Despite being independent, Edna still finds comfort in her husband and a level of joy in being with her children. When she must choose whether or not to she wants to go abroad with her husband, she chooses not too and leaves her home for a more secluded island. She wants to be with Robert, and yet as she swims out to sea, thinks of her husband and children.

“ They were a part of her life... but they need not.

.. possess her, body and soul” (176). She did not have strong wings because she still feels tied to her husband and children in some ways, and she realizes this as she meets her fate and drowns herself.

While Edna and Michael have both fallen victim to fate because of their character, there is another option. Hester’s character is different than Henschard and Edna’s in the fact that she changes character when needed to better her situation. While Hester was once passionate and daring, a mistake brands her with a reminder that everyone in the town of Boston can see. When found that she is an adulterer, she is forced to wear a scarlet letter “A” (standing for adulterer) on her chest. She becomes much more reclusive and lives in a state of solidarity for a while with her daughter Pearl. The townspeople taught their children the following: To look at her, with the scarlet letter flaming on her breast-at her, the child of honorable parents-at her, the mother of a babe, that would here after be a woman-at her, who had once been innocent-as the figure, the body, the reality of sin.

And over her grave, the infamy that she must carry thither would be her only monument. (72) She knows when to keep quiet to her lover, Dimmesdale, about the fact that his doctor, Chillingworth, is her husband. And after several years, Hester begins to integrate herself more into society and do charitable work. Because of her kindness, people now say to strangers, “ Do you see that woman with the embroidered badge? It is our Hester..

. who is so kind to the poor and so helpful to the sick, so comfortable to the afflicted” (142). The scarlet letter had the effect of the cross on a nun’s bosom” (142) even to those who still whisper about her scandal. Hester now

sees her chance, and takes it when she tells Dimmesdale the truth about Chillingworth.

The two decide to move to Europe with Pearl, and Hester's personality becomes once again passionate. But upon finding that Chillingworth plans to accompany the three to Europe to seek revenge, Dimmesdale does something very brave. He, a preacher, confesses to the people of the town that he is the father of Pearl and the lover of Hester. People realize that a man even as respectable as the Reverend Dimmesdale can commit sin. Just moments afterwards, Dimmesdale dies.

Chillingworth too dies soon because he can no longer take revenge on Hester since everyone knows the secret. After several years, Hester too dies, after living in seclusion for a while and then returning to Boston. Upon her death, the "A" " cease(s) to be a stigma which attract(s) the world's scorn and bitterness, and (becomes) a type of something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too" (227). The scarlet letter becomes a legend. While people still think it wrong for her to have committed adultery, they think it very respectable of her to dedicate so much of her time in helping others.

She is once in a very sticky situation due to her passion, but then realizes she needed to give people time to forget about her past and to praise her good deeds of the present. And when the time is right, she decides that her passion should again rule. Hester, in a bind, uses her character to control her fate rather than let it destroy her. Michael's character remains consistent throughout *The Mayor of Casterbridge* as he is either totally for something or

completely against it. Edna's character was consistent throughout *The Awakening* as she wanted to be strong and independent, but however was too weak to "soar" because of her responsibilities to her husband and sons. Michael's fate is thrown at him, and Edna helplessly succumbs to hers.

Hester's character was not consistent in *The Scarlet Letter*, and this allows her to be more in control of her destiny and how she is remembered. By examining these characters, we see ourselves that character is fate—we can either fall prey to it or use it to adapt.