

# Rustic characters in the mayor of casterbridge



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Hardy's characters may be divided into three groups or classes on the basis of their significance in the main action of a novel: First of all, there are the protagonists. the action is chiefly concerned with their destiny. Secondly, there are characters of a secondary importance who are in contact with the chief figures and derive interest and significance from such contact. They play only a subordinate part in the development of action. Thirdly, there are the minor rustic characters who do not have much significance as far as the main action is concerned. They play the role of on-lookers and provide Hardy the opportunity to articulate his own views. They are also called the, ' chorus group' or the, " philosophical party", on the basis of their function. The group of characters first seen looking in at Henchard presiding over the public dinner in the Kings Arms and later among the company at the Three Mariners listening to Farfrae's songs constitute this group. They are common to Hardy's Wessex novels with the exception of Tess of the d'Urbervilles and Jude the Obscure, and grandest of them being in Far From the Madding Crowd. In The Mayor of Casterbridge, this chorus comprises Mother Cuxsom, Solomon Longways, Christopher Coney, Buzzford etc. Though not essential to the plot they nevertheless serve a significant purpose in helping to place the major characters in a community and by a droll humour to the Novel. Hardy lived the major portion of his life in the countryside and therefore had an unerring insight of the Rustic community. In his novels, they are simple children of the soil: ignorant, superstitious and old-fashioned. They are quite content with their simple life and hardly ever think of rebelling against the adverse circumstances in which they find themselves through generations. They keep alive a tradition of life prevalent in the obscure corner of Wessex. Agriculture and activities associated with it pre-occupy them. It is the subject

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of their talks in marketplaces, dinner parties, and other social gatherings. Their fortune is bound up with the prospects of harvest. Thus, we hear how Henchard's bad corn has caused a great deal of trouble for the common people. They are remarkably superstitious- belief in supernatural elements which has disappeared from sophisticated people's mind, still lingers among them. They are reported as having seen ghosts of Roman soldiers in and around the ruined amphitheatre called the Ring, which is a relic of the Roman habitation in England many centuries ago. However, in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, unlike in *Far From the Madding Crowd* and *The Return of the Native*, no fun is made of the fear of supernatural on the part of some rustic characters. Rather it is Henchard himself who is struck with a supernatural presage to see his own image floating up under his eyes just when he is thinking of suicide by drowning. Although these rustics are realistically portrayed from real Wessex people, "there is thrown over them a veil of romantic glamour." C. Duffin rightly remarks, "They are in a degree idealised, the faintest atmosphere of poetry laps them round." They are divested to a great extent, "of that grossness and vulgarity which is seldom absent from rusticity in real life." David Cecil has brilliantly compared Hardy's Rustic characters to the chorus of Greek tragedy. First, they always appear in groups, rather than individually. The Chorus, Cecil points out, "is the symbol of the great majority humdrum mortals who go on living their uneventful days whatever catastrophe may the finer spirits place among them". Second, like the Greek Chorus they also serve some important dramatic functions. They make the machinery of the plot run smoothly. Third, the Hardyian choric characters help bring out not only the immediate, but also the ulterior significance of all that is taking place around them,

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pointing to the excesses in nature and absurdities in the main characters. They are the sound of sanity with their feet firmly planted in the ground. That's why Christopher Conny is perplexed in Henchard's marrying Susan in a society where social status and Money is of the prime concern: "... daze me if ever I see a man wait so long before to take so little!". They are deeply interested observers and occasionally drop shrewd comments. These rural-folks are also referred to as the " philosophical party", for in their comments they constantly rise from the particular to the general and give wise reflections on life. The Mayor's wife is dead and at her request four pennies are buried with her. One of the rustics, Christopher Conny, digs out the coins and spends them on drink, for says he, " Why should death rob life of fourpence?" The rustics at once see the reason of it and agree that as " money is scarce and throats get dry", it would be folly to waste even four pence on death. Often in their philosophic comments, they represent Hardy's own point of view. Mother Cuxsom's final observations after Susan Henchard's death are beyond doubt Hardy's own: "... her wishes and ways will be as nothing". Whatever humour we get in Hardy's novels is provided by these rustics. Like the minor characters of Shakespeare, they, too, are funny in themselves and objects of great amusement for others. These country-folk do much with their racy comments and comic actions to add cheer and sunshine to otherwise dark and gloomy atmosphere of Hardy's novels. Tess, otherwise a masterpiece, is deficient in rustic humour and so grows rather tedious and boring at places. Though Mayor of Casterbridge lacks to a certain degree this carefree humour unlike Hardy's earlier novels, there are nevertheless a few funny moments. One can particularly remember the anecdote related by Mother Cuxsom about a party at

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Mellstock many years ago to Christopher Coney and other like Nancy Mockridge: "Canst mind the sherry wine and the silver snuffers and how Joan Dummet was took bad when we were coming home and Jack Griggs was forced to carry through the mud and how a let her fall in dairyman Sweetapple's cow-baitor and we had to clean her gown wi grass..." The genial rustic humour derives as much out of simple farcical situation as out of the authentic use of Dorsetshire dialect. It is to emphasise their realism that they are made to speak in dialect used by the rustics of Wessex. In this way, Hardy achieved not only a realistic presentation of Wessex life, but also created a sense of their aloofness from common civilised society and a sense of their nearness to nature, so necessary for the performance of their chorus-like function. They appear to be the emanations of the surrounding hills and dales, woods and heaths, and entirely different from the other characters. However, the dialect which they use is subjected to the same process of "selection and ordering of material" as is the key-note of Hardy's art. Their speech is free from much of the grossness and vulgarity which characterises real rustic speech. Though rustic characters do not contribute much to the advancement of the plot in Wessex novels, this is not the case in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. The "Skimmity ride" organized by the crowd of the Peter's Finger inn causes the death of Lucetta and has far-reaching repercussions. The "Skimmington Ride" episode is unusual in that the villagers become participants in the action rather than commentators merely. Hence the emphasis on them is not just the addition of local color or explanation but is an important new plot development as well. One should also remember how the taunts of townspeople sparked the fire of enmity in Henchard and led to Farfrae losing his employment when the latter's festivities became

successful while the former's did not. These rustic characters are not full-length portraits, but they are realistically drawn. As C. Duffin puts it, " their collective function precludes all individual realism." As they appear always in a group, they have neither been individualised nor drawn at length. They are drawn in a convention different from the one used for the main characters. They remind us of the minor characters of Shakespeare, Sir Toby Betch, Sir Andrew, Maria, Feste, etc. they stand for real, Wessex country folk. Hardy presents only an outside, surface view and makes no attempts at diving deep into their souls or developing them at full length. It is only rarely that they are individualised. But they are permeated through and through with Wessex spirit and traditions. They are eternal like the woods and the dales which they inhabit. Man may come and man may go, but, like mankind, they go on forever and ever. As Baker puts it, " They are as eternal as the woods and fields and heaths; whereas the different lovers, the weak or faithless women, the anguished victims of despair, are symbols of a present phase of disturbance, restlessness and maladjustment."