

SUMMARIES & COMMENTARIES

Like many Victorian novels (The Mayor of Casterbridge was originally published in serial form. Hardy began writing it after his return to Dorchester in 1883) By 1885 it was completed, and then published in weekly parts in The Graphic, beginning in January 1886. The first English book form of the text appeared in May 1886. Hardy complained about the demands that serialisation made on him as an artist. He thought that preparing it for weekly publication had marred The Mayor of Casterbridge more than any of his other works for it had compelled him to include incidents that would keep the reader 'hooked', regardless of his conception of the novel as a whole. Hardy also objected to the – as he saw it – prudish tastes of the magazine publishers: young females would be outraged by anything of a morally dubious nature, they claimed. Hardy referred disparagingly to this conservatism as 'Grundyism'. He was forced to practise a form of self-censorship; for example, he was obliged to have Henchard marry Lucetta when he assumes Susan is dead. Later, when he revised the story for book publication, Hardy removed some superfluous episodes and restored the illicit ambiguity of the Henchard–Lucetta relationship. Further revisions were made when the novel was republished in the 1890s, including the restoration of actual Dorchester place names.

This Note refers to the 1997 Penguin Classics text of The Mayor of Casterbridge, which incorporates the changes Hardy made for the 1895–6 Wessex Novels edition.

SYNOPSIS

Hardy's story begins in the 1820s. Michael Henchard, journeying on foot across Wessex, in search of work, gets drunk at a fair at Weydon-Priors and auctions his wife Susan. She is bought by a sailor – Richard Newson – who emigrates to Canada with her and her daughter, Elizabeth-Jane. Filled with remorse, Henchard vows not to touch alcohol again for a

period of twenty-one years. He searches unsuccessfully for his wife for a number of months, and arrives in Casterbridge. Eighteen years later Susan returns to Wessex, accompanied by her eighteen-year-old daughter Elizabeth-Jane. She believes that Newson has drowned at sea and hopes that Michael will help her and Elizabeth-Jane in some way. At the Weydon-Priors Fair she learns that Henchard can be found at Casterbridge, where he is now a prosperous corn merchant and mayor. A Scotsman, Donald Farfrae, arrives in Casterbridge at the same time as the two women. Henchard has had some trouble with sprouting wheat and Farfrae offers him a method of making it usable. Henchard, immediately drawn to Farfrae, persuades him to stay on as his manager. Having observed him at the inn, Elizabeth-Jane also feels an immediate attraction towards Farfrae. The following morning her mother sends Elizabeth-Jane to Henchard's house to announce their arrival. She is ignorant of her mother's true relationship with him, believing him to be a distant relative. Henchard is moved by the girl he assumes is his daughter and sends a note to Susan, asking her for a secret rendezvous. There, it is agreed that Susan should stay on in Casterbridge, so that Henchard can woo and remarry her, thus making reparation for his previous misdemeanour.

Increasingly reliant on and fond of Farfrae, who instigates new and successful business methods, Henchard confides in him the particulars of the auction and his wife's return. He also reveals that he has had a liaison with a young Jersey woman (discreetly withholding her name), whom he had promised to marry, assuming that Susan was dead. Farfrae is asked to draft a letter breaking off the engagement. Following a rather businesslike but respectable courtship Henchard and Susan marry. Henchard grows very attached to Elizabeth-Jane and suggests that she should take his surname, but Susan dissuades her daughter from doing so. As a result of the improvement in her circumstances, Elizabeth-Jane blossoms. Her attraction to Farfrae continues to grow, and he seems to be attracted to her in return, following a meeting in a barn, set up by an anonymous note-sender.

After a clash over the treatment of a workman, Abel Whittle, Henchard's relationship with Farfrae deteriorates. He becomes jealous of his popularity and begins to view him as a rival. Henchard dismisses Farfrae, who establishes his own business. He also informs his rival

that he must have nothing more to do with Elizabeth-Jane. Susan becomes ill.

Lucetta Le Sueur -the young Jersey woman - writes to Henchard, to say that she will be passing through Casterbridge to collect her compromising love letters. However, she does not come: her aunt has died, leaving her a fortune. She adopts her aunt's surname, Templeman. Susan dies, leaving a letter for Henchard to read on Elizabeth-Jane's wedding day. But Henchard opens it and discovers that the girl is not his, but Newson's daughter. His feelings for Elizabeth-Jane change from love to dislike and, to rid himself of her, he decides to promote a match between her and Farfrae.

Meanwhile Lucetta has moved to Casterbridge, and by chance meets the lonely Elizabeth-Jane. She asks the girl to live with her as a companion. Lucetta still hopes to marry Henchard, but he does not pursue her as ardently as she had hoped and her feelings towards him cool. Farfrae comes to visit Elizabeth-Jane at Lucetta's house, and falls in love with Lucetta, who is immediately attracted to him. Henchard determines to ruin Farfrae, hiring Jopp as manager to assist him. But the weather again foils Henchard's plans, his business falters, and he dismisses Jopp. There is a confrontation between Henchard and Lucetta, witnessed by Elizabeth-Jane: Henchard has overheard Lucetta discussing marriage with Farfrae and, incensed, wrings a promise of marriage from her.

Shortly after this Henchard, acting as magistrate, is hearing a case when the defendant reveals the story of the wife auction at Weydon-Priors. Henchard is publicly disgraced. Increasingly isolated and on the verge of bankruptcy he moves into lodgings with Jopp. Elizabeth-Jane, also increasingly isolated, moves into lodgings when Lucetta reveals that she has married Farfrae. When Henchard is forced to sell up, Farfrae buys his house and business, although he attempts a reconciliation with his former employer. Henchard takes up a position as hay-trusser with Farfrae, but when he hears that Farfrae is likely to be made mayor, his jealousy returns. The loss of Lucetta to his rival also rankles, and when his vow of sobriety finishes Henchard begins to drink heavily. To his chagrin, Farfrae does succeed him as mayor and the reversal of fortunes is complete.

Henchard has not returned Lucetta's letters, which are still locked

up in his old safe, so she writes to him. He goes to collect them and, in a tantalising scene, reads extracts to Farfrae, without revealing the writer's name. Henchard unwisely asks Jopp to deliver the letters and they are passed round and read in a local inn. A skimmington ride is planned to shame Lucetta and Henchard.

At a visit by an important royal personage to Casterbridge, Henchard arrives drunk and is pushed out of sight by the new mayor. Seeking revenge for this slight he lures Farfrae to his barn, intending to fight and kill him, but, when he has Farfrae at his mercy, finds himself unable to kill him. He lets him leave. Lucetta observes the skimmington ride in which effigies of herself and Henchard are paraded on a donkey. She collapses. Henchard races after Farfrae to tell him that his wife is dangerously ill, but he is not believed. On returning home later that evening Farfrae discovers that Lucetta is close to death. She dies that night.

The lonely Henchard draws closer to Elizabeth-Jane, but his relationship with her is threatened when Newson reappears, seeking Susan and his daughter. Henchard lies, telling him that both women are dead. Newson leaves Casterbridge. Full of remorse Henchard considers suicide, but seeing the effigy of himself (from the skimmington ride) in the river, takes this as a sign that he is meant to live. There follows a short period of increased happiness for him with his stepdaughter, but Farfrae's renewed interest in Elizabeth-Jane and another appearance by Newson persuade him that he should leave Casterbridge before his lies are uncovered. He resumes his work as a hay-trusser.

Meanwhile Elizabeth-Jane is reunited with her real father and her wedding to Farfrae takes place. Shortly after the marriage she starts to wonder what has happened to Henchard and asks her husband to seek him out. Eventually Farfrae and Elizabeth-Jane discover that he has died in a ramshackle cottage, attended by Abel Whittle, who describes Henchard's final days. Henchard has left a will in which he asks that he should be forgotten. The novel closes with a description of Elizabeth-Jane, who has matured into a thoughtful, sober and well balanced young woman, who serves her community and her husband well.