

Full Length Research Paper

## Thomas Hardy's way of introducing Michael Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge: The Life and Death of a Man of Character*

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Accepted 9 May, 2013

In the novel, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Hardy presents Michael Henchard as 'a man of character' while throughout the novel Henchard commits a number of blunders. Hardy puts two characters in front of us— Michael Henchard and Donald Farfrae. By using this technique of showing the actions of his characters, Hardy proves that even an uneducated man may be a man of character. He draws a line between 'education and qualification', and instead of introducing his main character by his name, he gives a detailed description of Michael Henchard's personality to show that it is the personality of Henchard that matters more than the name he has. Hardy tries to prove that a lot of the bad stuff that happens to Henchard is a result of his natural personality, which he really cannot change. That is a convincing way of Hardy to introduce the main character of his novel. Moreover, it goes along with the novel's title because the novel is not named Michael Henchard but *The Mayor of Casterbridge: The Life and Death of a Man of Character*. Throughout the novel Hardy tries to have a balance in Henchard's character because Henchard is something between 'a Man' and 'a Mayor'.

**Key words:** Blunders, technique, personality, name, balance, man.

### INTRODUCTION

*The Mayor of Casterbridge* is a tragic novel by British novelist Thomas Hardy and is one of Hardy's Wessex Novels. He has an elusive task in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. The main character of this novel Michael Henchard has more personality flaws than the average novel's hero and commits a number of blunders, and yet the author wants us to feel sorrow for him when things go against him.

*It is the story of the rise and fall of a 'man of character', a man flawed in certain self-destructive ways; his story is confined in space and time; there are clear echoes of Greek tragedy and of King Lear. I think that this account*

*of the novel is useful and interesting, and it is hard to believe that it was not part of Hardy's intention to imitate tragedy to some extent. However, I do not think that this is the whole story. Henchard feels much more like a character from the Old Testament than a character from Sophocles. This, too, has been noted by a number of critics, and parallels have been drawn between Henchard, on one hand, and Job, Saul, Samson and Cain on the other hand. But, again, this is not the whole story (Hardy, 1902).*

The novel opens with a detailed description of Michael Henchard and his wife, Susan, as they walk along the

road looking for work:

*The man was of fine figure, swarthy, and stern in aspect; and he showed in profile a facial angle so slightly inclined as to be almost perpendicular. He wore a short jacket of brown corduroy, newer than the remainder of his suit, which was a fustian waistcoat with white horn buttons, breeches of the same, tanned leggings, and a straw hat overlaid with black glazed canvas. At his back he carried by a looped strap a rush basket, from which protruded at one end the crutch of a hay-knife, a wimble for hay-bonds being also visible in the aperture. His measured, springless walk was the walk of the skilled countryman as distinct from the desultory shambling of the general labourer; while in the turn and plant of each foot there was, further, a dogged and cynical indifference personal to himself, showing its presence even in the regularly interchanging fustian folds, now in the left leg, now in the right, as he paced along (Hardy, 1902).*

This is the method Hardy uses to open the novel and introduces the main character of his novel without providing him a name. Hardy first introduces the personality and then names him so that the personality of Michael Henchard may enter into our minds and from the very beginning, we may start our analysis on his character and think why Hardy calls him (Henchard) 'a man of character'.

### Responsibility without having a Livelihood

Hardy presents a situation where a person has a number of responsibilities and difficulties and earns nothing. Here, he (Hardy) blames the system of the society in which an uneducated person without a livelihood is forced to marry. For proving an uneducated guy Michael Henchard 'a man of character', Hardy also introduces a well-educated scholar in his novel – Donald Farfrae and shows his actions and decisions. Hardy puts these two characters in front of us and leaves us to compare them and answer why Henchard cannot be called 'a man of character'. Hardy tries to convey to us what is wrong when an uneducated person does something wrong; it will matter a lot when a well-educated scholar does the same thing.

He (Hardy) says that obviously Henchard has illicit relationship with Lucetta but he does so because this is what he knows about love. It is right that he does a number of blunders unintentionally but whenever he realizes he has done wrong, he is ready for punishment. Then Hardy raises a question about the case of Donald Farfrae. He likes Elizabeth-Jane and goes to meet her but by chance he meets Lucetta and falls in love with her and forgets why he is there. He forgets that his destination of love is Elizabeth-Jane. Hardy wants an answer to the question: 'What kind of love is it that

Donald Farfrae (an educated man) displays?'

### Name versus personality

Henchard is not named yet at this point. Hardy calls him 'the man' (1902) and later 'the hay-trusser'. In fact, we do not know his name until later in the chapter when his wife, Susan, calls him 'Mike'. His real name comes in light when in the second chapter, he takes an oath to give up alcohol for twenty-one years:

*"I, Michael Henchard, on this morning of the sixteenth of September, do take an oath before God here in this solemn place that I will avoid all strong liquors for the space of twenty-one years to come, being a year for every year that I have lived. And this I swear upon the book before me; and may I be struck dumb, blind, and helpless, if I break this my oath!" (Hardy, 1902).*

Undoubtedly, that is a different or a strange way but the best way of Hardy to introduce the main character of his novel. The next interesting thing is that it goes along with the novel's title because the novel is not named Michael Henchard but it is named *The Mayor of Casterbridge: The Life and Death of a Man of Character*.

But the question still exists in our mind: why Hardy should wait so long to name his main character? Some possible answers may be found from the opening description of Michael Henchard. It seems that Hardy tries to convey that it does not matter what a person's name is, but it matters what he has in his personality. Michael Henchard may have another name, and so in the beginning, he (Hardy) calls him 'the man' and with this technique he makes his character universal- he (Henchard) could be anyone.

He does not name him and compares him with some general types. He has "*the walk of the skilled countryman as distinct from the desultory shambling of the general labourer*".

### PRESENT – PAST BACKGROUND OF MICHAEL HENCHARD

In the novel, Hardy shows the things related to Henchard which he has in his present but does not give us even a single glimpse of his past background. All we find out about Henchard is that he was about 18 years old when he got married to Susan and now they have a daughter named Elizabeth-Jane.

We do not know where he came from, what his parents were, who brought him up, how he passed his childhood or how he got married to Susan. He really could be anyone.

But even when Hardy emphasizes how anonymous, and therefore how universal 'the man' in the opening description, he points out characteristics that are unique

about him. His “dogged and cynical indifference” is “personal to himself”. So it is right from the very start that Hardy characterizes “the man” as both universal and unique.

### **MICHAEL HENCHARD'S RELIANCE ON SUPERSTITION**

One of the major characteristics that can be seen in Henchard's character or that has been very smartly inserted by Hardy in Henchard is Henchard's reliance on superstition. This is another characteristic of Henchard's character which makes him different from the other characters of the novel. This is one of the major differences between Michael Henchard and Donald Farfrae, who is the most practical, literal-minded person in the novel. Henchard's superstition first comes up when he takes his oath never to drink again:

*But first he resolved to register an oath, a greater oath than he had ever sworn before: and to do it properly he required a fit place and imagery; for there was something fetichistic in this man's beliefs (Hardy, 1902).*

He sees patterns and guesses at divine meaning in everyday coincidences. For example, when Lucetta asks to see him to get her letters back, she proposes meeting him at the Casterbridge Ring, the old Roman amphitheater at the edge of the town. This is the same place where he had been reunited with Susan. It is just a coincidence - Lucetta did not know he had met Susan there - but Henchard sees a pattern and assumes it has some kind of deeper importance:

*The truth was that in appointing this spot, and this hour, for the rendezvous, Lucetta had unwittingly backed up her entreaty by the strongest argument she could have used outside words, with this man of moods, glooms, and superstitions. Her figure in the midst of the huge enclosure, the unusual plainness of her dress, her attitude of hope and appeal, so strongly revived in his soul the memory of another ill-used woman who had stood there and thus in bygone days, and had now passed away into her rest, that he was unmanned, and his heart smote him for having attempted reprisals on one of a sex so weak. When he approached her, and before she had spoken a word, her point was half gained (Hardy, 1902).*

### **Role of Music in Michael Henchard's Life**

Hardy presents Henchard as a passionate and an emotional guy and the smallest thing can cause those passions to bubble to the surface. Music, for example, can easily call up his emotions:

*In place of them he had no interest, hobby, or desire. If he could have summoned music to his aid his existence might even now have been borne; for with Henchard music was of regal power. The merest trumpet or organ tone was enough to move him, and high harmonies transubstantiated him. But hard fate had ordained that he should be unable to call up this Divine spirit in his need (Hardy, 1902).*

His passion for music has a tragic element to it: music moves him deeply, but he is not musical himself. He does not sing and never learns a musical instrument. He just loves to listen to music. Music would have been a good, healthy outlet for Henchard's pent-up emotions but he is not like Farfrae, who is able to express every passing mood by singing, whistling, humming, or dancing. Because Henchard is not musical and cannot express his emotions by singing, he ends up keeping them all pent up.

But it does not mean that his feelings and emotions are hidden to other characters and the readers. Hardy knows very well that none, in this world, can hide his feelings and emotions because they are natural and come in light. The source of the feelings and emotions coming in light may be different from person to person.

### **Conclusion**

Now if we talk about Henchard' feelings and emotions, whatever he feels can easily be seen on his face. Everything he feels is visible in his face, which is often described with the colors, red and black. He has a dark complexion, with dark hair and eyes, and he flushes easily when he is angry or upset. His face is described as a "thin" mask that covers his personality. It is so thin that it is easy to see what is happening underneath the surface:

*Henchard's face darkened. There was temper under the thin bland surface-the temper which, artificially intensified, had banished a wife nearly a score of years before (Hardy, 1902).*

On one hand, Henchard's quick temper is obviously a major flaw. It is the reason that he sold his wife, lost his friendship with Farfrae, and sent Elizabeth-Jane away. On the other hand, at least his temper is easy to see. He is not like Lucetta who hides what she is feeling and disguises her true self with fancy clothes and makeup. Henchard might have a terrible temper and too little self-control but at least he is honest about it. He realizes, for example, that all of his personal losses are at least partly his own fault:

*Susan, Farfrae, Lucetta, Elizabeth-all had gone from him, one after one, either by his fault or by his misfortune*

(Hardy, 1902).

And that might be one answer to how Hardy manages to make the reader care about a guy as deeply flawed as Henchard: for all his faults, he is at least honest with himself and others. His defects seem to be so deeply ingrained in his personality that he could not change them even if he wanted to. When he screws up and things go badly for him, he eventually recognizes that it is his own fault, even if he blames everyone around him at first.

And to counterbalance that terrible temper of his, Henchard is also very fair-minded. If we think about the scene in which he challenges Donald Farfrae to a fight to death. Henchard is a lot taller and stronger than Farfrae so he fights him with one hand tied behind his back to even things out. When he has to declare bankruptcy, he is completely honest and open with the bankers and does not hold back a single dime. When he swears the oath to avoid alcohol for twenty-one years, he keeps it to the very day, in spite of all the temptations to break it.

Thomas Hardy wants the readers to have pity on Michael Henchard. Hardy clears that obviously Henchard is responsible for his tragedy but all the blunders that have been committed by him were not intentional. They all were the results of his circumstances. What was important for Hardy was the sign of relation between people and their environment so that an object or mark 'raised or made by man on a scene is worth ten times any such formed by unconscious nature. Hence, clouds, mists, and mountains are unimportant besides the wear on a threshold, or the print of a hand' (Life and Work, 1984).

He (Michael Henchard) realizes all his flaws and punishes himself accordingly. He is not a well- educated scholar as Donald Farfrae but he never fears and accepts all the blunders of his life. In the very beginning of the novel, Hardy presents a detailed description of Michael Henchard without providing him a name so at the end of the novel he may justify the title of the novel, *The Mayor Of Casterbridge: The Life And Death of a Man of Character* and proves the main character of his novel, who is an uneducated guy and does not have a good background, Michael Henchard, 'a man of character'.

#### REFERENCES

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