The Mayor of Casterbridge
by Thomas Hardy
Hardy’s background

• The time and place of Thomas Hardy’s birth determined the early experiences on which he was to draw so heavily as a writer.

• In 1840 the county of Dorset was still relatively little touched by the sweeping changes that were transforming the rest of England.

• The railway, for instance, which had been spreading across the country for 20 years, did not reach Dorset until seven years after Hardy's birth, and the folk traditions of a small and scattered population thus survived longer there than in most other places.


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Dorchester, Dorset, England

Dorchester and UK/France

Dorchester and London
Hardy’s background

- The Hardy family home in Higher Bockhampton, though within walking distance of the county town of Dorchester, was no more than a hamlet.
- Dorchester itself, though an ancient town dating back to Roman times and an important center for the surrounding agricultural region, was small and characterized by rural poverty.
- His father and grandfather were both builders, and Hardy was apprenticed to an architect at 16.
- Darwin’s Origin of the Species was published when Hardy was 19, and the controversial theological symposium the year after led him to abandon the Christian church in which he was raised, although he incorporated his early knowledge of the Bible in his fiction.
Favorable 1886 review in Harper’s

- “In *The Mayor of Casterbridge* Mr. Hardy seems to have started with an intention of merely adventurous fiction, and to have found himself in possession of something so much more important that we could fancy him almost regretting the appeal first made to the reader's wonder.”
- “Mr. Hardy has never achieved anything more skilful or valuable in its way than the recognition and development of these [Henchard’s tangled web] in his last story; we are not sure that he has not placed himself abreast of Tolstoï and the greatest of the Continental realists in their management.”
- “Then the book is full of his proper and peculiar charm, which is for us always very great. It is a quality which, if he had no other great quality, would give him a claim upon his generation hardly less than that of any other contemporary novelist. It seems to exist apart from any beauty of style or felicity of phrase, and is like the grace of his women, which remains in your thought when you have ceased to think of their different pretty faces and variously alluring figures. It would be as hard to say what it is as to say what that grace is, and we can only suggest that it is a very frank and simple way of dealing with every kind of life, and of approaching men and women as directly as if they had never been written about before.”

Memorable Characters

- Henchard - considered by some critics to be Hardy's finest male character. He is a man at war with himself, isolated from others by his very nature. He is a titanic creation, doomed from the outset to be destroyed by his own willful, stubborn, inflexible temperament.
- Susan Henchard (Newson) - Henchard’s wife whom he sells
- Richard Newson - sailor who buys the wife and baby and takes them to Canada
- Elizabeth Jane - with her unswerving right-mindedness and her never-failing self-discipline, is a very beautiful and noble figure; and Mr. Hardy has made her supremely interesting merely by letting us see into her pure soul.
- Lucetta Templeman (Lucette Le Sueur) - Henchard’s mistress
- Donald Farfrae - A Scotsman who is Henchard’s opposite in nearly every way


Hardy’s women

• Hardy's women have fascinated critics of the novels.

• Samuel C. Chew suggests in *Thomas Hardy: Poet and Novelist* that “Hardy's women are all of one type, differing only in degree.”

• Another critic sees Hardy's women as "charming, impulsive, and dangerously contradictory.”

• Hardy’s female characters fall into several categories ranging from those who are fickle to those who are pure.

Hardy’s men

- Hardy's men, on the other hand, fall into two general categories:
  - the dependable, enduring, somewhat stolid, and sexually unaggressive men who tend to idealize women
  - the rakish, devilish, sexually aggressive users of women, to whom the heroines are inevitably attracted
Adaptations

• Two major film adaptations:
  – 1978 television film for the BBC starring Alan Bates as Henchard, Anna Massey as Lucetta, and Anne Stallybrass as Susan
  – In 2001 version with Ciarán Hinds as Henchard, Juliet Aubrey as Susan Henchard, Polly Walker as Lucetta, James Purefoy as Farfrae and Jodhi May as Elizabeth Jane
The critics love to love him, and then hate him, and then love him, and then hate him...

• During his lifetime, Hardy’s artistic reputation was like a roller-coaster—Hardy’s books were popular at publication, then fell out of favor in the late 1890s, so he "was a classic of the English novel long before he died," but he was not celebrated as a poet of the very first rank until after his death.

• Even today, Hardy's works continue to evoke an especially powerful subjective response in critics. One critic believes that the "strong disagreements about what is `good' or `bad' in Hardy's work prove only the relativity of judgment and the vitality of the author."

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