



LITERARY QUEST

An International, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, Monthly, Online Journal of English Language and Literature

Michael Henchard: A Tragic Hero in Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*

Mr. Bhagirath Prasad Meena

Lecturer, Department of English, Government Senior Secondary School,
Neemuchana, Alwar, Rajasthan, India.

Abstract

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) was born at Upper Bokhampton in Dorsetshire, the region that he later called Wessex in his novels. He trained as an architect and began to practise in 1867, though he soon became disappointed and sought another medium for expression- writing. The style of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* has marked resemblance with that of classical tragedy. Henchard qualifies to be known as a tragic hero due to his fate – the kind of reaction which is strange- a strange mix of cool acceptance and deep defiance.

Keywords

Hay-Trusser; Furmity; Love Affair; Tragic Hero; Casterbridge; Destiny.



Michael Henchard is the chief protagonist in Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Thomas Hardy has characterized it in such a way that readers connect easily with Michael Henchard. Before going further about the creator of this character i.e. Thomas Hardy. Hardy was born at upper Bockhampton near stinsford in Dorset on the 2nd June, 1840. His father was a master mason. He inherited his love of reading from his mother and love of music from his father. Thomas Hardy went to the village school and then to a school in Dorchester. He was very fond of other languages so he learned Greek himself.

In 1856, he started to work as an apprentice to an ecclesiastical architect. He also continues his habit of reading and writing. His acquaintance with William Barnes, the Dorset poet and Horace Moule, son of a vicar, he owned much intellectual stimulus. He began to write verse and essays but, advised by Moule, decided not to give up architecture. He went to London for work and became Assistant to Arthur Blomfield. He went to art galleries and concerts, and attended evening classes. In London he feels lonely occasionally and he became ill. Due to the feeling of nostalgia, he returned to Dorset. He started working again for John Hick for architecture.

During 1867 and 1868 he wrote a purposed story but it was never published as George Meredith asked Hardy not to publish it but to write another story with more plot. George Meredith advised Hardy to concentrate his career in literature. He took Meredith's advice too literally, and wrote a novel which was published in 1871 under the title *Desperate Remedies*. In 1872, his next novel *Under the Greenwood Tree* appeared.

In 1874, Hardy married Emma Lavinia Gifford. In between 1878 and 1912, Hardy wrote nine more novels, three volumes of short stories and other poems. In this period his most massive, unique and characteristic of his life about five hundred and twenty pages of mingled prose came named *The Dynasts*. He got fame because of this work and gradually came to be acknowledged, not without dispute, as the greatest English writer of his time.

Outwardly Hardy seemed to live a tranquil and successful life. But in his external life he was disturbed. His wife was much arrogant and she behaved very insulting with Thomas Hardy. She was very proud. She openly prided herself more upon being an arch deacon's niece than upon being married to the greatest living English writer. One thing which is worth to note that his wife even tried to stop the publication of *Jude, the Obscure*, which she thought to be immoral. But, Hardy was moderate in his behavior so he did not repent of his marriage. His wife died unexpectedly, 1912. He married again, in 1914, with Florence Emily Dugdale, charming and much younger than Hardy. Hardy was much affected by First World War. He visited the German and the English wounded soldiers. He was deeply affected by this atmosphere. Thomas Hardy died on 11th January 1928. One thing which is interesting to mention is that his ashes were buried in Westminster Abby but his heart was buried in his parish church yard because of his deep love for his native Wessex.

The Mayor of Casterbridge is the story about a man named Micheal Henchard who by profession is a hay-trusser. He comes to a village with his wife Susan and a baby daughter by the name of Elizabeth Jane. Micheal Henchard is in a search of a job. He enters into a tent where furmity is sold and he orders two basins of furmity. Under the influence of alcohol, he becomes so reckless that he offers to sell his wife for five guineas to anybody who will buy her. "For my part I don't see why men who have got wives and don't want 'em, shouldn't get rid of 'em as these gipsy fellows do their old horses" (16). And he announces, "Why begad I'd sell mine this minute if anybody would buy her!" (16).

A young sailor Newson bought the woman. The sailor walks out of the tent with Susan carrying her baby daughter Elizabeth Jane. Next morning, Henchard recalls the incident of the last night. He repents of his wrong deed and takes an oath that he will not take any liquor for the period of 21 years, his age is 21 years. He wanders here and there but all in vain and decides to go to

the town of Casterbridge and settles down there. After 18 years, Susan returns to the village of Weydon parish where her husband had sold her. She inquires from the same firmity woman; the firmity woman recalls that the man had told her that he was going to Casterbridge. When Susan came to Casterbridge she learns that Henchard is the Mayor of the town and a rich corn and hay merchant. Because of some bad wheat supply to the bakers of the town there is some kind of agitation against him in the town. A strange Scotchman named Farfrae writes to Henchard that he knows the method by which bad wheat can be improved. Henchard meets Farfrae and he appoints him as his corn manager. Susan meets Henchard and he therefore proposes to her to live with him. He marries Susan and is reunited with his family again. Now, there is a complication in Henchard's life. He has an affair with a young woman at New Jersey to whom he has promised to marry. He writes to that woman explaining the whole case. Henchard and Farfrae are now not in good terms. Henchard does not renew the contract with Farfrae as his corn manager and Farfrae thereupon starts an independent corn and hay business of his own. This further upsets Henchard. He forbids his daughter to meet Farfrae. In this way Henchard tries to put an end to the love-affair which was developing between Farfrae and Elizabeth. After Susan's death Henchard tells Elizabeth that she is his daughter not Newson's. Before dying, Susan leaves a sealed letter meant for her husband Henchard with the instructions not to open till Elizabeth's wedding day. Henchard opens the letter and learns that Elizabeth is not his own daughter but Newson's. He now becomes totally indifferent to Elizabeth. At this stage, another person named Lucetta comes into the picture. This lady is the lady of the New Jersey whom Henchard had promised to marry. She offers a post of household companion to Elizabeth, which she accepts. Lucetta is here only to marry Henchard. Before Henchard marries Lucetta, Farfrae comes to the home of Lucetta to meet Elizabeth because Henchard has allowed her to meet Farfrae. Elizabeth is not at the home and Farfrae enter into a

conversation with Lucetta. As a result, they fall in love with each other. Henchard soon finds that Farfrae is not only his business rival but also his rival in love. In order to take revenge, Henchard enters into certain bargains which led him to his own financial ruin. Henchard threatens Lucetta to marry him. Now at this stage, the firmity woman comes to Casterbridge and discloses the secret of Henchard's life. This disclosure causes sensation in the town and Lucetta hastily marries Farfrae. This marriage proves very distressing not only to Henchard but also to Elizabeth. The latter starts living separately. The decline in the life of Henchard is now very rapid. Henchard has now no alternative but to work as hay-trusser in the employment of Farfrae. The period of his oath not to take alcohol for 21 years now being over, he starts drinking again. Henchard has love letters of Lucetta which she used to write to him. He thinks to disclose them to the public to take revenge on Farfrae but in the end he agrees to return those love letters to Lucetta. He hands over love letters to a man named Jopp who has grudge against Henchard and Lucetta. He reads out some love letters in front of his friend. In the mean while Henchard meets Farfrae and challenges him to fight a kind of duel with him. He can kill Farfrae easily but he feels ashamed of himself and lets Farfrae go. Lucetta faints with shame and fear as the skimmity ride has been arranged and a procession appears in the streets of the town with the effigies of Henchard and Lucetta bound together and placed upon donkey. "Yes, two images on a donkey, back to back, their elbows tied to one another's! She's facing the head, and he's facing the tail" (330).

Strangely enough, Newson is not dead. He comes to Casterbridge to inquire about his wife and daughter. Henchard lies to him about the daughter. Meanwhile Farfrae and Elizabeth have developed a love affair again. Newson appears in Casterbridge once again, after having learnt that Elizabeth is still alive.

Now Henchard sees no hope of any kind before him. Newson will claim the girl; Farfrae will marry her, and Henchard will no longer mean anything to her. Henchard feels that the only course open to him now is to quit the town. He mournfully departs the town. Having learnt that Elizabeth is going to marry he comes with a caged goldfinch as wedding present which Elizabeth refuses to take. He leaves the place disappointed. Elizabeth repents soon and makes search with her husband Farfrae but they learn that he is dead. He is left behind a will which is full of bitterness against the world:

‘That Elizabeth-jane Farfrae be not told of my death, or made to grieve on account of me.’

‘& that I be not bury’d in consecrated ground.’

‘& that no sexton be asked to toll the bell.’

‘& that nobody is wished to see my dead body.’

‘& that no mourners walk behind me at my funeral.’

‘& that no flowers be planted on my grave.’

‘& that no man remember me.’

‘To this I put my name.’ (394)

Henchard was a man of strong character as Thomas Hardy called. After reading the story one can say that Henchard was energetic, strong, vigorous and unyielding. He has not only physically strong but also strong in will, determination, etc. He had a powerful physique and because of his strong character he was elected mayor of the town. His strength of character is particularly seen in having kept his vow not to drink liquor for twenty-one years. He was also a man of strong likes and dislikes. His likeness to somebody grew into a strong attachment and his hatred was fierce. He rapidly become intimate with Farfrae and confided his life’s secrets to him. His strong attachment with Elizabeth also shows his intensity of feelings.

One of the prominent qualities of Henchard is that he is a moody man. Whatever comes to his mood he out-rightly follows that. Elizabeth's experience of Henchard clearly confirms that he has no control over his anger. After having lavished love and affection upon Elizabeth, he suddenly became indifferent towards Elizabeth when he comes to know that she is not his daughter. In the end when Elizabeth marries Farfrae he goes to the wedding venue just to fulfill his desire to meet Elizabeth.

Henchard has the quality of a very strong sense of justice and fair play. He was the hard worker and the same he expected from his workers. He was also very fair in taking revenge on Farfrae. He tells his manager that he wants to ruin Farfrae by fair competition. He left the post of mayor when the furnity woman exposed the secret of his early life. He also fights with Farfrae with one arm bound in order not to have an undue advantage over Farfrae by virtue of strong physique. One can see lots of instances of his love for justice and fairness. He surrendered all his assets when he declares himself bankrupt.

There are many instances in which the kindheartedness of Henchard is explicitly manifested. He determines to destroy happiness of Farfrae and Lucetta by revealing her love letters, yet he could not actually commit this cruel deed. "Such a wrecking of hearts appalled even him" At the time of duel with Farfare he had the life of Farfrae in his hand but he spares him. He went running for miles in order to bring Farfrae to Lucetta's bed-side, while she was in her death-bed.

Henchard has many virtuous characteristic features, yet he suffers and meets his tragic end. We find him as a most dynamic and strong character but luck did not favor him. It shows he is a victim. Actually he commits no intentional mistakes. He is good and kind to everyone. He pays respect to all but in return he does not get much attention. He loves Elizabeth Jane but Elizabeth refuses to meet him in the end. His virtues are never repaid but he is provided with sufferings and frustration.

One can find Michael Henchard to be very near to Aristotle's definition of a tragic hero. According to Aristotle tragic hero suffers and meets his tragic end because of some human weakness. If we look at Henchard, he is not an eminently virtuous man. He is not a bad person by his intentions. But there are certain weaknesses in him and he suffers and meets his tragic end on account of these weaknesses. Aristotle says that a tragic hero must belong to a state of flourishing prosperity and downfall, from that prosperity brings terror and pity. One cannot feel pity for the downfall of an evil and unjust person. The downfall of Henchard creates pity in the readers' hearts. Hardy's Henchard is according to the definition of Aristotle, suffers more than what he deserves for his weaknesses. He has a good number of points in his character.

Work Cited

Hardy, Thomas. *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. UBS Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi, 2009. Print.

MLA (7th Edition) Citation:

Meena, Bhagirath Prasad. "Michael Henchard: A Tragic Hero in Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*." *Literary Quest* 2.5 (2015): 28-35. Web. DoA.

DoA – Date of Access

Eg. 23 Aug. 2015. ; 05 April 2017.