Chapter 3

The Mayor of Casterbridge (1886)

Hardy’s *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is a fictional study of the authentic life of a powerful individual whose character cannot be judged by traditional ethical principles. His particular life is beyond the conventional moral paradigms. It is an exploration of the morality of an individual’s inner self, his inner value system. Michael Henchard, the chief protagonist of the novel, possesses a unique moral personality. He luxuriates in his own specificity. In his essential self Henchard represents the postmodern worldview of the ‘triumph of the subjective, the ephemeral, and the fragmentary over the unchanging and the universal.’\(^1\) When Hardy called him “A Man of Character” he was referring to the morality of his enviable inner self and the totality of his authentic existence. In the creation of Henchard’s character Hardy is anticipating the postmodern move towards the other, towards what is different. Hardy seems to emphasise that reality must be approached not through ‘a centripetal movement of homogenization, but by centrifugal movement towards\(^1\) the other....\(^2\) It is Henchard’s ‘otherness’ that kills him in a world which is intolerant of pluralism. Within his unique inner world, Henchard practises a morality of authenticity. For instance, in all his adversities, Henchard remains true to

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Page references to *The Mayor of Casterbridge* are to the Penguin edition (1978)
himself, always owning up to the responsibility for his actions and confronting the consequences with equanimity and courage. Henchard’s existence is incredibly unique. He is not just a specimen of a class, but a highly particularized individual, credited with a set of moral principles that are only his own.

*The Mayor of Casterbridge* can be seen as a turning point in the development of the English novel. Hardy shows that the novel is no longer a mere social document, but a significant psychological history as well. Hardy is aiming at a different kind of realism in the novel. It is an individual centred novel. It is, perhaps, the only novel where one character dominates the entire course of action. It is a novel that delves into the psychic life of an individual. For the first time, Hardy turns intensely towards the inner life of an individual to estimate the moral quality of that life. The autonomy of the self is recognized. In Henchard’s character we come to know the ‘naked face of the other’, to borrow the phrase of Emmanuel Levinas. And trying to understand the Other is an ethical responsibility. In essence *The Mayor* is a celebration of the Other and a repudiation of totalizing moral principles. Majority of nineteenth century novels do not present characters as having interior life or subjective existence. But in the modern and postmodern fiction the subjective experience of the protagonist comes to the fore. Modern novels are not
social documents, but psychological histories of individual human beings. It is this concern with the subjective life of Hardy’s characters which compels some critics to link Hardy with the modern world. The inner life of the hero, the autonomy of the individual is the focus of modern fiction.

In *The Mayor* Hardy tries to show that man’s fate is not the product of any universal will, but it flows directly from his complex relations with the social world. Hardy sees the individual and his fate as indissolubly bound to a constantly evolving society. Henchard tries to define his identity within a mundane world which denies his specificity and frustrates him. He struggles hopelessly to find a rapport between his own inner self and the self of the fast evolving social world. His tragedy is caused by the new economic and social forces. Hardy tries to affirm the individual’s freedom and autonomy.

Viewed from the conventional ethical standards, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* may be read as a moral tale of the fall of an individual who violates the natural principle of marriage. Many critics and readers try to interpret Henchard’s adversities originating directly from the reckless sale of his wife. Albert J. Guerard in his essay on *The Mayor of Casterbridge* makes the observation that ‘Hardy recognized, intuitively at least, that the guilty may also punish themselves unconsciously and cause their own bad
luck.' In his opinion, Henchard's disasters are a retribution for his moral violation. This raises a philosophical question whether one's present actions can determine his future destiny. True, Henchard has committed a crime against nature by selling his wife. And this violation of the sanctity of the natural human bond remains inextricably interwoven in his consciousness, and even precipitates his final fall when the furmity woman divulges his past recklessness. He cannot escape the consequences of his past action which is a violation of natural morality. However, the focus of the novel is not on his morally and culturally offensive behaviour, but on his authentic self which is in conflict with the emerging modern world. Both the pre-modern and the modern world were intolerant of multiplicities; they craved for universality and tried to suppress the other. Postmodernism is an era of multiplicity and specificity; it is tolerant of the 'other.' That is why we argue that Hardy anticipated many of the postmodern tendencies in his major fictional works. In this novel he is pleading for the need to understand the 'otherness' of the other. Though there is a conflict in the novel between two modes of feeling – traditional and modern - Henchard is beyond both the worlds. The novel concentrates on the individuality and inherent moral quality of his authentic self, invaded by the new civilization which cannot tolerate his specificity. It is the force of Henchard's elemental nature and the emerging new social structure which set him on a downward
course, rather than his moral offense. Therefore, it is erroneous to view the
sale of Susan as the major cause of Henchard’s ultimate ruin. Such a view
is simply an uncritical instance of highlighting one issue among the more
significant conflicts inherent in the novel. While the auctioning of Susan is
heinously unethical – no one would contradict it and Hardy wants us to
consider it as such – there are other inexorable, vital forces which combine
to destroy the Mayor. Any attempt to reduce this superbly executed work to
a mere criticism of the violation of established ethical formula would be
ignoring the centrality of Hardy’s imagination. According to Rutland ‘The
Mayor of Casterbridge exemplified what had become Hardy’s personal
philosophy of life with a starkness to be found in none of his previous
books.’¹ More than anything else, here Hardy aims at a different kind of
realism, the realism of an individual’s inner life. It is the psychological
history of a unique character.

In spite of the moral offence committed by Henchard in the sale of
his wife, Hardy convincingly displays the unique moral force
of his character. Beneath Henchard’s coarse external nature lie fine human
qualities that make him stand out distinctly from the rest of the characters
in the novel. He is an elementary character. The scene of the sale of Susan,
macabre as it is, vividly expresses Henchard’s amazing capacity for
instinctive responses though it is detrimental to his own future happiness.
Living the given moment with an incredible emotional intensity is both a weakness and strength of his character. If frustration forces him to auction his wife, the repentance drives him to a life of austerity for twenty one years to expiate his sin. Henchard’s intrinsic goodness is manifested in his sincere repentance of the wrongs towards his wife just as his primitive nature is revealed in her sale. Except this isolated event, the narrative of the novel has no other event that can discredit the force of his inner moral strength. Once Susan returns to him, he tries to make reparation for his past wrongs by marrying her second time. It is not simply a formality; it is the act of a repentant sinner. It shows that he never hated his wife. What he detested was his married situation which was an obstruction to his youthful ambition. In his intention and motive Henchard always remains moral.

The essential content of morality is an altruistic concern for others, and Henchard possesses it in abundance beneath the facade of his exterior crudities. Benevolence is as much a part of his character as his coarseness. Everyone who comes into contact with Henchard experiences both the rough and mild aspects of his personality. What ought to be considered is the quality of his inner self which contains a fund of generous impulses that are more moral than the educated refinements of Farfrae. There are numerous incidents in the novel to substantiate this quality of Henchard. One such instance is his generosity towards Abel’s mother. Henchard’s
concern for others is exemplary. Though Lucetta is threatened with the divulgence of Henchard’s past affair with her, his natural integrity does not permit him to ruin her marriage with Farfrae. Rather, he despatches to her all the letters written by her during their courtship though they are misused by Joshua Jopp to take revenge upon Lucetta. When Lucetta is on the verge of death after the skimmity ride, Henchard runs for Farfrae who, however, fails to comprehend the honesty of his intention and dismisses his pleas as another trap to kill him. Even if his public image is tarnished by the standards of the social world, his personal integrity remains intact under all circumstances. Though he declines in social position, an Oedipus-like tragic status, he rises in personal stature and insight. It is in this tenacity of Henchard’s inner integrity that his moral character outshines that of all other characters in the novel. Henchard is guided by a set of moral principles which belong more to the ancient culture. He is Hardy’s most instinctual hero. Henchard’s character cannot be judged against any fixed formulas. His character asserts the pluralistic nature of man. What Hardy is trying to do is to highlight the basic human qualities in Henchard. According to Terry Eagleton, in some postmodernist theory ‘the injunction to glimpse the good in the bad has been pursued with a vengeance.’ This is the outcome of the rejection of universalizing ‘metanarratives’ which have dominated the western philosophy and metaphysics for many centuries. In
applauding Henchard’s character Hardy is celebrating the specificity and radical difference which are the cornerstones of postmodern thought. Henchard’s difference can be best understood in relation with Farfrae. He knows no formal refinements or etiquette to conceal his true emotions. For the sake of social decorum, he cannot suppress his natural self.

All the major characters in the novel - Elizabeth Jane, Susan, Lucetta and Farfrae - are recipients of Henchard’s unconditional love and concern on different occasions. Elizabeth-Jane is no less than an over-protected pet until her true identity is known to Henchard through his immoderate, inquisitive nature when he opens the half-sealed letter of his dead wife. But once his emotional world is disturbed he becomes totally imbalanced. In his abrupt change of attitude towards his step-daughter, there is a terrible poignancy of the bitter wretchedness of his situation. A whole new world of prospective happiness is shattered with one deadly blow of this discovery. For any other man, the shocking discovery of his supposed daughter’s true parentage would have been unbearable. However, Henchard holds on with incredible strength, and he would have even survived had he not lost Elizabeth-Jane to Newson. Towards the end of the novel, there is a moral growth in Henchard. He becomes more aware of the need to love and to be loved. Henchard’s moral strength lies not so much in his acts or deeds as in the intensity of his startling integrity while responding to the irrevocable
circumstances of his tragic existence. What drives him to his death is the extremity of his unique nature. Once an emotion seizes him he is under its overpowering influence. The loss of Elizabeth Jane becomes unbearable and it drives him to death - almost a self-willed death. Henchard has always functioned between extremities; no middle course is known to his nature. This attitude to life is generally absent in Hardy. But as far as Henchard's personality is concerned there is a terrible beauty in his extremities of living; there is a strong resonance of the common, uneducated natural humanity of which Wordsworth speaks about in his *Preface*. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Hardy concentrates on the morality of an authentically natural self, rather than on the relationship between the personal self and the social self as is the case in his later novels.

For Hardy morality is not conformity to social or philosophical creeds, but an allegiance to one's authentic self. It is a total, unconditional response to life - a response which is elemental, instinctual and primitive. Morality and instinctive behaviour are indistinguishable for Hardy, argues Noorul Hasan while talking about the character of Henchard. This is not to argue that the sale of Susan is not vicious or abominable. Indeed, it is. It is a blatant violation of a natural law. Nevertheless, what need to be examined closely are the circumstances that lead to this morally offensive act by Henchard who possesses many indisputable moral qualities. What Hardy
attempts in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is to show the 'instinct for life, if you will, instead of a theory of right and wrong, good and bad'.

Before charging Hechard with moral violation one has to examine closely the interrelationship of social circumstances and the psychic state of the offender in which the sale of his wife has been carried out. Henchard's act is motivated neither by the hatred for his wife nor is it a per-meditated act, at least the narrative does not offer any such hint; what he detests is a particular situation in which he is enmeshed through unthinking, premature decision of an early marriage while remaining completely insolvent. The external circumstances of his life are responsible for his unnatural behaviour.

Henchard is frustrated and dejected not so much with his marital status, although it is the apparent reason, as with the impossibility of finding a suitable job to realize his youthful ambition. Rutland makes a pertinent observation that *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is the only novel among the rest in which, not love, but ambition, is the dominant tragic theme. Ambition, of course, is one of the themes, but to see it as the dominant one is trying to shift the focus of the novel from its central preoccupation. Henchard's ambition is only an 'objective correlative', to
borrow the phrase from T. S Eliot, to expose the more vital, more elemental forces of his character.

The opening chapters of the novel reveal how temperamental and dejected Henchard is. Meticulous care has been taken to maintain a proper equilibrium while narrating the auction scene and the events that follow so that our sympathy remains with Henchard, the man of character. When the customers in the tent become drunk, the conversation revolves round “the ruin of good men by bad wives, and, more particularly, the frustration of many a promising youth's high aims and hopes and the extinction of his energies by an early imprudent marriage” (p.74). For a desperate man who has already deluded himself into believing that his early marriage has been a stumbling block to material success, such a discussion is an externalisation and revalidation of his already settled belief. And Henchard's assertion that “.... if I were a free man again I'd be worth a thousand pound before I'd done o't” (p.74) has both ironic and tragic consequences, for paradoxically his escape is from isolation to deeper isolation. Henchard experiences both loneliness and isolation chiefly due to the authenticity of his character. His 'otherness' will not be tolerated in a world that does not believe in pluralism. But Hardy does not believe in any form of totalisation. In this Hardy bears an affinity with postmodernism which repudiates all forms of totalizing attitude. But Henchard is a victim
of ethical generalisation. His way of life can never be understood by a world that has fashioned itself on the principle of universalism.

What is striking about Henchard even in his drunken stupor is his natural concern and inherent goodness. For instance, read closely the condition he demands for the sale of Susan: “I’ll sell her for five guineas to any man that will pay me the money, and treat her well” (p.77) “Treat her well” – even though his own treatment of her now is grotesquely despicable – is an expression of his deeply ingrained sense of fair play. It is the same sense of justice he would exercise while fighting Farfare with one hand tied behind, for his opponent is weaker than himself (Chapt.38) During the entire process of Henchard’s violent, morally offensive behaviour in the tent, all the spectators had assumed that “being out of work, he was, as a consequence, out of temper with the world, and society, and his nearest kin” (p.78). What emerges clearly from this observation is that it is this desperate personal condition generated by the social world which is the ultimate cause of Henchard’s momentary act of moral violation, and not any fundamental moral debasement in him. So Merryn Williams’s observation that ‘the social and the personal are so interlocked in the novel that we can’t comprehend it in isolation’ remains fully vindicated.

After Susan leaves the tent with Newson, Henchard is not the same person in spite of his drunken stupor, and the author’s voice lends him
support to disclose his inner feelings: “A stolid look of concern filled the
husband’s face, as if, after all, he had not quite anticipated this ending”
(p.79). If we examine Henchard in this unfortunate scene, what becomes
evident is the natural morality of Henchard. For instance, he tells the
stunned spectators after Susan’s departure: “Mark me- I’ll not go after her!
If she’s up to such vagaries she must suffer for ‘em.” (p.80) But the
following events prove otherwise; he regrets his ignominious act the
following morning and searches for his wronged family, not for weeks but
for months. All this reveals that Henchard’s repugnant act has not been a
pre-meditated one: it has been the act of an incredibly instinctive and
socially frustrated man. Susan has been too prosaic, too abjectly fatalistic
not to understand the genuineness of his character.

Henchard was “surprised and nettled that his wife had taken him so
literally” in spite of the fact that “yet she knows I am not in my senses
when I do that”. (p.83) Even if Susan has failed to understand him, neither
his creator, nor his serious readers have failed to comprehend his unique
character. No one is more perceptive than Walter Allen when he observes
that ‘much of Henchard’s tragic greatness comes from his impercipience.
He contains all nature within himself.’ Like the characters of Wordsworth
and Lawrence, Henchard cannot be separated from the earth. He is a
dominating figure inexplicable by human reason. Like Jude, Eustacia and,
to some extent, Clym, Henchard is destroyed by a singular mode of behaviour. Through Henchard’s character Hardy delves into the mysterious nature of the human psyche in which reside forces that are beyond individual comprehension or control. Henchard’s solemn oath in a country Church after the sale of his wife and the consistency with which he preserves it prove his inner strength. This is the strength, patience and determination of a man of character. And after nineteen years when Henchard and Susan meet at the Roman Amphitheatre, his first words are: “I don’t drink, you hear, Susan? I don’t drink now – I haven’t since that night.” (p.142) These are the words of sincere regret.

The central focus of The Mayor of Casterbridge is not on the infringement of a natural law but on the hitherto unexplored vitality of man’s inner life that constitutes the subject matter of both modern and postmodern fiction. Though Henchard’s sale of his wife is a serious violation of natural law, the novel is concerned with the life and character of an exceptional individual. We do not justify Henchard’s act, nor can he escape the consequences of this gruesome cultural offense. But we must not forget that he is a victim of social and cosmic conspiracies. Henchard’s suffering on account of the sale of his wife is only one dimension of his life. He is a solitary being whose individual self is in disharmony with the
social world. With *The Mayor* Hardy proves that great literature is necessarily transgressive.

When Hardy calls Henchard 'A Man of Character' in spite of the sale of his own wife, he is subverting the traditional notion of morality. The fundamental discrepancy between intention and act is vividly stated in this scene, gruesome as it is. The sale of Susan may be viewed as a symbolic, anticipatory gesture of the destruction of all that is natural, elemental, and native in Henchard’s farming world. Of course, it is Henchard’s delusion to fancy his wife to be a barrier to his worldly success, for whatever success he makes in Casterbridge without her is too temporary to endure, too fragile to withstand the overwhelming changes that overcome the agricultural society of Casterbridge. Hardy always deplored the vanishing of the traditional ways of life with the onslaught of modernity Hardy does not conceal his agony at the predicament and vulnerability of a traditional individual who hopelessly struggles to cling on to a culture that is gradually invaded by alien forces. In this connection Douglas Brown observes:

*The Mayor of Casterbridge* is the tale of the struggle between the native countryman and the alien invader, of defeat of dull courage and traditional attitudes by insight, craft, and the vicissitudes of nature..."
When at the Town Hall Henchard roars “if anybody will tell me how to turn
grown wheat into wholesome wheat I’ll take it back with pleasure, but it
can’t be done, “Farfrae, the newly arrived migrant “smiled
impulsively”(pp.105-06) It is the sardonic smile of a superior force
emerging slowly, but surely, in Henchard’s traditional world of farming.
Farfrae is a modern force who will eventually banish Henchard from his
natural environment as he lacks the capacity to adapt to the inevitable
transition witnessed by Casterbridge. Whenever his old way of life meets
the new, it is defeated. But Henchard is not so much ruined by Farfraes’s
superior modern skills as by his own idiosyncratic personality.

The old world is gradually disappearing; and Henchard is alien in the
new one. After nineteen years when Susan arrives at Weydon Priors
accompanied by Elizabeth Jane, She observes great changes:

Reaching the outskirts of the village they pursued the same track as
formerly, and ascended to the fair. Here, too, it was evident that the years
had told. Certain mechanical improvements might have been noticed in
the roundabouts and high-fliers, machines for testing rustic strength and
weight, and in the erections devoted to shooting for nuts. But the real
business of the fair had considerably dwindled. The new periodical great
markets of neighboring towns were beginning to interfere seriously with
the trade carried on here for centuries. (p.87)

And towards the end of the novel we are told that “the railway had
stretched out an arm towards Casterbridge at this time, but had not reached
it by several miles as yet”. (p.339) Even if held in check for a while, Henchard’s tragedy in such a world is inevitable, for the new world would be intolerant of his primitive, instinctive responses to life.

By introducing modern devices Farfrae has scientifically revolutionized Henchard’s business in the fashion of a capitalist industrial society. The arrival of horse-drill- an agricultural machine which can be used to sow grains with economy and precision is a radical improvement in the agricultural sector. And Elizabeth Jane’s reaction, “then the romance of the sower is gone for good” (p.240) is perhaps the most intelligent and nostalgic apprehension of emotional changes that the modernization can trigger off in the lives of the traditional farmers. When Farfrae buys Henchard’s hay-barns and corn-stores “the scales and steel yards began to be busy where guess-work had formerly been the rule.”(p.295) The catastrophically dismal response to Henchard’s public entertainment organized in Casterbridge vividly illustrates how the greater tact and resourcefulness of his rival can crush his older world.

The central focus in the novel is on a morality that is not separable from instinctive behaviour. Henchard’s intrinsic personality and character, marked by a life of impulse and instinct, vividly validate how unsusceptible he is to orthodox moral categories; his unique personality calls for sympathy and understanding; he is beyond the customary moral paradigms.
even though he appears as ordinary as anyone else in Casterbridge. That Hardy’s main concern in the novel is not with a vindictive campaign against Henchard for his offence in selling his wife in a drunken stupor is evident from his sub-title to the novel – ‘A story of a Man of character’. The justification of this apparently outrageous sub-title is keenly perceived by Noorul Hasan in his insightful observation of the character of Henchard:

What needs equal consideration, however, is the unhampered flow of moral feeling in this apparently disreputable character-his instinctive kindness, his craving for love, his primitive sense of justice, and his titanic capacity for endurance. 

To be able to comprehend the vitality and deeper significance underlying the novel is to capture the real strength of Hardy’s imaginative art- a strength that inhabits all his works. What Henchard embodies is not only any individual greatness or weakness, but a collective vitality and solidity of a whole culture on the threshold of extinction. Perhaps, Henchard is a less refined Gabriel Oak, but more elemental, and therefore, more tragic in a fast changing world where his values remain out-dated. Henchard’s morality has more affinity with the pre-modern and the postmodern culture than with the modern. The events of Henchard’s life vividly point to a universe which is hostile to man. Dale Kramer argues that ‘the plot of The Mayor of Casterbridge derives from the vision that places man against
man, an individual man against the universe, with nothing for him to rely
upon, finally, whatever he has inside himself.¹³

Henchard's struggle is against his own unique, idiosyncratic self
which is defeated in the emerging new world represented by Farfrae. It is in
this interplay of two opposing forces of life that Hardy tries to dramatise
the authentic life of Henchard. More than a statement of the invasion of the
traditional forms of life, the novel brings into sharp focus the nature of
morality by dramatizing the responses of two chief characters to life.
Henchard, senior in age and experience, is irretrievably conditioned by his
inalienable cultural consciousness whereas Farfrae is the product of a new
civilization. Yet, it is not Farfrae who is the cause of Henchard's decline;
rather, it is his own truculent self. Hardy tries to foreground the natural
morality practiced by an instinctual self: 'Within a determinist and
frightening universe the human being may communicate personal values
which, though as ephemeral as human life, bring some meaning to
sublunary existence'.¹⁴ Henchard's personal life is authentic in its own
terms, in its relation to an intensely claustrophobic culture of which he is an
integral part. His fatal flaw is a lack of awareness that 'those who seek to
impress themselves on the universe, to lay violent hands on time, to forget
that man is the slave of limit-such men can only succeed in destroying
themselves'.¹⁵
Michael Henchard is a man who is not restrained by the demands of equanimity, whether in love or in hatred. Once seized by a particular idea or emotion he works it out to the end quite oblivious of its consequences. He is never alert to the immediate, not to speak of long term, consequences of his actions. And Farfrae, sharp and percipient as he is, saw that "his friend and employer was a man who knew no moderation in his requests and impulses." (p.146) For instance, when his fancy is stirred by the note sent to him to the Town Hall by Farfrae, he does not show patience to wait, but goes personally to the Three Mariners (Chapt.7) His frank admission of his own deficiencies to a stranger, "in my business, it's true that strength and bustle build up a form. But judgment and knowledge are what keep it established....I am bad at science, Farfrae...you are just the reverse- I can see that. I have been looking for such as you these two years....." (p.117) is an honest confession of his limitations as well as his own unceremonious attitude in human relationships, something that Farfrae observes with scrupulous correctness. In this connection George Wing makes a very pertinent observation about Henchard that he was 'unceremonious in behaviour, scorned subtlety, and emotionally a bull in a China shop.' 16

About Henchard's natural, impulsive liking for Farfrae, Susan remarks: "...I am thinking of Mr. Henchard's sudden liking for that young man. He was always so" (p.127) In the face of his startling impulsiveness all
decorous formalities become insignificant. After being fascinated with Farfrae, Henchard does not even bother to interview Joshua Jopp who has applied for the post of corn manager. It is something he would look at with scorn and indifference if his fancy is gripped by an impulse.

The most eloquent example of Henchard's informality is his candid sharing of his disreputable past with Farfrae on the first day of the latter's appointment as the corn manager. He tells Farfrae something that he would regret later: "...and yet, whenever he thought of Farfrae, it was with a dim dread; and he often regretted that he had told the young man his whole heart, and confided to him the secrets of his life."(p.172) But this regret is unwarranted; it is a subjective apprehension with no external evidence to discredit his rival's integrity, for Farfrae never betrayed Henchard in this regard in spite of all their rivalries. And it is noteworthy that Hardy exercises maximum caution while building the character of Farfrae, for he is not a force to be rejected outright; it will be his kind who will dominate and be successful in the materialistic, modern world, no matter how critical Hardy is of such a civilization.

Henchard's private world is beyond any artificial social finesse. *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is 'a novel of temperament in action, in minute action even; its distinction derives from a severe concentration on the self-destructive aspects of that temperament.'
It is self-destructive in the most natural way. Henchard's tragic life is a natural concomitant of his authentic existence – an existence which ignores the demands of social pragmatism, but remains committed to the dictates of his own self which refuses to be educated into the subtleties of the new world to which he is a stranger. For 'Hardy tragedy lies in man’s puzzling incapacity to avoid defeat despite his limited but certainly existent freedom of choice.'

Even in love Henchard exhibits the same temperament. One peculiar trait of Henchard is that he grows jealous or possessive of a person or thing when he is threatened by a rival claim upon them. When Lucetta is in the town he does not care for her, but when Farfrae courts her he becomes jealous. Discovering Elizabeth-Jane's true paternity Henchard is emotionally shattered. But he is capable of overcoming the initial shock. However, Henchard is swayed by moods and emotions and in the process alienates himself from everyone around. 'Henchard is more and more alienated from the social context as the novel builds up a cumulative suggestion of his natural propensities.' And the actual human society in the novel cannot comprehend Henchard. Eventually, defeated by circumstances, he looks up to Elizabeth-Jane for love and care. He seems to have achieved some kind of self-realization through the bitter experiences of his life. What is admirable in Henchard is his deep sense of self respect.
and dignity even in the midst of utter hopelessness. For the first time Henchard realizes fully the value of love – to love and to be loved in turn. As Henchard leaves Casterbridge with his only possession – the basket – we are reminded of his entry into it twenty five years ago. Even now there is nothing that can prevent him from a new start. But now he longs for love, something which he had ignored twenty five years ago:

If I had only got her with me – if I only had!” he said, “Hard work would be nothing to me then! But that was not to be. I – Cain – go alone as I deserve – an outcast and a vagabond. But my punishment is not greater than I can bear (p.388)

These are the reflections of a man of character who does not evade responsibilities. His self identification with Cain – the sinner, an outcast and vagabond – is a proof of his belated self realization, a self knowledge that accepts his fate in totality. The elemental force of his personality is best expressed when he asserts to himself that “my punishment is not greater than I can bear.” The present intensity of his love for Elizabeth-Jane reveals a new awakening in him.

Having returned to Weydon-priors, where once he sold his wife years ago, Henchard reflects on the vicissitudes of life with Hardy’s approval:
Externally there was nothing to hinder his making another start on the upward slope, and by his new lights achieving higher things than his soul in its half-formed state had been able to accomplish. But the ingenious machinery contrived by the Gods for reducing human possibilities of amelioration to a minimum – which arranges that wisdom to do shall come pari passu with the departure of zest for doing – stood in the way of all that. He had no wish to make an arena a second time of a world that became a mere painted scene to him. (p.395)

In Henchard’s understanding of the cosmic design Hardy’s impression of life is evidently expressed:

Hardy was dogged by a view of life which could afford him no illusory comforts. His interest in humanity was great and lasting. He was a humane, sensitive man who could not entertain any suggestion of a Deity other than an indifferent or malevolent one, and who did not believe in any form of personal survival as it is usually understood.

It is this awareness which deters Henchard from making a new start.

Like any traditional man Henchard too has been superstitious and ritualistic. His early oath in a country church reveals his allegiance to ancestral forms of expiation. In Chapter Twenty Six, Henchard goes to the weather prophet and fills his granaries with the expectation of a bad weather and consequent high prices for the grains. But the weather abruptly changes into a bright one, giving an excellent harvest, thereby bringing great financial loss to the Mayor. But even here, it is the impatience and impulsive nature of Henchard that cause his ruin. Had he shown patience, he should at least have avoided losses even if no profit was made, but “the
momentum of his character knew no patience.” (p.263) When Henchard encounters defeat after defeat he is driven to believe that someone was working against him, and it might be Farfrae: “these isolated hours of superstition came to Henchard in time of moody depression, when all his practical largeness of view had oozed out of him.” (p.264) In his last attempt to keep away Farfrae from wooing Elizabeth-Jane of whom Henchard has become very possessive, he thinks of divulging her true parentage. As soon as this thought enters his mind, he exclaims with a shudder: “God forbid such a thing! Why should I still be subject to these visitations of the devil, when I try so hard to keep him away.” (p.382) All this demonstrates how strongly he remains part of a culture which is fundamentally primitive and superstitious. Living within such cultural paradigms, Henchard is unable to absorb the values and mores of a new civilization, no matter how hard he tries. What Hardy tries to portray is the honesty, sincerity and native morality that is inherent in such a culture as exemplified by Henchard. By nature Henchard is incapable of living in a social world that does not tolerate individual difference. Henchardian morality resists categorization. Henchard is moral in a savage, primitive fashion. His moral being has a force and fecundity that is evocative of the primitive, elemental justice of our ancestral world. Henchard always accepts the consequences of his action. At no time does he make an attempt
to rationalize his behaviour. After the sale of Susan he decides to face the consequences of his gruesome deed: “When he was calmer he turned to his original conviction that he must somehow find her and his little Elizabeth – Jane, and put up with the shame as best as he could. It was of his own making, and he ought to bear it”. (p.84) He has an almost mythical power of bearing anguish in silence. He is a model of tranquil stoicism. Solomon Longways once refers to this quality of Henchard: “He has a powerful mind to hold out so long.” (p.102) It is an allusion to Henchard’s oath and subsequently abstemious life for twenty-one years. After the discovery of Elizabeth-Jane’s true parentage, Henchard is once again abandoned by Fate; yet he remains unnerved, for “misery taught him nothing more than defiant endurance.”(p.192) To Elizabeth-Jane’s allegation that Henchard had deliberately kept her away from her father, he chooses to remain silent over the facts that “he had himself been deceived in her identity at first, till informed by her mother’s letter that his own child had died; that in the second accusation, his lie had been the last desperate throw of a gamester who loved her affection better than his own honour”, and that “he did not sufficiently value himself to lessen his suffering by strenuous appeal or elaborate argument.” (p.402) Henchard’s lie to Newson about Elizabeth should not be viewed as a sign of his lack of integrity, but as an expression of his need to love and being loved.
In choosing between Lucetta and Susan, Henchard’s moral priority is unshakably clear—it is Susan: “My first duty is to Susan—there is no doubt about that.” (p. 150.) But at the same his sense of moral justice yearns to treat the other woman with equal concern. More evidences of Henchard’s integrity are revealed throughout the novel. When the furmity woman discloses the sale of Susan, Henchard accepts the charge. It is the most impressive instance of the integrity of his character. And it is also the turning point of his life. From this moment his life is reduced to that of an exile. The process of disintegration which started with the discovery Elizabeth-Jane’s paternity is now completed. And this is Hardy’s most tragic vision of life that ‘man has made such a mighty struggle to feel at home on the face of the earth, without even yet succeeding.’

Henchard can’t succeed just as Tess can’t succeed since both are animated by the vitality of natural impulses and hunted by rigid moral laws.

With all his faults Henchard is a superior moral force in the novel. ‘Henchard still stands above the others in what might be called psychic virtue. In the conventional sense, he is both less moral than they and more so.’

He is a prototype of the postmodern isolated hero. He is a dominating and perplexing figure who is inexplicable by human reason. His character is evocative of the self isolated, socially alienated heroes of existential fiction in the tradition of Camus and Kafka. He is destroyed by both the universal
and social forces. First he severs himself from his wife, then he estranges himself from Farfrae, and finally from Elizabeth-Jane. Even the community of Casterbridge rejects him as the mayor. In spite of everything, he never loses his personal stature and integrity.

It is in contrast with Farfrae that Henchard’s moral qualities gain both clarity and distinction. True, neither of the men displays the capacity for strong, consistent emotional attachment. But by the end of the novel Henchard undergoes a deep inner change. Henchard’s passionately obsessive love for Elizabeth-Jane is an indication of his moral as well as emotional education. A chastened Michael Henchard of his last days can be a great threat to Farfrae’s new world. When Henchard requests Farfrae to stay back in Casterbridge as his manager, there is genuine affection in his request. But Farfrae, on the other hand, agrees mainly because he seizes the opportunity. In all his dealings Farfrae keeps his own interests above all other considerations. For instance, when he is offered mayoralty, he decides to stay on in Casterbridge against the anxiety of Lucetta. Still more, he comes to court Elizabeth-Jane and then becomes immediately infatuated with Lucetta’s sophistication. On his first, highly romantic meeting with Lucetta, he is able to keep in abeyance his burning sentiments for her when he remembers a business engagement; and on his wedding day he delays his return to Casterbridge for a few hours because he “had been detained by
important customers, whom, even in the exceptional circumstances, he was not the man to neglect."(p.286) He feels no grief for the unborn child that dies with Lucetta. Farfrae is mechanical, shallow and incorrigibly materialistic. John Rabbets makes a pertinent observation about the characters of Henchard and Farfrae:

The dissension and rivalry between Henchard and Farfrae dramatizes the clash of traditional and modern consciousness-the one crude, anachronistic, excessively personal, over emotional and yet redolent of certain rough grandeur; the other innovatory, impersonal, dispassionate, sensible, but somewhat mean-spirited.

The ethical triumph of Henchard is that he has been able to achieve some kind of moral growth towards the end of the novel. As the novel develops, Henchard grows into a formidable moral character. He has learnt to accept things, which he would have scorned earlier, with astonishing understanding and patience. No one in the novel displays a better understanding of Henchard than Elizabeth-Jane. While considering the Will of Henchard, she rightly contemplates that

the man who wrote them meant what he said. She knew the directions to be a piece of the same stuff that his whole life was made of, and hence were not to be tampered with to give herself a mournful pleasure, or her husband credit for large-heartedness(p.410)

As we have argued, The Mayor of Casterbridge is a celebration of individual uniqueness and authenticity. Henchard, the archetypal hero, takes on an epic stature before his death. His amazing energy, capacity for
heroic endurance coupled with a robust acceptance of his existential situation has gone into the making of a classical hero. He is, indeed, a masterpiece of superbly detailed character that inhabits and haunts not only Hardy’s moral imagination but the reader’s as well. With *The Mayor* Hardy has proved that he is opposed to the central tendencies of his age. He points to a different kind of inner morality that lies beyond the conventional. When Henchard is finally defeated, Hardy shows the destruction of a natural self by the social order. In the creation of this irresistible character Hardy has remained true to his vision of art: “The business of the poet and novelist is to show the sorriness underlying the grandest things, and the grandeur underlying the sorriest things.” And Michael Henchard is a fictional incarnation of this vision of Hardy. Grand and sorry alternately or simultaneously, he is the most moral of all characters in the novel in a natural way.
References


2. Ibid, p.2


