

"I felt very sorry for Elizabeth-Jane,
and kept hoping that everything would come out
right for her in the end." Maisie, 11



THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE

THOMAS HARDY

Michael Henchard knew he deserved the pain he felt.

Henchard is a handsome farm labourer. When he gets drunk at a country fair, he sells his wife and child to a sailor. The next day, ashamed by what he has done, he lets people believe that his wife has died. Thus begins a chain of events which leads Henchard deep into dishonesty and betrayal.

Repentant and determined to change his ways, Henchard works hard to improve his fortunes. He becomes rich, and is elected mayor of Casterbridge – though his temper and his pride make him difficult to like.

When Henchard's wife and daughter come back to find him, will he accept them? And what might they want from him? Will a reunion mean a happy ending?



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Thomas Hardy



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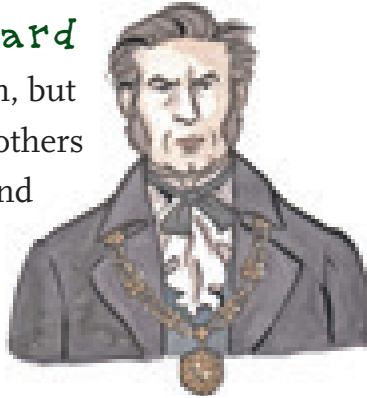
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THE CHARACTERS

Michael Henchard

Henchard is a strong man, but his pride lets him and others down. Will his lies be found out? Do you feel any sympathy for him?



Susan

Susan is a simple woman, anxious to do right by others and lacking confidence in herself. Will she find happiness with Henchard? Will she tell Elizabeth-Jane the truth?



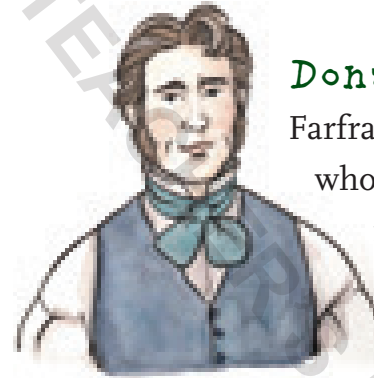
Elizabeth-Jane

Elizabeth-Jane understands people and is kind and true to those she is close to. Will she win Henchard's love – and Farfrae's? Is she too long-suffering?



Donald Farfrae

Farfrae is a successful young man who is good with people and needs to make friends. What will come of his friendship with Henchard?



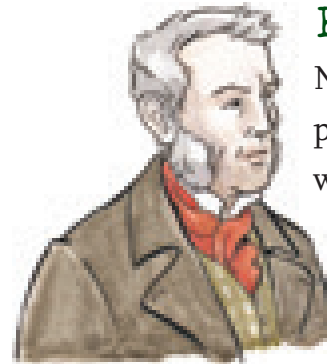
Lucetta Templeman

Lucetta is a young woman with a past. She will do anything to marry the man she loves. But will she be happy?



Richard Newson

Newson is a kind sailor who takes pity on Susan, and takes care of her when Henchard rejects her. Later he goes missing, and is believed dead. But will he come back – or not?





THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE

Susan Newson and her daughter Elizabeth-Jane were relieved to have reached the Wessex village of Weydon Priors after hours of trudging wearily along the dusty high road.

‘Why have we come here?’ asked Elizabeth-Jane. Her mother did not answer; she had not told her daughter about their shameful past.

Years ago, at the fair in this selfsame village, her first husband, Michael Henchard, had become drunk on furmity laced with rum. After an argument with Susan he had angrily offered both her and their baby daughter for auction. It was a shocking story. Luckily for Susan, Richard Newson, a sailor and a good man, had handed over five guineas, and had taken them overseas with him. Richard had looked after them well, but now he was lost at sea, presumed drowned.

For Elizabeth’s sake, Susan now wanted to find Michael Henchard. She was starting her search where it had all begun.

She spotted an old woman selling drinks, and while Elizabeth-Jane wandered round the fair went up to her. 'Were you here some eighteen years ago?' she asked warily, handing the woman a few pence for a drink.

'Thank you, my dear. Would you like a drop of rum to warm your heart? I've been here all my life, used to have a grand tent to sell from. Everyone came for my furmity.'

Susan looked round to be sure that Elizabeth-Jane was out of hearing.

'Do you remember a man selling his wife and baby?'

'Now that was a terrible thing to do; wicked, some said. I remember it well. He regretted it the very next day. He said if she ever came to look for him to tell her he's in Casterbridge.'

The old woman looked at Susan sharply. There was no disguising the shock on Susan's face as she turned away to find her daughter.



It was evening in Casterbridge, and a grand dinner was under way in the King's Arms. All the windows were open, and a mass of people stood outside watching the goings-on.

'What's happening?' Elizabeth-Jane asked one of the locals. She and her mother had just arrived in the town.

'It's a great public dinner of the gentlefolk,' said the old man beside them. 'The mayor, Mr Henchard, is in the chair. He's a grain merchant, biggest round here. Started off poor like the rest of us though.'

'Henchard!' exclaimed Elizabeth-Jane, craning her neck to see.



to keep the reader waiting in suspense for the next instalment, rather like television soap operas today.

The Mayor of Casterbridge takes place in the small market town of Casterbridge, which is based on the real southern English town of Dorchester in the county of Dorset, Hardy's nearest market town when he was growing up. It is at the heart of Wessex, a region made famous by Hardy, who was fascinated by the region's history and customs, as well as the local dialect. Casterbridge, like Dorchester in Hardy's time, is a town whose economy is based on farming and rural life, centred on its market and the buying and selling of grain and livestock.

The subtitle of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is 'The Life and Death of a Man of Character'. The Victorians were very interested in – and concerned about – the idea of 'character', and the importance of having a 'good name'. We can still see this operating now, where people in the news try to protect their names, and can

be destroyed by damaging information from their past being revealed. Henchard is a self-made business-man, coming from nothing to the position of mayor of Casterbridge. He is strong, but not very well educated or open to new ideas. He is destroyed by his own actions, and by the unforgiving and relentless nature of public opinion.

Many of Henchard's problems stem from his overindulgence in alcohol; drinking too much at Weydon Priors Fair is what gives him the idea and the nonchalant carelessness to sell his wife and daughter – and then 'forget' about it until he comes round from his drunken stupour. The availability of cheap alcohol was a very serious problem in Victorian Britain, so Hardy was exploring an issue which was familiar to many of his readers.

Another major theme in the novel is the harsh reality of Victorian society's treatment of women. Susan Henchard, Lucetta Templeman and Elizabeth-Jane Newson are dealing with many of the issues of powerlessness and