

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Mayor of Casterbridge by Thomas Hardy

Book Information

Thomas Hardy, The Mayor of Casterbridge
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Set in Wessex, England, shortly before 1830, this story is about the blind energies and defiant acts that bring an ambitious man to power, but can also destroy him.

Topics: Behavior, Superstitious; Classics, Classics (All); Countries/Regions, England; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12

Main Characters

Donald Farfrae the man originally from Scotland, who comes into Henchard's employ after offering him ways to salvage his grain

Elizabeth-Jane Newson daughter of Susan, who is mistakenly thought to be Henchard's daughter

Lucetta Templeman former suitor of Henchard's, who moves to Casterbridge after coming into wealth

Michael Henchard current mayor of Casterbridge, who once auctions off his wife and daughter during a drunken rage

Richard Newson real father of Elizabeth-Jane, who pretends to be dead after an accident at sea

Susan Henchard (Newson) auctioned wife of Henchard, who is purchased by a sailor named Richard Newson

Vocabulary

concatenation link together in a chain

effigy image or likeness of a person

fodder food for livestock

incipient making a start or beginning

jocularly a mood or temper marked by joy, laughter, or high spirits

phlegmatic unresponsive to what might normally excite interest or emotion

Synopsis

A man, woman, and child are seen walking down the street. It is noted that they do not appear to get along well. In a furmity tent at a local fair, Michael Henchard becomes drunk and offers his wife and daughter to the highest bidder. Susan pleads with her husband, but to no avail. A sailor appears and buys Susan and her daughter. The next day, Michael is upset by what has happened, but he blames the shameful sale on his wife. He searches for her, but he has no success. At the time of the auction, he was twenty-one years old. He goes into a church and vows to abstain from drinking for the next twenty-one years. After hearing that Susan and the sailor may have emigrated, Henchard gives up his search.

Many years later, it is reported that Richard Newson, the sailor who purchased Susan and Elizabeth-Jane, has died. Elizabeth-Jane is now a young woman. Susan determines that they must search for Henchard, who is "a relative by marriage," as she explains to Elizabeth-Jane. Upon coming to Casterbridge, they find Henchard appears to be a different man: he now looks distinguished and is mayor of the town.

It is noted that there are problems with the corn crop, and the townsfolk are angry with Henchard. Donald Farfrae appears and sends a note to Henchard. Later, Henchard meets Farfrae and learns that he is an intelligent man with a solution to the crop problems. He is immediately taken with the young Scotsman and offers him a management job. Farfrae declines and states that he wants to go to America.

Soon, Susan gives Elizabeth-Jane a note to take to Henchard, asking if he would like to meet with her. He readily agrees. He arranges for the widow and her daughter to live in a nice room while he pretends to court Susan, then marry her for the sake of Elizabeth-Jane. Only after Susan's death does he explain to Elizabeth-Jane that he is her real her

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father, not Richard Newson. The two get along well until Henchard learns that he is not Elizabeth's father and Newson is. From then on, he is bitter and cold toward her.

Meanwhile, Henchard has explained his dark past to Farfrae, who has accepted his job offer. He explains there is another woman he courted but could not marry because of Susan. Now he wonders what he should do. Around this time, the mysterious and beautiful Miss Templeman moves to Casterbridge and offers Elizabeth-Jane a way out of her father's cruel home--she invites her to stay at her home as a companion. This mysterious woman is Lucetta, Henchard's former lover. She hopes to use Elizabeth-Jane to lure Henchard into visiting her.

Elizabeth-Jane has developed a crush on Farfrae, and when he comes around to visit her, he and Lucetta are instantly attracted to one another. They carry out their courtship in secret, but Henchard finds out and vows vengeance against Farfrae. Henchard has in his possession many love letters written by Lucetta. He offers to use these to ruin her if she does not marry him. She relents and then quickly and secretly marries Farfrae. She eventually persuades Henchard not to use the letters, but to give them to her instead. Henchard trusts one of his employees to deliver the letters, but the snooping man reads them first, then reveals their contents at the local pub. There, the drinkers plan a skimmington-ride to destroy Lucetta's reputation.

Henchard attacks Farfrae one night, but in the end, Henchard cannot kill Farfrae. Later, Farfrae goes away on business, and the skimmington-riders come through town. Lucetta is pregnant, and the sight of this spectacle sends her into convulsions. She becomes dangerously ill. Farfrae returns to her, and she confesses everything before she dies.

Meanwhile, Richard Newson is still alive and has come for Elizabeth-Jane. Henchard lies and tells him she is dead. The guilt and worry that Newson will return and that Elizabeth-Jane will learn the truth and forget him nearly drive Henchard mad. Eventually, Newson does return and is reunited with

his daughter. Henchard makes an attempt to salvage his relationship with Elizabeth-Jane at her wedding to Farfrae, but she refuses. She cannot accept what he has done. Shortly after, Henchard dies completely alone. He had written a letter requesting that he have no Christian funeral, claiming that he does not deserve it. Elizabeth-Jane forgives her father and goes to look for him, but it is too late.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Why does Henchard spare Farfrae's life during their fight in the loft?

Although flawed, Henchard is certainly not an evil man. His intention in challenging Farfrae to fight in the loft is to prove (mostly to himself) that he is as good a man as his former employee, even in Henchard's degraded state. Henchard retains a fondness for the Scotsman despite his own jealousy and grievances. Had murder been Henchard's prime goal, he would have taken Farfrae unaware, a temptation Henchard had resisted on a previous occasion in the loft.

Literary Analysis

Make the case for Michael Henchard being viewed as a tragic hero.

Henchard rises to a high social standing and falls from it on the strength of a character that is both admirable and flawed. He has the energy, stamina, and resolve to forsake alcohol and thrive in a difficult business. However, he lacks prudence and control of his passions. The chief hallmark of a tragic sensibility comes as he accepts responsibility for his loss of all that is dear to him, even though it may not be in his personal power to change the course of his fate.

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Inferential Comprehension

Much is made of Susan's long-standing confusion about the legality of her being purchased by Newson. What does the way Susan accepts the arrangement say about her character?

Susan is a simple person, uneducated, and unperceptive. She is unaware that the laws of the land would not sanction her sale, and so she lives most of her life with Newson believing she is both obligated to staying and behaving morally. The bigamy she commits becomes known to her only later during her life with Newson, and the unhappiness it causes her is Newson's prime motive for faking his own death. Susan proves herself faithful enough to endure hardships she feels honor-bound to accept, but she is naive enough to accept as fact the legitimacy of an act even a fool would reject.

Constructing Meaning

Henchard had a habit of doing rash things that he later came to regret. List some examples.

He sells his wife and child in a moment of drunkenness. He fires Farfrae out of jealousy, when he really needs the man's expertise. He eagerly tells Elizabeth-Jane that she is his daughter, only to find out soon afterward that she really is not. He lies to Newson, saying Elizabeth-Jane had died, even though the lie is certain to turn her against Henchard eventually. He runs away from Casterbridge when he really loves Elizabeth-Jane and does not want to leave her.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors

Agriculture plays an important part in the lives of the characters in this novel. Corn is very important to them, and there are techniques of growing and harvesting corn that are discussed, as well as a few tools and equipment that were used in the 1800s. Agriculture is very different in today's society. Have students research farming and learn how it is practiced differently today than many years ago. How have technological

developments affected the culture of farming? In what ways are the typical rural areas and lives different from their counterparts of 150 years ago?

Understanding the Author's Craft As an exercise in creative logic, ask your students to outline a modern version of the plot of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Hardy's setting in the English provinces was already a world very much in the past even for his original audience, a fact emphasized by his frequently noting practices and edifices those readers would no longer find there. Students may search for a similarly "recently gone" setting in American history for their sketches. Among their challenges will be: by what device will Susan leave Henchard for Newson; how will Henchard himself rise in the world's eyes during the years of his bachelorhood; what nature of "blameless scandal" will explain Lucetta's unconsummated intimacy with Henchard and subsequent return to his town? The dust bowl for the 1930s might be one particularly promising suggestion for re-setting the novel in this way.

Recognizing Details Thomas Hardy goes into quite a bit of architectural detail in this novel. He specifically mentions the Palladian and Gothic ages of architecture. In order for students to get a better appreciation of his descriptions, have them research basic architecture of the time. A good place to look would be in art history books. Hardy discusses foundations, comrades, arches, and windows. It would also be helpful to research such terms as conches, clerestories, naves, bastions, flying buttresses, and the different types of vaults. Pictures or diagrams would be useful as well.

Comparing and Contrasting Hardy's novel contains most of the elements necessary to classify it as a tragedy. Henchard is a flawed, ambitious character who becomes a victim of his own impulses, but one with whom readers sympathize sufficiently to experience a catharsis at his undoing. Ask students to choose another tragic hero with whom they are familiar and compare that character's qualities to those of

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Henchard. Lear would be a good choice, as a man who also fails to manage "success" and love simultaneously. From *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff's more gothic and relentless need for revenge would offer other points of comparison. Perhaps the most telling contrast would be gained by comparing Henchard to Willie Loman. As with Loman in *Death of A Salesman*, the feasibility of portraying Henchard as authentically trapped in "tragic" circumstances (rather than merely afflicted with personal inadequacies) is one of this author's main creative burdens.