

The Mayor of Casterbridge

Author: Thomas Hardy

Introduction:

I chose to read *The Mayor of Casterbridge* because I wanted to read literature that dealt with the psychological and philosophical aspects of humans. I am interested in exploring topics such as human nature, destiny, and morals. I initially expected to read about a man's rise and fall in life and whether it was his decisions that shaped his life or just pure fate. I wished to read a tale with emotional depth and moral ambiguity.

Summary:

The novel begins with Michael Henchard, drunk, participating in an auction that began as a joke but later turned serious. He sells his wife Susan and baby daughter Elizabeth-Jane to a sailor named Richard Newson at a country fair. After sobering up, he regrets his decision and swears to not drink again. Henchard rebuilds his life over the years and becomes the Mayor of a town called Casterbridge, but his past catches up with him when Susan and Elizabeth-Jane appear. Henchard and Susan decide to remarry. After Susan dies, Henchard learns that Elizabeth-Jane is not his daughter and becomes cold towards her. Elizabeth-Jane goes to live with Lucetta Templeman, who had once been romantically involved with Henchard. Lucetta later falls in love with and marries Donald Farfrae, Elizabeth-Jane's lover and Henchard's rival. Lucetta's and Henchard's former love letters get discovered and read by peasants. Lucetta becomes ill and dies of shame. Henchard, who feels closer to Elizabeth-Jane now, deceives her actual father, Newson, telling him that she died. Elizabeth-Jane finds out Henchard's deception, and goes back to Newson, and marries Farfrae. Henchard appears on the wedding night but is callously rejected by Elizabeth-Jane. Feeling remorse for her cruelty, she goes looking for him with Farfrae and finds that he has died alone. His last wish was to be forgotten.

The novel involves themes such as fate, pride, guilt, and redemption. Hardy uses these themes to demonstrate how one's impulsive decisions can lead them down a road of guilt and loneliness.

Analysis & Opinion:

I think the complex personalities of all the characters worked really well with each other. Especially Henchard's and Farfrae's rivalry, which showed how traditionality and volatility contrast sharply with modern ideas and charm. For instance, Henchard remarks about Farfrae's growing popularity: *"He has supplanted me—he has done it—and he enjoys it!"* (direct speech). Something else that worked really well is the main character's guilt and attempt at redemption. He knew he was in the wrong and that he himself is to blame for all his mishaps in life. This is mentioned when Henchard realized he had *"lost everything he had valued"* (indirect speech). However, I feel like the beginning of the book where Henchard sells his wife and kid does not work well since it seems a bit unrealistic. One

character that stood out most to me is Susan, Henchard's wife. Though she is portrayed as weak and unable to stand up for herself due to being sold off and then remarrying the man who did that to her, I feel like there's a strength in the ways she carries herself. She has her priorities which is her daughter first and foremost. She is willing to undergo unfair treatment for her daughter's happiness and security. I feel like this character about her should get more recognition.

Personal Connection:

This book made me reflect on how small decisions can snowball into life-changing consequences. It also reminded me how we are all human and can make hasty decisions that not only affect us but also the ones around us. We should be careful in how we go about our life and the decisions we make, because one small mistake can take a huge toll down the road. However, this novel also changed my perspective on a few things. I now understand that it is important to forgive and forget—especially for the sake of your loved ones. There is no point in holding a grudge if it only hurts people. Life is too short to dwell on past mistakes, and sometimes you have to let go of your pride to move forward. After all, what's done is done, and trying to undo the past is often just beating a dead horse.

Conclusion:

I wholeheartedly enjoyed reading this book, so I would definitely recommend it to others. I feel like people who are interested in genres such as fantasy and horror wouldn't necessarily enjoy it, however people who like character-driven stories with emotional depth would definitely like it. This book makes you think about your own life and how your decisions have impacted where you are in life just as they did with Henchard.