THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE

BY
THOMAS HARDY

Dr. Monika Bhatnagar
Dept. Of English
Q. 1. Hardy calls Michael Henchard “a man of character.” What does this expression mean and how far is it an apt description of Henchard?

Or

Explain the meaning of the sub-title “A story of a man of character” used by Hardy for his novel The Mayor of Casterbridge.

Or

Examine the character of Michael Henchard to show the secret of his appeal to us.

An Exceptional Personality

The sub-title of the novel The Mayor of Casterbridge is “A story of a man of character”. A man of character means a man of striking, outstanding qualities. Michael Henchard is not just any man. There is something distinctive about him which marks him off from other human beings. He is not a colourless man. A colourless man is one who does not or cannot assert himself and just follows the lead given by others. Such a man has no independent opinion or views of his own. He simply borrows opinions from others who are more assertive. But Michael Henchard is a force to be reckoned with. He is a powerful, self-assertive person who cannot be ignored. He makes his mark upon men and affairs. He has qualities which lift him above the level of average humanity. A man of character is of course no embodiment of perfection. But he is a man worthy of respect from the moral point of view. He may have certain weaknesses or failings, but these must not be of a nature to degrade him. There are faults in him; but his faults are not so serious or morally objectionable as to lower him in our estimation. He is, on the whole, a good rather than a bad man. But he is an exceptional or extraordinary kind of man, with the element of goodness preponderant in him. It is in this sense that Michael Henchard is a man of character. The sub-title shows the importance which Hardy attaches to this man. This novel is the story of certain other persons also—Farfrae, Elizabeth-Jane, and Lucetta. But it is Michael Henchard who attracts our attention the most. Henchard has a towering personality. The spot-light is throughout on him. He wins our sympathy, our regard, and our admiration despite his weaknesses and lapses. He is truly a hero.
Strength, Physical and Moral

One of Henchard’s most striking qualities is his strength. Strength is, indeed, the keynote of his character. He rises to his position as the mayor by sheer energy and strength. He has no pit for weakness and he admires strength in others who may possess it. His strength is especially seen in his keeping his vow not to drink for twenty-one years. When we recall that he was previously addicted to liquor, we really feel surprised at his giving up liquor altogether for such a long time. The fact that he is able to keep his vow shows him to be a man of exceptional firmness and determination. He is also a man of his word. When he promises Lucetta that he will return her letters to her, he says: “Now don’t doubt me. I can keep my word.” Surely he can keep his word. It is another matter that he sends the letters to her through the wrong man, and his mistake is trusting Jopp with those letters costs Lucetta her life. But he sends the letters to her with the best of intentions.

Honesty and Fair Play

Henchard’s other distinguishing qualities are honesty, integrity, and a strong sense of justice and fairness. There is nothing crooked or dishonest about his business-dealings. When he decides to crush Farfrae, he makes it clear to Jopp that he wishes to do so by fair competition. Ordinarily when a man becomes revengeful or vindictive towards a business-rival, he would not shrink from adopting even the worst of methods to ruin him, but Henchard does not use any unfair means in his efforts to wreck Farfrae. Again, when he declares himself a bankrupt and his asserts have been valued, he surrenders even his gold pocket-watch and his canvas money-bag. Generally when a man declares his bankruptcy he takes care to hide some of his assets or some cash in order to meet his day-to-day expenses. But Henchard’s sense of justice does not permit him even to keep his pocket-watch. Everything about Henchard is fair and above board. He shows his sense of justice also in receiving Susan back even though in doing so he has to give up his intention to marry Lucetta. Another man would simply have made adequate financial arrangements to keep his wife and daughter in comfort, and he would have proceeded to marry the other woman. But Henchard makes a great sacrifice in taking Susan back. Later, when Susan dies, he gets ready to marry Lucetta to whom he had pledged himself. It is another matter that things go wrong in this situation also, but there was no doubt about Henchard’s willingness to keep his promise to Lucetta.

No Weakness for Women

Henchard’s attitude towards the female sex also distinguishes him from ordinary men. He regards women as weak creatures. For this reason he has rather an attitude of contempt towards them. A prosperous man like him would easily have become a philanderer. But Henchard has no weakness for women. As he tells Farfrae, his attitude towards women is one of indifference. He cannot appreciate the feminine graces. He keeps aloof from women and may even be called a woman-hater.
A Man of Strong Likes and Dislikes

The character of Henchard is distinguished also by his having strong likes and dislikes. He has taken a sudden fancy to Farfrae and insists upon Farfrae's staying in Casterbridge. "When a man takes my fancy, he takes it strong," he says to Farfrae. His affection for Elizabeth-Jane is even stronger. After discovering the fact that Elizabeth-Jane is not his daughter but the sailor's, he does become indifferent to her for a certain period of time but afterwards his liking for her again becomes so strong that he cannot live without her. She becomes indispensable to him, and he feels desolate when he visualises the possibility of her being claimed by Newson who turns up in Casterbridge unexpectedly. He has now begun to look upon Elizabeth-Jane as his very anchor in life. His heart would be empty if she leaves him, and he dies broken-hearted after learning that Elizabeth-Jane no longer has any room for him in her heart. In the context of his liking for Farfrae and his affection for Elizabeth-Jane, certain critics find sexual implications. For instance, it has been said that Henchard's liking for Farfrae has a homosexual basis. This is quite a strange view, because throughout the novel there is not a single word on the basis of which any suspicion about Henchard having homosexual leanings can cross our minds. Equally unconvincing is the view that Henchard's affection for Elizabeth-Jane has a sexual basis. In this case also there is not the least hint of Henchard's having any incestuous desire for the girl. His feeling of attachment towards Elizabeth-Jane is purely paternal. Even though Elizabeth-Jane is not his daughter, it is possible for him to harbour paternal feelings towards her. It would be perverse to attribute either homosexual feelings or incestuous feelings to Henchard. At the same time, if Henchard is capable of strong likings, he is also capable of strong hatreds. His strong love for Farfrae afterwards changes into a burning, fierce hatred. His hatred is as intense as his love previously was. He now publicly declares his determination to destroy Farfrae. The Psalm which he forces the singers to sing at The Three Mariners inn clearly shows the intensity of Henchard's hatred for the Scotchman. That Psalm opens thus:

"His seed shall orphans be, his wife
A widow plunged in grief;
His vagrant children beg their bread
Where none can give relief."

It is really a terrible fate which he desires for Farfrae. As he tells Elizabeth-Jane, he may even go to the length of killing that man. This is what he says to her: "He (Farfrae) has taken away everything from me, and by heavens, if I meet him I won't answer for my deeds." When he has been publicly humiliated by Farfrae on the occasion of the visit of a royal personage, Henchard cannot control his wrath. He fights a sort of duel with Farfrae and is about to kill him, though at the last moment he relents and lets the Scotchman go. It is noteworthy that, in fighting with Farfrae, Henchard has tied one of his arms to his side so as not to have an undue advantage over Farfrae because...
Henchard, being very much stronger than Farfrae, would like to render the contest equal. This incident also shows Henchard’s sense of justice and fair play. The incident of the fight shows also Henchard’s essential generosity. He may be rough in talk and in manners, and he may even become violent at times, but there is no doubt about his basic kind-heartedness.

Incapable of Cruelty

Henchard is incapable of any inhuman cruelty. His heart is sound, and he cannot deliberately inflict any cruelty upon anybody. At the last moment he changes his mind and abstains from revealing to Farfrae his past intimacy with Lucetta. Any other man would have gratified his desire for revenge by disclosing the name of the writer of those love-letters which Henchard reads out to Farfrae. In this context Hardy writes: “Such a wrecking of hearts appalled even him. His quality was such that he could have annihilated both in the heat of action; but to accomplish the deed by oral poison was beyond the nerve of his enmity.” This description of Henchard’s character greatly raises him in our estimation.

His Confession in the Open Court

There is another incident which also shows Henchard’s remarkable character and fills up with admiration for him. When in the open Court the furmity woman exposes the secret of his having sold his wife many years ago, another man in Henchard’s place would simply have denied the charge and would have got away with it. But Henchard admits the charge and says to his fellow magistrate: “Tis as true as the light. And upon my soul it does prove that I’m not better than she (the furmity woman). And to keep out of any temptation to treat her hard for revenge, I’ll leave her to you.” In other words, Henchard leaves the court because he would not like to sit in judgment upon the furmity woman. The disclosure of his past secret creates a sensation in the town and does great damage to his reputation, but Henchard is not sorry to have told the truth.

Some Other Traits of Henchard

There are certain other traits of his character which does deserve mention. Henchard is a lover of music. Music has a regal power over him. Nothing touches him more than an old melody. When he is about to fight with Farfrae and is waiting for the Scotchman, he hears the Scotchman humming a tune and he feels unnerved, because it has the effect of softening him. Hardy also describes Henchard as a man of moods, glooms, and superstitions. His moods are unpredictable and his temper is uncertain. His very features show that he is a man of moods. As the author says, Henchard’s personal goodness was of a very fitful cast—an occasional almost oppressive generosity rather than a mild and constant kindness. His general outlook on life is gloomy. He is a lonely man whom fate treats cruelly even though many of his misfortunes are due to his own mistakes. When he is leaving Casterbridge, he says to himself: “I—Cain—go alone as I deserve, an outcast and a vagabond.”
A True Hero with Exceptional Powers of Endurance

In spite of his weaknesses and faults, Henchard arouses our deepest sympathy when he dies, a broken and defeated man. He was impulsive, rash, and even reckless. Though essentially kind-hearted, he was often haughty and rough in his dealings with others. His jealousy of Farfrae and his subsequent hatred of the Scotchman do not do him any credit, and yet Henchard produces a powerful impression upon us. His very endurance of his misfortunes distinguishes him from others. As Hardy says, "misery taught him nothing but defiant endurance of it." Although he suffers terribly he says to himself: "But my punishment is not greater than I can bear." He is, indeed, a remarkable man, and his ultimate fate moves us greatly. He is truly a hero, and he not only dominates the novel but is an unforgettable individual.
Q. 6. Discuss with reference to *The Mayor of Casterbridge* Hardy’s vision of the human tragedy.

Or

Give your own idea of Hardy’s philosophy of life as reflected in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.

Or

What idea have you formed of Hardy’s conception of tragedy from your reading of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.

The Principal Considerations in a Tragedy

In considering any tragic work, whether it takes the form of a play or a novel, we have to ask ourselves the following questions: (1) What sorts of persons are the victims of suffering? (2) What are the causes of the disaster or catastrophe that befalls the characters? (3) What is the emotional reaction of the audience or the readers to the suffering depicted and what is the nature of the impact that the spectacle of human misery makes on them? (4) What is the writer’s view of human nature in general: whether he thinks it essentially mean and degraded or noble and sublime? All these tests of a tragedy have to be applied to *The Mayor of Casterbridge* also.

The Tragic Hero or Heroine in Hardy’s Novels

According to Aristotle, a tragedy depicts the fall of a man of high status or of a high social position. This person of high social position suffers from some flaw in character, and this flaw is chiefly responsible for his downfall, even though other reasons may also operate to bring about his ruin. Shakespearean tragedies also depict the downfall of men of high position or exalted rank. There too the tragic protagonist suffers from a flaw which brings about the disaster in his life and in the lives of certain other characters also. In modern times, however, the conception of the tragic hero has greatly changed.
In the different social climate of today, high social status has lost its relevance. Hardy was a pioneer in this respect. He shows his democratic outlook by choosing a person of ordinary social position as the hero or heroine in each of his tragedies. Furthermore, Hardy places the scene of his stories in the English countryside, in a region to which he gave the name of Wessex. The characters in his *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *The Return of the Native*, and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* are all natives of the countryside. In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Hardy is able to create one of the greatest tragedies in English fiction out of the life of a peasant woman. In fact, a subsidiary theme of that novel is the tragedy of the entire English peasantry as symbolized by the fate of Tess. Hardy’s democratic leanings give a strikingly modern quality to his novels.

**Hardy’s Choice of Characters in “The Mayor of Casterbridge”**

The characters in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* are also ordinary persons. It is true that both Henchard and Farfrae rise to the position of a mayor and acquire a good deal of wealth, but both of them are men of humble origin. Henchard begins life as a mere hay-trusser and, when the novel opens, he is unemployed and fed up with life. Farfrae has planned to go abroad in order to try his luck though, under the pressure of Henchard, he takes up a job as an employee of that man. Neither of them can claim any high status or exalted rank in the beginning of their careers. Susan and Elizabeth-Jane are ordinary women belonging to the lower stratum of society. Newson is an ordinary sailor. Lucetta is a poor girl who becomes rich afterwards because of a legacy left to her by a wealthy aunt. All the other characters in the novel are persons of the lowest classes. However, in one respect this novel is slightly different from the three novels named above. Most of the action of the story of this novel takes place not in a village but in a large town. The story begins in a village no doubt, the village of Weydon-Priors; but the scene soon shifted to the town of Casterbridge. Thus the story of this novel pertains to urban life, and yet the characters do not have much of sophistication about them with the possible exception of Lucetta who is a well-educated and elegant lady. The two principal characters are connected with agriculture, being hay-and-corn merchants. Essentially therefore they are linked with the peasantry. In fact, it has even been said that Farfrae who comes from outside to this town is a kind of intruder in this agricultural community, even though soon afterwards he becomes part and parcel of that community.

**The Causes of Disaster in Hardy’s Novels**

Hardy has variously been called a fatalist, a determinist, a pessimist, a meliorist, and so on. A pessimist though he is in so far as he concentrates on the dark side of human life to the exclusion of its bright and cheering aspects, no single formula covers all his novels so far as the cause of human suffering is concerned. Character, society, Nature, chance and coincidence—all these are responsible for the human tragedy, though the degree of responsibility of each varies from novel to novel. In *The Return of the Native*, character,
Nature, and the element of chance contribute to the tragedy almost equally. In *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* the character of the heroine is responsible for the tragedy to a much lesser extent than other causes. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, character plays a greater role than other causes in bringing about the tragedy.

**The Extent of Henchard’s Own Responsibility for his Tragedy**

Henchard’s own character accounts for his misfortunes to a very large extent. In fact, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* has been interpreted as showing Hardy’s deterministic outlook of life because many of Henchard’s misfortunes result from his own actions and deeds. The logic of cause and effect in this novel is observed by Hardy to a greater extent than in any of his other novels. Fate plays an important role here also, but Henchard’s own character plays a much greater role. The very opening chapter shows Henchard to be a man of rash and reckless nature. Partly under the influence of liquor and partly because of his sense of failure in life, he sells his wife. This action is certainly to be condemned, and it ultimately leads to disaster for him. Retribution overtakes him long after his committing the act of folly in selling his wife. For eighteen years this action of Henchard’s remained buried, but then he has to pay the penalty for that misdeed. The exposure of the fumity woman of his secret of his early life accelerates his downfall. Henchard’s relations with Farfrae also show how a man may suffer on account of his peculiar temperament. Henchard is a man of strong likes and dislikes. In the beginning he takes a fancy to Farfrae but soon afterwards his attitude towards the Scotchman undergoes a change because of his impulsiveness. If Henchard had been a shrewd and sagacious man, he would never have alienated Farfrae. Henchard’s antagonism towards Farfrae becomes so fierce that he resolves to crush him and in the process he crushes only himself. His bankruptcy is brought about by his own impulsive actions. Not only that; he has a haughty temper on account of which he loses the sympathy of many of the traders in the town as well as of his colleagues on the town council. Henchard’s own temperament proves his undoing in certain other ways also. On learning that Elizabeth-Jane is not his daughter, but the sailor Newson’s, he becomes utterly indifferent and cold towards her. Subsequently, after he has lost his status and his prosperity, he again becomes fond of the girl, and now he becomes so deeply attached to her that she becomes indispensable to him. The thought of losing her now fills him with dismay and horror. Ultimately he does lose Elizabeth-Jane also, and he dies as a broken and defeated man.

**The Responsibility of Fate for Henchard’s Tragedy**

Fate manifests itself in Hardy’s novels through the cruelty of Nature and through malicious chance and coincidence. Nature in this particular novel plays an extremely limited role. The unforeseen changes in weather lead to the collapse of Henchard’s arrangements for entertaining the people on a day of national rejoicing, and that is the beginning of his jealousy of Farfrae.
Later, the fluctuations in weather lead to certain miscalculations on his part and he suffers heavy losses in his business-transactions. Chance and coincidence play a much greater role than Nature. According to Hardy's philosophy of life, an impishness of circumstance invades out lives and becomes the cause of our suffering. Susan's return to Henchard after a period of eighteen years is a pure accident for Henchard and it leads to several complications. The final tragedy which breaks Henchard's heart is Elizabeth-Jane's changed attitude towards him when he goes to meet her on her wedding day. If Susan had not returned, there would have been no Elizabeth-Jane in Henchard's life and he would most probably have been a happily married man with Lucetta as his wife. Another mischance is the return of Newson who had been reported as having been drowned in the sea. Newson's return means Henchard's losing Elizabeth-Jane for whom he has now developed a deep affection. The fury of woman's accidental appearance in Casterbridge and her being produced before Henchard for trial are also a disaster for Henchard. In fact both the fury of woman and Newson are the instruments of a hostile fate operating to ruin Henchard. Even Farfrae's falling in love with Lucetta and her falling in love with him are the results of an accident, because Farfrae happens to visit Lucetta's house at a time when Lucetta is waiting for Henchard and when she has already sent Elizabeth-Jane out of the house in order that she herself can have a private meeting with Henchard who fails to turn up. This chance or coincidence leads to Farfrae's becoming Henchard's rival in love, and it adds to Henchard's antagonism towards the Scotman. Thus there are several circumstances of an accidental nature which produces in us an impression that fate or destiny cannot tolerate that human beings should continue to be happy for any length of time. In the closing paragraph of the novel, Hardy tells us that Elizabeth-Jane did not cease to wonder at "the persistence of the unforeseen." The persistence of the unforeseen is really a vital ingredient in this novel, as in others by Hardy.

The Responsibility of Social Conventions for a Part of the Tragedy in this Novel

Lucetta's fate is also a tragic circumstance in this novel, although in this particular case also much of the responsibility is Lucetta's own because, after having settled down in Casterbridge with the specific object of marrying Henchard, she transfers her affections to Farfrae. The love-letters that she had originally written to Henchard now prove her undoing. The skimmity-ride makes her panicky because of the fear of exposure of her past love-affair with Henchard. The social convention which demands that a woman should have had no love-affair with anybody before her marriage makes Lucetta terribly afraid of the consequences of this exposure. However, Hardy has not lent much emphasis to this aspect of the tragedy.

The Charge of Pessimism against Hardy

Hardy is certainly a pessimist in so far as his novels mainly depict sorrow, suffering, and misfortune. As Hardy puts it towards the close of this
novel, happiness is but an occasional episode in the general drama of pain. He also tells us much earlier in the novel that Elizabeth-Jane looked upon life as a tragical rather a comical thing. This is no doubt Hardy's own view. In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* Hardy says towards the close of the novel that the President of the Immortals had finished his sport with Tess. His quoting the following two lines from Shakespeare in the preface to *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is also significant:

> "As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods; They kill us for their sport."

**Not a Cynic**

However, Hardy is certainly not a cynic. There are, no doubt, villains in his novels. But, on the whole, his view of human nature is healthy and favourable. He does not look upon human nature as mean or sordid or degraded. Human nature is essentially good and noble. For all his weaknesses and failings, Henchard strikes us as a splendid man. Hardy is right in describing him as a "man of character". Even Farfrae is a well-meaning and generous man in spite of his commercial attitude towards life. There is nothing really ungentlemanly about Farfrae even though he does a wrong in transferring his love from Elizabeth-Jane to Lucetta. The other characters in the novel, with the only exception of persons like Jopp and the skimmity-riders, are also good folk.

**The Cathartic Effect**

Aristotle speaks about the cathartic effect of a tragedy. There is no doubt that every great tragedy arouses in the readers the feelings of pity and fear and thus brings about the catharsis or the purgation of these and kindred feelings. The tragic protagonist in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* really wins our deepest sympathies in spite of his faults and shortcomings. He wins our sympathy when he becomes a bankrupt; he wins our sympathy when he loses Lucetta; he wins our sympathy when, after several years of prosperity, he is again reduced to the humble position of a hay-trusser working under a man who was once his employee; he wins our sympathy when he leaves Casterbridge, comparing himself to Cain and calling himself an outcast and a vagabond; and, finally, he wins our sympathy when he is shabbily treated by Elizabeth-Jane on her wedding-day and when, soon afterwards, he dies, leaving behind a will which shows the mood of bitterness in which he spent his last few days. Indeed, his misfortunes and the fate that he eventually meets fill our hearts with the deepest sorrow. Similarly, there are moments in the course of the story which arouses feelings of apprehension and fear in our minds. Lucetta's fate is indeed terrible. When Henchard is about to reveal Lucetta's name as the writer of the love-letters, we hold our breaths in a state of terror, although luckily Henchard changes his mind. All situations of this kind stir the feelings of pity and fear in our hearts and bring about the catharsis of these and similar other emotions.

Cain - in the biblical book of Genesis, Cain & Abel are the first two sons of Adam e Eve. Cain, the first born, was a farmer.
Q. 9. In the novels of Hardy, chance, accident, and coincidence play a very important part. Illustrate this from *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.

*Or*

“In the novels of Hardy chance plays a dominant part in determining the destiny of characters.” Examine this statement with reference to *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. What is the effect of the use of chance upon Hardy’s art?

*Or*

“An impishness of circumstance invades our life and becomes the cause of our suffering.” Show the truth of this statement with reference to *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.

*Or*

“And in being forced to class herself among the fortunate, she (Elizabeth-Jane) did not cease to wonder at the persistence of the unforeseen.” Show the persistence of the unforeseen in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.

*Or*

Show with reference to *The Mayor of Casterbridge* Hardy’s belief in the ironies of fate.
The Vital Role of Chance and Coincidence

Chance and coincidence play a vital role in all the novels of Hardy. In the work of no other novelist do chance or accident and coincidence exercise such a striking influence on the course of events. While character is certainly responsible to a large extent for the undoing of human lives in Hardy's fiction, chance and coincidence often operate as the decisive factors. Hardy felt that an evil power ruled the universe, defeating every effort of man to better his fortune or to find happiness. Hardy could not believe in a benevolent Providence. Events were too plainly ironical: so they must have been contrived by a supernatural power. He believed that fate or destiny was sometimes indifferent, but most often hostile, to human happiness. In Tess of the D'Urbervilles he personifies the power of fate as "the President of the Immortals." A manifestation of the hostility of fate is to be found in the irony of circumstance that we meet in that novel as we meet it in The Mayor of Casterbridge. In other words, when human beings are not themselves responsible for the frustration of their happiness or when their own temperaments and mutual conflicts do not wreck their happiness, fate intervenes in the shape of chance or accident to contribute to or complete their ruin. In The Mayor of Casterbridge, Henchard's own character is largely responsible for his sufferings, and yet the irony of fate plays an important role even in this novel. On several occasions we have the feeling that fate or destiny is playing a trick on this man.

Susan's Return

Susan's return to Henchard after a period of eighteen years is a pure accident for Henchard. Henchard had given her up as dead. He had awaited her return for a long time but finally, hearing nothing about her, he had given up all thought of her. And then she suddenly turns up one day. Her arrival coincides with Henchard's decision to marry Lucetta. The unexpected return of Susan upsets all Henchard's calculations and brings a series of misfortunes to him. Although Henchard is very glad at his wife's and supposed daughter's being restored to him, yet he is somewhat perplexed how to deal with the other woman, namely Lucetta. He takes a sensible decision, of course, which is to take back Susan. As he tells Farfrae, his first duty is to Susan, but he feels that he should treat the second woman, no less than the first, as kindly as a man can in such a case. That a woman should come back after a long period of eighteen years was almost unthinkable, and yet the unforeseen happens, and Susan does come back.

Henchard's Accidental Discovery that Elizabeth-Jane is not His Daughter

Henchard dehort to win Elizabeth-Jane's filial love almost coincides with his discovery that she is not his own daughter. Having lost his wife Susan
through death and having lost the friendship of Farfrae through arrangement, Henchard tries to win the affection of Elizabeth-Jane whom he believes to be his own daughter. He tells her that she is his daughter and not the sailor Newson’s. She believes him and agrees to regard him as her father and also to change her name accordingly. Then Henchard, on opening the imperfectly sealed letter left for him by Susan, discovers the painful secret, namely that Elizabeth-Jane is after all the sailor’s daughter and not his own. If Henchard had not found Susan’s letter, or if that letter had been properly sealed, he would have lived happily with Elizabeth-Jane, at least till her wedding-day. But it was an accident that the letter had not been properly sealed. And it is another accident that Henchard finds the letter just after he has tried to convince Elizabeth-Jane that he is her father. In this context, Hardy remarks that this ironical sequence of things angered him like an impish trick from a fellow-creature. Like Prester John’s, Henchard’s table had been spread, and infernal harpies had snatched up the food.

Elizabeth-Jane’s Accidental Meeting with Lucetta, and Farfrae’s Accidental Meeting with the Same Lady

It is a pure accident that Elizabeth-Jane and Lucetta meet for the first time in the churchyard. This accidental meeting leads to several complications afterwards. Lucetta engages Elizabeth-Jane as a companion, her motive being partly to attract Henchard to her house. Henchard on his part is now ready to marry Lucetta. As the author tells us, he now transfers to Lucetta the sentiments which had run to waste since his estrangement from Elizabeth-Jane and Farfrae. But fate intervenes to prevent Henchard from marrying that lady. Farfrae pays a visit to Lucetta’s house in order to meet Elizabeth-Jane whom he wants to court with the object of marriage. It so happens that Elizabeth-Jane is at that particular moment not in the house, and Farfrae meets Lucetta just by chance. Lucetta has been expecting Henchard to visit her, but Henchard is unable to come, and Farfrae turns up there instead. What a coincidence! Far-reaching are the consequences of this coincidence. Lucetta falls in love with Farfrae, and Farfrae falls in love with her, with the result that Farfrae is no longer interested in Elizabeth-Jane who has all long been in love with him. A pure accident or coincidence leads to these big chances in the lives of four human beings. Lucetta would now like to marry Farfrae, not Henchard. Farfrae would like to marry Lucetta, not Elizabeth-Jane. Henchard who has lost Susan, Farfrae, and even Elizabeth-Jane, will now lose Lucetta also. Evidently fate is hostile to Henchard, and has played a trick upon him by sending Farfrae to Lucetta’s house just when Elizabeth-Jane is away. Here is a glaring example of the irony of fate.

The Appearance of the Furmit Woman

The appearance of the old furmit woman in Casterbridge is another accident. It was absolutely unforeseen that the furmit woman would one day disclose the secret of Henchard’s early-life. And, yet, perhaps the disclosure would not have come if the furmit woman had not been produced before
Henchard for trial. What a coincidence, again! The furmity woman is prosecuted by the police for committing nuisance near a church and Henchard is one of the two magistrates who will try her. The furmity-woman is perhaps the only living witness of the sale of Susan by Henchard. And she happens to be in Casterbridge, after having lived all these years in the village of Weydon-Priors where Henchard had first seen her. This coincidence again leads to far-reaching consequences. The disclosure of Henchard’s secret of his early life affects Henchard’s reputation badly. On hearing this report, Lucetta becomes almost panicky. She feels that to marry a man who was so brutal as to have sold his wife would be a greater disaster. Lucetta might yet have married Henchard in spite of her being in love with Farfrae, but the disclosure of Henchard’s sale of his wife has a deep effect on Lucetta’s mind and she decides not to take the risk of marrying Henchard. In this connection, Hardy tells us that, small as the court incident had been in itself, it formed the edge or turn in the incline of Henchard’s fortunes. On that day—almost at that minute—he passed the ridge of prosperity and honour, and began to descend rapidly on the other side. It was strange how soon he sank in esteem. It is true that Henchard had committed a grave injustice to Susan by selling her, and it is true that his action in selling her was disgraceful and dishonourable. But what had remained a secret for many years is suddenly revealed one day by a pure chance, and here lies the impishness of circumstance or the irony of fate.

The Fluctuations in Weather

Chance also affects the fortunes of Henchard through the unforeseen fluctuations in weather. His estrangement from Farfrae takes place on the day when, on account of unforeseen rain, his arrangements to entertain the public break down, while Farfrae’s prove successful because he had provided a covering overhead for the people. Subsequently when Henchard decides to crush Farfrae, who has become his rival in business, weather again deceives Henchard. Relying on the forecast of a weather-prophet, Henchard buys huge quantities of wheat, thinking that prices will go up on account of bad weather and that he will then make a big profit. But the weather improves, and the prices fall heavily. Henchard is compelled to sell his stock of wheat at a much lower rate and he suffers a heavy loss. And the irony is that the weather-prophet’s forecast afterwards proves to be correct. The weather does deteriorate and the new crop suffers much damage. Prices go up once again. If Henchard had waited for some time more, he could really have made a huge profit, but that was not to be.

The Death of Lucetta

The death of Lucetta as a consequence of the skimmity-ride is a wholly unforeseen occurrence. We could not imagine that, just after Lucetta has begun to think herself safe and secure because she has got back her love-letters, something would happen to kill her. The tragedy of Lucetta’s premature death is thus directly attributable to the cruelty of fate. It is true that in this particular case the logic of cause and effect is undeniable. But the fact remains that fate intervenes to bring about Lucetta’s death.
Newson’s Return

Newson’s arrival in Casterbridge to claim his daughter Elizabeth-Jane is another unforeseen and accidental occurrence. Newson was supposed to have been drowned. In fact it was the news of Newson’s death that had made it possible and even necessary for Susan to return to Henchard. If Newson had been known to be living, Susan’s return to Henchard would not have taken place, and Henchard’s life would have been absolutely different. But Newson was thought to be dead, and then suddenly one day he appears in Casterbridge searching for his daughter. Newson comes to claim his daughter just when she has become indispensable to Henchard as she is all he has now got, because in every other respect he is a ruined man. Newson’s arrival in the town almost coincides with Henchard’s new emotional attitude towards Elizabeth-Jane. The return of Newson is similar to the return of Susan, and similar also to the appearance of the furmity woman in the town of Casterbridge. In other words, Newson’s return also belongs to the category of unforeseen events, the ironies of fate, the tricks that fate plays upon human beings. As a result of Newson’s return, Henchard is deprived of the last possibility of happiness in his life.

The Exaggerated Role of Chance and Coincidence

It must be admitted that Hardy exaggerates the role of chance in human life. There is no doubt that several happenings in a man’s life are accidental and unforeseen. There are certainly coincidences in life which upset our calculations and hopes. But we cannot believe that a man’s life is a long series of chances, and all unhappy chances at that. Accidents may be happy or sad. But Hardy believes in sad accidents only. It is difficult for us to believe that a man is consistently the victim of the sad accidents or the victim of the tragic persistence of the unforeseen. In the case of The Mayor of Casterbridge, as has been fully recognized, there is a very strong connection between Henchard’s character and his fate; and yet the element of chance and coincidence has a vital and striking role. Henchard seems to be pursued by a series of mischances. The realism of this novel is thus marred by an extravagant use of accident and coincidence. The novel therefore becomes somewhat improbable because of the exaggerated role of chance. In short, the use of chance and coincidence by Hardy in all his novels appears to be a rather mechanical device. However, the device is perfectly in accord with his philosophy of life.
1. ELIZABETH JANE

Pessimistic

Elizabeth-Jane may be regarded as the heroine of the novel. She is introduced to us at the age of eighteen when, hand in hand with her mother, she is walking along the road to Weydon-Priors in search of her mother’s supposed kinsman, Henchard. What strikes us most about this girl is her gloomy outlook upon life. Though she had received no education, she was instinctively something of a philosopher. She looked upon life as a tragic, rather than a comical, thing. She believed that moments of gaiety were few in life and that these moments were no real part of the actual drama of life. She had this pessimistic view of life when she was still young. Her subsequent experiences merely confirmed her in her view: “Her experience had been of a kind to teach her, rightly or wrongly, that the doubtful honour of a brief transit through a sorry world hardly called for effusiveness.” In fact, Hardy seems to have put his own philosophy of life into this girl’s mind. She was a poor illustration of “the virgin that loveth to go gay.” She was a reflective, sober, meditative girl who did not know that gaiety was.

Ill-Educated

Elizabeth-Jane was rather crude, ill-educated, and without any accomplishment. She had no dash. She was painfully aware of this deficiency in herself: “If they only knew what an unfinished girl I am,” she said, “that I can’t talk Italian or use globes, or show any of the accomplishments they learn at boarding-schools, how they would despise me!” She often felt miserable to realize that her tastes were not good enough for her position as the daughter of a mayor. One grievous failing of Elizabeth was her frequent use of dialect words which irritated and annoyed Henchard who often scolded her for her ignorance. Her handwriting, too, was not fine as a cultured woman’s should be. In order to make up for her deficiency, Elizabeth-Jane began industriously reading books. She read and took notes incessantly, mastering facts with painful laboriousness. Her industry also showed itself in the manner in which she worked at netting in order to earn her own livelihood when she was living independently.

Deep Insight into Character

But, although she had received no education and possessed no accomplishments, she had a natural insight into character. She had an innate
intelligence which enabled her to grasp character and situations. She quickly recognized the partial likeness between her own character and Farfrae's. She found that Farfrae, like her, was a sober and reflective sort of person who looked upon life as a tragical and not a comical thing. She read Lucetta's character also correctly. She quickly guessed the nature of the relations that had developed between Lucetta and Farfrae. "A seer's spirit took possession of Elizabeth, impelling her to sit down by the fire, and divine events so surely from data already her own that they could be held as witnessed." She was a "discerning silent witch," so to speak. Again, though in the beginning she used to be puzzled by Henchard's uncertain moods, later she understood him well. "How this woman divined things!" said Henchard to himself when Elizabeth-Jane went to comfort him in his misery.

Courageous and Independent

Though a simple, home-spun girl, she had more courage than her mother and was much more enterprising. When mother and daughter found at Casterbridge that Henchard was the mayor of the town, the mother felt somewhat awed and hesitant to approach her former husband, but Elizabeth felt hopeful and optimistic about a warm reception from him. She boldly went to Henchard and conveyed the news of Susan's arrival to him. Later, when she found that Henchard had become indifferent to her, she had the courage to leave him. When he said, "This then is how you are going to treat me for all my trouble about ye?" she replied with spirit, "O father, how can you speak like that? It is unjust of you." When Henchard forced Lucetta to give him a promise to marry him, Elizabeth-Jane courageously said, "Don't compel her to do anything against her will. I have lived with her, and know that she cannot bear much."

Conventional

Elizabeth-Jane was a thoroughly conventional girl. She followed the old, traditional patterns of thought, and any departure from convention shocked her. Any suspicion of improper conduct was to her like a red rag to a bull. Any appearance of irregularity in social behaviour was horrible to her. "Her craving for correctness of procedure was, indeed, almost vicious." She was convinced that the only right course for Lucetta was either to marry Henchard or to remain single. Therefore, when Lucetta married Farfrae, Elizabeth-Jane thought Lucetta's conduct most improper and left her. She had a good knowledge of the scriptures and could quote from the Bible as she did on the occasion of Farfrae's introduction of the sowing machine.

Good, Gentle, Noble

On the whole, Lucetta's opinion about Elizabeth-Jane was correct. "She is a dear, good girl." Elizabeth-Jane was a most inoffensive, harmless creature. She was quite free from jealousy and did nothing to hinder the love-affair of Lucetta and Farfrae. There was no guile in her, no trickery, no cunning or diplomacy. She was perfectly above board, straightforward, and
frank. She was kind-hearted and sympathetic and tried to comfort the fallen and defeated Henchard as much as she could. And, though she misunderstood Henchard on being told that he had sent away Newson with a lie, she soon repented of her mistake.