

The plot of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, by Thomas Hardy, can often be confusing and difficult to follow. The pages of this novel are filled with sex, scandal, and alcohol, but it provides for a very interesting and unique story. It all begins one day in the large Wessex village of Weydon-Priors. Michael Henchard, a young hay-trusser looking for work, enters the village with his wife and infant daughter. What follows next, is certainly a little out of the ordinary, and this book provides an interesting plot, that is sure to brighten up any boring day.

Michael Henchard, looking for something to drink, enters into a tent where an old woman is selling furmity, a liquid pudding made of boiled wheat, eggs, sugar, and spices. Henchard consumes too many bowls of furmity spiked with rum. Feeling trapped by his marriage and under the influence, Henchard threatens to auction his family. The auction begins as a kind of cruel joke, but Susan Henchard in anger retaliates by leaving with a sailor who makes the highest bid. Henchard regrets his decision the next day, but he is unable to find his family.

Exactly eighteen years pass. Susan and her daughter Elizabeth-Jane come back to the fair, seeking news about Henchard. The sailor has been lost at sea, and Susan is returning to her "rightful" husband. At the infamous furmity tent, they learn Henchard has moved to Casterbridge, where he has become a prosperous grain merchant and even mayor. When Henchard learns that his family has returned, he is determined to right his old wrong. He devises a plan for courting and marrying Susan again, and for adopting her daughter.

A young Scotsman named Donald Farfrae enters Casterbridge on the same day as Susan and Elizabeth-Jane. Henchard takes an instant liking to the total stranger and convinces Farfrae to stay on in Casterbridge as his right-hand man. Henchard even tells Farfrae the two greatest secrets of his life: the sale of his wife and the affair he has had with a Jersey woman, Lucetta. Henchard is confused as to how to make good on his bad acts.

Henchard remarries Susan, who dies soon afterward, leaving behind a letter to be opened on Elizabeth-Jane's wedding day. Henchard reads the letter and learns that his real daughter died in infancy and that the present Elizabeth-Jane is actually Susan and the sailor's daughter. Henchard also grows jealous of Farfrae's rising influence in both Henchard's business and in Casterbridge. The two men quarrel and Henchard fires Farfrae, who then

sets up a successful competing grain business. Henchard is rapidly going bankrupt, after several bad business deals.

Soon after Susan's death, Lucetta Templeman, Henchard's former lover, comes to Casterbridge to marry Henchard. In order to provide Henchard with a respectable reason for visiting her, Lucetta suggests that Elizabeth-Jane move in with her. Henchard tries to force Lucetta to marry him, but she is unwilling. She has fallen in love with Farfrae and soon marries him. Henchard's business and love life are failing; his social position in Casterbridge is also eroding. The final blow comes when the woman who ran the firmity tent in Weydon-Priors is arrested in Casterbridge. When she spitefully reveals Henchard's infamous auctioning of his wife and child, Henchard surprisingly admits his guilt. The news, which is harmful to Henchard's reputation, rapidly travels through the town. Henchard is soon bankrupt and forced by his poverty to become Farfrae's employee. He moves to the poorest section of town.

Farfrae and Lucetta buy Henchard's old house and furniture. The Scotsman then completes his embarrassment of Henchard by becoming mayor of Casterbridge. Later, Henchard challenges Farfrae to a fight to the death. Henchard is on the verge of winning when he comes to his senses and gives up. As the mayor's wife, Lucetta becomes the stylish and important woman she has longed to be. But she fears her secret affair with Henchard, if revealed, might destroy her marriage to Farfrae. She begs Henchard to return the damning letters she had written him years before. Henchard finds the letters in his old house and reads some of them to Farfrae. He intends to reveal their author as well but relents at the last minute. Later, he asks Jopp, a former employee, to deliver the letters to Lucetta. Henchard doesn't realize Jopp hates both him and Lucetta. Jopp shares the letters with some of the lowlife of the town. Lucetta sees herself paraded in mimicry, and the shock kills her.

Henchard reconciles with Elizabeth-Jane, who continues to believe Henchard is her father. He sees his final chance for happiness crumbling, however, when Elizabeth-Jane's real father, the sailor Newson, comes to Casterbridge to find his daughter. Henchard lies to the sailor, telling him Elizabeth-Jane died soon after her mother's death. Newson leaves, but Henchard worries that the sailor might return to reclaim Elizabeth-Jane. During the following year, Henchard's life becomes fairly settled. He lives with Elizabeth-Jane and runs a small seed store. Farfrae begins flirting with Elizabeth-Jane, and the two plan to marry. Then the sailor returns, and Henchard flees Casterbridge.

Henchard appears at Elizabeth-Jane and Farfrae's wedding to deliver a

present.

Elizabeth-Jane spurns him, and Henchard sees that Newson has taken over as father of the bride--a role Henchard can never play. He leaves Casterbridge broken-hearted. A few days

later, Elizabeth-Jane discovers Henchard's present, a bird in a cage. The unattended bird has

died of starvation. Touched, she and Farfrae go in search of Henchard. Too late, they learn

he has just died in the hovel where he had been living with the humblest of his former

employees. The young couple read Henchard's pitiful will, in which Henchard asks that no

one remember him.

As one can see, too often scandal can end in tragedy, as in the case of poor Michael

Henchard. He lived a risky life, and paid for his mistakes in the end. The Mayor of

Casterbridge proves to be an interesting novel, that provides everything modern day critics

hope to keep out of the hands of children. The book proved to be at times, quite exegesis,

but the plot is presented well, and the settings described beautifully. Thomas Hardy creates

a masterpiece in describing the rise and fall of one Michael Henchard.