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The Mayor of Casterbridge

Thomas Hardy · *1886 · original English text*

In a furmity tent at a fair, Michael Henchard sells his wife and child. The next morning he swears off drink for twenty-one years and rises to be mayor of Casterbridge. The sale will not stay buried. Hardy calls the book the life and death of a man of character, and character, the narrator says, is fate.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

Can a man who has sold his wife outlive that act by oath, work, and public honor, or will the character that made the sale also unmake the mayor?

"Character is Fate, said Novalis, and Farfrae's character was just the reverse of Henchard's"

Mid-book, as Donald Farfrae's rise is weighed against Henchard's

Henchard's oath and labor make him a mayor, but his temper, pride, and need to dominate remain. Farfrae, milder and abler in the new ways, takes his business and the town's love. Susan returns, Lucetta comes, Elizabeth-Jane's parentage shifts, and Newson, who bought her long ago, is not dead. Henchard is broken in public and almost in love. He dies alone, leaving a bitter will. The book is not only about a bad hour at a fair; it is about a nature that will not be ruled.

KEY CHARACTERS

Michael Henchard
Hay-trusser, then mayor: fierce, able, proud, and ruined by a sale he cannot undo and a temper he cannot rule.

Susan Henchard
The sold wife, simple and lasting in her idea of the bond, who returns with a grown girl.

Elizabeth-Jane
The child of the story, whose parentage shifts, and who learns patience and a just kindness.

Donald Farfrae
A young Scot whose milder character and new methods take the business and the town.

Lucetta Templeman
A woman of Henchard's Jersey past, whose letters and marriage to Farfrae help unmake him.

Newson
The sailor who bought Susan and who returns when he is thought drowned.

AN OATH AFTER A SALE

> *"I, Michael Henchard, on this morning of the sixteenth of September, do take an oath before God here in this solemn place that I will avoid all strong liquors for the space of twenty-one years to come"*
>
> **Michael Henchard** · Chapter II

> *"Character is Fate, said Novalis, and Farfrae's character was just the reverse of Henchard's"*
>
> Mid-book

Grades 9–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01 The Sale, and an Oath

CHAPTERS I–II

At Weydon-Priors, in drink, Henchard auctions his wife Susan. A sailor, Newson, bids. The next day Henchard searches, then swears in a church to avoid strong liquor for twenty-one years.

- The tent's laugh ('Five shillings') and his 'Who'll say a guinea?' make a wife into a lot.
- Susan goes with Newson, believing the sale somehow binds her.
- The oath is solemn and real; it is also the start of a long self-command that will not reach his heart in time.

> *"I, Michael Henchard, on this morning of the sixteenth of September, do take an oath before God here in this solemn place that I will avoid all strong liquors for the space of twenty-one years to come"*
>
> **Michael Henchard** · Chapter II, in the church

02 The Mayor

CHAPTERS III–XVII

Years later Susan and Elizabeth-Jane find Henchard a wealthy corn-merchant and mayor. He hires the young Scot Donald Farfrae, and then begins to envy him.

- The reunion is arranged in secret; the girl does not know the sale.
- Farfrae's skill with the bad wheat is a new kind of mastery.
- Henchard loves the young man like a son and cannot bear a rival.

03 Lucetta, and a Fall of Weather

CHAPTERS XVIII–XXIX

A woman from Henchard's past, Lucetta, comes to town and turns toward Farfrae. Business, weather, and pride begin to strip the mayor.

- Old letters and a new courtship cross in dangerous ways.
- Henchard's methods, once enough for the town, fail in a changed market.
- The private man and the public man come apart.

04 Returns

CHAPTERS XXX–XL

The furmity-woman tells the sale in open court. Newson is not dead. Elizabeth-Jane's true parentage is a second blow, and Henchard cannot keep his tongue or his place.

- A past act, joked and forgotten by others, is still a fact.
- His love for Elizabeth-Jane is real and jealous.
- The town watches a great man come down step by step.

05 The Life and Death of a Man of Character

CHAPTERS XLI–XLV

Henchard leaves, returns, and is shut out of the last affection he wanted. His will asks that no one remember him. Elizabeth-Jane, kinder than his will, is the book's remaining grace.

- The close is not a scaffold but a lonely death and a hard paper of wishes.
- Farfrae and Elizabeth-Jane have a future the old mayor cannot share.
- Character has been fate; mercy, at the end, is mostly another's.

Character and Fate · Pride · Repentance · A Public Fall · Mercy

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–12

1. The hosted text is the original English of Project Gutenberg #143, subtitled The Life and Death of a Man of Character. Chapters are numbered in roman numerals (I–XLV).
2. The oath is exact: "I, Michael Henchard, on this morning of the sixteenth of September, do take an oath before God here in this solemn place that I will avoid all strong liquors for the space of twenty-one years to come."
3. In the tent he asks, "Who'll have her?" and "Who'll say a guinea?" A laugh of "Five shillings" precedes the real bid.
4. "Character is Fate, said Novalis," is the narrator's comment, not Henchard's motto. It is a key to the pairing with Farfrae.
5. The sale of a wife is a moral horror the book never treats as a joke, though the fair crowd laughs. Read it as the act that measures him.

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #143, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/the-mayor-of-casterbridge/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.