

The Mayor of Casterbridge Retold by Tim Herdon

Aims

- To make students interested in the book.
- To familiarise students with some of the themes of the book.

Pre-reading Activities

- 1 Tell students that the title of the book is *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and that the name of the author is Thomas Hardy. Explain to students that Hardy lived from 1840–1928 and that his most famous stories take place in a county called ‘Wessex’ which Hardy invented. Mention that, at the time he wrote them, Hardy’s books were controversial – they often shocked people or made them angry. Now ask students to look at Illustration 1 (the cover of the book). Elicit their initial thoughts about what type of book *The Mayor of Casterbridge* might be, and what they think might happen.
- 2 Ask students to read Extract 1 (information about the people in the book). Now ask *Who do you think is the most important character in the book? Why?*
Answer: Michael Henchard – who is the Mayor of Casterbridge in the title.
From the brief description of Henchard given here, ask students to suggest adjectives that might describe Henchard’s character. Write these on the board.
- 3 Now ask students to read Extract 2. Discuss the events in the extract. Elicit students’ views of these events. Ask *Why do you think Henchard is acting in this way?*
Possible answer: He is drunk.
How do you think his wife is feeling? Revisit the list of adjectives from Activity 2. Ask students *Do you wish to remove any words from this list? Are there any you wish to add to the list?*
- 4 Ask students what we mean by the ‘hero’ of a book.
Suggested answer: The main male character of a story, a man who people admire because he is brave. Now ask them what we mean by the ‘villain’ of a story.
Suggested answer: An evil character in a story.

Next ask *Do you think Henchard seems like a hero or a villain?* After discussion, students are likely to decide that Henchard is not really a hero or a villain – he’s somewhere in-between. Tell students that Henchard is in fact, an *anti-hero* and give them a definition – a main male character who is not brave, or is a failure; someone who makes mistakes and poor decisions. Ask *Can you think of any other anti-heroes in stories or films?*

Possible answers: Clint Eastwood in the Man with no Name trilogy, Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs* and the *Hannibal* films, Captain Jack Sparrow in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films.

- 5 Remind students of Extract 2 again (if necessary). Working in pairs, ask them to think of someone with an important role in their own community (e.g. a politician, a judge). (NB It need not be an actual person!) Now ask them to think of a terrible secret this person might have. They should keep this secret from the rest of the class. Students now take it in turns to question pairs to find out what their person’s secret is.
- 6 Ask students to read Extract 3, where Henchard makes a solemn promise not to drink. Ask *Why do you think he made this promise?*
Answer: He was very sorry for what he had done and never wanted to behave in that way again.
Ask Do you think Henchard will keep this promise? Now ask students to imagine that almost twenty one years have passed since Henchard made this promise. Ask them to write a diary entry about how Henchard is feeling. Share these with the whole class.
- 7 Ask students to read Extracts 4 and 5. Tell them that chance or fate plays an important part in the events of the book, and discuss what we mean by these words.
Answer: Something that unavoidably happens to a person; something that is their destiny – an event that has been ‘pre-decided’ for their life.
Ask Has your life been affected by chance? When? Can you give an example? Do you believe in fate?
- 8 Ask students to work in pairs and think of something that will make Henchard stay in

Casterbridge. They should make notes about this event and, if time allows, write the final scene ending with the phrase ‘*And so, Henchard decided to make Casterbridge his home.*’

- 9 Ask students to read Extract 6 and ask them *Where do you think this extract is from?*

Answer: It’s part of a letter.

Working in pairs, students discuss who they think the letter is from and to, and what they think it is about. Now ask them to imagine a meeting between the two characters and to write some lines of dialogue between them. Students then take turns to role-play this dialogue in front of the whole class.

- 10 Ask students to look at Illustration 2. Elicit what they think is happening in the illustration. Now ask them to imagine what happens next and to write this scene.

Post-reading Activities _____

- 1 Start a discussion – either in pairs or with the whole class – with the phrase ‘*This book left me feeling ... because ...*’
- 2 Ask students to look through the book and to list the decisions Henchard makes (e.g. Decision 1 – to sell his wife). Students now choose one of these decisions and change it. Ask *What difference does this make to the story?*
- 3 Write a list of genres on the board, using students’ suggestions (e.g. comedy, murder mystery, thriller, romance, ghost story, science fiction, adventure). Now ask students to choose a genre and to make notes about how they could change *The Mayor of Casterbridge* to this new genre. They can, if they wish, change the setting of the book, or set it in a different time (e.g. the present day or the future). Feedback to the whole class.
- 4 Tell students that, although Hardy was a successful novelist, he actually thought of himself as a poet. If possible, find one or two of his poems online and read them to the class. Ask students to write a short poem inspired by *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.

People in the story

Michael Henchard: a farm worker who rises to become the Mayor of Casterbridge; he is married to Susan Henchard

Susan Henchard: a rather weak woman; she is married to Michael Henchard

Elizabeth-Jane: Susan's daughter; she has a quiet, strong character

Donald Farfrae: a Scot who becomes very successful in Casterbridge because of his cleverness and kindness

Lucetta Templeton: a woman who knows Michael Henchard from the past

Extract 2

'Henchard said in a loud voice, 'Those men out there get rid of their horses when they don't want them. Why can't we do that with our wives too?'

One or two men laughed.

'I wouldn't be surprised if there was someone who would buy *your* wife from you. She looks like a fine woman,' said one of them.

Now was a good time to stop this joke: to continue with it would not be sensible. But Henchard was in no mood to be sensible.

'Well, here's your chance. What will you offer me for this fair beauty?' he said, pointing at Susan.

'Michael, you have said things like this before, but this is no longer funny,' said the young woman.

'I know I've said it before and I meant it. All I want is a buyer,' he replied.

Raising his voice he said, 'Well, is anyone interested? If you are, now's your chance.'

Again there were a few laughs. Susan begged him to leave the tent, 'Come on, Michael, it's getting dark and I've had enough of this nonsense. If you don't come now, I will leave without you.'

But Henchard did not move; it was almost as if he didn't hear her. This time his voice was even louder, 'This woman is no good to me. Who among you will buy her?'

Extract 3

Entering the church, he knelt down near the front. Looking upwards at the cross, he said the following words:

'I, Michael Henchard, make a promise before God – that for the next twenty-one years, the same number that I have lived so far, I will not touch any kind of strong drink.'

Standing up, he had the feeling that this was the start of a new direction.

Extract 4

If you would take ... would accept the job of manager, you would have complete control of my corn department and I'd pay you a good salary. What do you say?

Farfrae was clearly touched by Henchard's offer. 'You are too kind, but no, I can't accept the position. I have a plan to go to America and my heart is set on it. I want to see the world.'

'Are you sure, Mr Farfrae? It is a great pity, truly a great pity. I'm not very good with the science part of things, or with the numbers. You're the opposite – I can see that. I have been looking for a man like you for two years now, but it seems it is not to be.'

'I'm truly sorry,' replied Farfrae, 'but I think that I will regret it if I don't make this great trip.'

Extract 5

As Elizabeth-Jane was falling asleep, she found herself thinking of Farfrae. She wondered if it was possible that something might happen to make him stay in Casterbridge instead of going to America.

Extract 6

I decided to come here and ask you to carry out the promise you made to me some time ago. I hope you still think the same as you did when we last spoke about this matter. Not knowing your situation, however; I decided to come here first and find out for myself. The aunt I told you about in Jersey died recently and left me enough money, to allow me to live in some comfort. I am renting High Place Hall. I shall be able to see you in a day or two.

My notes

Illustration 1

My notes

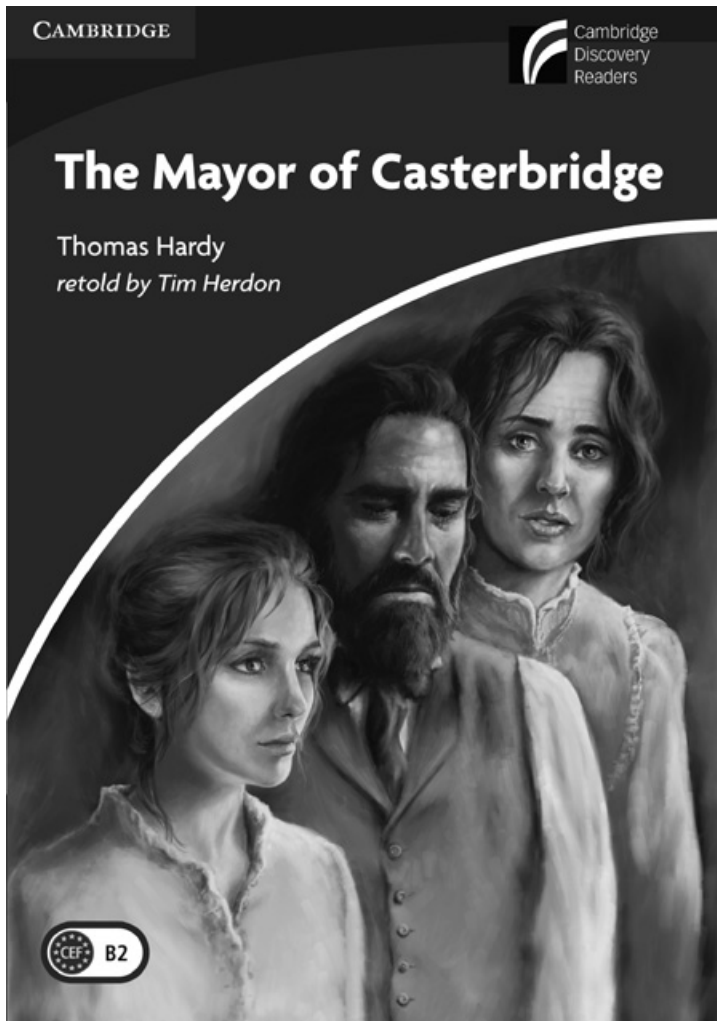


Illustration 2

