

CONTEMPLATING REDEMPTION IN

The Mayor of Casterbridge

WHEN COLDER WEATHER SETS IN AND I AM ON SEMESTER BREAK, I LOVE TO CURL UP AND LOSE MYSELF IN A LONG, LUSH NOVEL – SOMETHING BY ONE OF THE BRONTËS OR GEORGE ELIOT, OR MY FAVORITE, THOMAS HARDY.

Hardy's novels unfold in the semi-fictional landscape of Wessex in southwest England, filled with verdant hills and fields, windy heaths and menacing shadowy woodlands. The English countryside figures so prominently in his novels that one might consider it a character in its own right.

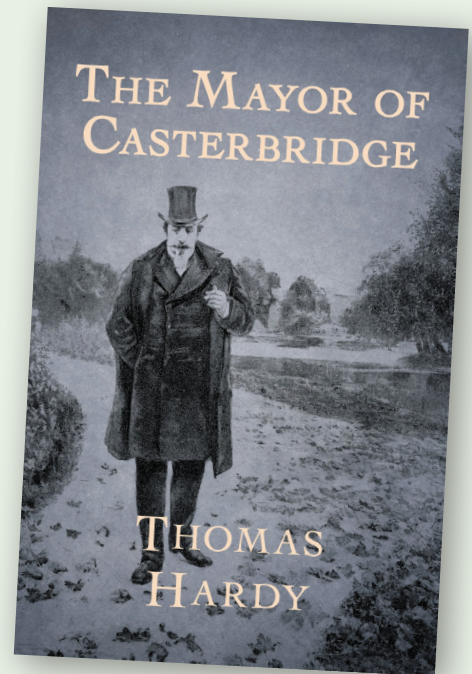
Hardy's human characters often mirror these extreme landscapes: the women hauntingly beautiful, the men sometimes powerful and arrogant, handsome and cruel, or dark and brooding. Hardy draws readers into a world where human existence and the rhythms of nature are inseparable partners in an ongoing dance.

The Mayor of Casterbridge, written in 1896, begins with a scene that embodies this dance perfectly. Against the waning daylight, a small nuclear family moves slowly in silhouette across a bleak landscape. At a distance, they appear unified against all outside forces, but closer inspection reveals that the male figure walks independently, taking little notice of the female or the baby she tends.

Instead of love and protection, we sense harshness and fatigue as the travelers, covered in dust, trudge forward in silence. When, shortly thereafter, Michael Henchard (the male figure) decides to sell his wife and baby to another man, we are appalled but not altogether surprised.



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From this point, the novel follows the fortunes of Michael Henchard as he steadily rises to prominence. He becomes a wealthy businessman and, before long, the mayor of the city of Casterbridge, where he seems to execute his office in good faith.

Unwittingly, however, he has sold the townspeople bad wheat, and although Henchard pledges to take measures that will prevent a reoccurrence, one of the townspeople heckles him by asking, "But what are you going to do to repay us for the past?"

Herein lies one of the novel's central questions: How and to what extent can one make reparation for past mistakes? Or, in other words, is redemption possible? And if it is, by what means do we achieve it?

Organized religion or deeply held religious beliefs expressed in systematic worship certainly do not play a dominant role in the worldview of the characters in this novel, or in any of Hardy's other novels.

Instead, Hardy conveys the sense that faith, Christian teaching, pagan superstition and local folk customs all work together to form the rural consciousness of his characters.

They often turn to Scripture as a repository of moral adages and ethical guidelines rather than as a source of theological insight or fervent belief. For example, out of remorse for selling his family, Henchard swears a Gospel oath that he will not drink for 21 years. He constantly seeks to make restitution and wonders about miracles as a means of restoring the reprobate.

Henchard even refers to himself as Cain because of the depravity of his offenses against his family and, in the end, he is offered forgiveness and compassion by a gentle character named Abel.

Moreover, the novel constantly echoes Gospel parables that make reference to sowing, reaping, good and bad

seeds, and grains of wheat — both through episodes in the plot and more figuratively. Yet, in none of these examples do we find genuine faith in a loving God who is the source of forgiveness, grace and absolution.

Many readers consider the plot or “the things that happen” as the backbone of any novel, but fruitful literary analysis also comes from exploring how and why these things happen. Who has agency and what are the internal mechanisms of cause and effect at work (acknowledging, of course, that the external cause is the author, who crafts the plot as he or she wishes)?

Our interpretation of the novel and its resolution depend, in part, on how we answer these questions. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Hardy conveys a sense that the novel’s events are partly determined by circumstance and coincidence, by simple bad luck, by the traditions of rural culture and the increasing disruption caused by industrialization.

There is even room to argue that some divine or supernatural force, either beneficent or destructive, plays a part. By far the most compelling argument, however, is that events in our lives grow directly out of our human nature.

Hardy presents Michael Henchard as a man who makes his own success. However, Henchard also makes his own hardship and then clings resolutely to it by refusing to accept grace and forgiveness when they’re offered.

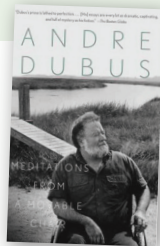
He has a great capacity for good and a genuine desire to do it, but this desire often gets undercut by his hasty judgment, impulse and caprice. His faulty logic leads him to jump to the wrong conclusions, and so his tragic outcome becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Whether we think he has any other legitimate options in the novel depends on our interpretation.

Either way, Henchard’s downfall can provide a useful framework within which to contemplate redemption. Do we seek it through our own agency and will, or do we reach out in love and humility to a loving God who reaches back? ■

COMING UP:

Meditations From a Movable Chair

by Andre Dubus



In these autobiographical essays, Dubus writes about coming to terms with a life-altering injury that left him wheelchair-bound. He grapples with the resulting impact on his sense of masculinity and with issues of disability, fatherhood and physical identity. Most importantly, he reflects on the sustaining power of faith and of communion with the crucified Christ. Please note: Some of these essays contain raw language and references to violence, and thus may not be suitable for young readers.

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