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# The Subversion of Traditional Gender Roles in Thomas Hardy's 'The Mayor of Casterbridge'

## **Abstract**

This essay examines Thomas Hardy's understanding and subversion of gender roles in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* by focusing on the novel's two most prominent characters and their respective progressions over the course of the narrative. Michael Henchard's hypermasculine behavior and eventual undoing is juxtaposed with Elizabeth-Jane's active rejection of the male gaze, as well as her unique role as a proxy for the reader. In his 1886 novel, Hardy questions the legitimacy of gender expectations by acknowledging and subsequently undermining patriarchal traditions.

## **Keywords**

Hardy, Henchard, Elizabeth-Jane, gender

## **Disciplines**

English Language and Literature | Literature in English, British Isles

## **Comments**

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The Subversion of Traditional Gender Roles in Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*

Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) concludes with a paragraph that details the perspective of the novel's most prominent female character. After having married Donald Farfrae and learned of her stepfather's death, Elizabeth-Jane's strong senses, experiences, and acceptance of her position in life is emphasized by the narrator. The novel's exclusive focus on a female character in its final moments is particularly unusual when contrasted with a selection of Hardy's other narratives, namely *Far From the Madding Crowd* and *The Return of the Native*. Unlike *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, these novels conclude by emphasizing the voices and experiences of their male characters, including Gabriel Oak and Clym Yeobright, respectively. Elizabeth-Jane emerges as a singular female character whose presence is valued at the conclusion of a narrative that is directly informed by her perspective. The reader largely understands and experiences the novel through Elizabeth-Jane's eyes, and the prevalence of her gaze differs from the longstanding tradition of the male gaze in literary works.

Elizabeth-Jane's reliable perspective is especially striking when contrasted with the behavior and failings of the novel's titular character, Michael Henchard. Elizabeth-Jane actively educates herself throughout the novel and secures a

comfortable position as Farfrae's wife by its conclusion, whereas Henchard struggles financially and romantically until his death in the novel's final chapter. He is consistently undermined by his hypermasculinity, whereas his stepdaughter gains the respect of both the reader and the people in Casterbridge. By juxtaposing Michael Henchard's hypermasculine behavior and eventual undoing with Elizabeth-Jane's pervasive, and decidedly female, gaze, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* criticizes the titular character's patriarchal attitude and subverts a tradition that typically favors the male perspective.

Elizabeth-Jane functions as spectator in a multitude of situations that involve key characters and moments in the text. Ironically, her continued struggle to find a home in which she is accepted and appreciated is the catalyst that allows her to live in multiple places as a witness to many of the novel's crucial scenes. For example, Susan and Elizabeth-Jane seek out Henchard in Casterbridge after being falsely informed of Newson's supposed death. The young woman joins the crowd as a spectator outside of The Kings Arms, and she is later given access to Farfrae's room as a worker at The Three Mariners. Upon moving into the mayor's home in the novel's fourteenth chapter, the narrator states, "The position of Elizabeth-Jane's room...afforded her opportunity for accurate observation of what went on there" (70). Not only does this sentence illustrate the position in which Elizabeth-Jane is conveniently placed, but it also acknowledges her ability to make accurate observations about her surroundings. Moreover, she goes on to live with Lucetta after having been rejected by her stepfather. This position allows her to witness the love-triangle that emerges between Farfrae, Henchard, and Lucetta. Elizabeth-Jane

often finds herself in a role that enables her to silently observe her surroundings and, similarly to the reader, provide a sound judgment of the other characters.

Despite the novel's utilization of a third-person narrator, Elizabeth-Jane functions as a proxy for the reader throughout the novel. In "The Role of Elizabeth-Jane", Michael Millgate addresses the effect of Elizabeth-Jane's status as a bystander, stating, "Because of her position of onlooker, and because of her good sense, she gradually establishes herself for the reader as much the most acute and reliable intelligence within the novel, the one whose judgments are most to be trusted" (362). This statement is best exemplified when she observes a tense, yet ludicrous, interaction between Lucetta, Farfrae, and her stepfather at High-Place Hall. When Lucetta offers the men bread and butter, they reach for the same slice in an attempt to vie for the woman's attention. According to the narrator, Farfrae "was too much in love to see the incident in any but a tragic light" (138). This assertion indicates that, as an individual who is directly involved in the novel's affairs, Farfrae is unable to accurately assess the dynamic between Lucetta, Henchard, and himself. Silently, Elizabeth-Jane observes the scene and offers her own evaluation of the situation. The narrative states, "'How ridiculous of all three of them!' said Elizabeth-Jane to herself" (138). The reader's understanding of the novel aligns with our quiet observer. Additionally, the novel draws attention to the anticipated disconnect between Farfrae's perspective and our own assessment of his involvement in the love triangle while simultaneously encouraging our association with Elizabeth-Jane's gaze and subsequent judgment.

In addition to functioning as a proxy for the reader, Elizabeth-Jane's observations subvert the tradition of the male gaze. In "The Role of Elizabeth-Jane", Millgate discusses this permeating tradition and, more specifically, Hardy's role in perpetuating it. He states, "In *Far From the Madding Crowd*, Gabriel Oak shows an almost voyeuristic talent for finding himself in positions from which he can observe Bathsheba unseen" (362). He also notes how, in *The Return of the Native*, "Diggory Venn becomes almost an ubiquitous seeing eye" (362). Similarly to Elizabeth-Jane, Gabriel Oak and Diggory Venn take on the role of an onlooker in their respective narratives. They are often in a position that allows them to observe, interact with, and evaluate the other characters in the novel. For example, Gabriel Oak functions as a confidant and moral guide for both Bathsheba and Boldwood. Not only does he hold Bathsheba accountable for sending a thoughtless and deceitful valentine to the farmer, but he is also the first person to recognize the severity of Boldwood's mental decline. By constantly using male characters as the lens through which the reader understands and interprets a narrative, authors are (perhaps unknowingly) perpetuating the normalization of the male gaze.

Elizabeth-Jane continues to subvert expectations of gender by rejecting the role of a female character that exists to be observed and sexualized by men. Feminist film critic Laura Mulvey introduced the concept of the male gaze in her 1975 essay, titled, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". According to Mulvey, the male gaze has been maintained by a history of narratives that overwhelmingly favor men and their perception of women. Although she focuses on the representation of women in films, Mulvey's ideas pertain to other forms of storytelling; namely, the

literary tradition. By having a female character assume the position of an observer and judge of character, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* disrupts a tradition that has typically assigned that role to a man. Mulvey describes that, historically and currently,

The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (62)

Initially, Elizabeth-Jane's appearance "was not regarded with much interest by anybody in Casterbridge" (74). After dressing herself in fine and flashy clothes, however, "everybody was attracted" (74) to her. The narrator states, "sex had never before asserted itself in her so strongly, for in former days she had perhaps been too impersonally human to be distinctively feminine" (75). The description of "impersonally human" indicates that her character and intrinsic womanhood exists outside of the male characters and their attraction to her. As opposed to assuming the woman's traditional role of being looked at, Elizabeth-Jane becomes the observer. In addition, the narrative actively discourages the male gaze and its fixation on her appearance. Uncomfortable with the attention, Elizabeth-Jane resolves to sell her clothes and purchase books to further her education. She refuses to be "styled-accordingly" and downplays her visual impact by opting to dress plainly.

Unlike Elizabeth-Jane, Lucetta Templeman emerges as a female character whose physicality caters to the male gaze. Her characterization is exemplified by her fixation on clothing in chapter twenty-four of the novel. She explains to Elizabeth-Jane, "But settling upon new clothes is so trying...You are that person' (pointing to one of the arrangements), 'or you are *that* totally different person' (pointing to the other)," (127). She ultimately chooses an eye-catching cherry-colored dress before going to the marketplace where her two suitors, Farfrae and Henchard, are situated. Lucetta's newfound wealth and desire to abscond her scandalous past are the factors that fuel her obsession with outward appearances. The narrator states, "It was finally decided by Miss Templeman that she would be the cherry-coloured person" (127). According to this statement, Lucetta is convinced that her identity is defined entirely by how her appearance is perceived by others. In an attempt to evade her ruined reputation, Lucetta becomes dependent on the gaze of her male suitors and their subsequent judgment of her. As she dons her finery, she has, as Mulvey would say, a "strong visual" impact that connotes "to-be-looked-at-ness" (62). Lucetta takes on the role that Elizabeth-Jane had rejected by embodying a female figure that exists to be looked by men and, by extension, styling herself with the intention of catching their gaze. The color of her dress is bright, flashy, and in direct contrast with Elizabeth-Jane's demure appearance.

By juxtaposing Lucetta and Elizabeth-Jane with one another, the text encourages the reader to recognize the superficiality of the male gaze and Lucetta's dependence on it. During their initial meeting, the two women are immediately compared and contrasted with the other. Of Lucetta, the text states, "The



personage...was about [Elizabeth-Jane's] age and size, and might have been her wraith or double, but for the fact that it was a lady much more beautifully dressed than she" (103). As the scene progresses, however, the narrator asserts, "Elizabeth could now have been writ handsome, while the young lady was simply pretty" (103). The author stresses that, despite being moderately pretty and beautifully dressed, Lucetta is less "handsome" than her female companion. In addition, her attractiveness is largely determined by her clothing. Lucetta's introduction functions as a criticism of society's tendency to associate beauty with material possessions. Even Elizabeth-Jane, who is able to critically observe Lucetta's interactions with men in later scenes, is initially "arrested by the artistic perfection of the lady's appearance" (103). Her carefully constructed exterior has a similar effect on her suitors; as Henchard and Farfrae vie for Lucetta's attention, Elizabeth-Jane becomes "invisible in the room" (133). Lucetta actively enhances her desirability with the intention of pandering to the attentions of men, whereas Elizabeth-Jane is described as being "occupied with an inner chamber of ideas, and to have slight need for visible objects" (74). The author demonstrates how, as a nonparticipant in the perpetuation of the male gaze, an intelligent and beautiful woman is sidelined. Even the Scotsman, who was initially attracted to Elizabeth-Jane, "seemed hardly the same Farfrae who had danced with her and walked with her in a delicate poise between love and friendship" (11) after meeting and becoming infatuated with Lucetta.

Elizabeth-Jane's steadfastness is contrasted with Lucetta's weak constitution and eventual death. When the truth about her past indiscretion with Henchard is

revealed through the skimmity-ride, Lucetta collapses and quickly dies. Although her death is attributed to a combination of shock and a miscarriage, the implication is that she had placed her entire self-worth in her reputation. Upon seeing the effigies, Lucetta cries, “He will see it, won't he? Donald will see it! He is just coming home—and it will break his heart—he will never love me any more—and O, it will kill me—kill me!” (211) This statement suggests that Lucetta’s entire personhood is dependent on how others, particularly her husband, perceive her. When the illusion of her outward appearance is shattered, Lucetta’s inner strength and self-worth are too weak to sustain her. Elizabeth-Jane, on the other hand, continues to move forward in spite of difficulties. At the novel’s conclusion, the narrator determines that Elizabeth-Jane is capable “of making limited opportunities endurable” (252). Unlike Lucetta, Elizabeth-Jane’s character is not dependent on the good opinion of a man. Rather, she is defined by her actions and quiet resolve. By focusing on Elizabeth-Jane at its conclusion, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* asserts that her individuality and strength should be appreciated more than Lucetta’s striking ensembles.

*The Mayor of Casterbridge* extends its examination of gender roles to the titular character and his hypermasculine behavior. Michael Henchard demonstrates his hypermasculinity in the novel’s opening chapter when he drunkenly sells his wife and child to a sailor. His wife informs the reader that Henchard had “talked this nonsense in public places before” (10), indicating that his poor decisions are a perpetual problem as opposed to isolated incidents. In “Hardy and his Mayor: A Gendering of a Critical Response,” Shanta Dutta addresses how male critics have

dismissed Henchard's action as a drunken mistake. She writes, "The male critical tradition has very subtly transformed it to: Henchard sells his wife because he is drunk" (36). She also cites Elaine Showalter's "The Unmanning of the Mayor of Casterbridge," stating, "Showalter rejects the perennial adjective 'drunken' in characterizing the wife-sale; in fact, she speaks of the premeditated sale of wife and child" (37). Despite his commitment to abstain from alcohol for twenty-one years, Henchard continues to demonstrate his aggressive masculinity at multiple points throughout the novel by asserting his dominance over women and his workers.

Henchard's hostile conduct is exemplified in his treatment of Elizabeth-Jane. After informing his stepdaughter of what he believes to be the truth of her parentage, he reflects on his accomplishment. The text states, "Elizabeth was his at last... He was the kind of man to whom some human object for pouring out his heart upon—were it emotive or were it choleric—was almost a necessity" (95-96). Henchard's motivation behind his decision is purely selfish. He is primarily concerned with asserting control over Elizabeth-Jane, and he expresses a desire to use her as a "human object" for his own benefit. Upon discovering that she is not, in fact, his daughter, Henchard immediately resents her. Although he craves an emotional connection with another person, his lack of paternal ownership over the young woman overwhelms his judgment and deters him from treating her with any semblance of respect. The mayor's aggressive and controlling behavior is demonstrated by his treatment of his stepdaughter. As Dutta and Showalter argue in their respective analyses, his actions cannot be blamed on the influence of alcohol.

At first, the town of Casterbridge upholds Henchard's hypermasculine behavior. Similarly to the male gaze, hypermasculinity has traditionally functioned to reaffirm the supposed superiority of the male gender. Behaviors such as physical strength, aggression, and the ability to control others are typically assigned to men and, therefore, valued by a society that actively perpetuates the marginalization of women. This patriarchal tradition is acknowledged by Henchard's social and economic ascent. After ridding himself of his wife and child, he reappears in the novel's second chapter as successful businessman and the town's mayor. At first, this positive transformation suggests that the novel is advocating for aggressive masculinity and its role in Henchard's success. When Elizabeth-Jane first encounters Henchard, he is described as being "the powerfulest member of the Town Council, and quite a principal man in the country" (29) by a man outside of the King's Arms. The man also informs Elizabeth-Jane that the mayor had "worked his way up from nothing when 'a came here; and now he's a pillar of the town" (29). The reader is provided a glimpse of the respect that Henchard is given by the people of Casterbridge before he loses his position of authority in the novel's later chapters.

Ultimately, Henchard's downfall is caused by the community's reevaluation and condemnation of his hypermasculine behavior. This shift in the public's perception of the mayor's patriarchal attitude is evident in the increasingly negative response to his actions throughout the novel. For example, Farfrae berates him for publically humiliating Abel Whittle in chapter fifteen. The Scotsman states, "A man o' your position should ken better, sir! It is tyrannical and no worthy of you" (77). In this moment, Farfrae redefines the town's "pillar" as an unreasonable and

“tyrannical” bully. Furthermore, the firmity-woman effectively ruins Henchard’s reputation when she speaks out about his reckless actions in the novel’s opening chapter. The narrator states, “The retort of the firmity-woman before the magistrates had spread; and in four-and-twenty hours there was not a person in Casterbridge who remained unacquainted with the story of Henchard’s mad freak” (165). The text goes on to state, “On that day—almost at that minute—[Henchard] passed the ridge of prosperity and honour, and began to descend rapidly on the other side” (166). These sentences illustrate how the people of Casterbridge are able to reassess and determine an individual’s standing in the community.

Although the condemnation of Henchard is indicative of him as a character, it also functions as a larger criticism of patriarchal attitudes that are upheld and perpetuated by society. Richard Nemesvari addresses the relationship between societal constructs of masculine behavior and Henchard’s ruination in *Thomas Hardy, Sensationalism, and the Melodramatic Mode*. He argues, “The novel’s protagonist acts out a version of manliness that has served him well for most of his life, only to discover that the performance no longer suits the cultural theater in which he finds himself” (62). The people who provided Henchard with a position of authority are the ones who proceed to undermine his reputation as the novel progresses. As opposed to excusing the actions of its titular character and perpetuating the tradition of male dominance in society, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* acknowledges the influence of the patriarchy before proceeding to punish Henchard for his actions. As a result, the novel criticizes patriarchal traditions without

completely ignoring their pervasive effect on our understanding of gender in society and, more specifically, literary works.

In addition to the judgment he receives from his peers, Henchard is forced to acknowledge his wrongdoings when Susan, Elizabeth-Jane, and Lucetta reenter his life. In "The Unmanning of the Mayor of Casterbridge," Showalter acknowledges the positive effect that the wife-child auction has on Henchard at first. She states,

It is the combined, premeditated sale of wife and child which launches Henchard into his second chance. Orphaned, divorced, without mothers or sisters, wife or daughter, he has effectively severed all his bonds with the community of women. (396)

Showalter rightfully points out how, upon selling his wife and child, Henchard is granted the freedom to build a new life in which he is prosperous and respected. One could argue that his eventual failings are the result of these women and their presence in his life. If this were the case, Henchard's misogynistic feelings would be justified. As the narrative advances, however, all of Henchard's failures can be traced back to his own decisions. Although his relationships with these women contribute to his social and economic decline, their reemergence in the text is not to blame for his failings. The novel denies Henchard the privilege of eluding his responsibilities and, by extension, subverts a patriarchal tradition that typically excuses, or even encourages, misogynistic behavior. In the first chapter of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, the reader is a witness to a culture in which acts of blatant sexism are overlooked. In the furmity tent, the male crowd discusses "the ruin of good men by bad wives, and, more particularly, the frustration of many a promising

youth's high aims and hopes and the extinction of his energies by an early imprudent marriage" (9). As the auction proceeds, the very men that engaged in this misogynistic conversation proceed to either encourage the sale or look on as passive enablers. By forcing Henchard to take responsibility for his behavior, the text challenges the male culture that was presented in this opening chapter.

At the novel's conclusion, Henchard and Elizabeth-Jane's respective endings are juxtaposed with one another. While the former mayor is forced to return to his work as a hay-trusser, Elizabeth-Jane's struggle to find a stable home and companion is resolved when she secures a comfortable position as Farfrae's wife. The narrative ends after the newly married Elizabeth-Jane is informed of her stepfather's recent death that, as evidenced by the progression of his ruination, was the result of his own actions. When compared to Henchard's drastic decline and tragic demise, Elizabeth-Jane's relative success suggests that her qualities as a character are worthy of recognition and compensation by both the town of Casterbridge and the narrative itself. Henchard, who was once referred to as the "pillar" of Casterbridge, no longer embodies the ideals that his peers actively redefined and set forth through their judgment of him. In "The Role of Elizabeth-Jane," Michael Millgate draws attention to the young woman's role as positive force at the end of the novel, stating, "the central figure has been removed and the lesser ones who formerly stood in his shadow are left to pick up the pieces and restore order as best they can" (365-366). Her steadfastness, quiet resolve, and good judgment are stressed as she is entrusted with the narrative's final moments. Furthermore, the novel's unrelenting focus on her in its concluding paragraphs

addresses her ability to move forward in a resilient, yet melancholy, manner. These admirable qualities, as well as her crucial observations and their consistent impact on the reader, complicate Millgate's suggestion that she is a "lesser" character in the novel. Elizabeth-Jane effectively takes over Henchard's role as the text's central and defining figure after his behavior proves to be unfavorable and destructive. By shifting the focus of the narrative from Henchard to his stepdaughter, the author affirms the notion that Elizabeth-Jane's defining characteristics are worthy of attention and praise.

Elizabeth-Jane's newfound role as a model figure in Casterbridge is demonstrated by the townsfolk's perception of her towards the end of the novel. Although Henchard's actions are the cause of his demise, it is the public's reevaluation of his behavior that undermines his standing in the town and results in his ostracism. Furthermore, their appreciation for Elizabeth-Jane marks a distinct shift in the ideals that they value as a collective group. Upon discovering that Farfrae has opted to marry Henchard's stepdaughter, a minor character named Coney states, "... no wonder at all. 'Tis she that's a stooping to he—that's my opinion. A widow man—whose first wife was no credit to him—what is it for a young perusing woman that's her own mistress and well liked?" (232) He goes on to assert, "she's a sensible piece for a partner, and there's no faithful woman in high life now"; well, he may do worse than not to take her, if she's tender-inclined" (232). Coney's assertion that "there's no faithful woman in high life now" is a slight to not just the women, but also the public and its previous inability to recognize Elizabeth-Jane's moral value. In spite of her economic standing and refusal to pander to the male gaze,



Coney's asserts that she is "well liked" by her peers. His understanding of their oversight regarding the young woman suggests the town of Casterbridge has redefined the qualities it looks for in its inhabitants.

The public's perception of Farfrae as the new mayor furthers their appreciation for Elizabeth-Jane. In a patriarchal society, men are typically the model, or default, citizen through which the town's ideals are represented. It is unusual that the narrative focuses so extensively on a female character towards the end of the novel, particularly when her husband could have been made to fulfill the role of the town's model figure. Returning to Coney's assessment of Elizabeth-Jane's marriage to the widowed mayor, he asserts, "'Tis she that's a stooping to he" (232). Despite his achievement's, Elizabeth-Jane's astounding moral qualities are ranked above Farfrae's intellect and social standing in the eyes of the townsfolk. In chapter thirty-six of the novel, the narrator informs the reader,

Farfrae was still liked in the community; but it must be owned that, as the Mayor and man of money, engrossed with affairs and ambitions, he had lost in the eyes of the poorer inhabitants something of that wondrous charm which he had had for them as a light-hearted penniless young man. (203)

Hardy goes out of his way to illustrate how the minor characters in the novel perceive their young mayor. Despite his relative likability, Elizabeth-Jane overshadows the Scotsman in terms of her resilience and judgment. The novel's slight criticism of Farfrae furthers the destabilization of the patriarchy in the novel.

Elizabeth-Jane and Henchard's distinct endings contribute to the subversion of traditional gender roles in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. At the beginning of the

novel, Henchard embodies a hypermasculine ideal through his aggressive and controlling behavior. His upward mobility was made possible by a society that, prior to reevaluating their standards, valued his virility. When a member of the crowd outside of the King's Arms informs Elizabeth-Jane that Henchard had "worked his way up from nothing," (29) it is suggested that the townsfolk truly admired his character and expression of masculinity. Henchard's passing signifies a metaphorical death of the patriarchal ideals that allowed him to build a life for himself in the eighteen years between the first and second chapters of the novel. Moreover, Elizabeth-Jane's rejection of the male gaze is directly contrasted with Henchard's inability to adapt to a world in which his masculine behavior "no longer suits the cultural theater in which he finds himself" (Nemesvari 62). By rewarding and esteeming a woman who refuses to conform to stereotypical female roles, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* actively questions the legitimacy of gender expectations.

Thomas Hardy's 1886 novel engages in criticisms of patriarchal traditions that would be addressed by scholars over a hundred years later. Through the novel's most prominent male and female characters, the author establishes the expectations that determine our society's understanding of gender before proceeding to subvert them. As the novel progresses, the men and women who fulfill conventional gender roles are undermined and ruined. Furthermore, the character that rejects society's expectations of the male gaze and its role in perpetuating patriarchal traditions is able to obtain a secure position by the novel's final chapter, as well as the respect of her fellow townsfolk. Through the strength of her strong senses and quiet wisdom, Elizabeth-Jane survives through the narrative's conclusion. She quietly, yet firmly,

determines, “There were others receiving less who had deserved much more” (252). Her understanding of the hardships that plagued her life, as well as the lives of others, speaks to the novel’s overarching examination of inequality and the forces that either hinder or benefit us. In overcoming these struggles, Elizabeth-Jane’s character effectively critiques and destabilizes these pervasive forces and their function in society.

I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.

*Emma Shaw*

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