

### 3.1 Text 1: The Mayor of Casterbridge

Thomas Hardy's novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, written in 1886, tells the story of the rise and fall in fortunes of farm worker Michael Henchard. After drinking too much rum at a country fair, Henchard sells his wife, Susan, and their baby daughter, Elizabeth-Jane, to a passing sailor (as described in this extract). Henchard swears never to drink again, and eventually rises to the position of town mayor, but after a series of fateful events triggered by Susan's return, he ends his days a lonely, broken man.

The young man and woman ordered a basin each of the mixture, steaming hot, and sat down to consume it at leisure. This was very well so far, for furmity<sup>1</sup> was nourishing, and as proper a food as could be obtained within the four seas<sup>2</sup>; though, to those not accustomed to it, the grains of wheat swollen as large as  
 5 lemon-pips, which floated on its surface, might have a deterrent<sup>3</sup> effect at first. But there was more in that tent than met the cursory<sup>4</sup> glance; and the man, with the instinct of a perverse<sup>5</sup> character, scented it quickly. He watched the furmity seller from the corner of his eye, and saw the game she played. He winked to her,  
 10 and passed up his basin in reply to her nod; when she took a bottle from under the table, slily<sup>6</sup> measured out a quantity of its contents, and tipped the same into the man's furmity. The liquor poured in was rum. The man as slily sent back money in payment.

The man finished his basin, and called for another, the rum being signalled for in yet stronger proportion. The effect of it was soon apparent in his manner. At the  
 15 end of the first basin the man had risen to serenity<sup>7</sup>; at the second he was jovial<sup>8</sup>; at the third, argumentative, at the fourth, the clench of his mouth, and the fiery spark of his dark eye, began to tell in his conduct<sup>9</sup>; he was overbearing<sup>10</sup>— even brilliantly quarrelsome.

The child began to prattle<sup>11</sup> impatiently, and the wife more than once said to her  
 20 husband, "Michael, how about our lodging? You know we may have trouble in getting it if we don't go soon."

But he turned a deaf ear to those bird-like chirpings. He talked loud to the company.

The conversation took a high turn, as it often does on such occasions. The ruin of  
 25 good men by bad wives, and, more particularly, the frustration of many a promising youth's high aims and hopes by an early imprudent<sup>12</sup> marriage, was the theme.

"I did for myself that way thoroughly," said the trusser<sup>13</sup> with a bitterness that was well-nigh<sup>14</sup> resentful. "I married at eighteen, like the fool that I was; and this is the

30 consequence o't<sup>15</sup>." He pointed at himself and family with a wave of the hand. "I haven't more than fifteen shillings<sup>16</sup> in the world, and yet I am a good experienced hand in my line; and if I were a free man again I'd be worth a thousand pound before I'd done."

The auctioneer selling the old horses in the field outside could be heard saying,  
35 "Now this is the last lot — now who'll take the last lot for a song? Shall I say forty shillings? 'Tis a very promising broodmare<sup>17</sup>, a trifle over five years old, and nothing the matter with the hoss at all, except that she's a little holler in the back<sup>18</sup> and had her left eye knocked out by the kick of another, her own sister, coming along the road."

40 "I don't see why men who have got wives and don't want 'em, shouldn't get rid of 'em as these gipsy fellows do their old horses," said the man in the tent. "Why, I'd sell mine this minute if anybody would buy her! The woman is no good to me. Who'll have her? Will any Jack Rag or Tom Straw among ye buy my goods? Stand up, Susan, and show yourself."

45 The woman looked on the ground, as if she maintained her position by a supreme effort of will.

"Five shillings," said someone, at which there was a laugh.

"No insults," said the husband. "I'll tell ye what," said the husband, bringing down his fist so that the basins danced, "I'll sell her for five guineas<sup>19</sup> to any man that  
50 will pay me the money, and treat her well; and he shall have her for ever, and never hear aught o' me<sup>20</sup>. But she shan't go for less. Now then — five guineas — and she's yours. Susan, you agree?"

She bowed her head with absolute indifference.

"Five guineas, or she'll be withdrawn. Do anybody give it? Yes or no?"

55 "Yes," said a loud voice from the doorway.

All eyes were turned. Standing in the triangular opening which formed the door of the tent was a sailor, who, unobserved by the rest, had arrived there within the last two or three minutes. A dead silence followed his affirmation<sup>21</sup>.

60 "You say you do?" asked the husband, staring at him. "Saying is one thing, and paying is another. Where's the money?"

The sailor hesitated a moment, looked anew at the woman, came in, unfolded five crisp pieces of paper, and threw them down upon the tablecloth. They were Bank-of-England notes for five pounds. Upon the face of this he clinked down the shillings severally — one, two, three, four, five.

65 “Now,” said the woman, breaking the silence, so that her low dry voice sounded quite loud, “before you go further, Michael, listen to me. If you touch that money, I and this girl go with the man. Mind, it is a joke no longer.”

“A joke? Of course it is not a joke!” shouted her husband, his resentment rising at her suggestion. “I take the money; the sailor takes you. That’s plain enough.”

70 “Tis quite on the understanding that the young woman is willing,” said the sailor. “I wouldn’t hurt her feelings for the world.”

“Faith, nor I,” said her husband. “But she is willing, provided she can have the child. She said so only the other day when I talked o’t!”

“That you swear?” said the sailor to her.

75 “I do,” said she, after glancing at her husband’s face and seeing no repentance there.

“Very well, she shall have the child, and the bargain’s complete,” said the trusser. He took the sailor’s notes and deliberately folded them, and put them with the shillings in a high remote pocket, with an air of finality.

**Glossary**

<sup>1</sup>furmity: a kind of porridge made from grains of wheat

<sup>2</sup>within the four seas: within the jurisdiction or legal boundaries of England

<sup>3</sup>deterrent: off-putting

<sup>4</sup>cursory: passing, fleeting

<sup>5</sup>perverse: behaving in a deliberately unreasonable or obstinate way

<sup>6</sup>slily: without anyone noticing

<sup>7</sup>serenity: a state of peacefulness or calm

<sup>8</sup>jovial: in a cheerful mood; sociable and outgoing

<sup>9</sup>conduct: behaviour

<sup>10</sup>overbearing: unpleasantly overpowering

<sup>11</sup>prattle: babble and chatter; baby talk

<sup>12</sup>imprudent: rash, hasty

<sup>13</sup>trusser: a hay-trusser, someone who turns a haystack into smaller tied bundles of hay

<sup>14</sup>well-nigh: almost; very nearly

<sup>15</sup>o't: of it

<sup>16</sup>shilling: old unit of money (there were 20 shillings in a pound)

<sup>17</sup>broodmare: female adult horse used for breeding

<sup>18</sup>she's a little holler in the back: she has a slightly hollow back (associated with old age or maltreatment of the horse)

<sup>19</sup>guinea: old unit of money (one pound and one shilling)

<sup>20</sup>aught o' me: anything from me

<sup>21</sup>affirmation: declaration