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**Exploration of Class Conflict and Economic Exploitation: A Marxist Critique of Thomas Hardy's  
The Mayor of Casterbridge****Mazhar Iqbal<sup>1</sup>, Nasir Mushtaq<sup>2</sup>**

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**DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v4i1.1761>****Abstract**

Marxism highlights the importance of literature that centers on the struggles and aspirations of the working classes. This study offers a Marxist analysis of Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, examining the novel through the theoretical framework propounded by Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and their successors. Employing a hermeneutic and interpretive research design, the study investigates the dynamics of class struggle, economic determinism, and ideological power structures embedded within the social fabric of the narrative. The research explores how economic forces divide society into dominant and subordinate classes, shaping characters' behavior, relationships, and moral choices. It demonstrates that the ruling industrial and capitalist class strives to sustain its economic dominance through exploitation, manipulation, and ideological control, while the working class remains entrapped in conditions of poverty and dependency. Through its exposure of class oppression, economic exploitation, and moral corruption, Hardy's (1886) novel reflects the structural inequalities inherent in capitalist society. This study contributes to Marxist literary criticism by foregrounding the interplay between economic base and social superstructure in the text and provides a foundation for future research on class ideology in Hardy's works and other Victorian novels.

**Keywords:** Marxism, Class struggle, Economic determinism, Capitalism Ideology, Exploitation, Power structures, Victorian society, Base and superstructure, Commodity fetishism.

**Introduction**

Literature has long served as a reflection of the socio-economic realities that shape human existence, and the nineteenth century novel in particular offers a rich terrain for examining the operations of class, power, and ideology. "Literature has long served as a powerful medium for reflecting the complexities and realities of human life, acting as a lens through which pivotal events that have shaped human culture are immortalized" (Afzal et al., 2024, p. 869). Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* emerges from the Victorian industrial context, a period marked by rapid economic transformation, expanding capitalism, and deepening class divisions. While the novel is often read as a tragic narrative of individual fate and moral downfall, it also encodes within its structure the tensions of economic determinism and class struggle that were central to the theories of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Viewed through a Marxist lens, Hardy's work reveals how material conditions, ownership of property, and access to economic power determine social status, interpersonal relations, and moral authority. Thus, the novel not only portrays personal tragedy but also dramatizes the structural inequalities embedded within capitalist society.

"Marxism, a philosophy and social theory developed in the 19th century based on Karl Marx's works, views

history as a continuous struggle between the bourgeoisie and proletariat classes” (Afzal, 2024, p. 774). The selected novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge* demonstrates the features of Marxism. There is an apparent stance of the thoughts of Marx and Engels about class resistance and conflict (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels) in the novel under study. The novelist has made a great use of Marxism in the selected novel in his own way. Hardy (1886) points out that our society has only two classes, the upper class and the lower class. Both major classes within society remain fundamentally antagonistic toward one another. Rather than fostering harmony or mutual coexistence, they exist in a condition of perpetual conflict rooted in material interests. Each class perceives association with the other as a threat to its rank, status, and economic position. Consequently, social integration between them—whether through marriage, friendship, or other forms of relational unity—is often resisted, as such connections challenge the hierarchical structure that sustains class dominance.

In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, the villain and the hero join to the upper class with all the features and characteristics of the superior class, whereas the heroine who depends on the villain for her livelihood, belongs to the lower class of the society with poverty and problems. All the maids and female servants who are working at the house of the hero and villain, are from the lower class. Hardy (1886) implies that our society is divided into two classes which are economically determined, the superior group with all the sources of revenue and production and the poor class with nothing in hand except problems and frustration created by economic poverty and they are made to wait on the upper class for livelihood for themselves and for the members of their family. They are just toys and puppets in the hands of the lords and ladies from the upper class. The lords and ladies exploit their needs and compulsion. Both the classes are all the time at daggers drawn against each other because of their difference in status, incomes, economic position and standard of life style. Both of them have their own views and feelings concerning their morality, their life style, their background and their norms and condition in the society. The author of the literary pieces has presented two classes those of the rich and the poor or we would use the language of Marx who termed them, the bourgeoisie (the elite class, the industrialists, the capitalists) and the proletariats (the poor workers, the labourers)(Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels). Both the strata of the society are against each other on every front of life, they never want to be together at one table; they loathe each other in every respect of life and consider themselves two opposite components of life. Both of them don't tolerate each other rather both of them hate each other and take it against their status, rank and position in the society to mix up with the opposite class through any social relation (Mikhail Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy*).

The higher class of the rich people never likes to have any relation with the poor class and never allows the circumstances of the economic conditions that the subordinate group of poor people may get equal to them. The lords and ladies from the upper class do their best to keep the poor workers, labourers and servants from the lower class must linger behind of them at the inferior rank and social status. So that the poor workers and servants may always keep on serving and waiting on them in all the domains of life, as the labourers in the factories, the employees at the offices and house servants at their homes. The people from the upper class of the rich always do their level best to offer them very little earnings and source of income. So that they may never have anything extra of needs to save up to any money to start their personal business and work with the savings rather the people from the poor class are kept in poor conditions with the poor wages. So that they may be in the position to meet both ends and only lead their lives by eating foods for two times a day and most of the time, we find that the poor people from the working class don't have enough income to eat hearty meal and healthy foods rather they feel all the time hunger and sustain their life on taking loans from their lords on tough conditions to sustain their lives in the economic determined society (Mikhail Bakunin, *Appeal to the Slavs*).

The study demonstrates that the people from the upper group have all types of uncertainty, hatred, disgust, and differences for the poor people. From the lower class of the society only because their group is based on the provision of all types of resources for income and all types of sources of luxuries in the economic determined society. All these mentioned above characteristics of the lords and ladies from the upper class are

those which make their judgment about different things, those source of wealth when are in abundance with the people change their ideologies with the passage of the time. The financial set up and the abundance of the wealth change the thinking of the people about their norms in the society. The economic system with its characteristics changes the psyche of the people about the traditions and culture in the society. The economic condition set the association and behaviour of the people about all the things. The person gets settled and changes his ideologies in the society according to culture and condition of the society which is determined by the economic condition of a person and his society. The thinking mode of the people is changed with the power of the wealth when it is got or when it is lost (Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*). The person who gets wealth, he or she makes his/her own concepts and ideas in the society according to his/her wishes and will. We find this type of thoughts in the novel under study.

The Marxist critics say that every individual who gets treasures, sources of high returns and reaches up till the level of the people from upper class, his thinking also gets changes and it is developed up to the level of the people from the upper class and whenever, with the economic crises, he is destroyed and declines to the level of the poor people, his thinking also gets declines and he starts to work like the poor people. That person who enters into the upper set with hard work and economic development on the base of wealth, riches and prosperity, would like to end his relation with the previous economic group of the poor persons (Pierre-Joseph Proudhon).

The servants are just like the machines which are for the service of the rich lords who purchase their services with the force of money. Otherwise the poor people may never serve the rich people because of their hatred for them who are hated by the poor people, the poor people are also hated by the rich people who keep them as the servants and not as the human beings. The poor people serve them and get reward in the shape of wages, there never develops any human relationship on the base of humanity because both the groups are very different from each other, they cannot live together (Mikhail Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy*). The poor servants in the novel under analysis are hated and humiliated by the affluent lords who deem them only serving hands and not human beings. The servants are dismissed of their services without telling their faults because the lords and ladies from the rich class want human machine working like machine and obeying all types of orders without discriminating any difference between right and wrong on the basis of humanity without the human feelings.

The superior class of the rich lords and ladies never likes to have the inferior group show human feeling and human characteristics to stay equal to them in any context of life. The rich people keep the lower class of the workers and servants at lower rank. So that the poor workers may never think themselves the human beings just like the people from the upper class and always keep on helping them and serving them as labourers in the factories, subordinate and peons at the offices and at servants at their homes. Whenever the anger, hatred and frustration of the people get rise, it is cooled down by the alms and charity and most of the time the poor workers are suspended and dismissed of their services to make an example for the whole class of the poor people. Sometimes, through the process of request and negotiation the poor workers get bonus or increments in the wages which are also very meager. The poor workers are at the hands of the affluent people in economic determined society. In the literary piece under analysis the maids and other servants who are working at the house of hero and villain (Thomas Hardy, *Mayor of Casterbridge*) are never shown that they have risen up in the status that they have left the job at her house to start their own business with the handsome wages which they get from her rather they remain in the same condition and same economic position.

The individuals from the upper class or the individuals entering into the set of bourgeoisies show crystal clear difference of thinking about the social norms and conditions. They have their thinking, habits and behaviour different from those of the people from the poor class. Those individuals who enter into the upper class with got abundance of wealth and economic progress also start to behave like the people from the upper class and start to consider themselves as the lords and ladies from the time immemorial because economy builds their thinking and decorum to deal the people in the society (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels).

Riches and financial position bring change in their judgment and there are different differences of judgment between both the classes. The writer has recognized that increasing change of opinion in the mind of the person steadily and abruptly is on the bases of financial system (Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*). When the person does not have riches, his opinion is fairly dissimilar; when the poor person gets a lot of wealth his psyche is abruptly changed; when that person enters into the sway of increasing economical luxury, his judgment enters into the sway of change; he starts to get changes in his decorum, in his habits and in his behaviour with other people in the society; when the being gets rise in the wealth, his way of decision, his manners, his behaviour obtain the colours and shades of the individuals of the higher set. It looks the person is nothing, he is a plaything in the hands of the financial bound classes, he is to do the things living in the region of classes, he is to reflect as the populace of that group assume; he is to carry on with other people of the identical class and with the group from other class exactly as the other community of his own set think, behave and do (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels).

The monetary conditions of an individual poses his judgment to that level that the people of his previous group openly declare that he has become one of that group to which he went; to which he got the fresh relation with and to which he is keen to advance (Mikhail Bakunin, *God and the State (Dieu et L'état)*). The people of his own group become the prey of same type of chauvinism that is exerted by the individuals of his recently acquired group.

The present novel under analysis has all the features of Marxism and has also pointed out that the rich class uses abusive language and they don't consider the poor class as the class of human beings. The author has attempted to give a new variation of Marxism that abusive language and hatred and a hidden detestation for the poor is not needed in the modern age rather economy plays the real role which does not need to bifurcate the classes with the help of abusive language and hateful behavior (Friedrich Engels, *The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man*).

The study shows that the higher group has all the uncertainty, revulsion, and differences only because their group is based on the provision of capital, riches, resources and wealth which alter their decision, ideologies, norms, civilization, association and behaviour with the passage of time, even the person who enters into the higher group of the rich class with his hard work and struggles and comes up till the level of bourgeoisies, he thinks like them (Mikhail Bakunin, *Appeal to the Slavs*). The young lords in the novel under analysis feel proud of their status and hate and disgrace by the well-off lords who deem them only immature lords with new got wealth and no experience of prosperity and its luxuries. All the lords give themselves airs and take all others as inferior to them because of the pride of their wealth which is making their psyche and thinking. Capital brings change in their judgment and there are different differences of judgment. The writer has recognized that increasing change of opinion in the mind of the person steadily and abruptly is on the bases of financial system (Friedrich Engels, *Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State*). When the person does not have riches, his opinion is fairly dissimilar; when an individual enters into the sway of rising economical luxury, his decision starts to get changed; when the individual gets rise in the wealth, his way of decision, his manners, his behaviour obtain the colours and shades of the individuals of the higher set. It looks the person is nothing, he is a toy in the hands of the monetary bound classes, he is to do the things living in the area of classes, he is to reproduce as the lay people of that group take for granted; he is to take on with other people of the same class and with the group from other class precisely as the other community of his own set think, behave and do (Mikhail Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy*).

In the literary piece under analysis, we find same type of situation of the poor class which is being crushed under the feet of upper class which is using ever new ways to exploit the compulsion of the poor class. The upper class is behaving the poor class as the slaves who are bought and sold, they are no more than the parts of the machines which can be changed whenever they are found good for nothing and those mechanical parts have no feelings, passions, emotions and thoughts. The people from the lower class are also being treated in the same way. They are used in different ways and the emotions, feelings and passions of the poor are not

given any thought rather the upper class crush the passions and feelings of the poor class only to fulfill their own feelings, passions and emotions in the actual world with the power of money (Mikhail Bakunin, *God and the State (Dieu et L'état)*). The rich class purchases the human beauty with the power of money and they have run sex department in the world and we find in the world, there are so many girls who working as business girls whose beauty, feelings, passions, emotions and gestures are bought and sold in the world of economy.

### Research Questions

- How has Thomas Hardy demonstrated the features of Marxism in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*?
- How are structural Marxist elements reflected in the social, economic, and institutional structures of the novel?
- What variants of Marxism (such as structural Marxism, classical Marxism, or cultural Marxism) can be identified in the novel?

### Objectives of the Study

- To analyze and demonstrate the features of Marxism represented in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.
- To explore the structural Marxist elements embedded in the economic, social, and institutional frameworks of the novel.
- To identify and examine the variants of Marxism reflected in the novel.

### Literature Review

Marxism started with the world popular and authentic writer and philosopher Karl Marx who explored the society and presented his views and concepts about the social set up. He presented his view that our society is economically determined into two major sects, in the terms of economic position that economic prosperity, wealth and riches which frame out the social set up and frame the social status of a person in the society (Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*). He propounded his views and concepts about the structures of the society which according to him was divided into only two groups, one is bourgeoisie with all the luxuries, riches, resources, wealth and economic power and the other is proletariats with problems, disturbance in life, economic destitution and poverty and both the classes remain on war against each other (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels). According to his concept and views, both of the classes remain busy in surviving their got economic power, riches, wealth and prosperity rather they struggle to progress themselves higher and higher in the social set up in economic terms and in that pursuits they do every type of thing whether right or wrong, justifiable or unjustifiable and after getting their targets they justify the things with the power of economy.

Both the groups hate each other; both of them think each other as burden on the earth and a large trouble in their way of development. Through the exploration of Bakunin, we come to know that the persons from both the classes want to be served on the expenses of other and this gets the position into chaos in the society (Mikhail Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy*). The persons from both the social groups want to gather more and more wealth, riches and sources of income more and more that should be more than their needs that would be much more than the needs and luxurious life of their coming so many generations. This inclination of the thoughts of the people to get more and more wealth developed personal ownership and covetousness for wealth (Friedrich Engels, *Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State*).

The upper class invents novel methods with passage of times to gather wealth and exploit the compulsions of the poor group to get them do more and more work from them and to serve them in different walks of life. The rich people do not give proper foods to the poor class that they have to feed on the remains of foods which the upper class thinks useless for them and the dependent workers are forced by the circumstances and position to feed on those remains of the useless foods. The poor workers are not given suitable wages that they are not able to save something to run their own business rather they remain poor and are kept at the lower wages and

are kept as the slaves and servants through their passage of generation to generation (Mikhail Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy*). The servants don't have any source of income as all the sources of income and daily earnings are controlled by the upper classes who never leave a single chance to disturb the poor and exploit them who are in poor condition with scanty wages which are not sufficient even to feed the members of their family with good foods (Mikhail Bakunin, *Appeal to the Slavs*).

Both the groups of the society have deep seated detestation against each other and both of them never want to mix together at any level of their life, neither at social level nor at monetary level. Both of them critique each other. The upper class says that the lower working classes are burden on the economy of the society and they are generating only eating mouths with the passage of time and don't add finances to the world economy where as the poor group says that the upper class are indolent, stationary looters of the riches of the world and they don't do anything with their hands. According to the lower class they themselves are the real producers of all types of things in the society and they do produce all the things with their hands whereas the people of the upper class remains in the deluxe villas and graceful offices and never do anything personally, they never do physical work in person, they are the looters, they are the usurpers of the riches of the world; in the society, they pass only orders for the poor to work according to their wishes and will; they only take immoral benefits of the compulsion of the poor labourers, they never do justice with the compelled labourers so they are the burden on the financial system of the world, they should also do work physically along with the workers and should get wages equal to the labourers as the workers get from the producers, it was the spirit infused by Marx in the hearts of the employees to over throw the superior group for the affluence of the world (Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*).

The increasing detestation was never appeased and this venom never permitted both the classes to merge up at their communal congregation and gathering rather the upper group measured it squalor of the gathering to permit the poor people to feast with them. Till today, the Shooder (the lowest caste and rung of the society in India) are not permitted to be there to attend the religious lectures of Geeta ( the religious book of the Hindus) and they are given employment in the cleanliness department only to clean and rub down the streets, same situation is found in Pakistan where the cleanliness department is in the hands of minority which are Christians in Pakistan, the lower class do not have a particular creed, they have different religions in different countries. They are poor people anywhere in the world, the poor servants at homes, on farms, at educational institutions, factories and in offices. They are in very poor state everywhere (Mikhail Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy*)

In these days, the poor people are mounting up, they are gaining education and with the help of education they are availing the chances of good jobs that they can lay by something as well as they can dine good foods. The poor working class sacrifices their possessions, their reserves even their houses and knick-knacks to furbish their coming up generation with the ornaments of learning which train them to mount in life. With the help of opulence in life the upper class recognizes them as their sons in law and daughters in law. They become the members of the higher group in the society but it never means that the poor class overcomes the upper class rather the learned and affluent young boys and girls become the part and parcel of the higher group and they behave like the persons of the upper class rather it is a novel strategy of the higher group to bring in the power of the time into their class and continue on their rule on the poor class. The poor people in the older period used to make all the equipments for the comfort of the higher class, they used to serve the higher group with their hands and minds in the factories, industries and at homes of the upper class and in the current times the poor class in addition to their work at homes, industries and factories, they are serving in a novel mode that they edify their children who serve the higher group in their factories, industries and offices as employees as well as some of the learned young boys and girls from the poor class become the sons in law and daughters in law and serve the boys and girls from upper class and those youthful boys and girls working at the offices and in their industries, get handsome wages and train the imminent followers to serve the higher class. The two being analyzed groups remained at the same state and the dream presented by Marx could not be materialized that the working class will over throw the higher class (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels).

The present analysis of the novel under analysis (Thomas Hardy, *Mayor of Casterbridge*) through the glasses of Marxism has demonstrated that the upper class uses very abusive language only to influence the psyche of the poor people so that they may never think to come near the boundaries of class distinction and should remain at their place.

The scrutiny of the present novel under analysis shows that the writer of the novel has attempted to cross the limitations of the class distinction and he has put forth his efforts to make both the class sit together like the equal human beings. He has delivered his view through circumstances presented in the novel that the class difference on the bases of economy should be finished. This type of attempt to finish the class distinction is found in Sajad Amin's short stories also especially in his short stories, 'We All are the Passengers' (Sajad Amin, "We All Are the Passengers") and He Forgot the Pains of His Mother (Sajad Amin, "He Forgot the Pains of His Mother").

The current novel under examination has all the features and variants of Marxism along with the novel methods of exploiting the poor with new strategies every day. The investigation of the literary piece will exhibit all the rudiments and skin tones of Marxism.

### **Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

This research employs a qualitative approach framed within the theoretical boundaries of Marxism to align with the objectives of the present study. Explanatory and interpretative techniques have been applied to analyze the text of the novel in order to trace the features, elements, and variants of Marxist thought embedded within it. The novel is examined through the lens of Marxism and class struggle as articulated by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. In addition, the perspectives of Mikhail Bakunin, particularly as presented in *Statism and Anarchy*, have been incorporated to illustrate the consequences and outcomes of class conflict.

Marxism is a socio-economic and political theory that looks at the influence of material conditions, especially modes of production, on social relations, institutions and human consciousness. It was created in the nineteenth century in the joint efforts of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. In its essence, Marxism states that the economic organization defines how society should be organized and that history is progressive as a result of the struggle between conflicting social classes. Marx and Engels (2012) define history as driven by class antagonism, asserting that "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (p. 14). This assertion makes the conflict of classes the driving force of history. Marxism thus does not perceive society as a unity, but as a group of people with conflicting material interests. Marxism has its basis on the historical materialism principle.

According to Marx (1977), "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness" (p. 21). This statement makes it clear that ideas, beliefs, and moral values are the product of economic and social conditions and not from independent entities. The superstructure, which consists of politics, law, culture and ideology, is determined by the economic base-comprising forces and relations of production. Therefore, material life conditions shape the way people view themselves and other people in the society. According to the Marxist theory, the capitalist society consists of two main classes, Bourgeoisie, which is the owners of the means of production and Proletariat, which are workers who sell their labour power on wages.

According to Marx and Engels (2012), the bourgeoisie is the ruling elite that owns capital and industrial production and the proletariat relies on wage labour to survive. This structural resistance creates exploitation and conflict. The process of exploitation is described by Marx (1976) as a surplus value: "The value of labour-power, and the value which that labour-power creates in the labour process, are two entirely different magnitudes" (p. 301). This difference shows that employees generate more value than they earn in salaries. The surplus, the overvalue, is taken by the capitalist, which is the economic basis of the inequality of classes. Marx also contends that capitalism estranges people out of their labour, their products and their human nature. According to Marx (1978), he identifies: "The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces"

(p. 71). In this case, Marx points out the contradiction of capitalist production: economic development empowers the owners of capital and undermines the independence and self-respect of labourers. Labour is commodified and human relations transformed into exchange relations. Ideology is another issue that is discussed in Marxism as a means of class power. According to Marx and Engels (1970): “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas” (p. 64). This implies that the interests of the people who own economic resources are represented in the dominant social beliefs. Ideology serves to justify inequality, and exploitation is therefore natural and inevitable. These ideas were extended by later theorists. Mikhail Bakunin opposed the centralized power and claimed that economic control could not but result in political suppression. According to Bakunin (1990), systemic inequality is caused by concentrated economic power. Equally, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon ((1994) once said: “Property is theft” (p. 13), in which he pointed out that the ownership of productive resources by individuals is what institutionalizes exploitation.

In literary criticism, Marxism offers the lens through which the narrative can be analyzed in terms of material circumstances, hierarchies of classes and ideological domination. The characters are seen as a product of economic forces and not as isolated individuals. Social conflict, moral judgments and interpersonal relationships are discussed as manifestations of structural inequality based on ownership, labour and capital accumulation. This paper uses Marxism as a systematic approach to the analysis of the novel of choice by basing the analysis on historical materialism, surplus value theory, alienation, and ideological critique.

### **Textual Analysis**

*The Mayor of Casterbridge* presents a vivid portrayal of the struggles faced by individuals striving to ascend the social hierarchy, the moral compromises required to secure financial stability, and the pervasive influence of wealth on human thought and interaction. From the outset, Hardy (1886) foregrounds the commodification of human relationships through the shocking wife-sale scene, where Henchard publicly auctions Susan, crying, “Who’ll have her?” (p. 7), and finalizing the bargain with the curt declaration, “Done!” (p. 9). His insistence—“I meant it. She shall go to the highest bidder” (p. 8)—reduces marriage to a commercial contract and exposes how economic desperation transforms intimate bonds into negotiable property. Michael Henchard’s journey from poverty to prosperity and eventual ruin illustrates the transformative and often corrosive power of economic status. Following the sale, Henchard attempts moral reform, keeping “his vow of total abstinence for twenty-one years” (p. 24), a period that coincides with his rise to civic prominence. Through relentless labour, “He worked hard, as a rule, in his business, and acquired a reputation for being a man of character” (p. 26), suggesting that social mobility in Victorian society depends upon discipline, self-regulation, and public respectability. Yet Hardy’s tragic philosophy—encapsulated in the assertion “Character is fate” (p. 110)—implies that personal flaws ultimately undermine economic achievement.

The novelist also interrogates intra-class rivalry and capitalist competition through Henchard’s relationship with Donald Farfrae. As the narrative progresses, “The Scotchman had got the corn trade of the town in his hands” (p. 168), symbolizing the displacement of traditional authority by modern commercial efficiency. Henchard’s humiliation deepens as he realizes that “He had been displaced by the young Scotchman” (p. 175), reflecting the ruthless instability of capitalist enterprise where status and wealth are perpetually contested. Hardy further critiques the commodification of women within this economic framework. Susan’s sale literalizes female objectification, while Lucetta’s social vulnerability underscores how women’s security depends upon advantageous marriage. Her anxious realization that she may have “committed herself to a false step” (p. 214) highlights the fragile intersection of reputation, desire, and financial dependence in a patriarchal economy. Henchard’s tragic decline ultimately reveals the emotional cost of a society organized around material wealth. Once a prosperous mayor, he becomes socially and economically marginalized, ending his life in isolation. His final request—“That Elizabeth-Jane Farfrae be not told of my death, or made to grieve on account of me” (p. 302)—signals his complete erasure from familial and civic memory. Through Henchard’s rise and fall, Hardy not only depicts class struggle between rich and poor but also exposes intra-



class competition, social jealousy, and the destabilizing effects of capitalism on Victorian society.

The leading character, Michael Henchard, embodies both the struggles of the lower class and the aspirations of the upper class. At the beginning of the novel, he represents the working poor, wandering in search of employment and burdened by economic insecurity. He arrives at Weydon-Priors “with his wife and child, a hay-trusser by trade” (p. 5), a detail that situates him firmly within the rural laboring class. His work is physically demanding and socially precarious, underscoring his marginality within the economic hierarchy. This condition aligns with Karl Marx’s argument in *Das Kapital* that the proletariat, despite relentless labour, remains structurally disadvantaged within capitalist systems. Henchard’s impulsive act of selling Susan dramatizes both economic desperation and moral collapse. After the auction, Hardy (1886) juxtaposes human brutality with animal tenderness: “In contrast with the harshness of the act just ended within the tent was the sight of several horses crossing their necks and rubbing each other lovingly as they waited in patience to be harnessed for the homeward journey” (p. 8). The image exposes the degradation inherent in commodification. In reducing his wife to an object of exchange, Henchard not only dehumanizes Susan but symbolically diminishes himself. The marketplace logic that governs livestock now governs marriage, revealing the penetration of capitalist exchange into intimate life.

Yet Henchard’s trajectory also illustrates the transformative power of economic advancement. Through discipline and ambition, he rises to become a prosperous corn-merchant and eventually Mayor of Casterbridge. His social ascent demonstrates how material success reshapes identity and worldview. As Hardy (1886) observes, “He worked hard, as a rule, in his business, and acquired a reputation for being a man of character” (p. 26). Prosperity enables Henchard to adopt the attitudes and authority of the bourgeoisie, reflecting Marx’s contention that social being determines consciousness. Economic elevation thus produces not merely financial security but a shift in self-perception and social alignment. However, Hardy (1886) also emphasizes the instability of such transformations. Henchard’s later decline into bankruptcy reveals the fragility of identity under changing material conditions. His fall confirms the precariousness of status in a competitive capitalist society, where fortune fluctuates and reputation is vulnerable to market forces. The novel’s social commentary becomes explicit in the remark: “Straightforward dealings don’t bring profit—’tis the sly and the underhand that get on in these times!” (p. 15). This observation suggests a moral economy distorted by opportunism, implying that success often depends upon manipulation rather than integrity. Since the day of the fair, a sense of moral and social malaise pervades the narrative landscape. The once-vibrant fair scene gives way to a harsher commercial world where survival favors the cunning. Henchard appears, at least temporarily, suited to these conditions; yet Hardy foreshadows an inevitable reckoning. His rise and fall illustrates the fluidity of class identity and the extent to which economic structures shape personal destiny. Ultimately, Henchard’s life exemplifies the Marxist notion that capitalist systems generate alienation and instability, transforming individuals according to material circumstance and exposing the tenuous boundary between proletarian struggle and bourgeois aspiration.

Hardy (1886) employs Marxist principles to reveal that wealth functions as a central determinant of human behavior and social relationships, shaping not only the opportunities available to individuals but also their moral and emotional choices. The novel consistently emphasizes that human interactions are often governed more by economic considerations than by ethical or affective concerns, reflecting a society in which material prosperity dictates social hierarchy and personal influence. Henchard’s sale of his wife, Susan, and their infant daughter, Elizabeth-Jane, for a mere five guineas exemplifies the extreme lengths to which economic necessity can compel an individual, reducing intimate and sacred human bonds to mere transactional exchanges (Hardy, Ch. 1). This act illustrates the profound alienation inherent in a system where survival and economic advancement outweigh personal loyalty, affection, and moral responsibility. Similarly, the character of Farfrae demonstrates how wealth functions as a magnet for social and romantic favor: Elizabeth-Jane and, later, Lucetta are drawn to Farfrae not primarily for his virtues or character, but because of the social power and security conferred by his prosperity. Susan is horrified to discover that her husband has risen to such

heights. This successful version of Henchard stands in stark contrast to the itinerant man with an alcohol addiction who sold her at the town fair, leaving her feeling overpowered: “He is not how I thought he would be—he overpowers me! I don’t wish to see him any more” (Hardy, 1886, p. 23). Through these dynamics, Hardy (1886) exposes the ways in which social desirability and relational alliances are mediated by economic status rather than personal merit. Henchard himself, despite his past emotional entanglements, seeks to exploit Lucetta’s wealth to recover his financial stability, further reinforcing the notion that individuals are guided primarily by material incentives rather than moral or emotional imperatives. In doing so, Hardy (1886) critiques a society structured by economic determinism, where human relations—romantic, familial, and social—are subordinated to the imperatives of wealth and class, and where moral considerations are frequently compromised by the pressures of material survival and social ambition.

Hardy (1886) further explores that class struggle is not limited to interactions between rich and poor; it also manifests prominently within the upper class itself. Farfrae and Henchard, both having achieved economic advancement, exemplify how competition and rivalry arise even among members of the bourgeoisie. As the narrator observes, “The Scotchman had got the corn trade of the town in his hands” (p. 168), a development that signals Farfrae’s commercial triumph and the gradual displacement of Henchard’s authority. Henchard bitterly realizes that “He had been displaced by the young Scotchman” (p. 175), a recognition that intensifies his jealousy and sense of personal diminishment. Their conflict reveals that the pursuit of wealth and social standing does not merely create hierarchies between classes but also generates tension within the elite, exposing the fragility and instability of status in a capitalist society. Henchard’s growing envy toward Farfrae’s rising prosperity reflects the human tendency to equate material success with personal worth. Hardy (1886) encapsulates this tragic determinism in the stark assertion, “Character is fate” (p. 110), suggesting that Henchard’s pride and impulsiveness convert economic rivalry into personal antagonism. The struggle between the two men is not merely commercial; it infiltrates emotional and social spheres. When Elizabeth-Jane’s affection shifts toward Farfrae, Henchard’s reaction is shaped less by paternal concern than by wounded pride and rivalry. His later will, in which he commands, “That Elizabeth-Jane Farfrae be not told of my death, or made to grieve on account of me” (p. 302), reflects the extent to which competitive resentment has alienated him from familial bonds. Similarly, Henchard’s determination to secure Lucetta for himself, despite her attachment to Farfrae, reveals how personal relationships become entangled with economic pride and social prestige. His earlier public humiliation and Farfrae’s professional success make marriage a symbolic contest for dominance rather than an act of affection. Thus, even intimate attachments are subordinated to financial and reputational considerations. Through this intra-class conflict, Hardy (1886) portrays the bourgeoisie as engaged in a continuous negotiation of power where prosperity and prestige are inseparable. The rivalry between Henchard and Farfrae demonstrates that capitalist society breeds not only class division but also antagonism within the elite itself. Competition, suspicion, and emotional estrangement emerge as intrinsic features of a system structured around wealth. In this way, Hardy anticipates Marxist notions of alienation, illustrating that economic determinism corrodes personal integrity and fractures social bonds not only between classes but within them.

The picture of social class, as defined by wealth and success, is clearly present in the minds of the people of Casterbridge. A bystander, a local townner, humbly remarks to the prominent members of a council, including Michael Henchard, the Mayor of Casterbridge: “Ah, lots of them, when they began life, were no more than I be now!” (Hardy, 1886, p. 33). This statement reflects the belief that achieving a good position in a workplace brings wealth, and with wealth comes high social status in society. Even Michael Henchard’s ex-wife is not exempt from this perception. When she contemplates being reunited with her former husband, she feels humble upon seeing him as the Mayor of Casterbridge: “Yes, yes,” answered her companion hastily. “I have seen him, and it is enough for me! Now I only want to go—pass away—die” (Hardy, 1886, p. 35). This situation illustrates Marx’s concept of the mode of production, where those who possess capital live separately from workers, and this distinction is widely recognized in society. Despite being the Mayor, Michael

Henchard is first and foremost a successful businessman with workers employed in his company. His wealth and business success enable his appointment as Mayor, confirming his position as one of the highest-class individuals in Casterbridge.

A striking and provocative aspect of Hardy's (1886) Marxist vision is his treatment of women as economic commodities, which serves to highlight the extreme consequences of a society governed by material wealth and economic determinism. Henchard's wife, Susan, and their daughter, Elizabeth-Jane, are depicted as saleable objects, stripped of personal agency, autonomy, and emotional consideration, and exchanged solely to satisfy immediate financial needs (Hardy, Ch. 1). Through this depiction, Hardy (1886) illustrates a society in which human relationships, even those most intimate and sacred, are subordinated to economic imperatives. Women, in this context, are not valued for their individuality, character, or emotional contributions, but are treated as instruments through which men can secure financial stability, social advantage, or personal gain. Hardy (1886) thereby introduces a variant of Marxist critique in which the commodification of human beings extends beyond labor and material goods to include women, emphasizing how capitalist structures can transform social and familial bonds into mechanisms of transaction and utility. The narrative further underscores the moral and psychological consequences of such commodification, revealing how economic pressures can compel men to violate social and ethical norms, reducing marriage, family, and affection to matters of financial negotiation. By portraying women as objects of economic exchange, Hardy (1886) critiques a social system in which economic power dictates value, status, and human worth, demonstrating that economic determinism penetrates not only public and professional spheres but also the most personal and emotional aspects of life. This treatment of women emphasizes the intersection of class, wealth, and gender, revealing that under the pressures of economic hierarchy, marginalized individuals—particularly women—are rendered vulnerable to exploitation, manipulation, and dehumanization, making Hardy's (1886) work a profound social commentary on both Marxist and feminist dimensions of Victorian society.

*The Mayor of Casterbridge* exposes the profound social, moral, and psychological consequences of an economically determined society, revealing the intricate ways in which wealth shapes human life. Hardy (1886) presents a world where financial capital dictates thought, behavior, and social identity, determining not only one's access to resources but also the very way individuals perceive themselves and others. The poor, bound by economic necessity, are compelled into servitude, exploitation, and moral compromise, often sacrificing personal desires, dignity, and even familial bonds to survive (Hardy, Ch. 1; Ch. 5). Meanwhile, the upper class, though ostensibly privileged, is not immune to the pressures of wealth; internal conflict, rivalry, and jealousy emerge among the bourgeoisie as the pursuit of prosperity governs ambition, personal relations, and social maneuvering (Hardy, Ch. 19; Ch. 25). Hardy also emphasizes the commodification of human life, particularly in the treatment of women, where wives and daughters are reduced to economic instruments, exchanged or sought after as sources of wealth rather than recognized as autonomous individuals (Hardy, Ch. 1; Ch. 22). Through these interwoven narratives, the novel illustrates Marxist principles in action, showing how class divisions, labor exploitation, and the pursuit of capital shape not only material conditions but also psychological dispositions, ethical frameworks, and interpersonal dynamics. Ultimately, Hardy's (1886) work provides a nuanced critique of Victorian society, demonstrating that economic determinism extends far beyond material inequality, penetrating social relations, personal morality, and the very structure of human experience.

## Conclusion

Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* offers a profound exploration of the relationship between social class, economic power, and human behavior, showing how material conditions shape identity, morality, and social interactions. Through the rise and fall of Michael Henchard, the novel demonstrates that wealth and social status profoundly influence thought, conduct, and relationships, with the upper class exercising dominance over the lower class while the poor are subjected to exploitation, subjugation, and alienation. The text exposes

the inherent conflict between social strata, illustrating that class struggle permeates both public and private life. Hardy also highlights the psychological consequences of economic mobility, as Henchard's rise to wealth transforms his values, behavior, and social identity, while his decline returns him to the vulnerabilities and limitations of the lower class. The narrative critiques entrenched hierarchies, revealing the mechanisms of economic exploitation, social inequality, and class antagonism, while emphasizing that wealth determines not only material circumstances but also moral judgment, social conduct, and human relationships. Ultimately, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* functions as both a literary masterpiece and a social commentary, showing how class divisions and economic conditions shape individual consciousness and societal structures, reflecting the enduring influence of material circumstances on human life, interactions, and moral values. ndered bought slaves (Mikhail Bakunin, *Appeal to the Slavs*).

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