

# Modernism vs. Traditionalism in The Mayor of Casterbridge

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## An Essay on Modernism vs. Traditionalism in The Mayor of Casterbridge

During the first half of the 19th century English society was making the difficult transition from a pre-industrial Britain to 'modern' Victorian times. In agriculture, most of the transition took place around 1846 with the repeal of the corn laws. This allowed foreign grain to be imported into England for the first time. Consequently, the entire structure and methods of agriculture in Britain were greatly altered. Much of the action in Thomas Hardy's novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge* takes place during the years surrounding 1846. These were the years in which traditionalists took their last stand before being defeated in the name of progress. The contrasts between [Henchard](#), a man relying on the traditional way of life and Farfrae, a man intrigued by modern ideas, illustrate the inevitability that progress and modernization will overcome tradition.

The conflict of tradition versus modernization is shown through Henchard and Farfrae's contrasting approaches to business, their contrasting attitudes toward modernization and their changing roles in Casterbridge society. The contrast between Henchard and Farfrae's business attitudes demonstrates the conflict between the traditional and modern

approaches to business.

[Michael Henchard](#) and Donald Farfrae take very different approaches to bookkeeping and managing the employees of Henchard's Business. Henchard is a man who has an old-fashioned attitude toward business; he is unable to write properly and as a result his financial records are poorly kept and unorganized. The majority of his business records are kept in his head. Farfrae, however, is a young man who approaches business with a modern attitude. Farfrae keeps the business account books in perfect order: not hesitating to work late doing it. A light shone from the office window, and there being no blind to screen the interior Henchard could see Donald Farfrae still seated where he had left him, initiating himself into the managerial work of the house by overhauling the books. Henchard entered, merely observing, 'Don't let me interrupt you, if ye will stay so late.' He stood behind Farfrae's chair, watching his dexterity in clearing up the numerical fogs which had been allowed to grow so thick in Henchard's books as almost to baffle even the Scotchman's perspicacity. The corn-factor's mie...

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...d there was a great ringing of bells in Casterbridge, and the combined brass, wood, catgut and leather bands played around the town with more prodigality of percussion notes than ever before. Farfrae was Mayor-the two-hundredth of a series forming an elective dynasty dating back to the days of Charles I... (P. 237/238)

Farfrae's position as Mayor is representative of modernization being welcomed into Casterbridge. Tradition has been replaced by the progression of [modernism](#) and those that try to hold on and maintain the traditional ways, like Henchard, can only fall behind and be forgotten. Both Henchard and Farfrae are representational of how modernization progresses over tradition and how the advance of technology makes us lose the traditional skills we once treasured. Henchard builds his whole life on such values and methods only to be left behind when Farfrae and his modern methods are accepted in Casterbridge. Just as England went through the change in agriculture due to industrialization, Thomas Hardy's Casterbridge society saw modernism progress over tradition; an inevitable change that will continue to happen until we run out of things to learn.

Bibliography: None required

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