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The Outsider Within the Victorian Community: Nicholas Bulstrode in Middlemarch and Michael Henchard in The Mayor of Casterbridge

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The Outsider Within the Victorian Community: Nicholas Bulstrode in *Middlemarch* and
Michael Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*

by

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Marian Conklin

ABSTRACT

Many have written about the theme of interconnection in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, where individual lives and fates are woven into the larger life of the community, but few have written about this theme in relation to *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Thomas Hardy's fictional and historical depiction of Dorchester and the larger area of Wessex. Hardy's novel about "the life and death of a man of character," is a complex and psychological characterization, but it also is representative of a particular province during a time of rapid change in community structure, just as *Middlemarch* is. I would like to suggest that it is through the complex characterizations of the outsider and outcast from the community that Eliot and Hardy reinforce the theme of interconnection. My aim will be to highlight this point through an examination of Nicholas Bulstrode, the *Middlemarch* banker with a shady past, and Michael Henchard, the *Casterbridge* mayor with skeletons of his own, illustrating the integral role these two characters play in reinforcing the authors' themes of interconnection and disconnection within their novels. Although Henchard is the main character of *Casterbridge* and Bulstrode a minor character in *Middlemarch*, both characters are integral to the notion of the outsider within the enclosed Victorian community.

I will develop this idea by first looking at the role community plays in each character's concept of self. Then I will look at the degree to which these characters are a part of their communities and the point at which this connection begins to unravel. Finally, I will examine the role introspection plays in revealing to each man his lack of connection, not only to his community, but also to himself, thus illustrating the Victorian concept of interconnection and interdependence as a vital part of selfhood and perhaps of survival.

Introduction

If it can be said that no man is an island, then it is the Victorian novelists who proved this point. The Victorian sense of community was particularly profound, and nowhere more so than in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, "both in terms of its interwoven human relationships, and...a series of developing individual destinies" enclosed within a provincial community of the 1830's (Rogers 378). Eliot's novel was finished in 1872; fourteen years later, in 1886, Thomas Hardy published *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, also set in an enclosed community of the 1830's or '40's.

There the similarities between the two novels would end, were it not for the parallels between the circumstances and the motives of banker Nicholas Bulstrode in *Middlemarch* and title character Michael Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Both men are important in their respective communities; they are civic and business leaders who are respected, if not loved. Both have shady secrets from the past which lead to public disclosure, humiliation, and exile. Much has been written about these characters, but their names are not connected in any significant way in the body of Victorian criticism. This omission is probably attributable to the fact that Henchard is the title character in Hardy's novel while Bulstrode serves as a minor character in Eliot's novel. However, the two characters are functionally linked. Although Bulstrode's plot is subordinate to the central plot of *Middlemarch*, his story line is woven through them all as a cautionary tale against any individual who sets himself apart, through pride and

deceit, from his community, resulting in ruin. It is this concept of community as imperfect yet essential for happiness which is one of the central themes of George Eliot's novel. Similarly, Henchard, through pride and deceit, isolates himself from the community from which he derives his identity. Hardy's conceptualization of community is different, darker than that of Eliot, yet the plot indicates that communal ties are essential for survival in a somewhat hostile world. This thesis will examine the role of community in the structure and destruction of self-identity for these two characters.

In a brief survey of criticism that is related to my topic, I found several articles and books that were very helpful. Rosemary Ashton's book, *George Eliot: A Life*, gave background on what Eliot studied and what was going on in her life as she wrote *Middlemarch*. Simon Gatrell's book, *Thomas Hardy and the Proper Study of Mankind*, gives some background on writers who may have influenced Hardy's fiction. I gained some insight into Victorian understanding of psychology and its influence on the novel from Nicholas Dames' article, "'The Withering of the Individual': Psychology in the Victorian Novel." Two books supplied material related to state of mind and criminal behavior: Lisa Rodensky's *The Crime in Mind: Criminal Responsibility and the Victorian Novel*, and William A Davis's *Thomas Hardy and the Law: Legal Presences in Hardy's Life and Fiction*. For insight on the inner conflicts of the two characters, I used Eugene Goodheart's "The Licensed Trespasser: The Omniscient Narrator in *Middlemarch*," and *Imagined Human Beings: A Psychological Approach to Character and Conflict in Literature* by Bernard J. Paris. Other articles provided me with some lesser information or insights, and they are mentioned in my bibliography.

Chapter One: Self Identity and Community

Bulstrode: Entrance into the Community Through Marriage

Much has been written about the Middlemarch community. The fact that the novel's original subtitle was *A Study of Provincial Life* says a lot about George Eliot's concept for the novel. In fact, community is the central theme in this novel. Each character is an integral part of the community, and the community is an important part of the life of each character. The image of the web sets the tone for the novel, for the web that is the community connects the threads of all the lives within it. The omniscient narrator declares: "I at least have so much to do in unraveling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven, that all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web" (141). The connections of lives within Middlemarch are intricate; all lives touch each other. The narrator also speaks of the "gossamer web" of romantic love, "made of spontaneous beliefs and indefinable joys, yearnings of one life towards another, visions of completeness, indefinite trust" (346). It is significant that this web refers to a relationship that ultimately is less than successful; the web that binds people's lives can have ill effects as well as good.

George Eliot does not use the web only as a symbol of connection in *Middlemarch*; the narrator speaks of a web in connection with a character's thought

process. Bulstrode's conviction that his actions are divinely blessed has been "perpetually spinning...into intricate thickness, like masses of spider-web, padding the moral sensibility" (617). In this manner, the web, symbolic of community, conversely is also symbolic of anti-social behavior as Bulstrode gets caught in his own complex web of deception. In *Middlemarch*, those individuals who do not truly act in the interest of the community or serve as an integral part of the community cannot prosper forever.

Such is the case of Nicholas Bulstrode. In the list of *Middlemarch* characters, the name Nicholas Bulstrode would appear far down the page, for he is not one of the key figures. However, because his fortune is linked with that of Lydgate, one of the main characters, his role in the novel is one of importance. Both characters fall from positions of status within the community to disgrace and exile, but Bulstrode loses his identity in this process as well. This loss is due to the fact that Bulstrode's concept of self stems from the power inherent in his two overlapping positions within the community: his role as an evangelical lay person and his role as a philanthropic businessman. Bulstrode uses these positions to control a community that he keeps at a distance and thus isolates himself from the fact that his money, power, and position were gained through dishonest and unscrupulous means. When he was young, Brother Bulstrode the Dissenter had powerful speaking and preaching skills which won him a small, loyal following that included a wealthy older widow whom he married. His duplicity in hiding the existence of the widow's estranged daughter and grandson resulted in his inheriting her full fortune at her death, at which time he withdrew his assets from her less-than-respectable family

business and moved to Middlemarch, where he got a fresh start, made a “good” marriage, and created a “good” self, all based on secrecy and lies of omission.

In the weave of the Middlemarch community, Nicholas Bulstrode is at once prominent and an outsider, even though he has raised a family and conducted business in Middlemarch for some time. The people of Middlemarch have never been “fond of strangers coming into a town” (295). Those people who have resented Bulstrode question his lineage and observe that “five-and-twenty years ago nobody had ever heard of a Bulstrode in Middlemarch” (124). This statement indicates the extent to which an established provincial community at the time of the Reform Bill in England remained closed to a non-native. Bulstrode, as “a man not born in the town, and altogether of dimly known origin” is accepted in his circle and tolerated outside of it only because he has married Harriet Vincy, who is from a “real Middlemarch family” of established manufacturers and because he has enhanced her status within the community through his wealth (96).

Harriet Vincy Bulstrode serves as her husband’s staunchest supporter, intervening between him and members of her family and the community. When her brother, Walter Vincy, claims that Bulstrode “doesn’t always show that friendly spirit towards your family that might have been expected of him,” Harriet speaks up for her husband (346). When her good friend Mrs. Pymdale confides that she dislikes outsiders, Harriet links her husband with Abraham and Moses and reminds her friend of the Christian duty to “entertain strangers” (295). Harriet feels somewhat inferior to her husband concerning “her own want of spirituality” and admires him so much that she thinks his “memoirs

should be written” (348). Harriet’s submissive and supportive personality enables Bulstrode to maintain his position within the community. As he comes to understand fully later in the novel, life without Harriet would be very difficult, if not impossible.

Bulstrode’s financial prowess and his marriage may have given him a foothold in the community, but his power alienates the residents of Middlemarch. For one thing, he knows the town’s “financial secrets” and can “touch the springs of their credit” (155). He extends a great many “private minor loans” that are accompanied by a strict inquiry into the circumstances of the debtor, thereby gaining a “domain in his neighbours’ hope and fear as well as gratitude,” thus serving Bulstrode’s main principle “to gain as much power as possible, that he might use it for the glory of God” (156-57). Bulstrode, however, uses his power not to glorify God but to humble everyone else through his moral microscope. Bulstrode’s lofty religious ideals and self-absorption stem from his inner shame and guilt over his past. George Eliot uses shame in her novels as a means of binding a community together in a “Darwinian” manner that also results in persecution of those who transgress (Hirsch 84). So the reader senses that, ultimately, the person who stands above the community will eventually be ejected from that community. Beyond his unpleasant and unethical business practices, Bulstrode is alienated from the people of Middlemarch by birth, for he is not part of the landed gentry over whom he presumes to preside in local matters. Although Bulstrode is a “philanthropic banker” (88) and a man of means, wealthy Mr. Featherstone puts him in his place as a “speckilating fellow” (111) because he’s not a landowner. Significantly, Bulstrode eventually buys the most prominent piece

of land in Middlemarch because he craves the power that comes from “local landed proprietorship” (519).

Beyond his economical and social status, another element that divides Bulstrode from his community is his separatist spiritual agenda. Bulstrode makes a point to not conform to the moral standards of the Middlemarch populace, standards he views as deplorably bankrupt. Bulstrode uses this superior and pious demeanor to separate and distinguish himself from the rest of Middlemarch. At a dinner, he refuses to participate in conversations about worldly things and bows in response to a gentleman’s mild “oath,” in order to express his dislike for “coarseness and profanity” (89). However, it is not enough for Bulstrode to elevate himself; he must also humble others. Bulstrode is a man who rarely shrinks from his duty to “point out other people’s errors” (128). Then there is the matter of the physical manifestations of his piety: a “subdued tone” to his voice, a “sickly air” about him, and the “Franciscan tints” of his complexion (92-93). Bulstrode not only looks and acts as if he is “not of this world,” he also isolates himself further by adopting the attitude that there is little he can do to “arrest the errors of the obstinately worldly” (347). He does not have any close friends, nor does he want any, preferring instead to orchestrate events in the Middlemarch community through his lofty position as a spiritual philanthropist. He sees himself as a Christian martyr who will not conceal his spiritual agenda in public matters “in the face of persecution” (127). Possessing this mindset, Bulstrode not only alienates the members of his community but also rationalizes his actions as service to a higher authority. Eugene Goodheart states that Bulstrode “exemplifies the disparity between motive and ideal...his life is unconsciously devoted to

not knowing himself” (557). Because he is unable to look at his own actions, Bulstrode lives a false ideal within a life of relative isolation.

The general population of Middlemarch tends to categorize Bulstrode as either Methodist or evangelical or as Pharisee and hypocrite (88, 114). Mrs. Taft spreads false tales about Bulstrode because the rumors justify her “suspicions of evangelical laymen” (163). Bulstrode’s brother-in-law, Walter Vincy, who sees himself as a “plain Churchman,” accuses Bulstrode of having a “tyrannical spirit, wanting to play bishop and banker” (130). Although they generally do not thwart Bulstrode, most people grumble about him behind his back, and this is the crux of Bulstrode’s dilemma. While he prefers to abstain from “worldly” concerns, he needs the cooperation of the Middlemarch population in order to achieve his agenda within the community. Bulstrode may want no friends, but he is in dire need of them, and while his marriage gains him entry into Middlemarch, marriage alone is not sufficient to gain or maintain his standing within the community.

Henchard: Entrance into the Community Following Divorce

Although the characters of Nicholas Bulstrode in *Middlemarch* and of Michael Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* are completely different, their need for approval and a respectable social standing within their particular communities is identical. The image of community that dominates *Middlemarch* also is a strong theme in Hardy’s novel, but this theme is achieved in his novel through descriptions of the landscape. Weydon Priors, a village outside of Casterbridge which is “carpeted with dust” and whose trees are “dingy green” (21) is the place where Henchard leaves his wife and child,

the place where they learn his current whereabouts twenty years later, and the place where Henchard returns when he leaves Casterbridge. The dimness and decay of the place serve as a contrast to the livelier town of Casterbridge, surrounded by “wide fertile land,” where the farmer’s boy works a stone’s throw from the town clerk and barns with high doorways open “directly upon the main thoroughfare” (92). Although Casterbridge is not urban, it is bustling, “the pole, focus, or nerve-knot of the surrounding country life,” where farming conditions affect those who work in town and the aristocrats as well, causing each to enter into “the troubles and joys” of the other (62). In contrast, the darker side of the town is represented by the bridge at the bottom of town, described as “sunless, even in summer,” which crosses the “slow, noiseless and dark” river (127). This is the end of the line, where public hangings take place and where the “*misérables*...shabby genteel men...whom the world did not treat kindly” stare into the river, avoiding the gaze of others, and sometimes even jump into the river to end it all (224). Those who are comfortably placed in the community of Casterbridge are at its center of bustling commerce; those who are shut out end up at the bottom or exiled from Casterbridge to some other place. Like Middlemarch, Casterbridge offers community to those in good standing but firmly shuts the door to those who are in disgrace.

Henchard’s concept of self, like Bulstrode’s, is grounded in his community and based on two interrelated things: his public position in Casterbridge, and his private standing with the people he is closest to. Above all else, Henchard wants others to think highly of him. Unlike Bulstrode, Michael Henchard enters the community of Casterbridge not through marriage, but through “divorce” from a wife, who, to his way of

thinking, is a liability. As a twenty-one year old hay-trusser, Henchard sees his marriage to Susan as the “frustration” of his “high aims and hopes, and the extinction of his energies” (10). In a drunken state, Henchard auctions off Susan and their daughter Elizabeth-Jane as his “goods” in a tent for five guineas. Sober, without “revealing his conduct,” Henchard searches for his family, finds they have emigrated, and decides to move to Casterbridge to begin a new life (20). Nearly two decades later, he has achieved the life he had wished for.

Unlike Bulstrode, Henchard brought no assets into the community of Casterbridge when he arrived with his basket of tools. On his own, without a family or family connections, Henchard “worked his way up from nothing” to become “a pillar of the town” (37). Although the setting of Hardy’s novel is similar in time and locale to Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, the community of Casterbridge is very different, more open than that of Middlemarch. Although there are definite social classes in both fictional towns, the social boundaries in Casterbridge are more fluid. Henchard’s neighbors admire him for using his “one talent of energy to create a position of affluence out of absolutely nothing” (220). In this setting, a hay-trusser with lofty ambitions can become mayor, “the powerfulest member of the town-council, and quite a principal man in the country round besides” (37). Henchard is looked up to as a community leader and a business leader as well, but his work is his life, and he has generally avoided the company of women. He has become part of his community but has no private life to speak of.

Then Henchard’s “lost” wife, Susan, and her daughter Elizabeth-Jane find him, and Henchard, who is known as a “lonely widow man” (36), has a problem. He wants to

make restitution, but he needs to keep his past a secret in order to protect his public reputation and to prevent his daughter from being shamed and despising him (72). He solves this by “courting” and marrying Susan again in a loveless arrangement whereby Susan can secure her daughter’s future and Henchard finds a potential companion in Elizabeth-Jane. In fact, this man, who, by his own admission, is “by nature something of a woman-hater” (78) with “well-known haughty indifference to the society of womankind” and a “silent avoidance of converse with the sex” (83) becomes “very fond” (88) of his daughter. The acquisition of a wife and daughter doesn’t change Henchard’s standing within the community, but the marriage does create a private domestic life for him which he did not have before. Henchard doesn’t seem to particularly want a family. His private motive for this arrangement is to “make amends to his neglected Susan,” provide a “comfortable home for Elizabeth-Jane,” and pay restitution through “lowering...his dignity in public opinion by marrying so comparatively humble a woman” (83-84). Ironically, the marriage does not lower his public image, for local opinion on Henchard and his marriage is divided as always; some say Henchard has a “bluebeardy look,” while others feel that he is “a godsend” for Susan (86).

The divided opinion is due to the fact that, while Henchard has maintained a respectable position for some time, not everyone in Casterbridge is fond of the mayor. While people have “collectively profited” from Henchard, they have also been “made to wince individually on more than one occasion” (114). The minor tradesmen and the poor have suffered from the bad wheat that Henchard bought and distributed. Henchard admits his responsibility and hires a new manager to avoid repeating the same mistake in

the future, but the people want him to replace their bad supply of wheat instead. Henchard, however, is unwilling to assume that level of responsibility and angrily responds that “you must make allowances for the accidents of a large business” (38). When things are going well and he has public approval, Henchard is a friendly and urbane man, but when the tide of public opinion turns against him, Henchard becomes antisocial and angry.

A lot of public resentment of Henchard is due to his changeable personality. On the one hand, he is perfectly comfortable in the “chair of dignity,” wearing a suit with “jeweled studs, and a heavy gold chain,” but on the other hand, there is “temper under the thin bland surface” (38). Henchard’s attempt to discipline an employee who is chronically late becomes “tyrannical,” and he publicly humiliates the man, necessitating that his manager intercede between the angry employer and hapless employee (100). The narrator of the novel describes Henchard as Faustian: “a vehement, gloomy being, who had quitted the ways of vulgar men without light to guide him on a better way” (115). Simon Gatrell touched on Henchard’s instability in *Thomas Hardy and the Study of Mankind*, linking John Stuart Mill’s principle from *On Liberty* to Hardy’s treatment of characters such as Henchard who are full of passion. Mill maintained that passionate men have a potential for greatness so long as their impulses are balanced by their consciences. Henchard’s conscience fails to overrule his passions, making him the quintessential tragic hero (84-85).

It is Henchard’s instability that causes him to lose everyone he is close to. Originally, Henchard pursues Donald Farfrae as an employee because he likes him; he

reminds him of his brother (49), and Farfrae's "judgment and knowledge" complement Henchard's "strength and bustle" (49). In fact, it is less a business transaction than a contract for friendship. When the two men shake hands on Farfrae's hiring, Henchard says, "now you are my friend" (65), and he moves him into his home. Henchard, who knows "no moderation," confides his deepest, darkest secret to Farfrae because Henchard is lonely and has "nobody else to speak to" (76-77). But Henchard's insecurity ultimately drives Farfrae off, his wife Susan dies, and then a lonely Henchard gives in to his impulse to tell Elizabeth-Jane that she is his daughter, only to discover that she in fact is not. This knowledge torments Henchard, who now treats his "daughter" with harshness and contempt. Predictably, it is only when he drives her away that he realizes he will miss her. Henchard, who craves closeness to people, is so overbearing and possessive that he ends up alone.

Self-identity, for both Bulstrode the banker and Henchard the mayor, is largely based on status. When they rank high on the public scale, both men feel good about themselves. Without that public approval, the men feel as though their worth is diminished. While Bulstrode likes to think of himself as beyond the need for approval from the world, he in fact is highly conscious of and protective of his public image. Bulstrode likes Lydgate simply because he is a stranger to Middlemarch: "One can begin so many things with a new person!—even begin to be a better man" (125). Bulstrode neither sees Lydgate as an individual, nor has he any interest in Lydgate's concerns; all his focus is on the potential a newcomer has to fulfill Bulstrode's own personal agenda. When he loses an argument with Vincy, Bulstrode's armor is pierced sufficiently to see

himself for a moment in a “coarse unflattering mirror” (131). Bulstrode also takes things personally. When public opinion turns against the new hospital that Bulstrode has funded, he sees this as a “determination to thwart himself, prompted mainly by a hatred” of his religion (442). Bulstrode does not require that people like him, but he does need to feel that their objections to him are invalid.

While Henchard’s self-perception does not shift with every disagreement, his identity is definitely tied to his reputation and status within Casterbridge. The need to avoid public embarrassment rules Henchard’s actions. Twenty years before, it was his reluctance to reveal the facts behind his wife’s disappearance that made his search fruitless. When he meets his estranged wife again nearly twenty years later, he arranges the meeting to take place at the “Ring,” an ancient Roman amphitheatre described in gothic terms as “melancholy...lonely...sinister,” now used for “appointments of a furtive kind,” (71). When Farfrae disagrees with Henchard at work, Henchard is not upset by the insubordination, but by the fact that Farfrae challenged him in front of his employees. Henchard will do anything to preserve his reputation and status within the town of Casterbridge, but it is because he identifies himself through his status that he eventually destroys both his status and himself.

Chapter Two: Loss of Community/Loss of identity

Deception Leads to Isolation

Secrets have no place within a community; they will eventually be revealed, and when a man's dark past comes to light, he loses his place within the community. This is the strong message of both *Middlemarch* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Both Bulstrode and Henchard will do almost anything to suppress the truth about their pasts, but their desperate moves are to no avail. In fact, it is Bulstrode's desperation to hide the truth that causes him to make the mistakes that actually bring about his ruin. In these novels, present mistakes weigh more heavily in the end than past blunders. Both men are rejected by their communities. They lose their status, their positions, and they are even affected economically. This loss is even harder to bear because they end up alone, rejected and isolated from their former associates. These changes force both Bulstrode and Henchard to face their mistakes, but now that their self-images have been tarnished in the eyes of their communities, they have lost all confidence and vanity.

The biggest difference between the characters of Nicholas Bulstrode and Michael Henchard is that Bulstrode will resort to anything, including murder, to preserve his reputation, while Henchard's actions are questionable rather than criminal. To begin with, Bulstrode paid an "adequate sum" twenty years before to John Raffles, the investigator who kept quiet about the existence of heirs for Bulstrode's first wife's money. When Raffles resurfaces in Middlemarch after Bulstrode thought him safely

away in America, Bulstrode tries again to buy him off, this time with an annuity, but Raffles will not be bought since his chief motive is to torment Bulstrode. Bulstrode suffers greatly from the fear that, after all these years of a quiet and respectable life, he is about to be exposed. First, he attempts to give Will Ladislaw, the rightful heir, some of his money, but Will refuses to accept, preferring instead to retain his “unblemished honour,” and leave Bulstrode in possession of his “ill-gotten money” (624). When Raffles tells Caleb Garth about Bulstrode’s past, Garth quits Bulstrode’s employment but does not further the gossip, leaving Bulstrode with the “hope of secrecy” (697). Bulstrode’s aim is to somehow contain the leak the Raffles has created in his security.

In the midst of his life’s unraveling, Bulstrode also is withdrawing from the Middlemarch community, from the management of his business and his charities, and eventually from the community itself. He hopes this withdrawal will be temporary, but Bulstrode is arranging to spend some time “near the coast” (680) supposedly in order to repair his health, which has been deteriorating since Raffles’ first appearance in Middlemarch. In actuality, Bulstrode is setting up an escape plan in case the truth about his past cannot be contained, but he leaves open the possibility that this will be a temporary relocation, hoping to the last that he will avoid detection. This action cuts Bulstrode off from his normal routine, which has sustained him for decades, and it also alienates him even further from the people of Middlemarch.

In the end, Bulstrode’s carefully constructed life unravels anyway, when Raffles shows up at Stone Court, the victim of alcoholic poisoning. Lydgate instructs Bulstrode that Raffles is to receive absolutely no alcohol during his treatment because alcohol and

opium are a fatal mixture. In a moment of weakness, “irritated at the persistent life” (708) in Raffles, who is the bane of his existence, Bulstrode gives the key to the liquor cabinet to his housekeeper, who asks to ease Raffles’ suffering. As Raffles slips into a deep coma, Bulstrode watches “the enemy of his peace going irrevocably into silence” (711). Bulstrode does not confess his culpability even to himself, preferring instead to think that he has been delivered by “Providence” (717). Unfortunately for Bulstrode, Raffles had already told someone who was less discreet than Caleb Garth about Bulstrode’s past, and this news circulates around Middlemarch just as the news of Raffles’ death at Stone Court becomes known. Despite all his extraordinary measures, Bulstrode’s secrets are out, and, what is worse, he is now a suspect in Raffles’ death.

Lisa Rodensky extensively examines Bulstrode’s thought processes and actions in her book, *The Crime in Mind: Criminal Responsibility and the Victorian Novel*.

Rodensky concludes that George Eliot deliberately ensured that Bulstrode could not be held legally responsible for Raffles’ death but that he would be convicted by public opinion. In other words, Bulstrode is not responsible for Raffles’ death because he wished it or because he enabled the housekeeper to give brandy to Raffles despite Lydgate’s stern warning about the dangers of doing so, but because he both wished Raffles dead and acted in such a way as to bring that death to pass. Rodensky further notes that Eliot has readers judge Bulstrode as well, but cautions them that his thought processes are not dissimilar to everyday rationalizations; in fact, “Eliot’s interest in *Middlemarch* is in the power of public opinion as the arbiter of guilt and innocence” (151). This authorial interest in the impact of community opinion on the individual is

significantly played out through Bulstrode, to whom reputation and respect are exceedingly important. Ironically, Bulstrode, who holds the people of Middlemarch in a mild sort of contempt, actually needs those same people to hold him in high esteem, especially when he cannot even look at himself and his own behavior honestly.

In comparison to Bulstrode, Henchard arguably is a “man of character,” as the novel’s subtitle suggests, for Henchard’s sins are much smaller and of a personal rather than a criminal nature, and he deceives no one more than he deceives himself. First, after his wife Susan’s death, he tells Elizabeth-Jane that she is his natural daughter, not taking her feelings into consideration. That night, never having had any “deep respect” (125) for Susan, he opens her letter to him that was not to be opened until Elizabeth-Jane’s wedding day. This letter reveals that he is not Elizabeth-Jane’s father after all, but, feeling humiliated, he chooses not to tell her this truth. Instead, Henchard treats Elizabeth-Jane so coldly that she finally moves out, and he becomes isolated from the one person who means the most to him because he cannot face the truth. At the same time, Henchard has lost in popularity in Casterbridge to Farfrae, his former friend turned rival. When Henchard’s term as mayor ends, Farfrae is chosen to be on the town council instead of Henchard. When Henchard begins to lose business to Farfrae, he resorts to drastic buying and selling tactics that make him lose so much money, his business is turned over to the bank (189). Now Henchard’s fortunes are truly beginning to reverse.

Henchard’s real downfall occurs when he presides as magistrate over the case of a disorderly female, who turns out to be the woman who witnessed Henchard’s sale of his wife so many years before, and the woman tells Henchard’s story to the court. Unlike

Bulstrode, Henchard admits his mistakes at long last and even steps down from the bench because he is “no better than she” (202). The past that he took such care to hide all these years proves to be Henchard’s downfall precisely because it has just been revealed and wears “the aspect of a recent crime” (218). Henchard’s secret is out, and he is the talk of the town, much to the delight of his enemies. According to William A. Davis in his book, *Thomas Hardy and the Law: Legal Presences in Hardy’s Life and Fiction*, the trial is Henchard’s opportunity to face the truth about himself. However, while Henchard’s public confession reconciles his past, he continues not to see his present motivations clearly and to hurt the people he cares about and, ultimately hurt himself most of all (113).

Community Rejection and its Impact on the Individual

Rejection by the community that once held him in high esteem proves to be Henchard’s undoing. He is now bankrupt, and, worse still, his business, home, and Lucetta, the woman who had promised to marry him, are all taken over by Henchard’s self-declared rival, Farfrae; even his name on his business has been painted over. In fact, “it was strange how soon he sank in esteem,” both financially and socially: “the velocity of his descent in both aspects became accelerated every hour. He now gazed more at the pavements” (218). There is also “a film of ash” on his once fierce red face (219). He wears “the remains of an old blue cloth suit of his gentlemanly times, a rusty silk hat, and a once black satin stock, soiled and shabby” (229). He lives in a shack with his former overseer, a man who hates him. Henchard’s loss of public esteem makes him lose all self-esteem; he thinks of himself as nothing and no one.

Yet his pride still rankles. Because Elizabeth-Jane visits him Henchard decides to stay in Casterbridge and even accepts a job as “a day-labourer in the barns and granaries he formerly had owned,” thinking that “honest work was not a thing to be ashamed of” (228). Henchard decides that life will be worth living as long as he has Elizabeth-Jane as his “daughter,” the one personal connection replacing all of his former connections to the community. But resentment gets the better of him “like an irritant poison,” and Henchard begins to drink heavily again (238). He remembers Lucetta “in her narrow days,” before she inherited a fortune, and continually repeats to himself that he was once master of the man who now masters him (229). Bitterness erodes Henchard’s character until even Farfrae no longer trusts him.

Bulstrode also suffers from his community’s rejection, which finally comes at a board meeting where he has planned to “resume his old position as a man of action and influence in the public affairs of the town” (725). The chairman of the board informs Bulstrode that he is expected to either refute the “scandalous” allegations against him or to withdraw from all his positions in the town. At first, almost reflexively, Bulstrode tries to fall back on his position as a Christian minister under attack by the enemy, paraphrasing the Bible: “Who shall be my accuser?” (727). This statement creates an outcry against Bulstrode’s “canting palavered Christianity,” and a questioning of his attitude, which is “painfully inconsistent with those principles which you have sought to identify yourself with” (728). Thus, Bulstrode has to face, in public, before all of the town’s leaders, his own hypocrisy. As a result, he becomes physically ill from nervous shock and shuts himself up in his room. His physical appearance changes as well; he

looks smaller to his wife, “so withered and shrunken” (750).

Unfortunately, Nicholas Bulstrode is not the only one who suffers from his community’s rejection. His wife, Harriet, who decides to stand by her husband, mourns the end of a way of life. Her physical appearance is just as altered as Michael Henchard’s. Harriet begins a life of humiliation, replacing all her jewelry and bows and beautiful gowns with a “plain black gown, and...a plain bonnet-cap” (750). Harriet, who could have chosen to judge her husband the same way that the community has judged him, instead assumes the burden of his guilt and possesses the “courage to face painful truths that have been hidden from her during all the years of her marriage” (Raphael 79). Harriet’s courage is in stark contrast to her husband’s cowardice, for he is unable to face the things he cannot say to her, things she has to face on her own.

For both Henchard and Bulstrode, loss of community brings about a loss of self-definition. Henchard loses all the trappings that made him feel successful. His home, one of the nicest in Casterbridge, had been a home of excess. His garden held no more restraint than he did, the fruit trees “so stout, and cramped, and gnarled that they had pulled their stakes out of the ground, and stood distorted and writhing in vegetable agony, like leafy Laocoöns” (77). His home, too, was ornate, the chimney-piece composed of “intricate woodcarvings” (77). As mayor, Henchard had dressed in an evening suit with a frilled shirt, “jeweled studs, and a heavy gold chain” (34). He had held court at meetings, overpowering the opposition through his sheer physical energy. Now, no one listens to him. His house, garden, and all the finery are gone. The man who had defined himself as Mayor now has nothing, does nothing, is nothing.

Similarly, Bulstrode loses all the trappings of his estate. He must now shut up his home, The Shrubs, for good instead of for a while. He must give his beloved piece of property, the most valuable one in Middlemarch, to the tenancy of his wife's nephew, Fred Vincy, an extravagant young man of whom Bulstrode had never approved. The added expense of moving from Middlemarch puts an additional strain on his budget that was already suffering from a recent economic downturn. In addition, Bulstrode must give up management of his bank and control of all neighborhood councils. Nicholas Bulstrode, banker and Christian minister, has become Nicholas Bulstrode, thief and murderer.

Chapter Three: Community-forced Introspection

Rejection, Accountability, and Isolation

Despite all of the changes in their lives and self-perceptions, Bulstrode and Henchard have to face something infinitely more frightening: themselves. Public disgrace forces each of these two men to look inward to find the reasons for their failures, and each man has to acknowledge his mistakes, if to no one but himself. Each of these men has rationalized his behavior and his circumstances for years. Bulstrode told himself that Providence was responsible for all his successes and failures, the successes being the just rewards for Christian behavior and the failures being just punishment, if any were merited, for past sins. Henchard similarly sees his failures not as his own mistakes, but as coming from “some sinister intelligence bent on punishing him” (127). Neither man has ever admitted to himself that his actions are responsible for his fate, but public censure has a way of providing the opportunity for personal reconciliation.

Bulstrode has a lifelong habit of denial, so looking at his behavior through the eyes of his Middlemarch neighbors is very difficult and very painful. When confronted, Bulstrode gets angry, and “his intense pride and his habit of supremacy overpowered penitence, and even dread,” resulting in his prideful dismissal of both the charges as unfair and the adversary as unworthy, although when alone he breaks down and cries “like a woman” after his first encounter with “an open expression of scorn” (624). Bulstrode’s habit is to reframe everything in his mind; his recent crime is “hypothetic,”

and he even prays hypothetically, asking for pardon “*if* I have herein transgressed” (emphasis mine 724). However, when Bulstrode’s defense is rejected, when he has not one supporter left in Middlemarch, he is finally forced to see the truth, for “the terror of being judged sharpens the memory” (615). Bulstrode has been able to ignore his past until this point, but the knowledge was always there, and when others see his behavior as wrong, he has to apply his own standards to himself. Memory is at the “moral centre” of George Eliot’s novels, supplying “the emotional glue which links past and present together” (Shuttleworth 50). Forced to remember his past because of his present, Bulstrode can fool himself no longer. Without a friend, in total disgrace, all Bulstrode has left is his wife, but he cannot bring himself to confess, even to her, so he lets her hear about his misdeeds from others. When she returns home, Bulstrode must now face himself as reflected in the eyes of the one person he loves, the one person he has left. Yet even here, Bulstrode has to hide, incapable of even looking at her in case “he should never see his wife’s face with affection in it again” (750). When Bulstrode realizes that his wife has forgiven him, he can go on, having that one connection left in his life, but he is unable to give his wife anything more than a silent confession; the best he can do is to not proclaim a false innocence. All that forced retrospection has given Bulstrode is the realization of his segregation from society and his own guilt. He is incapable of public confession and repentance, and this lack prevents any reconnection with the Middlemarch community.

Henchard, on the other hand, publicly admits his guilt, but then, he has committed no crimes other than moral ones. The public gossip and ridicule are a lot to bear for a

man who for so many years lived only for his reputation and position within this community. However, Henchard stands tall in his disgrace and even gives all he has to his creditors, although he blames the speculations that resulted in his bankruptcy on his foreman: “Why did ye let me go on, hey?” (189). Unlike Bulstrode, Henchard does make public reparations for his public debt, but it is his private failure that haunts Henchard. He cannot face the fact that he told Elizabeth-Jane’s father that she was dead, telling himself that it was not a deliberate lie but “the last defiant word of a despair which took no thought of consequences” (301). As Robert Kiely so aptly put it, “Henchard’s sufferings stem mainly from a useless and eventually harmful effort to silence or conceal unalterable realities. But nature will not have it that way, nor will Hardy” (199). Eventually, Henchard suffers so much from his isolation from Elizabeth-Jane that his pride unbends enough to ask her for forgiveness. Unlike Bulstrode, however, Henchard does not receive forgiveness from the only person he has left to love; Elizabeth-Jane complains of his bitter deception that “nearly broke” her father’s heart: “Oh, how can I love as I once did a man who has served us like this” (327). This final rejection is the end for Henchard. His isolation from the community that gave his life definition and meaning is now complete.

Loss of connection with their communities leaves both Bulstrode and Henchard with only one option: relocation. Neither man can bear to face a community to which he no longer belongs; neither can either man face the looks of censure or dismissal from people who used to give him respect. Bulstrode already had his plans in place for a “temporary” relocation, but it is now to be a permanent one. Bulstrode is “withering”

under the consciousness that he has been rejected and attacked, “not for professing the Right, but for not being the man he professed to be,” so he is preparing to “end his stricken life in that sad refuge, the indifference of new faces” (823). Bulstrode even has to dispose of his property through his wife, since even her family will not accept anything from him now. Bulstrode’s life as a part of the Middlemarch community is now over; he must start over, at the age of sixty, without a community to support his false self-image that had sustained him for decades. Yet there is hope for Bulstrode; in a new community, he can possibly hope to find a quiet place to live out the rest of his years; although it will be a life without the position and respect he was used to, Bulstrode still has a life left to live with his wife by his side.

Henchard has no such cushion. When he initially lost his place within the community of Casterbridge, Henchard intended to leave, but Elizabeth-Jane’s devotion changed his mind. As long as he had one person left, Henchard could bear the humiliation, or so he thought. However, his old arrogance and sense that he does not deserve his fate continue to interfere with Henchard’s acceptance of his fate and lead to the lie that costs him his “daughter.” Without Elizabeth-Jane, Henchard has no reason to stay in Casterbridge, the place that has caused him so much pain, so he leaves permanently, only wishing to be left alone. Ironically, in Henchard’s isolation from Casterbridge, there is one person who will not leave him alone, and that is Abel Whittle, the employee whom Henchard had once publicly humiliated. However, Whittle is kinder to Henchard than any member of the Casterbridge community because he remembers that Henchard also privately had taken care of Whittle’s mother, supplying her needs in her

old age. Now the circumstances are reversed, and Whittle takes on the role of Henchard's caretaker. He finds an abandoned cottage for Henchard to rest in. Once, Henchard thought of relocation and living as he had formerly, as a common laborer, but now that he is completely and, he thinks, irrevocably severed from his community he has no wish to construct a new life in a new location, no reason to go on.

Relocation of the Self Outside of the Community

Finally, each man, Henchard and Bulstrode, must restructure his life and his image of himself anew. The communities that provided each man with his chosen identity now are no longer a part of that identity, so a new one must be built. Bulstrode's new self must face the actions of his old self each day, every time he looks at his wife. They have sent their daughters off to boarding school in order to protect them from their father's ruined reputation, but they still have to face each other. Bulstrode is forced to observe the physical effects of Harriet's suffering, the "sorrow that was every day streaking her hair with whiteness and making her eyelids languid;" he must look at her "grief-worn face, which two months before had been bright and blooming" (824-25). Knowing that he is the cause of this suffering changes Bulstrode; he now wants Harriet to call the shots. He is willing to bend, give control over to her, and he also is willing to help others whom he was most unwilling to help before as an act of reparation. Even though Bulstrode is ousted from his community, he must do what he can to ease his wife's suffering so that he can live with her in a community of two.

There is one aspect to Bulstrode's character that he is unable ever to change, and that is his inability to confess his sins to any human being. He manages to pray to "the

conception of an Omniscience,” but he cannot face the possibility that his wife would judge him. If Harriet were to call him a murderer, Bulstrode would not be able to continue, for then he would have to finally and completely face his actions. Maintaining his silence is Bulstrode’s final means of maintaining the small shreds of his tattered self. He is truly unable to face himself in the end, but this attitude is the only means Bulstrode has of going on with his life. He comforts his aching conscience with the thought that he might yet confess to Harriet, perhaps on his deathbed, when she “might listen without recoiling from his touch,” but, as the narrator states, “concealment had been the habit of his life,” so it is extremely unlikely that Bulstrode will ever manage that significant a change in his character or his self-image (824).

Unlike Bulstrode, Michael Henchard never really changes at all. For Henchard, a forced relocation from Casterbridge, the community that had enabled him to build the image and life he had always envisioned for himself, is a kind of death. Therefore, death is not something Henchard fears; death becomes a release from the pain of his altered existence. Unlike Bulstrode, Henchard has no high opinion of himself in the end, and he is amazed that Whittle can “care for such a wretch as I” (333). Henchard has never defended himself because he’s never really liked the person he was; he only had regard for the role he played within his community. When that role was taken from him, he still could play the role of father with Elizabeth-Jane. When he lost even that role, Henchard had no concept of himself left to hold onto, having based all his worth on the roles that he played within his community. Henchard allows Whittle to administer to him, but he cannot care for himself, so he stops eating, weakens, and dies within a month.

It is Henchard's will which sheds some insight into the man that he was. Stubborn to the bitter end, he dictates that no one be told of his death, that no one observe any mourning, and that "no man remember me" (333). Elizabeth-Jane understands this as "a piece of the same stuff that his whole life was made of" (334). Henchard rejected his family so many years before, and he rejects them at the end of his life as well. He values himself outside of his social context so little that he cuts himself off from everything and everyone who helped to construct his former identity as businessman, mayor, and father. Without his community, there is no Henchard to reconstruct. But as Bernard J. Paris points out, "Henchard wants to feel himself the most alienated, abandoned, and misunderstood of mortals" (181). He rejects the very community that has rejected him.

Perhaps Bulstrode and Henchard can best be perceived in their final images at the end of the novels. Bulstrode, who has always had a cadaverous image, only becomes even worse, and with his wife joining him in looks and outlook, he becomes a sort of walking dead man. Unable, in the final analysis, to see himself even through his wife's eyes because of his deep-seated fear of rejection, Bulstrode never fully faces his own reflection either. He lives on, transplanted to another community of strangers to which he will probably never belong, but it is only a façade that exists in the end. This is not the same façade that Bulstrode constructed through a community, but it is not any more real than his other face. Bulstrode lives, but he fails to become authentic.

Conversely, Henchard can be symbolized by the dead body of the caged goldfinch that he had intended as a wedding gift for Elizabeth-Jane. His request for forgiveness

rejected, Henchard leaves and forgets the bird, who dies of starvation in a shrouded birdcage, just as Henchard dies of starvation in isolation. Tragically, Elizabeth-Jane discovers the dead bird at the same time that Henchard is dying himself. She realizes that the bird was Henchard's "token of repentance," from a man who never offered "any regrets or excuses," a man who was "one of his own worst accusers" (329). Now, when it is too late, Elizabeth-Jane can extend to Henchard the forgiveness that might have saved his life had the timing not been off. But then, Elizabeth-Jane has a fatalistic attitude about life that is corroborated by Henchard's tragic death, believing that "happiness was but the occasional episode in a general drama of pain" (335).

Conclusion

The differences in the novels' conclusions are indicative of the differences in the authors' purposes in writing. Each novel has a very different tone. *Middlemarch* ends in a more positive manner with a summary that ties all the ends together to make sense of the whole. Bulstrode ends in deserved obscurity, Lydgate suffers through a mundane existence wherein his dreams are never fulfilled, but everyone who remains in Middlemarch generally goes on to live life as he or she is expected to live, Dorothea finding some fulfillment in the role of wife and mother, making the world a better place through quiet, "unhistoric acts" (838). This neat package that George Eliot hands to the reader does not ring quite as true as the stark message of pain that ends Hardy's novel. But then, *Middlemarch* has an intrusive narrator who tells the reader what to think, and George Eliot's novel is about community as a structure to sustain an orderly, if not happy, existence. Conversely, Hardy's novel takes a more pessimistic view of community. While the community structure in Casterbridge endures beyond its former mayor's death, it is a community in flux, with new leaders and a more modern way of conducting business. While both authors placed their novels in the period of England's reform, a time of rapid change, *Middlemarch* is a more Victorian community whose values are sustained in the end, and Casterbridge is a more modern community subject to the winds of change.

The characters of Bulstrode and Henchard represent the old ways of life within their respective communities. Each one is resistant to any change that will threaten his image of himself within the community. It is this flawed self-image, based on outdated notions in a changing world, based on personal lies about each man's past that cannot sustain life for either man. In the end, Henchard is authentic in a way that Bulstrode could never be; he is always himself, even though he never likes himself and cannot forgive himself. Bulstrode bases his life on a self-image formed at "the happiest time of his life," a time when he was at his most powerful, a time before his fall from grace (615). Though both Bulstrode and Henchard based their self-images on the expectations of their communities, it was disparity between the public role and the private man that causes them to lose their images and their communities in the end.

In a larger sense, the two characters are representative of the two authors' goals in writing and of the late-Victorian period in which they produced these two novels. Though the novels themselves are situated historically in the years of Reform and deal with issues of a mobile and increasingly urban population due to the consequences of industrialization, the writers have a decidedly changed perspective that reflects the times in which they wrote. Both authors present flawed idealistic characters who cannot live up to their own ideals, but they present them in such a way as to make readers identify with them somewhat and therefore sympathize with their misery on some scale. The authors also demonstrate that inflexible people who cannot adapt to changing times do not thrive and sometimes do not survive.

More pertinent to the aims of this essay, through the characterizations of Nicholas Bulstrode and Michael Henchard, both George Eliot and Thomas Hardy showed that the interconnections of Victorian communities held throughout the changes in the ways those communities were structured. The measure and effectiveness of the community depended upon the contributions of the individuals, but the individuals were also constrained by the larger community. Those individuals who suffered most were the ones who set themselves apart from others and who failed to look at themselves for what they truly were. If a man cannot look at himself in a mirror until his community holds that mirror up to his face and forces him to do so, he is rejected by the people that he has rejected and is unable to reconstruct a new image, one that will benefit not only himself but also his community. Henchard, the tragic hero, and Bulstrode, the tragic villain, communicate through their failures that which is necessary for success. A man must first know himself before he can truly succeed.

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