

Essay on Independent Reading

The following is an outline of a critical essay on Thomas Hardy's work *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. The paper that you submit will not be an outline, but a formatted essay divided up into at least five paragraphs. The example below is meant to help you structure your own essay.

I. Introduction

- A. Briefly state how you will introduce your essay (anecdote, interesting fact, quotation, general discussion of the literature, etc.)
- B. Main idea (State the thesis in one sentence by answering the question, "What is the theme of this book and how does the author express that theme?" You might want to include the author and title of the work.

Example: In Thomas Hardy's *Mayor of Casterbridge* the presence of Roman antiquity in the town of Casterbridge impresses upon the reader the idea that man is a small, fateful actor who plays his part on the stage of a large, indifferent cosmos. This thesis would allow you to talk about the effect of setting on the theme.)

II. Body Paragraph 1

- A. Topic Sentence (Write the first supporting statement for your main idea.)
Example: Hardy's description of the meeting place between Henchard and his wife serves to contrast man's frail and insignificant condition with an immense and impersonal cosmos.
- B. Explain and give textual support.
Example: The model for Casterbridge was the town of Dorchester, once a fort of the ancient Romans. Hardy skillfully incorporates the distinctive historical features of his hometown in a fictional setting that is local but at the same time chronologically and spatially expansive. The effect of the characters moving around in this colossal historical backdrop is hardly less than dizzying, like being on the edge of a precipitous crag looking down. It is in an ancient Roman amphitheater where Henchard and his wife have their fateful meeting to discuss their tragic predicament. Built centuries ago when England was under the Roman Empire, the building is impressive and immense. The tragedy of man's life and death seem to lose significance in the context of the immensity of the Roman architecture: "The Amphitheater was a huge circular enclosure with a notch at opposite extremities of its diameter north and south. From its sloping internal form it might have been called the spittoon of the Jotuns. It was to Casterbridge what the ruined Coliseum is to modern Rome, and was nearly of the same magnitude." Although in human terms, the predicament of the Mayor Henchard is catastrophic and large in scope, it is made microscopic by the immense clandestine meeting place.

III. Body Paragraph 2

- A. Topic Sentence (Write the second supporting statement for your main idea.

Example: Hardy's Roman setting not only serves to emphasize man's smallness but also underscores man's inescapable fate.

- B. Explain and give textual support.

Example: The presence of Rome in Casterbridge was inescapable: "Casterbridge announced old Rome in every street, alley and precinct. It looked Roman, bespoke the art of Rome, concealed dead men of Rome. It was impossible to dig more than a foot or two deep about the town fields and gardens without coming upon some tall soldier or other of the Empire..." By his setting Hardy suggests that as the presence of Rome in Casterbridge was inescapable, so was there a reminder everywhere and at all times that man is mortal and he cannot escape his fate. The remains of Roman civilization, such as the skeletons of Roman soldiers, were grim reminders of man's mortality, vestiges which the people of Casterbridge thought to ignore by their remoteness: "Imaginative inhabitants, who would have felt an unpleasantness at the discovery of a comparatively modern skeleton in their gardens, were quite unmoved by these hoary shapes. They had lived so long ago, their time was so unlike the present, their hopes and motives were so widely removed from ours, that between them and the living there seemed to stretch a gulf too wide for even a spirit to pass." Hardy's irony here is the same irony found in the classical Greek plays, one that calls attention to man's ignorance and pride: as if he were immune to the fate of all men, a man foolishly lives his life full of false hopes and aspirations.

IV. Body Paragraph 3

- A. Topic Sentence (Write the third supporting statement for your main idea.

Example: The central image that Thomas Hardy creates through his description of the Roman Coliseum, the largest prop of his setting, suggests foreboding gloom.)

- B. Explain and give textual support.

Example: Now covered with grass, the coliseum was no longer used for its original cruel purpose—gladiator fights and executions. Yet the Roman coliseum remained "melancholy" and "lonely," and gruesomely spectral. Representing the heralds of an impassive cosmos, ghosts haunt the coliseum. Hailing from the metaphysical realm, the specters of the past testify of Hardy's terrible, impassive universe. No matter what the human activity performed within the Amphitheater, even it is "gay," the spectral forces are at work:

"Some boys had latterly tried to impart gaiety to the ruin by using the central arena as a cricket-ground. But the game usually languished for the aforesaid reason—the dismal privacy which the earthen circle enforced, shutting out every appreciative passer's vision, every commendatory remark from outsiders—everything, except the sky; and

to play at games in such circumstances was like acting to an empty house. Possibly, too, the boys were timid, for some old people said that at certain moments in the summer time, in broad daylight, persons sitting with a book or dozing in the arena had, on lifting their eyes, beheld the slopes lined with a gazing legion of Hadrian's soldiery as if watching the gladiatorial combat; and had heard the roar of their excited voices; that the scene would remain but a moment, like a lightning flash, and then disappear.

Hardy's description suggests that the aura of the coliseum's original cruel purpose had not disappeared and evokes in the reader a premonition of Henchard's inescapable impending doom and despair.

V. Conclusion Write a conclusion to your essay. The conclusion should answer the question, "What is the significance of what I have written in terms of the novel as a whole?" Discussing other elements that work to suggest the work's theme would be appropriate. Students should not just repeat the main idea of the essay. Example: There are other elements in Hardy's work that suggest that Henchard is a fated character. With the development of Henchard as the Aristotelian tragic hero as well as its reliance on literary devices such as dramatic irony, situational irony and foreshadowing, Hardy's novel is reminiscent of Greek tragedy. Henchard, the tragic hero of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, is volatile; even though he intends good, especially in his bouts of remorse, his good intentions ironically go awry—always. Like Oedipus of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, no matter what Henchard does, he walks at a sure, steady pace, blindly and inexorably, toward the hangman's noose. However, it is the setting of classical Rome that most loudly suggests the idea that the cycle of human tragedy and its short fitful dramatic act on stage never changes.