



# Save the Men! The Crisis of Masculinity and Manhood in Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and A.E.W. Mason's *The Four Feathers*

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## ABSTRACT

*In Victorian culture the paradigms of masculinity shifted over the period of time. The First Boer War of 1880, for example, changed many aspects of Victorian cultural and social map. The crisis of masculinity becomes an acute issue for Victorian men as they are losing, power or privilege relative to their prior status in places such as family, work, education. There is also a shift in men's "experiences of their position as men, their maleness, and what it means" (Dyer 8). They feel powerless and uncertain, confused and even lost.*

*Many works of fiction give meaning to a disintegrated body through the power of language. A wounded, displaced, lost, or even a disabled male body, in the case of the returned veteran, is associated with the 'Other', fragile and passive. The male is often estranged from a collective identity and suffers in solitude in an attempt to achieve a meaningful masculine identity, having to come to terms with the notion of what men are and what they should be. The project will explore the ambiguities of manhood and masculinity in the selected novels of the Victorian and Edwardian era, which deal with the instability of masculinity, male rivalry and female disdain.*

**Keywords:** manhood, masculinity, crisis, identity, gender roles, disability, male body

## Introduction

"It is an eternal corner-stone, from which they can begin to build themselves up again... that men in some sense or other worship heroes."

Thomas Carlyle

Richard Dyer once stated that "masculinity is a bit like air – you breathe it in all the time, but you aren't aware of it much" (28). However, masculinity is not natural but a cultural state. In their lifetimes, individual men often undergo painful but necessary tests of manhood to either accept or reject the societal demands imposed on them, in order to locate their own notions of masculinity – their social compromises. For these men, manhood is a "pose that is deeply conflicted, pressured, and forced; a mask of omnicompetence and almost obsessive independence," notes David Gilmore (209). In Victorian and later Edwardian culture, the paradigms of masculinity shifted over time. The First Boer War of 1880, for example, changed many aspects of the Victorian cultural and social landscape. The crisis of masculinity becomes an acute issue for Victorian men as they "are losing power or privilege relative to their prior status" in areas such as family, work, and education (8). There is also a shift in men's "experiences of their position as men, their maleness, and what it means" (8). They often feel powerless, uncertain, confused, and even lost. The body is never neutral and is always marked by differences of gender, race, class, and other factors. Therefore, the male body is a signifier of the instability of masculinity and can be seen as a cultural text to be read.

Bodily trauma and wounds erase and threaten masculinity, leading to the construction of a marginalized identity. Many works of fiction give meaning to a disintegrated body through the power of language; ambiguities of masculinity and the male body, are found in both Victorian and Edwardian literature.

The male body is often associated with the 'Other,' being fragile and passive. The male is frequently estranged from a collective identity and suffers in solitude in an attempt to achieve a meaningful masculine identity, having to come to terms with the notion of what men are and what they should be. The paper will examine *The Mayor of Casterbridge* by Thomas Hardy and *The Four Feathers* by A.E.W. Mason, which deal with the instability of masculinity, male rivalry, and female disdain. Many male characters often grapple with intricate and poignant struggles that mirror the complexities of the society they inhabit. These characters are frequently confronted by the constraints of social norms, class divisions, and the changing dynamics of the Victorian and later Edwardian era. They navigate the tension between traditional masculinity and evolving societal expectations, often leading to inner turmoil and conflict. In works such as *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Far from the Madding Crowd*, as well as *The Mayor of Casterbridge* Hardy's male protagonists, like Angel Clare, Gabriel Oak, Michael Henchard, and others confront dilemmas of love, duty, and personal identity. These struggles shed light on the fragility of masculine identity in a world characterized by shifting roles and societal upheavals, highlighting the vulnerability and humanity of his male characters in the face of adversity. A.E.W. Mason's Edwardian novel *The Four Feathers* is a compelling exploration of courage, loyalty, and personal growth set against the backdrop of British colonialism. The story revolves around Harry Feversham, a young officer who resigns from his regiment just before they are sent to fight in the Sudanese campaign. Labelled a coward by his comrades and fiancée, he receives four white feathers symbolizing his supposed fear. Determined to prove his bravery and redeem his honor, Harry embarks on a journey of self-discovery and redemption. As he travels through the harsh landscapes of Africa, he faces not only physical challenges but also the complexities of his own character. The novel delves into themes of identity, the expectations of society, and the transformative power of personal choices. Mason masterfully weaves a tale of personal struggle and growth, while also providing a thought-provoking critique of the notions of honor, duty, and imperialism prevalent during the late 19th century.

The fiction of the Victorian and later Edwardian period faces the overwhelming problem of masculinity and its modeling. The combination of male virility, manliness, and social respectability is explored throughout the works of many writers. Manhood is considered an "evolving social construct" that undergoes a number of changes (Stearns 11). Issues of sexuality, self-control, and power dynamics included in the 'politics of masculinity' are interconnected in the novels of the time. Many men find themselves trapped by the construct of a gentleman - a "strict doctrine of male virtue [that] placed tremendous pressure on men, who represented in a sense the purveyors of patriarchal respectability" (Federico 56). As a number of characters seek to become gentlemen, they are torn between the desire to "simultaneously conform to the gentlemanly/chivalric code and to resist it" (Banerjee 1-10). The shift from "the aristocratic ideal of a gentleman to its middle-class embodiment" leads to "instability in the ideology of masculinity" (Waters 3). In Victorian and Edwardian culture, manliness is "associated with virtuous restraint, self-regulation, and obedience to conscience" (Alderson 15-18). Notions of masculinity offer men superiority and power over the 'Other,' particularly women. The goal of this paper is to explore the representation of masculine identities in the two novels by Thomas Hardy and A.E.W. Mason and to determine how these texts examine or externalize masculinity, perception of the body/disabled or damaged/injured body, and male power struggles.

Victorian masculinity was rooted in a set of rigid norms and values that emphasized traits such as strength, stoicism, self-control, and authority. Men were expected to exhibit qualities of moral uprightness, economic success, and social responsibility, often being seen as the primary breadwinners and protectors of their families. Industrialization and urbanization transformed the nature of work and family life, leading to a reconfiguration of traditional gender roles. As society shifted from agrarian to industrial, new opportunities and challenges arose for men, influencing their perceptions of self and their place in the world. The British Empire's expansion during this period also shaped notions of masculinity, as men were often associated with concepts of adventure, exploration, and imperial authority. It is important to state that Victorian masculinity was not a monolithic concept; it varied based on factors such as class, race, sexuality and geography. While upper-class men were expected to embody a refined and cultured version of masculinity, working-class men often faced different expectations tied to manual labor and ruggedness. Additionally, the emergence of feminist movements and changing social attitudes challenged traditional gender roles and contributed to discussions about the fluidity and limitations of Victorian masculinity. Overall, Victorian masculinity encapsulates the complexities of an era marked by both continuity and transformation in gender norms and the evolving understanding of what it meant to be a man in a rapidly changing world. One of the notable challenges was the evolving nature of work and labor. Industrialization continued to reshape the economy, leading to the rise of factories and urban centers. Men, especially those from working-class backgrounds, had to adapt to new forms of employment, often facing long hours, poor working conditions, and limited job security. This shift brought about questions of labor rights and fair wages, sparking discussions about workers' rights and the role of trade unions.

Social expectations also played a significant role in shaping the challenges men faced during the later Edwardian era. While Victorian ideals of masculinity still lingered, there was a growing sense of tension between

traditional gender roles and emerging notions of individuality. Men were expected to fulfill their roles as providers and heads of households, but they also had to navigate changing attitudes about leisure, fashion, and personal expression. The Edwardian era was also characterized by political and social unrest, with movements such as suffrage, labor activism, and calls for social reform gaining momentum. Men were confronted with questions about their role in these changing landscapes. Some embraced progressive ideals and advocated for reform, while others clung to more conservative notions of authority, identity and stability.

As international tensions escalated, the specter of impending conflict loomed large over the Edwardian era. This period was a time of military build-up and geopolitical maneuvering, eventually leading to the outbreak of World War I in 1914. Men from various occupations faced the prospect of conscription and the challenges of wartime service, which included not only physical danger but also the psychological toll of combat. Overall, the Edwardian era was a time of shifting social, economic, and political landscapes that presented men with a range of challenges. From adapting to changing work environments to negotiating evolving gender roles and facing the uncertainties of a rapidly changing world, men during this period were called upon to navigate complex and often contradictory expectations while also confronting the impending upheaval of World War I.

Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) explores the life and death of a 'man of character': the failed patriarch Michael Henchard. In the reviews of the novel, R.H. Hutton notes that "there is a grandeur of conception about this [Henchard's] shrewd, proud, illiterate, primitive nature... but as for the all-conquering Scotchman who fascinates everybody... there must be some failure of art there" (139). Farfrae represents a middle-class man of his time, who "has learned to moderate his expectations and adapt his talents in order to gain and maintain a position of social respectability" (Devereux 52). Henchard's rivalry with Farfrae symbolizes a struggle against the mediocrity of society. With "passionate intensity and bewildered drive toward love," Henchard is a misguided and defeated hero in the novel. He embodies the patriarchal system of values, where women and male rivals – like Farfrae and Newson – are seen as possessions to satisfy his sexual and social needs. He is tragic "precisely because he cannot exist outside the patriarchal value system" (Devereux 53).

Michael Henchard is a public figure, a man whose fate and life are determined by his reputation and acceptance within the community. Words are his enemies, and along with women, they cannot be trusted. As he enters the "Good Furmity Sold Here" tent and takes a drink from a woman, he "loses his dominion over his world" (54). In the realization of his failure, he blames his wife Susan: "Why didn't she know better than to bring me into this disgrace!" (15). The wife-auction is a symbol of male misogynistic fantasy: Henchard gets rid of marital ties through a financial deal with another man, sailor Newson: "I don't see why men who have wives and don't want them shouldn't get rid of them like these gipsy fellows do with their old horses. Why shouldn't they put them up and sell them by auction to men who are in need of such articles? Why, begad, I'd sell mine this minute if anybody would buy her!" (9).

In her article "*The Mayor of Casterbridge*: Talking about Character," Jeanette King argues, "as a man in a patriarchal society, he has the power of naming" (44). Henchard imposes his masculine identity on others - he wishes for Elizabeth-Jane to take his name after he remarries Susan to "assert his dominion over her, his creation of her" (Devereux 55): "'Twas I that chose your name... 'twas I who gave you your name!" (95). Both Elizabeth-Jane and Lucetta change their names to Farfrae, becoming the property of Henchard's rival. The name obsession is linked to the power of the father in the novel, and if Elizabeth-Jane had been a boy, Henchard would never have sold her. In his will, he addresses Elizabeth-Jane by her married name, "acknowledging his rival's victory in obtaining the prize and relinquishing his paternal control over her" (Devereux 56). In the end, he is reduced to a name himself - Michael Henchard. By selling his wife, he "becomes a self-dispossessed patriarch, a man without the human fertility to perpetuate his power structures" (Fisher 122). Henchard wrecks his own family, and twenty years later he tries to 'create' Elizabeth-Jane by giving her his name. As he attempts to expel women from his life, they return and ultimately destroy him. After the fight, Henchard confesses that "God is my witness that no man ever loved another as I did thee [Farfrae] at one time... And now – though I came here to kill 'ee, I cannot hurt thee!" (207). Unable to kill Farfrae, his "manhood is crushed" (Devereux 62): "he [Henchard] remained on the sacks in a crouching attitude, unusual for a man, and especially for a man of such stature. Its womanliness sat tragically on a figure so stern in its display of virility" (208). Henchard is concerned that Farfrae will change his opinion of him: "He thought so highly of me once. Now he'll hate me and despise me forever!" (208). Henchard may have crossed "to his feminine side, but the transition suggests a loss of power and control" (Devereux 62). He becomes 'Cain' by "emphasizing his continuing identity with destructive masculinity as well as the betrayal of the ideal of fraternity" (63).

Henchard and Farfrae represent two opposite masculine identities: if Henchard uses a "rule of thumb" in his business, Farfrae relies on calculation and figures. Henchard sees in Farfrae a business potential and commercialism, with a "curious mixture of romance and thrift in the young man's composition so endearing to his heart that Farfrae could play on him as on an instrument" (208). Henchard's kindness (helping the Whittle family) is juxtaposed with Farfrae's actions, which always have a purpose. He cancels the search party for Henchard as its continuation will "make a hole in a sovereign" (249). If Henchard is passionate and spontaneous, Farfrae is calculating and rational in business and matters of love. In his relationships with women, Farfrae dominates and manipulates them (120).

Henchard wishes to make up for the past mistakes with both women. He does not fit the gentleman's definition but fulfills his duty as a man by remarrying Susan: he is "as kind to her as a man, mayor, and churchwarden could possibly be" (67). His sense of honor drives him to ask for Lucetta's hand in marriage: "You cannot, in honor, refuse me" (150). As the novel unfolds, a "netted lion" Henchard is inarticulate and powerless, and his "loss of masculine dominance signals the loss of all power" (Devereux 66). His social standing as a mayor and respectable citizen shrinks, and without masculine self, he is reduced to a wanderer: "I, an outcast, encumberer of the ground, wanted by nobody, and despised by all, live on against my will!" (241). He remains faithful to the old patriarchal ideals, and as they crumble, a stronger, younger man like Farfrae takes over.

A. E. W. Mason's imperial adventure novel *The Four Feathers* (1902) deals with the construction of masculinity, male rivalry, heroism, male bonding and female disdain. The white feathers, symbols of cowardice, signify issues of male gender modeling. The novel introduces a young man Harry Feversham, setting up a contrast between father and son "to illustrate the mental limitations of the former and the potential of the latter" (Hoppenstand xvii). General Feversham represents the brave men in his family's ancestry: "The Fevershams had been soldiers from the very birth of the family... first-class fighting men" (12). Lieutenant Sutch, who visits the party, becomes a substitute father figure for Harry, who does not connect with his biological father: "Harry Feversham wore his father's name, but he had his mother's dark and haunted eyes... his mother's imagination. The father had been familiar with his son's appearance for so long that it held no significance in his mind" (11). Harry is both fascinated and terrified by war stories; he is a child born out of the Redan attack. Lord Wilmington's cowardice and suicide story adds to the gallery of men who failed the masculine ideal (10). When Sutch tries to explain the reasons for cowardice to Harry, he has "the look of a dangerous animal in a trap" (11). If Sutch perceives Harry's emotional turmoil and senses his anxiety, his biological father remains blind to his son's emotions, insisting that "he is Feversham" and therefore has no fear (11). From the beginning, Harry Feversham is condemned for a failure of the masculine ideal upheld by his father. His duty as an officer is to "avenge the death of General Gordon" in the British re-conquest of Khartoum. However, Harry rejects a military paradigm of behavior: "...the dreadful thing that had been dreadfully anticipated for so many years had finally befallen him. He was known as a coward. The word which had long blazed upon the wall of his thoughts in letters of fire was now written large in public places" (34). Three of his friends, believing him a coward, send him white feathers, forcing him to "confront the devastating truth of his own martial inadequacy" (Gullace 189). The empire does not accept Harry's motive, and neither does his love interest, Ethne: "Three little white feathers and the world's at an end" (34). She adds another feather to the three existing ones: "The thing that she has done was cruel, no doubt. But she wished to make an end – a complete, irrevocable end" (39). Women worship men of action, contributing to the brutality and killing in war, as well as the perception of the strong male body and tough manliness: "Brute courage? Women make a god of it" (48).

To redeem himself and his honor from the humiliation of the four feathers, Harry engages in a few heroic acts. In Africa, his symbolic ascent to manhood occurs when he plunges a dagger into an Arab, "infusing his sanguinary quest for personal courage with visceral phallic imagery" (Gullace 190). Later as he saves his friends from the Dervishes, proving his ability to kill and have no fear, "Harry's redemption is complete" (190). In the end, he becomes a better soldier and a better man, as he "is able not only to master his personal fear but also to use it to achieve great and noble things" (Hoppenstand xix). Ethne treasures his redeemed white feather not as a "symbol of cowardice, but as cowardice atoned" (147).

As Harry departs, the narrative shifts to Jack Durrance, who embraces the culture of the empire and becomes Harry's rival for Ethne's hand. Before the loss of his sight while serving in Sudan, he is a brave yet unimaginative soldier, akin to General Feversham: "Hector of Troy was his ancestor; he was neither hysterical in his language nor vindictive in his actions. He was not an elderly schoolboy with a taste for loud talk, but a quiet man who performed his duties without noise, capable of sternness, when necessary, with unflinching severity; his nature, however, was gentle and compassionate" (179). Deprived of his sight, he gains a deeper understanding of life: "It is only since I have been blind that I have begun to truly see" (210). He shares similarities with Sutch, whose career is abruptly halted by bodily wounds: "For a young and active man succeeding in a career where activity is a necessity, there are no compensations when that career is abruptly cut short through no fault of his own" (202). Wounded or injured men do not align with the cultural ideals of masculinity; in fact, public disgrace is often perceived as worse than a physical disability (203). Despite his physical wound, Durrance remains an exemplar of a man of action, choosing to return to Sudan (280).

The construction of masculinity is then rooted in a dichotomy between the "fragility of masculinity at the psychic level" rather than emphasizing its role as a foundation for men's social power (Roper and Tosh 15, as quoted in Adams 3). The articulation of social power operates both in alignment with and in opposition to the fragility of masculine identities (Roper and Tosh 15, as quoted in Adams 3). Masculine norms encompass more than just erotic desire; they encompass multifaceted constructions of identity and social authority that inevitably position the private self in relation to an imagined audience, as stated by Adams (3). Numerous Victorian and later Edwardian expressions of masculinity, both within domestic contexts and on colonial soil, exemplify Judith Butler's renowned assertion that "gender is a doing" (Gender Trouble 25). The significance of masculinity is a central concern in both literary and

cultural transformations. These men are characterized not only by the regulation of their bodies but also by the assignments of gendered identity that circulate beyond that discourse.

The discussed authors delve into the multifaceted dimensions of masculinity, ranging from the normative to the transgressive, the private to the public, and even from the effeminate to the manly. Their characters are profoundly affected by the anxieties and tensions prevalent in their societies. The concept of 'manliness' evolved into a new moral code and social imperative. However, embracing this ideal was a challenging and testing experience for many men as they navigated power, privilege, and status in both the private and public spheres of life. The late nineteenth century was a period of transition, as noted by Elaine Showalter, wherein the "gender crisis affected men as well as women," and the struggle for supremacy "concealed deeper uncertainties and contradictions" (8-9).

The novels authored by Thomas Hardy and A.E. Mason scrutinize masculine identity, the male body, and its performativity. A pertinent question that arises is, "where were they [men] placed on the scale of masculinity?" (8-9). The emergence of the New Woman concept, the expansion of imperial conquests, and the rise of nations like Germany and America are outcomes of the anxieties that destabilized legal, sexual, and social affiliations. In literature, "masculine context... Englishness was closely associated with masculinity, and manliness was perceived as a dominant characteristic of English literature, underscoring the self-consciously masculine identity" (Trodd 6-8). These works of fiction contribute to a crisis of masculinity, broadening our comprehension of the ongoing conflict that male protagonists grapple with daily. They shed light on the multifaceted dimensions of masculinity and explore the intricate challenges that these protagonists face and confront.

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