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Thorstein Veblen, A Descendant of the Mayor of Casterbridge

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From about 1850 onward there began to emerge a literary type that was in a few decades to symbolize all of the potentialities and all of the flaws of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century—the strong, resilient, self-conscious "isolate" who, for one reason or another, rejected his society and preferred to "go it alone." Sometimes this literary lone wolf attempted reintegration with society, à la Flaubert and Kafka. Often he preferred to set himself outside society proper like Melville's Bartleby the Scrivener, Gide's Lafcadio, Mann's Tonio Kröger, and numerous American detective-story heroes.

Thomas Hardy dealt at some length with the problem of social isolation, notably in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886). Interestingly enough, the same striking independence and indifference to society that was characteristic of Hardy's Michael Henchard was exhibited by a major figure in American economic and sociological theory who wrote in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century—Thorstein Veblen. Readers of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* are familiar with the "death-wish" tendencies of Henchard and with his Greek tragic-hero qualities that enable him to contend alone in an agon against everything and everybody. Thorstein Veblen was as emphatic in his isolation and as clearly a tragic hero, as was Henchard, although the latter was a man of mediocre intelligence, and Veblen was one of the geniuses of the age. But the re-

1 Freud, another isolate, in a genuine sense, came in his later writings to emphasize the "death wish," or Thanatos, as characteristic of our civilization. The reader will remember the suicide child, Father Time, in Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, who represented "the beginning of the coming universal wish not to live."

semblance between the two is really more striking than we might imagine from this predilection of theirs to cut themselves off from society.

Henchard, at the end of his life, desired to be obliterated from the earth in every sense, almost as though he were a fertility deity who had to die completely so that life might be perpetuated in the next generation. His will, found pencilled on "a crumpled scrap of paper" and read after his death, reveals how thoroughly he desired disappearance from the world:

Michael Henchard's Will
That Elizabeth-Jane Farfrae be not told of my death, or made to grieve on account of me.
& that I be not bury'd in consecrated ground.
& that no sexton be asked to toll the bell.
& that nobody is wished to see my dead body.
& that nobody walk behind me at my funeral.
& that no mourners be planted on my grave.
& that no man remember me.
To this I put my name.

Michael Henchard

After Veblen's death, on August 3, 1929, a similar paper was found, unsigned, which he had written in pencil probably within a week of his death:

It is also my wish, in case of death, to be cremated, if it can conveniently be done, as expeditiously and inexpensively as may be, without ritual or ceremony of any kind; that my ashes be thrown into the sea, or into some sizable stream running to the sea; that no tombstone, slab, epitaph, effigy, tablet, inscription, or monument of any name or nature, be set up in my memory or name in any place or at any time; that no obituary, memorial, portrait, or biography of me, nor any letters written to or by me be printed or published, or in any way reproduced, copied or circulated.

Whether or not those whom Henchard left behind obeyed Henchard's will to the letter (his foster daughter obeyed the will only "as far as practicable") is not made clear. Probably they disobeyed it by remembering him. Certainly Henchard has been enshrined in countless minds as one of Hardy's most unforgettable characters. It is also ironic that Elizabeth-Jane was informed of Henchard's death, simply because Abel Whittle, who befriended him at the end, could not read, and therefore was not able to obey the will. In Veblen's case the irony of the will that could not be fulfilled to the letter is more pronounced and complex. Henchard had left his will pinned to the head of his bed, so that the will would be likely to be acted upon immediately after his death. Hardy speaks, in fact, of Elizabeth-Jane's "independent knowledge that the man who wrote [the will] meant what he said." But Veblen's unsigned will was left inconspicuously among his papers, where it would not be likely to be acted upon as Veblen would have wished, even though, as it turned out, "the funeral arrangements accorded with Veblen's wishes." Even had his will been posted on his bed, as Henchard's was, it could not really have been obeyed to the letter or in spirit. In recent months, as it happens, Veblen has been the subject of renewed study by social scientists, and therefore, in effect, a "memorial" of him is still "circulated." Thus the two rebels, Henchard and Veblen, wrote finis to their own lives in gesture only. In the minds of men they are anything but forgotten.