
Unit-2 □ Thomas Hardy: *Far From the Madding Crowd*

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3.2.0. Introduction

In this unit you will be introduced to a novel by Thomas Hardy, a late-Victorian novelist and poet. It will be interesting for you to continuously compare this novel with that of Charles Dickens, which you have read in the previous Unit. It will be interesting to note the differences in social concerns, setting and style of the two novelists. While Dickens' novels have a concern that may be regarded as chiefly urban, Hardy's is definitely rural and regional. The novel under focus, *Far From the Madding Crowd*, from its very title, may make you expect a pastoral, idyllic setting, an expectation which may not hold true after you read the novel. So, let us begin looking at the novelist before we enter his novel-universe.

3.2.1. Thomas Hardy: Biography and Style

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) was a Victorian novelist, poet and writer whose work reflects the philosophical, spiritual and social milieu of the age distinctly. Hardy was born when the young Queen Victoria had been on the throne only three years, and he died when the 1920s were drawing to a close. Hardy rose from lower-class rural obscurity to climb the ranks of society to become the foremost writer of the age. His funeral drew large crowds, the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, led the nation's mourning, and his ashes were laid to rest in Westminster Abbey. Since Hardy's death, his reputation both as a novelist and as a major poet has grown; his short stories and his minor novels are being revalued, while developments in literary theory and criticism continue to reveal fresh aspects of a writer whose modernity continually surprises. Intensely private, evasive and ironic, Hardy has always proved an elusive subject for biographers. Much of Hardy's life, as he observed, is present in his novels, poems and short stories, and there is a complex strand of relationship between his life and his writings. These encompass, uniquely, his depiction of the topography of Dorset, where he was born and grew up, for his fictional county of 'Wessex', and his exploration of its society and history. In his writing Hardy engages with the thought, ideas and trends of his age: developments in science, new philosophies that sought to fill the vacuum left by the loss of religious faith, the growth of a radical politics that gave expression to the striving of the working class for social equality and democracy, the struggle for a better status for women, and the effects of the First World War. Another important aspect of Hardy's work is the literary market place in which his work was published, especially since the majority of his novels and some of his short stories first appeared as serials in the popular magazines of the day. The Victorian writer's relationship with editors and publishers was difficult. Hardy in particular, as he departed in thought and writing from established values, had to run the gauntlet of prudishness of Victorian publishers and reading public. On the brink of a new literary era, Hardy broached topics and themes, such as relationship between the sexes, with greater frankness and



Thomas Hardy

starkness than some Victorian readers liked; consequently, he lived through a period of outraged criticism. Today however we wonder at the furore and rather admire Hardy's ability to voice the ideas and issues far ahead of his times. Hardy was a great champion of individual liberty, full of empathy for the lot of women and in fact he created such powerful women in his novels that many critics and readers have opined that his male characters appear lifeless and insipid in contrast to his spirited heroines – Bathsheba, Tess, Sue or Eustacia.

Sickly from an early age, he was educated at home until he was sixteen. He then began an apprenticeship, and then a career, as an architect. He started writing poetry in the 1860s but did not publish his first novel until 1871. He married Emma Lavinia Gifford in 1874. After some time in London he built himself a house (called Max Gate) in his native Dorsetshire and lived there for the rest of his life. The marriage was initially satisfying, but gradually the couple grew apart because of temperamental incompatibility, until Hardy's later novels such as *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure* made Emma take his views of marriage in them so personally that she shut herself up in a life of seclusion in the attic rooms of the Hardys' home Max Gate till her death in 1912. He married Florence Dugdale, who was his secretary for many years, in 1914.

His first novel, *Desperate Remedies*, was published anonymously in 1871. This and his two succeeding novels, *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872) and *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873), although not popular successes, were favorably reviewed by the critics. It was not until the publication of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Hardy's fourth novel, that Hardy won widespread popularity as a writer, and he was able to give up architecture. Hardy went on to write novels at an extraordinary rate for more than 20 years, writing one every one or two years. His most famous novels written during these years include *The Return of the Native*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, and *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. After the publication of *Jude the Obscure* caused a major scandal in 1895, Hardy stopped writing novels and devoted the rest of his life (more than 30 years) to poetry. He wrote eight volumes of poetry till the end of his life, which ranged from mid-Victorian to early twentieth century, and positioned him among poets of the Modern period. His last great project was an epic poem titled *The Dynasts*, a versed chronicle of the Napoleonic Wars. What perhaps remains less known are the large number of short stories which he wrote—Fifty plus collected in seven volumes such as *Wessex Tales*, *Life's Little Ironies*, *A Group of Noble Dames* and also some very important non-fictional essays like 'The Dorsetshire Labourer'.

Hardy was a devoted reader of philosophy, scientific texts, the Bible, and Greek literature, and he incorporated much of his knowledge into his own works. One of the most profound influences on his thinking was **Charles Darwin**, particularly Darwin's emphasis on chance and luck in evolution. Though brought up to believe in God, Hardy struggled with a loss of faith suffered by many of his contemporaries; he increasingly turned to science for answers about man's place in the universe. When he died in 1928, at the age of 88 years, venerated as a poet of national and Universal importance, much of his faith in the 'meliorism' towards which the Universe was moving, as expressed again and again in *The Dynasts*, had been shaken by the mindless slaughter of a generation in the First World War.

3.2.2. Far From the Madding Crowd: Composition and Publication

It was not until the publication of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Hardy's fourth novel, that Hardy won widespread popularity as a writer, and he was able to give up architecture. The book was published serially in 1874, in Corn Hill Magazine, edited by Leslie Stephens. The novel was published in short sections, and as you read it, you can see that they intentionally leave the reader in suspense; this was a device to motivate readers to buy the next issue of the magazine. Illustrations were an integral part of such serial publication and like in many of his novels Helen Paterson provided 24 illustrations for *Far From the Madding Crowd* (**two have been provided in this Unit for your benefit on p. 156, 160**). Early reviewers compared Hardy's writing to that of George Eliot and recognised him as an important new voice in English fiction.

One of Hardy's central concerns in all of his writing was the problem of modernity in a society that was rapidly becoming more and more industrial. One of his projects as a writer was to create an account of life in the swiftly changing Dorsetshire as it had once been. He was particularly interested in the rituals and histories of that part of England, as well as the dialect of its locals. The title *Far From the Madding Crowd* suggests avoidance of the life of a city, modernised government, crowds and industry; in it, Hardy tries to fashion a portrait of what he saw as an endangered way of life and to create a snapshot for future generations to look at.

At the beginning of the novel, Bathsheba Everdene is a beautiful young woman without a fortune. She meets Gabriel Oak, a young farmer, and saves his life one evening. He asks her to marry him, but she refuses because she does not love him.

Upon inheriting her uncle's prosperous farm she moves away to the town of Weatherbury. Bathsheba stands out as one of the earliest, powerful and independent women characters in the Hardy-Universe and through her Hardy portrays the innate capacity of women to be strong, resourceful and independent in a social world which restrains them and curtails opportunities for their growth. The novel is also one whose Preface for the first time chalks out the geographical dimensions of his 'wessex' (you can read about this in a text box below).

3.2.3. Cast of Major and Minor Characters in the Novel

Major Characters

Bathsheba Everdene: Spirited young mistress of a large farm.

Gabriel Oak: Patient, reliable shepherd; suitor of Bathsheba.

William Boldwood: Gentleman farmer in love with Bathsheba.

Francis Troy: Lover and, later, husband of Bathsheba.

Fanny Robin: Runaway maid, who is betrayed by Francis Troy

Minor Characters

Mrs. Hurst: Bathsheba's aunt.

Liddy Smallbury: Bathsheba's maid.

Maryann Money: Bathsheba's charwoman.

Mrs. Coggan: Employed by Bathsheba.

Cainy Ball: Young under-shepherd to Gabriel.

Benjy Pennyways: Bathsheba's ex-bailiff.

Bill Smallbury, Henery Fray, Jacob Smallbury, and Labal Tall Some of Bathsheba's farmhands.

3.2.4. Brief Summary of the Plot

The events of the novel occur in Hardy's 'wessex' which is South West of England beginning in the 1840s. Gabriel Oak is a 28 year old shepherd and aspires to be a farmer with his own flock of sheep. He meets and proposes to the alluring Bathsheba Everdene, who has recently arrived in the hamlet. But she turns him down because he seems too plain and is unpropertied. Disaster strikes soon as Gabriel's

flock, which had been paid for with borrowed money, falls off an embankment due to his undisciplined sheep dog George. At about the same time, Bathsheba inherits her Uncle's farm near Weatherbury. After chancing on her property during a fire and helping her out, Oak is employed by her and eventually becomes the *de facto* supervisor on her a farm in reduced circumstances. Bathsheba is depicted as a sprightly, beautiful but vain woman who flirtatiously sends an enticing Valentine to her neighbor Farmer Boldwood on a whim. Encouraged thus, and believing that Bathsheba wishes for his attention Boldwood proposes marriage to her, which she turns down. In the meantime Sargent Troy, an unprincipled man of questionable reputation, seduces her affections with a dazzling display of his swordsmanship and smooth talking, and they eventually wed hastily in Bath, despite Gabriel Oak warning her against Troy's reputation. Boldwood tries to buy Troy off when he learns he has returned, unaware of the marriage. Troy, who is a dandy, is not suited to run the farm and wastes money in gambling while the crops are neglected. An important sub-plot of the novel rests with Fanny Robin, Bathsheba's former servant, who has become pregnant by Troy before his marriage with Bathsheba and arrives in extreme poverty at the Casterbridge Union House to have her baby and to eventually die. When the truth is revealed, Troy is distraught at the death of his one true love and arranges to have her buried with a headstone listing both their names. Troy and Bathsheba have by then fallen out and Troy wanders to the ocean shore and seems to have drowned, but actually is rescued by some boatmen and ends up in America. Boldwood, now once again, presses Bathsheba for a date when she will marry him, much to her distress. Troy returns to perform in a travelling act at the sheep fair and is spotted by the previously fired bailiff, Benjy Pennyways. At the Christmas Eve party at Boldwood's, Troy turns up and Boldwood, now a man driven to madness by his obsession over Bathsheba, kills him with a shotgun. Bathsheba cleanses the body and maintains an overnight vigil with it, then arranges for it to be buried besides Fanny. Boldwood goes to jail. Oak at last marries Bathsheba, now a much sober and less lively person.

3.2.5. About the Title

The title *Far From the Madding Crowd* comes from Thomas Gray's famous 18th-century poem 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard', where the poet says:

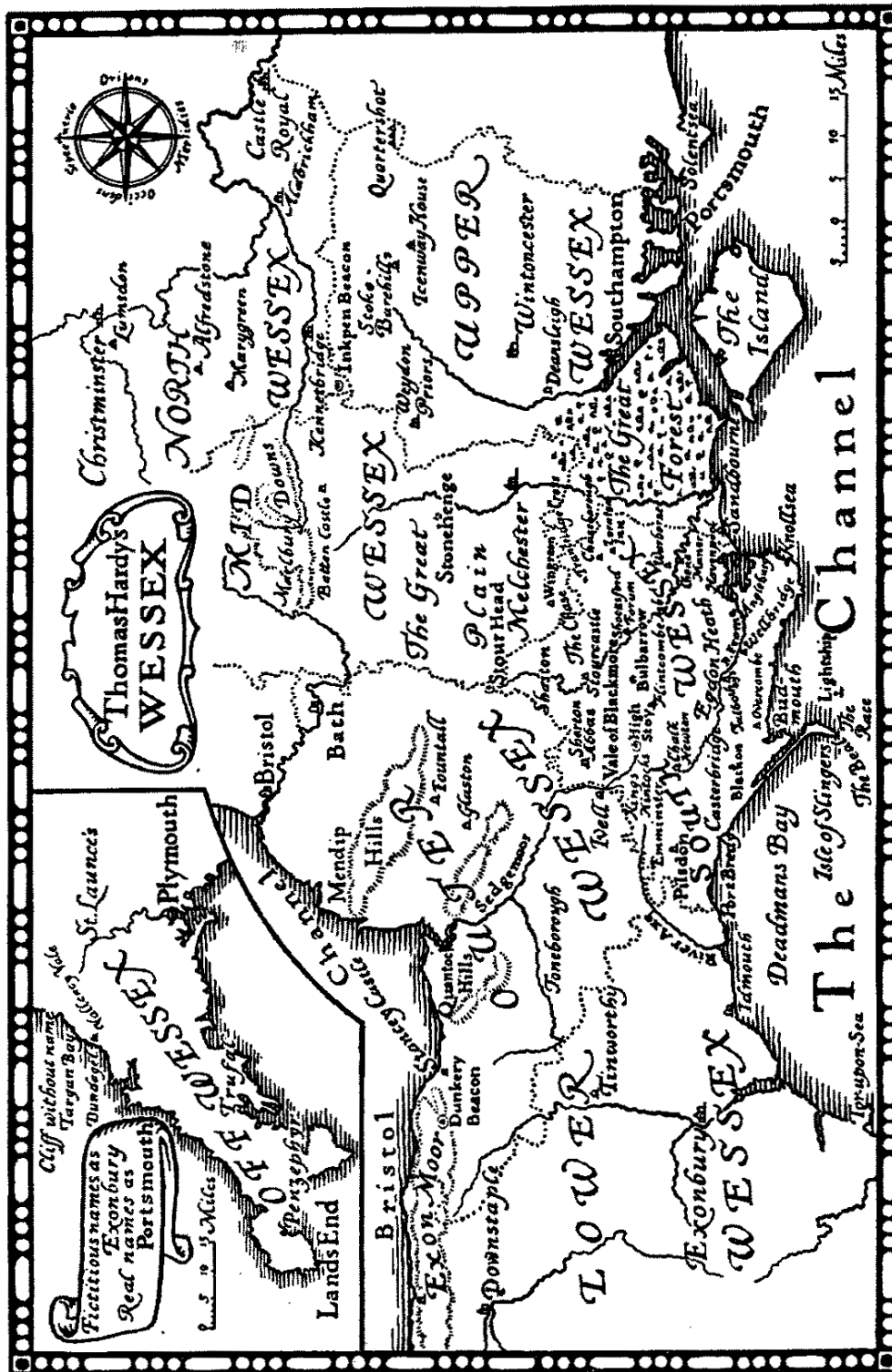
"Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,
Their sober wishes never learned to stray;

Along the cool sequestered vale of life
They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.”

By alluding to Gray’s poem, Hardy evokes the rural culture that, by Hardy’s lifetime, had become threatened with extinction at the hands of ruthless industrialisation. His novel thematises the importance of man’s connection to, and understanding of, the natural world. Gabriel Oak embodies Hardy’s ideal of a life in harmony with the forces of the natural world. It is through this vital connection that Oak is able to emerge successful in protecting Bathsheba’s farm from harm and finally achieve fulfillment.

Note to Learners
Thomas Hardy’s ‘Wessex’

Thomas Hardy set all of his major novels in the south and southwest of England. He named the area “Wessex” after the medieval Anglo-Saxon kingdom that existed in this part of that country prior to the Norman Conquest. Although the places that appear in his novels actually exist, in many cases he gave the place a fictional name. In a 1895 preface to the novel *Far From the Madding Crowd* he described Wessex as “a merely realistic dream country”. The actual definition of “Hardy’s Wessex” varied widely throughout Hardy’s career, and was not definitively settled until after he retired from writing novels. When he created the concept of a fictional Wessex, it consisted merely of the small area of Dorset in which Hardy grew up; by the time he wrote *Jude the Obscure*, the boundaries had extended to include all of Dorset, Wiltshire, Somerset, Devon, Hampshire, much of Berkshire, and some of Oxfordshire, with its most north-easterly point being Oxford (renamed “Christminster” in the novel *Jude the Obscure*). The idea of Wessex plays an important artistic role in Hardy’s works (particularly his later novels), assisting the presentation of themes of progress, primitivism, sexuality, religion, nature and naturalism; Learners are requested to have a look at the Map of Hardy’s Wessex to gain a better understanding of the ‘partly real, partly dream’ locations used by the author in his fictional universe. See the Map of Hardy’s Wessex provided alongside, for a proper understanding of the setting of the novel.



The Map of Hardy's Wessex

Source : www.fulltable.com

3.2.6. Important Themes

a) Chance, coincidence and moral responsibility

As in every Hardy novel, chance and coincidence play vital roles in charting the course of the characters in *Far from the madding crowd*. From the inception, chance plays a shaping role in the lives of Bathseba Everdene who is suddenly raised from being a penniless woman to the owner of Weatherbury farm. The use of chance and coincidence as a means of furthering the plot was a technique used by many Victorian authors but with Hardy it becomes something more than a mere device. Fateful incidents (overheard conversations and undelivered letters, for instance) are the forces working against mere man in his efforts to control his own destiny. In addition, Fate appears in the form of nature, endowing it with varying moods that affect the lives of the characters. Those who are most in harmony with their environment are usually the most contented; similarly, those who can appreciate the joys of nature can find solace in it. Yet nature can take on sinister aspects, becoming more of an actor than just a setting for the action. It is chance which leads to Oak losing his status as independent Farmer and yet it is chance again which leads him on to become the Bailiff of his sweetheart's farm. It is mischance which takes Fanny Robin to the wrong church on her marriage day and eventually leads to her suffering and death. It is also chance which destroys Boldwood's final joy, of acquiescing Bathsheba into promising to marry him, as her missing husband Troy returns. Thus chance and coincidence are woven into the plot as a leitmotif, which makes the reader question how much of what happens to the characters is dependent on their moral actions and how much on Fate?

Learners' Activity

Learners, it would be an interesting task for you to read the novel carefully on your own and make a list of chance events and coincidences which determine the plans or lives of the characters or affect the course of the plot. You may tally your list with that of fellow learners to see how many you have actually noticed or missed.

b) Unrequited Love

Much of the plot of *Far from the Madding Crowd* depends on theme of unrequited love—love by one person for another that is not mutual in the sense that

the other person does not feel love in return. The novel is driven, from the first few chapters, by Gabriel Oak's love for Bathsheba. Once he has lost his farm, he is free to wander anywhere in search of work, but he heads to Weatherbury because it is in the direction that Bathsheba has gone. This move leads to Oak's employment at Bathsheba's farm, where he patiently consoles her in her troubles and supports her in tending the farm, with no sign he will ever have his love returned.

Oak's feelings for Bathsheba parallel Boldwood's feelings for Bathsheba. Given the fact that Bathsheba whimsically sends Boldwood a valentine, sealed with the strong message "Marry Me," Boldwood has enough reason to believe she might love him. Though she tries to extinguish any such belief, telling Boldwood repeatedly she will not marry him, unlike Oak, who is willing to take Bathsheba at her word, Boldwood looks for the slightest sign that she may soften or relent. This finally causes him to become insane and kill his rival, Troy, and lands leading to his arrest and incarceration. Bathsheba herself suffers a similar unrequited love for Sergeant Troy. She gets married to Troy, but feels he is mistreating her once they are married. But she cannot help herself because she loves him so much. He, on the other hand, is not capable of a stable love relationship. Having deserted his one true love Fanny Robin, who is pregnant of him, at a momentary attraction for Bathsheba, he is filled with regret at Fanny's death. He deserts Bathsheba and mourns for his lost love. When he is thought to have drowned, though, Bathsheba still thinks enough of him to go on waiting, to see if he will come back. Unrequited love thus shapes much of the could-be-tragic ingredients of the plot. The woman we see at the end of the novel, marrying Oak, is not the same spirited Bathsheba but one who is much sober and broken by heartbreak.

c) Nature: As Guide and Enemy

Nature is almost always a leading character in Hardy's novels and it seems to work as shaper of fates of the human characters or as a major agent in the events in the. In *Far from the Madding Crowd*, nature at times aids humans in their actions, but, on occasions, nature seems to work more to mar them. Hardy imagines and describes Nature as a feminine force and she does seem to sympathise with Bathsheba and Gabriel Oak, a character especially attuned with nature. The seasons of the year correspond to the moods mainly of Bathsheba and Gabriel. Nature seems to work to draw Bathsheba and Oak together. It serves as a means of protection for Bathsheba, but it expresses its cruelty toward Sergeant Troy. It helps to impair his fate, perhaps, because he is not one who is obeisant to its order. Recollect his sword

play in chapter 28, which seduces Bathsheba and “The caterpillar was spitted upon (the sword’s) point”? A contrast to Gabriel Oak’s warming of new born animals this whimsical destruction of nature in Troy marks him out as an antagonistic force.

Nature guides its children and assists them when it can. Hardy refers to Nature as the mother of man throughout the novel. He describes Bathsheba Everdone as “a fair product of Nature, in the feminine kind.” He again refers to Nature as a mother when he speaks of “one of those whimsical coincidences in which Nature, like a busy mother, seems to spare a moment from her unremitting labours to turn and make her children smile.” Much later in the novel when Hardy describes an imminent storm and the animals as they sense its presence, he again refers to Nature as the mother of humanity.

Gabriel proceeded towards his home. In approaching the door, his toe kicked something which felt and sounded soft, leathery, and distended, like a boxing-glove. It was a large toad humbly travelling across the path. Oak took it up, thinking it might be better to kill the creature to save it from pain; but finding it uninjured, he placed it again among the grass. He knew what this direct message from the Great Mother meant.

Nature attempts to warn its children to prepare for foul weather, but its advice is ignored. Hardy’s narrator explains that “every voice in nature was unanimous in bespeaking change”.

3.2.7. The Significant Episodes in the Novel

a) Dying of the sheep

In chapter 5 of the novel ‘A Pastoral Tragedy’ strikes Gabriel Oak. An instance of an animal suffering a terribly ironic fate which parallels that of man occurs in Chapter xxii of *Far from the Madding Crowd*. Gabriel Oak’s dog works laboriously to drive the flock off a precipice. He then is shot although he had expected to be rewarded for his deed. Hardy states: “The dog came up, licked his hand, and made signs implying that he expected some great reward for signal services rendered.” The tragedy which George has unwittingly led his master to is his complete loss of independence as farmer, because the flock was bought and raised with borrowed money. It is however important to take note of the fact that it was the same dog who had come to his rescue at a time when he hardly escapes death. Bathsheba explains

how she comes to save Oak from suffocation: “I heard your dog howling and scratching at the door of the hut when I came to the milking The dog saw me, and jumped over to me and laid hold of my skirt”. The dying of the sheep however is an episode in the novel which determines the future course of action for its protagonist.

b) Bathsheba’s sending of the valentine to Boldwood

In chapter 13 Bathsheba sends a Valentine to Farmer Boldwood in jest, hardly fathoming the long felt repercussions of her actions. tries out her new role of farmer. Proud as she is, moving independently in a man’s world, the only man oblivious to her beauty is Mr. Boldwood, who does not look at her once, as Liddy remarks on the way home from Church. When Bathsheba and Liddy are at home on Sunday, Bathsheba is about to send a valentine to a young boy when Liddy suggests that she send it to Boldwood instead. On a whim, Bathsheba agrees, setting in motion one of the novel’s tragedies. The valentine contains a meaningless ditty, “Roses are red, Violets are blue...” but Bathsheba impulsively stamps it with a seal that reads, “Marry Me.” The narrator reflects that Bathsheba’s action may have been motivated by Bolwood’s indifference to her charms. Unfortunately, the letter has a profound effect on Boldwood. It is the one ornate object in his puritanically plain home and life. This one act will haunt both Bathsheba and Boldwood until the end of the novel. Hardy uses this set of circumstances to analyse one of his favorite concerns: how a person’s life is determined by minor, seemingly insignificant events. Sometimes these events are questions of luck or forces beyond human control. Here, however, Hardy examines human agency: Bathsheba sends the valentine in jest, without thinking, but her act results in extraordinary consequences. The narrator says later when Bathsheba, pursued by Boldwood, resolves never to disturb his life by look, sign or action: “But a resolution to avoid an evil is seldom framed till the evil is so far advanced as to make avoidance impossible”.

c) Sergeant Troy’s Swordplay

In chapter 28 titled ‘The Hollow amid the Ferns’ Troy finally has possession of Bathsheba’s attention and her heart through a display of his swordplay. The swordplay is symbolic in revealing the reckless, irresponsible and flashiness of Troy. Troy is so completely in command of his sword and so perfectly confident of his skill that he does not hesitate to risk Bathsheba’s life for the sake of his performance. His actions have utterly overwhelmed Bathsheba: “She felt powerless to withstand or

deny him.” We must not overlook Hardy’s own showmanship. He creates a sensuous chapter, with the lush setting, textures, colors, and lighting all playing their parts. In



“She took up her position as directed.” Troy Courts Bathsheba; *Cornhill* illustration by Helen Paterson Allingham

an age of prudery and strict censorship against improper material in print, Hardy cleverly weaves sexual overtones into this episode of this novel, as Troy’s swordplay is symbolic in many ways. The narrator points out the success of Troy’s actions with Bathsheba who is now in love with him: “...Troy’s deformities lay deep down from a woman’s vision whilst his embellishments were upon the

very surface; thus contrasting with homely Oak, whose defects were patent to the blindest, and whose virtues were as metals in a mine.” This blindness makes Bathsheba, an otherwise strong and wise woman, pay a heavy price.

d) The storm scene

The storm in chapter 37 is one a catastrophe in the novel yet again inflicted by the natural world. In this struggle with nature, we see how different people respond to forces beyond human control. Gabriel emerges as the person most attuned to reading the signals of nature and able to comprehend them and control them as well as he can. Chapter 36 gives an extraordinary account of a series of natural signs—-a toad on the path, a slug crawling across the table, and sheep huddling together. Hardy first presents this information to the reader who is incapable of interpreting it, and then shows how Gabriel is able to interpret it correctly: Gabriel realizes that the sheep’s position foretells a long and constant rain after the initial storm. Richard L. Purdy observes that the novel moves like a natural calendar, by the seasons for lambing, shearing, haying, and the harvest. He states that “the fortunes of Bathsheba and Oak and Troy are closely bound up with the unvarying cycle of Weatherbury Farm.” Nevertheless, the storm reveals to everyone Sergeant Troy’s irresponsibility and his inadequacies. Nature shows a lack of sympathy for Troy as he laments the death of Fanny Robin. After the death of Fanny and her baby, Troy feels remorse for the manner in which he treated the ill-fated girl, by making her suffer as unwed

mother and die ultimately. In an attempt to atone for his behavior, he buys her a beautiful grave stone and spends the evening planting snow-drops, hyacinth, crocus bulbs, violets, daisies, and many other varieties of flowers upon her grave. Nature refuses to let Troy receive satisfaction from his labours the weather unleashes its fury as rain begins to fall soon after Troy finishes his planting, washing away his futile efforts at atonement.

e) Fanny Robin's arrival at Casterbridge Union

An instance occurs in the novel in which an animal shows compassion and gives aid to a fellow being. The dog is spurned, just as man is often treated unjustly in his attempts to do good. A dog comes to the aid of Fanny Robin as she, in the last stages of exhaustion, struggles toward Casterbridge Union. Hardy describes the dog as he discovers Fanny: "The animal, who was as homeless as she, respectfully withdrew a step or two when the woman moved, and, seeing that she did not repulse him, he licked her hand again." Hardy then describes an extremely poignant scene in which the dog drags Fanny toward Casterbridge Union:

'The ultimate and saddest singularity of woman's efforts and invention was reached when, with a quickened breathing, she rose to a stooping posture, and resting her two little arms upon the shoulders of the dog, leant firmly thereon, and murmured stimulating words... The dog, who now thoroughly understood her desire and her incapacity, frantic in his distress. . . . "'

The dog drags the unwed mother Fanny to the union, and ironically, he is stoned away by the people of the refuge. Fanny's fate is mirrored in the dog's plight. Both the animal and the woman are homeless, and they wish only for someone to care about them. The dog is rejected by man in much the same way as Fanny is rejected by society. This scene remains etched in the reader's mind for its poignancy, irony and the suffering of the unwed mother in Victorian society—a theme which would recur again in Hardy's fiction with greater emphasis (read Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* for a better understanding of Hardy's empathy for women and their oppression through Victorian sexual double standards).

3.2.8. Analysis of the Important Characters

a) Bathsheba Everdene

Very early in the novel, Gabriel's conversation with Bathsheba shows her to be

a capricious, spirited young woman who has never been in love. The two of them discuss marriage with frankness and Bathsheba admits that she would like to have all the trappings of marriage—she would delight in a piano, pets, and her own carriage; she would enjoy seeing her name in the newspaper’s marriage announcements—but she objects to the concept of having a husband in the first place and to losing her freedom. While Bathsheba seems a bit superficial, her independence and strength are admirable, and she remains a sympathetic character. Bathsheba is the central figure of the novel. At the beginning of the novel she is around twenty years old and poor, helping to tend her aunt’s farm. She is vain. The first time Oak sees her she is seen taking out a mirror and examining her face, unaware that anyone is looking. She flirts with Oak but does not accept his proposal of marriage because she does not believe he can put up with a strong-headed and independent woman like herself and proudly declares: “I want somebody to tame me: I am too independent; and you would never be able to, I know”. When an uncle dies and leaves her his farm, Bathsheba takes control. She fires the bailiff for stealing, and instead of hiring another bailiff, she



Julie Christie, as Bathsheba Everdene, in the 1967 Hollywood adaptation of *Far from the Madding Crowd*.

Source: google images (daily mail)

takes on the duty of managing the farm herself. Her independence and determination to carve her niche in a male-dominated world makes her an admirable character.

Though raised by fortune to a stature of responsibility, that she still has the flirtatious girl in her, is revealed on Valentine’s Day when she sends an anonymous valentine to the serious and indifferent bachelor Mr Boldwood who lives next to her farm. When he takes this claim of love seriously, she feels guilty and finds herself unable to refuse him outright. It is this act of whimsicality which initiates tragic

consequences for her and other characters in the novel. Bathsheba however, is a conscientious employer. She gives her workers bonuses when work is going well. When news arrives that Fanny Robin, who once worked for her uncle, has died, Bathsheba arranges for the body to be brought back to Weatherbury, to be buried in the local cemetery. When she meets the dashing Sergeant Troy, she is seduced by his extravagant flattery and falls in love with him, and ends up marrying him. When Bathsheba has fallen in love, the narrator comments ominously, “When a strong woman recklessly throws away her strength, she is worse than a weak woman who has never had strength to throw away”, pointing to her consciousness somewhere deep down that Troy will not be her ideal husband. Gabriel and Boldwood are the only ones who know (from Fanny’s letter) that Troy was Fanny Robin’s lover, whom she intended to marry when she ran away. Knowing this, Gabriel tries to hint at Troy’s immoral character but Bathsheba refuses to listen. Troy after marriage mistreats Bathsheba— spends her money, ignores her, and almost ruins her farm. Throughout these difficult times, she relies on Oak, both for help in managing her farm and as a sympathetic ear to listen to her troubles. Bathsheba becomes a colder, more pragmatic person after Troy leaves.

In the end, when Boldwood is in jail and Troy is dead, Bathsheba rekindles the same playful, flirtatious relationship with Oak that she had at the beginning of the novel. She recognizes his loyalty through all that has happened and realises she has loved him all along.

b) Gabriel Oak

From the very first chapter, the novel’s rustic focus clearly emerges. Hardy’s treatment of his subject alternates between a painstaking realism and an idealised romanticism. While he details the minutiae of rustic culture and includes specific information about the practice of farming, he also links Gabriel to the pastoral literary tradition, an ancient classical form that enjoyed new popularity during the Renaissance. Playing his flute as he tends his sheep, Gabriel evokes the carefree, flute-playing shepherds that populated these poems’ idyllic landscapes. Furthermore, throughout the novel Gabriel will occupy the position of the observer who watches others make mistakes without ever implicating himself in the action; the traditional pastoral lyric commented on the civilized world in a tone of similar detachment. The thing that characterises Gabriel Oak most consistently in this book is the quiet, dignified way he goes about his life, no matter what tragedy strikes his life. This calm allows Gabriel to quietly appreciate life and contribute his help to a lot of things in

life which other characters do not. Even when Gabriel's sheep fall off a cliff and lead him into total bankruptcy, he does not create a furore but accepts his fate. Instead, we find that "there was left to him a dignified calm he had never before known and



“Do you want a shepherd Ma’am?” February 1874 installment of the *Cornhill Magazine* Serialisation of the novel.

that indifference to fate which, though it often makes a villain of a man is the basis of his sublimity when it does not” (6.5). He just draws strength (his surname ‘oak’ is not given without a symbolic resonance) from his experiences and keeps pushing onward. If there is one thing that really sets Oak apart from the

other characters in this book, it's his loyalty to Bathsheba Everdene. Even when Bathsheba rejects his first marriage proposal, he claims, “I shall do one thing in this life—one thing certain—that is, love you, and long for you, and keep wanting you till I die” (4.65). But unlike Farmer Boldwood or Sergeant Troy, Oak never bothers Bathsheba with proposals until she relents. He has too much dignity to force Bathsheba to marry him if she doesn't love him. Without question, if there's a moral center to this book, it's definitely Gabriel Oak. The final ending of the novel, where Oak is finally married off to Bathsheba, has been criticised for its tame and unconvincing nature but it was probably a virtue-rewarded ending which Hardy chose, his vision of life not yet overwhelmed by pessimism.

c) William Boldwood:

Farmer Boldwood is Bathsheba's second suitor in the novel. Boldwood is a bachelor, about forty years old, who owns the farm next to the Everdene farm. He is depicted as a man with dignity and of reserved nature who takes responsibility for Fanny Robin when her parents die. Boldwood, as his name suggests, is a wooden, reserved man. He seems indifferent to women or love until Bathsheba sends him a valentine on a whim. This one act will haunt both Bathsheba and Boldwood until the

end of the novel. Hardy uses this set of circumstances to analyze one of his favorite concerns: how a person's life is determined by minor, seemingly insignificant events. Bathsheba Everdene first becomes aware of Boldwood when he comes to visit soon after she takes over her uncle's farm. Her maid Liddy explains that Boldwood is a confirmed bachelor and shows no interest in women, which spurs the vanity in Bathsheba to send him an anonymous valentine. The valentine starts Boldwood thinking about women. He becomes convinced that he is in love with Bathsheba and he is obsessed with the thought of getting her to marry him. Because he is used to business interactions and not personal ones, he pressures her to marry him and is confused when she is reluctant. When she secretly marries Troy, Boldwood feels she has been stolen from him and in his obsession lets his farm go to ruin. After Troy is thought to be dead, Boldwood interprets the fact that she will not remarry for seven years to mean that at the end of that time, she will marry him, ignoring the legal parameters for such abstinence. When she says she will give him an answer at Christmas, he prepares a lavish party, assuming she will become his fiancée. When Boldwood is jailed for shooting Troy on his reappearance, the extent of Boldwood's delusions/obsessions becomes clear. Locked closets are found in his house, laden with dresses, furs, and jewelry, all inscribed to "Bathsheba Boldwood," with a date seven years from the present date, when he expects her to marry him. Because he is clearly insane, Boldwood is not hanged for Troy's murder and his sentence is changed to life imprisonment.

d) Sargent Frank Troy:

Sergeant Frank Troy is presented in the novel as a contradiction. Throughout the novel, his actions show him to be an opportunist and a womaniser. As a soldier dressed in Scarlet has much attractiveness, an attractiveness which he uses recklessly over women. He is first introduced as responding to Fanny Robin, who has walked miles in winter to the town to which his battalion has moved. Fanny asks Troy when he is going to marry her, but Troy says he cannot come out and see her. He does agree to marry her, though, but when she shows up late to the wedding, as a result in the confusion over Church names, he uses it as an excuse to call off the wedding. In courting Bathsheba Everdene, Troy shows himself to be skillful and witty. He uses Bathsheba's love for him as a leverage to squander her wealth, illtreat her and almost ruin her farm through mismanagement. He swindles Boldwood out of money when he offers him to make leave Bathsheba, by taking the money although he and Bathsheba are already married. Troy spends Bathsheba's money on liquor for the

farm hands, who are not used to hard liquor, and as a result almost ruins a year's work. He also loses heavily at the horse races.

On the other hand, he is, at heart, a romantic. When he hears of Fanny's death, he is truly grieved, to such an extent that he is willing to lose his comfortable position as Bathsheba's husband. He impulsively tells Bathsheba she means nothing to him, that Fanny was his true love. He erects a tombstone to Fanny that says he was the one to put it up, despite the scandal that could ensue. He then runs away, eventually joining a traveling show, in order to forget his beloved and her death. He is taken to be dead after drowning but he returns again, as villain

who tries to make Bathsheba obey him. He meets his nemesis in Boldwood, who shoots him for supposedly stealing his Bathsheba a second time. Sergeant Troy is depicted as the only figure who is in antagonism to the benevolent forces of Nature, as mentioned in earlier sections.

e) **Rustic Characters**

Rustic characters, who have been listed above, are an important ingredients of Hardy's novel-universe, especially in *Far From the Madding Crowd*. In chapter 22 the scene characterising the farm laborers is typical of Hardy's novels. Here, Hardy pauses the plot for an entire chapter, giving a detailed account of how the laborers speak, how they spend their free time, and their opinions about each other. These groups of lower-class, common characters figure in almost all of Hardy's novels; like Shakespeare, he often uses them to effect comic relief, offsetting a tragic scene with one of a more light-hearted tone. There are many such instances where the rustic characters— **Bill Smallbury**, **Henery Fray**, **Jacob Smallbury**, and **Labal Tall** Some of Bathsheba's farmhands.—or her maid **Liddy** act as choric figures and also at times further the course of the plot. With the detailed conversations and activities of the rural characters, Hardy also intends to introduce urban or middle-class readers to the many different kinds of people that exist in the lower classes. In a later essay on 'The Dorsetshire laborer', he complains that people tend to stereotype farm workers and lump them all together as the figure named as 'hodge'; It is his aspiration to break that stereotype by developing three-dimensional rustic figures.

3.2.9. *Far From the Madding Crowd*: A Pastoral Ending?

As Howard Babb describes, "At bottom, Hardy's story juxtaposes two different

worlds or modes of being, the natural against civilized and it consists on the superiority of the former by identifying the natural as strong, enduring, self-contained, slow to change, sympathetic, while associating the civilised with weakness felicity, modernity, self-centeredness” The ending of the novel has been criticised as being tame and unromantic, because it seems that the union of Bathsheba and Oak is not natural and convincing. Bathsheba had never looked upon Gabriel as a possible husband, except taking his love for her as granted. It is difficult to believe that a woman like Bathsheba would marry Gabriel just because he has become indispensable to her for looking her farm and business. The ending would have been more appropriate and more in harmony with Hardy’s philosophy of life if Gabriel were to leave Bathsheba and his love for her were to remain unfulfilled. Hardy did not wish to make this novel too sad. It is one of his early works and Hardy’s philosophy of life had not yet become so dark and pessimistic, neither his faith in the eventual improvement of mankind been eroded. Many readers welcome the happy ending because they would like to see Gabriel Oak rewarded for his loyalty and devotion to Bathsheba, as a fit ending to a novel with at least apparent pastoral patterns.

3.2.10. Summing Up

- Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) was a Victorian novelist, poet and writer whose work reflects the philosophical, spiritual and social milieu of the age distinctly.
- The novel under focus, *Far From the Madding Crowd*, from its very title, may make you expect a pastoral, idyllic setting, an expectation which may not hold true after you read the novel.
- On the brink of a new literary era, Hardy broached topics and themes, such as relationship between the sexes, with greater frankness and starkness than some Victorian readers liked; consequently, he lived through a period of outraged criticism.
- The title *Far From the Madding Crowd* suggests avoidance of the life of a city, modernised government, crowds and industry; in it, Hardy tries to fashion a portrait of what he saw as an endangered way of life and to create a snapshot for future generations to look at.
- Bathsheba stands out as one of the earliest, powerful and independent women characters in the Hardy-Universe and through her Hardy portrays the

innate capacity of women to be strong, resourceful and independent in a social world which restrains them and curtails opportunities for their growth.

- His novel thematises the importance of man's connection to, and understanding of, the natural world. Gabriel Oak embodies Hardy's ideal of a life in harmony with the forces of the natural world. It is through this vital connection that Oak is able to emerge successful in protecting Bathsheba's farm from harm and finally achieve fulfillment.

3.2.11. Comprehension Exercises

● Long Answer Type Questions-20 Marks

1. Examine the role of chance and coincidence in furthering the plot of *Far From the Madding Crowd*.
2. Discuss some of the important themes in the novel *Far From the Madding Crowd*.
3. Comment on the role of Gabriel Oak as Bathsheba's guardian angel with textual illustrations.
4. Bathsheba is an independent woman who throws away her own strength willingly. Examine her character in the light of this statement.

● Medium Length Questions: 12 marks

1. Briefly examine the role of Boldwood in *Far From the Madding Crowd*
2. Discuss the role of Nature in *Far From the Madding Crowd* as both friend and enemy of man with suitable textual references.
3. What role do animals play in the plot of *Far From the Madding Crowd*?
4. Examine the character of Sergeant Troy and his treatment of women.

● Short Questions: 6 marks

1. Explore the significance of the valentine episode in the novel.
2. What role does Fanny Robin play in *Far From the Madding Crowd*? Discuss in brief.
3. Describe and bring out the significance of Sergeant Troy's swordplay in 'The Hollow amid the Ferns'.

4. Comment on Hardy's portrayal of rustic characters in the novel. Point out any significant role played by any two of them.

3.2.12. Suggested Reading

Hardy, Thomas. *Far From the Madding Crowd*. London: Macmillan (The New Wessex Edition), 1974.

Online version of text: <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/27>

Kay-Robinson, Denys. *Hardy's Wessex Reappraised*. London: David and Charles, 1972

Morgan, Rosemarie (ed.). *Student Companion to Thomas Hardy*. USA: Greenwood Publishing, 2006.

Howard, Babb. 'Setting and theme in *Far From the Madding Crowd*'. *ELH*, Vol.30, 1963.