



PASTORAL PERCEPTIONS IN FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD: A STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Thomas Hardy occupies a distinct place in English literature as a poet, short story writer and a great tragic novelist of eminence. *Far From the Madding Crowd* is Hardy's first major work with a distinguishable pastoral back ground from his other novels. And in this novel, Hardy used the word 'Wessex' for the first time. Hardy has mastered the pastoral life of the agricultural districts of Wessex – the farming, the sheep-keeping, the labouring, the feasting and the mourning with all the vividness of a powerful imagination. He has witnessed the joys and sorrows, love and marriage, failure and frustration in the rural Wessex and presented the same in *Far From the Madding crowd*.

The various characters in the novel are made to live before the reader. Bathsheba with her love and vanity, Gabriel Oak with his unwavering loyalty and devotion; Troy with his irresistible manner of talking; Boldwood with his serious and gloomy nature and his volcanic passion – all these are Hardy's realistic and convincing characterisation. It is also closely observed that how the three men namely Gabriel Oak, Farmer Boldwood and Sergeant Troy tried to win the love of Bathsheba.

The article also closely examines the significance of the title, *Far From the Madding Crowd*, in addition to various pastoral perceptions like – its rural background, Hardy's view of philosophy and various critical comments at the end of the novel.

KEY WORDS: Pastoral perception, unwavering loyalty, irresistible manner, frustration, volcanic passion.

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Far from the Madding Crowd is the first of Hardy's major work to make a claim to greatness. Dale Kramer rightly points out, " *Far from the Madding crowd* is said to be the most stable among Hardy's novels and has continued to hold a high place

among the Wessex novels". Indeed with the production of this novel the name of Hardy was ranked with those of the first living English novelists. If one goes through the reviews of Hardy's other novels, one can find that each of them, as it was

praised, was held to be not good as *Far from the Madding crowd*. It is "the finest, as it is certainly, the most popular among Mr. Hardy's other novels". It is a story in which Hardy for the first time used the word Wessex. John Bayley says, "Far from the Madding crowd was Hardy's first master piece, and after many readings, it remains for me his most absolutely satisfying novel, the most characteristic expression of his genius". His dramatic power and gift of characterisation reached perfection with the publication of this novel in 1874. Being a major work, it has its unique virtues: "the bold theatricality of the narrative progression, the rich yet strictly functional evocation of setting, the rich bound poetry of the dialogue".

In his famous stanza, *Elegy* written in a country churchyard, Thomas Gray refers to the quiet and peaceful life of the people living in a village. Hardy borrowed the phrase, 'Far from the Madding crowd' from Gray's poem and used it as a title for the novel. The 'madding crowd' represents the crowded, congested, suffocating life of the city. Hardy wishes to imply that the life of the country people is peaceful and calm and free from tumult, the turmoil and the strife which mark the life of the town people.

This novel has markedly pastoral character. Hardy himself described the book to Stephen as a 'Pastoral tale'. And the progress of the narrative is marked throughout by the festivals and occupations of the agricultural year lambing and shearing, hay making and harvest, the hiring fair and the sheep fair, the shearing and harvest suppers, Saint Valentines' Day and Christmas. Troy meets Bathsheba in the hay-field; so Gabriel strips the blushing sheep under Bathsheba's modest but critical eye. The ironic uncertainties of Gabriel's relationship with Bathsheba are subtly defined by the seating arrangement at the shearing supper, where distinction of class merges with sexual rivalry; so Boldwood's obsession is displayed in all its grotesqueness by the sombre incongruities of his Christmas party.

Gabriel Oak specifically a pastoral figure in the novel, is 'linked with traditional presentations of the

shepherd as rustic lover and philosopher'. In the Norcombe chapters, Gabriel is introduced as a flute-playing shepherd, and of the 'pastoral tragedy' when he loses his sheep, at the hiring fair, he is sensitive to his fall from his 'modest elevation as pastoral king' to the level of hired man. The opening chapters of the novel represent a pastoral world and simultaneously invalidate the pastoral myth. These characters are a kind of prologue in which the traditional pastoral world is demythologised. As Daniel R Schwarz says, "while the opening chapters dramatise Bathsheba's repeated intrusion into Gabriel's consciousness and her subsequent rejection of his suit, the ending focuses on the intrusion of Gabriel into Bathsheba's consciousness".

Far from the Madding crowd is viewed within a pastoral perspective, the argument builds up in two, rather different ways. There is to begin with, a classical emphasis on the preference of rural to urban values which finds its purest expression. 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". This opposition between 'the natural' and 'the civilised', between nature and nurture, is crucial to the concept of pastoral; apply it to this kind of directness to Hardy's novel is to see how remote it is from the particularities of that novel, remote both in the language employed and in the basic opposition implied.

Hardy's view of Nature in *Far from the Madding crowd* has been defined by association with certain prominent pastoral elements in the novel. Peter J Casagrande very aptly remarks, "Nature in this view, is a normal norm and Oak, as protagonist is the imitator and champion". Hardy's conception of Oak and Oak's rural world is expressive of a new idea of nature and man's place in nature that is diametrically opposed to the idea of nature inherent in traditional pastoral.

The pastoral background in *Far from the Madding Crowd* is scarcely distinguishable from *Under the Greenwood Tree*. Penny Beumelha says, it has all the “absurdities, improprieties incongruities and suddenly sensational incidents”. For the first time, the distinction between romance and reality ceases to be an artistic flaw in the unity of the novel, and formal which counters the mundane with the incredible, the beautiful with the grotesque, is extended to its theme. In the famous description of the storm, he combines a faithful and perspective vision of natural processes with an exaggerated and fanciful treatment. In many ways, this episode is the crux of the novel, demonstrating finally the contrasts between the solid Gabriel Oak and the other two chief male characters, Troy and Boldwood.

Ian Gregor says, “the novel provides a version of pastoral deeply congenial to the conservative spirit, a spirit finding in remembrance of things past a sanction of the present, and in Hardy’s title, idyllic celebration”. Albert Guerard, a tough minded critic, who has done more than any one to see Hardy’s fiction in the light of the twentieth century-writing about *Far From the Madding Crowd* says, “at its best it creates a pastoral world of antique simplicity, a fitting background for its changeless drama of love and betrayal, of faithful shepherdesses and glamorous faithless soldiers”.

Gabriel Oak, in the very first chapter is a shepherd-farmer. His loss of two hundred sheep to the folly of his dog and subsequently he is appointed as shepherd to Bathsheba. Although Bathsheba is chiefly a farmer, she owns a large flock of sheep as farmer Boldwood owns a large flock of sheep. Such occupations as sheep-washing and sheep-shearing are described in great detail by Hardy. Indeed, the sheep constitute one of the leading interests in the story. Oak’s loss of his sheep is a major crisis in his life. Gabriel Oak is entrusted with the duty of taking the flocks of Bathsheba and Boldwood to the annual fair at Greenhill. The pastoral element in the story is a part of its rural character. The rural background of the story is, in fact, emphasized by the pastoral element.

The specifically pastoral aspect of the novel are emphasized in many of the images and allusions which Hardy evokes. For instance, Boldwood speaks of waiting for Bathsheba as Jacob had for Rachael. Such allusions combine with others in the novel- for example, those implicit in the naming of Troy and Bathsheba – and with the pastoral character of the setting and the continuing life of farm and village to throw into relief and into perspective the foreground narrative.

In the novel Hardy has mastered the life of the agricultural districts in the South-Western countries – the details of the farming and the sheep-keeping, of the labouring, the feasting, and the mourning, are painted with all the vividness of a powerful imagination. Further it is the story of a ballad: the soldier lover, the betrayed maiden, the neglected wife, the faithful shepherd, the aloof, tormented gentleman lover.

As to the main characters of the story, the two namely, Sergeant Troy and Farmer Boldwood, are both of them conceived and executed with great power, while Shepherd Oak and Bathsheba remain from the beginning to the end only half-conceived and half-drawn figures. The stiffness, the awkward reserve, the stolidity, the latent heat, and the smouldering passion which when once kindled eats up Farmer Boldwood’s whole nature, are painted with the pen of a considerable artist. Again, Sergeant Troy’s bold and unprincipled gallantry, his reckless selfishness, and his bursts of at once cruel and remorseful passion when he finds he has ever killed the only woman he has ever loved, without casting a thought of the fact that he also has ruined the happiness of the woman he married, but he did not love, are equally strongly painted.

The various characters in the novel are made to live before the reader. Bathsheba with her vanity, love flattery, impulsiveness, courage and self-confidence, Gabriel Oak with his unwavering loyalty and devotion; Troy with his irresistible manner of talking; Boldwood with his serious and gloomy nature and his volcanic passion – all these are Hardy’s realistic and convincing characterisation. Even the rustics are made to live in the pages of the

novel. The various portraits drawn by Hardy in the story are true to life.

The principal tragedies that occur in the course of the novel relate to the lives of Gabriel Oak, Boldwood, Bathsheba and Fanny Robin. In fact Hardy has spent more space and more pains on depicting Oak's character than the character of any other male figure in the story. He is as solid and dependable as the Oak tree whose name he bears. J.M. Barrie aptly says, "Oak is the hero ... the good fellow with a head as well as a heart". In the words of Peter.J.Casagrande, "Gabriel Oak is a new kind of character in Hardy's fiction – a man whose intelligence and self-mastery enable him both to control his own impulses and to study and repair the misworking of external nature".

Oak is a silent undemonstrative type of a lover. He treats love as an enduring, lasting passion which knows how to give without any expectation of any return. His fidelity to Bathsheba is remarkable. From the time that he saves her corn-ricks from fire he serves her whole – heartedly and ungrudgingly. Henry James rightly observes that the chief purpose of the book is, "to represent Gabriel's dumb, devoted passion, his biding his time, his rendering unsuspected services to the woman who has scorned him, his integrity and simplicity and sturdy patience".

Gabriel has a philosophic attitude towards life. He endures his misfortunes calmly and resolutely. When his dog has driven his sheep over the precipice and he finds them all lying dead at the foot of the hill, he does not curse his luck. When Bathsheba does not respond to him for a long time, he does not feel gloomy or depressed by Boldwood. Though his love is disappointed for a long time, he remains calm and courageous.

By nature, Oak is kind-hearted and sympathetic. He feels very sad at the pre-mature and the tragic end of his two hundred sheep. When he meets Fanny Robin by chance, without knowing the girl he offers her a shilling on seeing her distress even though he himself is a needy person at the time. When Boldwood was trying to win Bathsheba, he did not

enter into any rivalry with him but kept his own love under control.

Bathsheba is the heroine of the novel. Henry James remarks, "She is a young lady of the inconsequential, wilful, mettlesome type which has lately become so much the fashion for heroines..." She is greatly influenced by flattery. It is her love of flattery which blinds her to the true character of Troy. As Penny Boumelha puts it, "Her relationship with Troy is marked by instruments of violence, begun with the spurs, consummated by the sword, and ended by the gun".

Her initial rejection of Oak is partly due to his lack of masterfulness: "I want somebody to tame me; I am too independent; and you would never be able to, I know"(P.66). Richard Carpenter has written of Bathsheba's behaviour as 'subconscious rape-provocation, betraying her need to be dominated and possessed". Indeed, throughout Hardy's novels, women experience attraction to a man as a feeling of being hypnotised, paralysed and rendered will-less. As Penny Boumelha rightly asserts, "Bathsheba's coquetry with Oak and her sending of the valentine to the previously indifferent Boldwood are both ways of simultaneously taking and concealing the sexual initiative". George Wotton describes the process: "Living in the ideology of femininity, the woman demands to be seen by men. But each of men by whom she is surrounded demanded that she should be seen only by him and treats her according to his vision of her".

When the sight of the dead Fanny fills Troy with remorse and repentance, he finds it impossible to live with Bathsheba any longer. He talks to Bathsheba very harshly, thus intensifying the pain which she is already feeling on discovering that a love affair had once existed between her husband and Fanny. Troy pushes her away, deserts her and goes away. Subsequently, he returns to claim Bathsheba, but she is stunned to see him. His insolence provokes Boldwood to fire at him and Bathsheba becomes a widow. When she marries Gabriel Oak, she does not love him in the ardent and passionate manner in which she loved Troy. Bathsheba's tragedy is due to partly to her own

temperament and partly to the cruelty of fate which is responsible for the turn of events.

The view that women are inherently in firm pervades in *Far From the Madding Crowd*. Bathsheba's weakness when she explicably refuses to pay the toll at Norcombe is 'what is always is' in women vanity. She refuses to thank Oak when he pays it for her because, "in gaining her a passage he had lost her point, and we know how women take a favour of that kind" (Ch.1). When she saves Oak from death by suffocation in his hut, she is described as "that novelty among women –one who finished a thought before beginning the sentence with which to convey it" (Ch.3). In her presence Oak is a Samson danger of being unmanned, Boldwood an Adam in peril of fatal temptation.

The three principle male characters in the novel present a sharp contrast to one another as men and lovers. Gabriel Oak is a man of solid and sterling qualities. Troy is an accomplished flatterer. He seduces and betrays Fanny Robin; then he marries and deserts Bathsheba. Gabriel Oak, on the contrary is loyal and devoted to Bathsheba; he serves her faithfully and whole-heartedly. Michael Millgate rightly observes that, "...as a contrast to Oak, Troy is even more effective as a foil to Boldwood: where the latter is slow, massive, profoundly obsessive, Troy is trick, light and casual".

Boldwood is an over-serious type of person, leading a retired and scheduled life. He is a melancholy and gloomy type of being disinclined to mix with others. On the other hand, Gabriel is fond of company in the local Malthouse. As a lover, Gabriel is absolutely selfless; but Boldwood's attitude towards Bathsheba is possessive and his love is selfish. Disappointment in life darkens Boldwood's life. Howard Babb observes, " Boldwood's quest for Bathsheba continues, he becomes more and more pointy link with a civilized world like Troy's".

Fanny Robin was the youngest maid-servant of Bathsheba. She was very trusting and simple minded. Troy had reduced her after promising to marry her. Troy would have married Fanny if he had not accidentally met Bathsheba. At the time of

delivery approached, she was miserable and decided to go to Cambridge Union House which was a charitable institution. By the time she reached her destination, she died after giving birth to a child. The child was also died.

Fanny's death had disastrous consequences for Bathsheba. When Fanny's coffin lay in Bathsheba's house, Troy arrived there and, seeing the dead body of Fanny, he was overcome by grief. The death of Fanny had affected Troy so deeply that he no longer wanted live with Bathsheba. Fanny's death indeed, brought about a tragedy in the life of Bathsheba. After leaving Weatherbury, Troy had walked on aimlessly till he arrived at a small basin of sea enclosed by rocks. The news are brought to Bathsheba that her husband had been drowned in the sea. Later he arrived in Weatherbury, on Christmas eve when Boldwood was giving a party at his house. Bathsheba was stunned to see Troy and felt indescribably wretched and miserable. Troy stretched out his hands to pull her towards him. Finding Bathsheba unwilling to go with Troy and Troy's threatening attitude towards her, Boldwood acted instaneously. He quickly picked up a gun which lay close by and fired at Troy. The strange circumstances in which Troy met his death filled with wild grief. When Gabriel proposed marriage to her, she agreed. Thus the death of Troy and the imprisonment of Boldwood led Bathsheba to marry Gabriel Oak who was in fact her very first lover.

Far From the Madding Crowd like all good stories, it lets one down at the last, and the end of second volume is disappointing. The reader is not satisfied with the death of Sergeant Troy, who if punished at all, should have been punished by very differently; nor with Farmer Boldwood's insanity, nor even with poor Gabriel Oak's marriage. Some of the critics insist that a book ought end satisfactorily for the sake of reader's feelings. In *Far From the Madding Crowd* 'the characters and the march of events are more or less puppets'.

The ending of the novel has been criticized as being tame and unromantic. It seems that the union of Bathsheba and Oak is not natural and convincing. Bathsheba had navel looked upon Gabriel as a lover

and had never felt attracted by him as a possible husband. 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. Many readers welcome the happy ending because they would like to see Gabriel Oak rewarded for his loyalty and devotion to Bathsheba.

In all the other novels of Thomas Hardy, the role of chance or accident repeats itself with the result that the reader finds it difficult to believe that chance can play such a major role in the lives of human beings. In *Far From the Madding Crowd*, the element of chance or accident does not do much damage to the realistic effect of the novel. In this novel, all the accidents are of a sad and unhappy nature.

As in his other novels, Hardy paints a gloomy picture of life in *Far From the Madding Crowd*. He believes that man is born to suffer. He concentrated on the tragic side of life. Gabriel's hope of becoming an independent and shepherd-farmer are frustrated at an early age. His love for Bathsheba does not bear any fruit for a long time. Boldwood experiences an acute mental torture caused by the non-fulfilment of his passionate desire to possess Bathsheba. His passion drives him crazy, and his ultimate fate is very sad. Bathsheba's experience of love and marriage is very bitter and painful. Her love for Troy leads to the tragedy of her life. The principal characters in the novel suffer partly on account of the cruelty of circumstances and the hostility of fate, but mainly owing to their own errors, follies and faults. The only people who are happy in the novel are the rustics who have no desires and aspirations. Hardy hates life because life is so unpleasant, so bitter and so full of distress and misfortunes.

Hardy believes in the fundamental goodness for human beings and the nobility of human nature.

Oak is a model of loyalty, sincerity and self-sacrifice. Bathsheba suffers from weaknesses like vanity, love of flattery and want of judgement, but she is essentially kind-hearted and noble-minded. Farmer Boldwood is also good at heart. His concern for Fanny and his regret at her tragic fate are indicative of the goodness of his heart. All the characters in the novel have their short comings, failings and faults. But they are more good than evil (with the exception of Troy). So it is fair to state that Hardy loved the people in his novels even though he hated the life which they lived.

One of the most striking features of *Far From the Madding Crowd* is its physical setting which has symbolic meanings. For instance, Hardy describes the appearance of the newly married Troy at Bathsheba's bed room window, the picture is an odd combination of simplicity and ingenuity. The creeping plants around the window are 'bowed with rows of heavy water-drops, which had upon objects behind them the effects of minute lenses of high magnifying power' (ch.35). The use of the romantic pathetic fallacy contrasts markedly with Hardy's peculiarly original use of the weeping rain drops. The freshness of early morning is shown emotionally as a time of undeveloped ripeness and weakened effects. The honeymoon from its inception is marked with portents and signs of sickness, yet the tokens which Hardy mentions are not blatantly symbolic, and the total effect is undoubtedly intended merely as an imaginative comment on the action.

The title of the novel *Far From the Madding Crowd* represents the quiet lives of the rustic characters. Although Boldwood and Bathsheba live in the countryside, far from the madding crowd, they are neither happy nor contented. They are vicissitudes in their lives. There is tumult in the life of Boldwood. There is a tragedy in the life of Bathsheba. These two are far from happy. Fanny Robin's end is also tragic and heart-rendering. There are certain persons even in the countryside whose temperaments and whose nature mark them out for tragedy and who are the chosen victims of fate. Hardy wants to make the reader believe that even in

the countryside misfortune and suffering are not absent.

Hardy brings out the essential component of tragedy that is the intensity of inner experience by directly comparing the physical sufferings of Fanny with the psychological sufferings of Bathsheba. Earnest A Baker aptly remarks, "Taken as a whole, *Far From the Madding Crowd* offers a mature view of life. The themes of Hardy's later novels extensions of their early schematic expression in this novel".

The specific pastoral aspects of the novel are emphasized in many of the images and allusions which Hardy evokes. Susan Tall's husband is called Laban; Boldwood speaks of waiting for Bathsheba as Jacob had done for Rachael. Gabriel could play his flute with 'Arcadian sweetness'. Such allusions combine in the novel with others with the pastoral characters of the setting and the continuing life of the farm and the village to emphasize the foreground narrative.

In *Far From the Madding Crowd*, the three men of different temptations aspire to Bathsheba's hand: Gabriel Oak, whose name is a guarantee of his heroic combination of goodness and strength; Troy, a traditional soldier-philanderer, who does not belong to the rural community; and Farmer Boldwood, whose stolidity has been purchased at the price of repression and whose feelings drive him to obsession, crime and madness. Hardy felt constrained to provide his readers with a happy ending; but it is reached by way of suffering and tragedy.

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