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Works Cited

Ingham, Muriel B. "Far from the Madding Crowd." *Masterplots, Fourth Edition*, November 2010, pp. 1-4.
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Far from the Madding Crowd**Thomas Hardy**

Born: June 2, 1840; Higher Bockhampton, Dorset, England

Died: January 11, 1928; Dorchester, Dorset, England

Quick Reference

First published: 1874

Type of work: Novel

Type of plot: Psychological realism

Time of plot: 1869-1873

Locale: Wessex, England

Principal characters

Gabriel Oak, a shepherd

Bathsheba Everdene, the mistress of Weatherbury Farm

Sergeant Troy, her first husband

William Boldwood, her suitor and a farmer and neighbor

Fanny Robin, a woman betrayed by Troy

The Story:

Gabriel Oak is a small-scale farmer, but his honesty, integrity, and ability win him the respect of all of his neighbors. When he hears that a young woman named Bathsheba Everdene has moved into the neighborhood, he goes out of his way to see her and falls immediately in love. Gabriel is the kind of man who looks only once to know that he has found the right woman. After seeing her only a few times, he goes to her aunt, for whom Bathsheba works, and asks for the girl's hand in marriage. Although he is refused, he feels that it is the relative, not Bathsheba, who denies him.

A short time later, Gabriel's sheepdog becomes excited and chases his flock of sheep over a cliff, killing them all. Ruined, Gabriel gives up his farm and goes elsewhere to find work. On his way across the country, he passes a burning barn and runs to aid the men fighting the flames. After the fire is put out, the owner of Weatherbury Farm arrives, and it is suggested that Gabriel be hired as shepherd in return for the fine work he did. To his surprise, the owner of the farm is Bathsheba, who recently inherited the place from her uncle. Gabriel becomes her shepherd. He is struck by the change in their positions in such a short while. Now Bathsheba is the landowner, and Gabriel is the servant.

On his way to his new quarters, Gabriel meets a girl standing in the woods. She speaks to him and asks him not to say that he saw her, and he promises to keep silent. The next morning while working at his new job, he hears that Fanny Robin, one of Bathsheba's maids, disappeared, and he rightly guesses that Fanny is the girl he met. It is suspected that she went off to meet a soldier who was stationed in the area a short time before. This suspicion is correct. Fanny went to find Sergeant Troy at his new station, for he promised to marry her if she came to him. A date is set for the wedding, but Fanny goes to the wrong church. When she finally finds Troy, he refuses to make arrangements for a marriage a second time.

Bathsheba is a good manager, and Weatherbury Farm prospers; but she has her caprices. One of these is to send an anonymous valentine to William Boldwood, a conservative, serious man who is her neighbor. Boldwood is upset by the valentine, especially after he learns that Gabriel recognized Bathsheba's handwriting. The more Boldwood sees of Bathsheba, however, the more deeply he falls in love with her. One day during the sheep washing, he asks her to marry him, but she refuses his proposal. Nevertheless, Gabriel and the rest of the workers feel sure that she will eventually marry Boldwood.

About that time, Sergeant Troy returns to the neighborhood. Bathsheba is attracted to him at once. Gabriel knows enough of Troy's character to know that he is not the man for Bathsheba, and he

tells her so. Not knowing the story of Fanny, Bathsheba is furious at Gabriel's presumption. She and Troy are married soon afterward, and the former Sergeant becomes the master of Weatherbury Farm. With Troy running the farm, things do not go well. Gabriel is forced to do most of the work of overseeing, and often he is compelled to correct the mistakes Troy makes. Troy gambles and drinks and causes Bathsheba much unhappiness. Gabriel and Bathsheba are alternately friendly and unfriendly. One day Troy and Bathsheba, riding in a horse cart, pass a young woman walking down the road. Troy stops the cart and goes to talk to her. The woman is Fanny, who is feeble and ill. Troy tells her to go on to the next town and wait there for him to come and give her money. As soon as they arrive home, Troy asks Bathsheba for some money. She gives it to him after a quarrel.

Fanny goes on to Casterbridge, but she is so weak and ill when she arrives there that she dies shortly afterward. When news of her death reaches Weatherbury Farm, Bathsheba, unaware that Troy was the girl's lover, sends a cart to bring the body to the farm for burial. When the body arrives, Gabriel sees scrawled on the coffin lid a message that both Fanny and a child are inside. He erases the last words in his fear that the real relationship of Fanny and Troy might reach Bathsheba's ears; but Bathsheba, suspecting that the coffin conceals some secret, opens the casket late that night. At the same moment, Troy enters the room and learns of Fanny's death and of the death of his child. Torn with grief, he tells Bathsheba that she means nothing to him, that Fanny was the only woman he ever loved, and that he married Bathsheba only for her looks and for her money. Bathsheba shuts herself up in an attic room.

Troy has a beautiful tombstone put up over Fanny's grave, which he covers with roses and lilies. During a heavy storm that night, water pours from the church roof through the mouth of a gargoyle, splashes on the grave, and ruins all of his work. Troy disappears from Casterbridge. News comes shortly afterward that he was caught in a dangerous current while swimming in the ocean and drowned. Bathsheba does not believe that Troy is really dead; Boldwood, convinced of Troy's death, does his best to get Bathsheba to promise to marry him if Troy does not reappear within seven years, at the end of which time he will be legally declared dead. At a party Boldwood gives for her one night, Bathsheba yields to his protestations of love and says that after the time passes, she will marry him. As she is leaving the party, Troy enters. He was rescued at sea and wandered slowly back to Casterbridge in the character of a strolling player.

At his entrance, Bathsheba faints and falls to the floor. Everyone is so concerned for her and surprised by Troy's appearance that they do not see Boldwood when he takes down a gun from the wall. Boldwood aims at Troy and shoots him in the chest. Troy dies immediately. Boldwood is tried for the murder, but because his mind has given way, he is committed to an institution. Gabriel, who makes every effort to save Boldwood from hanging, becomes a leader in the neighborhood. As Bathsheba's bailiff, he manages her farm and that of Boldwood as well. Of her three lovers, he is the only one left.

One day, Gabriel goes to Bathsheba and tells her that he is planning to leave her service. Bathsheba listens quietly and agrees with all he says. Later that night, however, she goes to his cottage and there tells him, by gesture more than by word, that he is the only person left to her now and that she needs both his help and his love. The farmers of the district are all delighted when Bathsheba becomes Mrs. Oak, and Gabriel becomes the master of Weatherbury Farm.

Critical Evaluation:

As the title indicates, Thomas Hardy's first major novel has an isolated setting: rural, remote from the world, and mainly centered upon Upper Weatherbury Farm in Wessex. Unlike that in *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872), however, this secluded environment at times gives way to the town: the busy corn exchange in Casterbridge, the King's Arms Hotel, the Casterbridge workhouse, the cities of Bath and Budmouth, and the lively Buck's Head Inn on the Casterbridge Road.

Nevertheless, the setting has a timeless quality, accentuated by the round of seasonal activities and the continuity of agricultural life. Major scenes in the novel focus around the sheep shearing, saving of hayricks in the storm, spring sheep washing, and the autumn sheep fair at Greenhill. Nature here, however, is not merely background or a constant factor informing characters' actions and proclivities; it is more powerful, a force vast and indifferent to man's thoughts and actions. This is the nature that in Hardy's later novels evolves into inexorable fate, before which the individual is helpless and in opposing which he or she comes to destruction. The main characters in this novel who survive are those who succeed in adjusting themselves to nature's laws and often hostile dominance: Gabriel Oak and Bathsheba Everdene.

Far from the *Madding Crowd* exhibits confident power throughout in its fully developed characters, the imperceptible movements in the various conflicts involving Bathsheba and her three lovers, and in the way these conflicts evolve from their varied personalities. The combination of the four personalities furnishes the most explosive potential for melodramatic situation: Bathsheba's capriciousness and attractiveness to men; Oak's stolid, patient, unswerving loyalty and love for her; Boldwood's composite character with its "enormous antagonistic forces" and "wild capabilities"; Sergeant Troy's impulsiveness, his living only for the present moment, dashing but totally irresponsible; and the simple nature of Fanny, unaffected and victimized. Interactions of these intimately associated characters, in an almost closed environment, engender passionate and at times almost unbelievable conflicts.

Further complicating the clashes and intricate relationships among these four are the unforeseen, relentless accidents of nature: the initial loss of Oak's sheep, the heavy storm with water that ruins Troy's flowers on Fanny's grave and that precipitates his disappearance, the loss of Boldwood's hayricks in a second storm. The novel progresses in turns, driven headlong by Bathsheba's careless whim of sending Boldwood an anonymous valentine and again by Troy's determination to possess her in spite of all odds. Even Oak and Fanny, the two who outwardly seem driven by the impulsive actions of others, unconsciously complicate the plot by their very quiet and

uncomplaining natures. Fanny, betrayed by Sergeant Troy, goes down before forces she has no means to combat, although she has a macabre revenge in the scene in which Bathsheba opens her coffin to find Troy's child dead with its mother.

Oak, of stronger stuff, endures — like the nature he is so close to and of which he seems an integral part. Although he feels Bathsheba rules his life and the reader may be swept into this illusion, it is the earth and all of its creatures to which he is bound. Only when Bathsheba comes full circle through her marriage to the dissolute, unstable Troy, her half acceptance of Boldwood's position and estate, back to an understanding of the land and its enduring qualities as embodied in Oak, can their marriage be possible. What Gabriel holds to in Bathsheba and what she herself does not recognize is the same elemental belonging to the land and its eternal strength.

The language of the novel is bound to the earth; the best example of this is the rural chorus, which is to figure in Hardy's later novels and which provides much of the humor. The habitués of Warren's Malthouse on the Casterbridge Road are intimately involved in the action and contribute to domestic scenes and rural atmosphere. They not only serve to comment on the various episodes but also reinforce the setting, for they, too, belong to the earth. In fact, they form part of the novel's foundation; it is of importance that Oak is at home with them and shares their social outlook. When the Malthouse crowd appears at the end of the book to serenade the newly married Gabriel and Bathsheba with their "venerable worm-eaten instruments," Gabriel invites them: "Come in, souls, and have something to eat and drink wi' me and my wife."

In this novel, the reader finds the emerging role of nature, the typical romantic, dramatic situations that will even intensify in later novels, and devices such as the village chorus and rural activities to mark the continuity and coherence of human existence. Apparent also are the chance encounters, series of coincidences, unforeseen accidents, overheard conversations, and secretly observed actions — all of which make up the fabric of a typical Hardy narrative. His plots, because of these devices, share an improbability and sense of the miraculous found in folklore. The coffin scene where Bathsheba finds Fanny and Troy's child is the stuff of which ballads are made. The scene in which Troy woos Bathsheba with a sword exercise, in its bold sexual symbolism, also foreshadows such scenes as the fight between Henchard and Farfrae in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and the entwined couples at the hay-trusser's dance in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891).

Although not as carefully structured as his later novels, this work shows Hardy's ability to convey the mental life of his characters, especially that of a complicated woman. He boldly draws his theatrical scenes, exploits his evocative rural settings, and for the first time in his career as a novelist dares give his work amplitude and passion. Not yet, however, does the reader find in this book the intense sense of gloom over a vanishing way of life — a depression that marked much of Hardy's later writing; nor does the story embody humanity's defeat and tragedy that increasingly became Hardy's preoccupation.

Essay by: "Critical Evaluation" by Muriel B. Ingham

Further Reading

Buckler, William. *The Victorian Imagination: Essays in Aesthetic Exploration*. New York: New York University Press, 1980. Explores the politics and society of Victorian England as they affect the formal elements (plot, character construction, imagery) and the political and social aspects (gender, class, rural/urban relations) of Hardy's work; specifically addresses *Far from the Madding Crowd*.

Bullen, J. B. *The Expressive Eye: Fiction and Perception in the Work of Thomas Hardy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987. Distinguishes Hardy from other writers of the period by examining his painterly eye and visual accuracy. Discusses Hardy's descriptions of landscapes.

Daleski, H. M. *Thomas Hardy and Paradoxes of Love*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997. Daleski reevaluates the treatment of gender in Hardy's novels, defending the author from charges of sexism and maintaining that some of Hardy's female characters are depicted sympathetically. Daleski argues that Hardy is the premodern precursor of sexual failures and catastrophic ends.

Kramer, Dale, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999. An introduction and general overview of all Hardy's work and specific demonstrations of Hardy's ideas and literary skills. Individual essays explore Hardy's biography, aesthetics, and the impact on his work of developments in science, religion, and philosophy in the late nineteenth century. The volume also contains a detailed chronology of Hardy's life and Penny Boumelha's essay "The Patriarchy of Class: Under the Greenwood Tree, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *The Woodlanders*."

Mallett, Phillip, ed. *The Achievement of Thomas Hardy*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000. A collection of essays that analyze some of the novels and other works and discuss Hardy and nature, the architecture of Hardy, and the presence of the poet in his novels, among other topics. Includes bibliography and index.

Millgate, Michael. *Thomas Hardy: A Biography Revisited*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. This biography enhances and replaces Millgate's 1982 biography, considered to be one of the best and most scholarly Hardy biographies available. Includes bibliography and index.

Page, Norman, ed. *Oxford Reader's Companion to Hardy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. An encyclopedia containing three hundred alphabetically arranged entries examining Hardy's work and discussing his family and friends, important places in his life and work, his influences, critical approaches to his writings, and a history of his works' publication. Also includes a chronology of his life, lists of places and characters in his fiction, a glossary, and a bibliography.

Shires, Linda M. "Narrative, Gender, and Power in *Far from the Madding Crowd*." *Novel* 24, no. 2 (Winter, 1991): 162-178. Examines the character of Bathsheba Everdene and her feminine power over Oak, Boldwood, and Troy. A feminist analysis that points out Hardy's portrayal of Bathsheba is unusual, in contrast to other heroines such as Eustacia Vye and Tess Durbeyfield.

Swann, Charles. "Far from the Madding Crowd: How Good a Shepherd Is Gabriel Oak?" *Notes and Queries* 39, no. 2 (June, 1992): 189-201. Analyzes Gabriel Oak as a character and as a prototype of a Wessex shepherd; addresses Hardy's interpretation of the rural world.

Tomalin, Claire. *Thomas Hardy*. New York: Penguin, 2007. This thorough and finely written biography by a respected Hardy scholar illuminates the novelist's efforts to indict the malice, neglect, and ignorance of his fellow human beings. Tomalin also discusses aspects of his life that are apparent in his literary works.

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