

Discuss "Far From The Madding Crowd" as a Pastoral Novel

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Discuss the pastoral elements in Hardy's "Far From The Madding Crowd"

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 background 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. 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.

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. 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.

The specifically pastoral aspect of the novel is 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. 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 believes in the fundamental goodness for human beings and the nobility of human nature.

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