

CRITICAL APPRECIATION OF THE NOVEL

The Subject-matter of the Novel

This novel is a satire on the spirit of the great Elegy written in a country churchyard by Gray. Here the poet propounds the idea that the village people – farmers and land labourers are contented, sober people and they live in great serenity and peace of mind. Hardy presents a picture of the farmers which is in complete contrast to that presented in the elegy by Gray. Here the three farmers, Troy, Boldwood and Gabriel Oak fall victim to the charms of farm-owner Bathsheba. A realistic picture of the rural life has been presented on a very large canvas by Hardy. The tragic events and incidents of the triangular love have been very emotionally described by Hardy. Thus love at first sight between Oak and Bathsheba succeeds.

The Plot of the Novel

Far From the Madding Crowd has an interesting gripping plot. We read the story from chapter to chapter breathlessly. We are emotionally involved in the fortunes and vicissitudes of various characters. The incidents are full of suspense so that the reader feels a strong urge to know what happens next. Love is the central and pervading subject matter in the novel, hence the novel has constant source of interest for the reader. Different types of man's love for women are described leading to different results. Indeed, Hardy is a very successful maker of plots. The story abounds in dramatic scenes and situations. Many incidents are merely unforgettable. Bathsheba's encounter with Troy, Boldwood's vehement declaration of love, the demonstration of sword play, Bathsheba's drive to Bath at night are so sensational that the reader goes through them with utmost interest. Troy is so filled with remorse and repentance at the sight of the dead body of Fanny that he treats Bathsheba harshly and leaves Weatherbury for good. Thus the scenes and situations are most arresting. By joining together the incidents and situations, Hardy emerges as a supreme craftsman of plot in Jar From the Madding Crowd.

Another beauty of the novel is the portrayal of character. Although the characters in *Far From the Madding Crowd* are common people – farmers, labourers, rustics and villagefolk, yet through them Hardy has described some primal forces of human nature. Hence, they became living characters. They live for all times and all climes. Every character has been so drawn that we can understand his or her basic traits. Thus Bathsheba's character is the character of a heroine painted in all its shades and facets. Similarly the character of Gabriel Oak has been portrayed very realistically. Realism of Hardy finds expression in the shaping of human character. Heredity and environment play their potent part in types. In *Boldwood* we have a typical English farmer who is full of temper and ire. The rustic characters, Joseph Poorgrass and others are made to live in the pages of the novel. Almost all the characters portrayed by Hardy in the novel are true to life. The readers can share their feelings, passions and their sorrows.

The Novel as the Expression of Hardian Philosophy

Far From the Madding Crowd is one of the earliest novels of Hardy, yet it illustrates Hardy's basic thought about human destiny. Hardy's belief is that man is born to suffer. Oak's destiny plays its destructive role. His hopes of becoming an independent prosperous shepherd farmer turn to dust. His love for Bathsheba remains unfulfilled for a long time. Fanny's end is most tragic.

Hardy believed in a pessimistic world. Man is simply a toy in the hands of Nature. In the novel all the characters suffer. They suffer partly on account of their own faults and follies and partly on account of adverse circumstances. The element of chance which plays most dominant role in the later novels is present in this novel also. Often it is an unseen accidental happening which causes the unhappiness of characters in the novel. The novel shows Hardy's belief in cruel or hostile fate. The only persons who are happy in the novel are the rustics who have no desires or aspirations. Hardy believes that a state of desirelessness is the only way to happiness. Hardy is a pessimist but he is not a cynic. He does not hate mankind.

Humour in the Novel

While most of the novels of Hardy are tragic; *Far From the Madding Crowd* ends with happy marriage of Gabriel Oak and Bathsheba. In spite of a sombre and dark view of life, Hardy does not miss an element of humour in the lives of his characters. The best form of humour is provided by the rustics who are present in almost all the novels of Hardy. But in this novel, the background is rural, characters are village folk, farmers and rustics. These through humorous incidents and situations provide humour to the reader which relieves the boredom and pessimistic picture of life. In the novel, the rustic interludes are many and they are full of humour and fun. In the very beginning of the novel we come to know that

Weatherbury folk are as hardy, merry, thriving wickered a set as any in the whole country. The most entertaining passages in the rustic interludes are undoubtedly those in which we get glimpses of such outsiders as Coggan's first wife Charlotte or Bathsheba's parents. Besides, humour is provided by many remarks and comments made by Hardy in the course of the narration. The element of humour relieves the tension of the story which is, on the whole, one of sorrow and suffering.

Pastoralism and Local Colour in the Novel

The novels of Hardy are regional stories : almost all the novels of Hardy deal with Wessex life. Wessex became a living character in the novels of Hardy. The novelist has given vivid and detailed descriptions of the landscape and scenery around Norcombe Hill and the village of Weatherbury, the customs, traditions and the habits of the people. References are made also to farming, harvesting, hay-making, bee-keeping and transactions of the market. The presentation of the countryside is so superb, that we can form a realistic picture of Wessex region in our imagination.

Style of Hardy in the Novel : Masterly Style

The critics have praised the prose style of Hardy. He has superb command over English language. His descriptions of landscape, hills, heaths, valleys and villages are masterly and wonderful. Even in the portrayal of human character his language is beautiful and elegant.

Correctness

Another very impressive quality of Hardy's style is his concreteness and preciseness. Whatever he describes, he presents a very correct picture of it. Far From the Madding Crowd provides many examples where Hardy has described scene incidents, landscape and places with perfect verisimilitude. Nothing is redundant or unnecessary in his prose, so reader can take away any word or phrase from his description without some loss or harm to the meaning.

Musical Images

We have in the novel the use of dulcet piping of Gabriel and the bass of Boldwood. The loving detail of the scene is combined with images of music, beauty, peace and pastoral life. In this novel, Hardy is at ease more totally in command of his material.

Some Defects of the Novel

There are some visible faults in the composition of the novel. A reading of the novel shows that Hardy relies too much on accidents for the furtherance of the plot. Then some of the characters are so portrayed that

a brilliant piece of art. But Andrew Lang observed, "Its brilliant qualities are likely to neutralize the glare of its equally prominent faults."

Hardy has described events and incidents with sympathy and sensitiveness. The style blemishes can be passed over if we keep our view on character-creation. Passionate, wilful, charming, Bathsheba compels our attention and wins our admiration. Some critics have criticised Hardy with projecting prosaic reality in his novels. This subject matter is related to the village folk. Hence the critics say that the reality is ordinary and humdrum. H. C. Duffin has given very appreciative response to this criticism. He says, "By choosing his characters from the plebeian and labouring orders, he places them under the primal curse of man, the necessity of working for a living. The gain is great. There is a certain grim satisfaction in finding here as in life, the primary assumption of a relentless struggle for existence that binds its victims within violable bonds, so that when trouble comes there is no fairy flight of escape."

5. Major Character Sketches

- (1) Gabriel Oak
- (2) Bathsheba
- (3) Boldwood
- (4) Sergeant Troy
- (5) Fanny Robin

(1) GABRIEL OAK

Hardy is a realist : he believes in reading human character through physical characteristics. Oak is the hero of the novel. His dress, manners, and other particulars have been given in the very beginning of the novel :

“When Farmer Oak smiled, the corners of his mouth spread till they were within an unimportant distance of his ears, his eyes were reduced to clink, and diverging wrinkles appeared round them, extending upon his countenance like the rays in a rudimentary sketch of the rising sun. On working days, he was a young man of sound judgment, easy notions and proper dress and general good character. On Sundays he was a man of misty views rather given to postponing and hampered by his best clothes and umbrella. To state his character as it stood in the scale of public opinion when his friends and critics were in tantrums, he was considered rather a bad man, when they were pleased he was rather a good man. When they were neither, he was a man whose moral colour was a kind of pepper and salt mixture. Since he lived six times as many working days as Sundays, Oak’s appearance in his old clothes was most peculiarly his own – the mental picture formed by his neighbours in imagining him being always dressed in that way. He wore a low-crowned felt hat spread out at the base by tight jamming upon the head for security on high winds and a coat like Dr. Johnson, his lower extremities being encased in ordinary leather leggings and boots emphatically large to reach foot a roomy apartment so constructed that any wearer might stand in a river all day long and know nothing of damp – their maker being a conversation man who endeavoured to compensate for any weakness in his cut by unstinted dimensions and solidity. Oak carried about him a watch, by way of watch what may be called a small silver clock, in other words, it was a watch into shape and intention and a small clock as to size.”

The above passage shows that Gabriel Oak is a simple unsophisticated farmer.

every man that came into her contact. On the first day of her arrival at Weatherbury the nature of Bathsheba has been described by Hardy in the following words :

"There was no necessity whatever for her looking in the glass. She did not adjust her hat, or put her hair, or press a dimple into shape, or do one thing to signify that any subintention had been her motive in taking up the glass. She simply observed herself as a fair product of Nature in the feminine kind, her thoughts seeming to glide into far-off though likely dramas in which men would play a part-vista of probable triumphs – the smiles being of a phase, suggesting that hearts were imagined as lost and won."

It is on account of the physical charm that Gabriel Oak falls in love with Bathsheba at first sight. When Boldwood meets her he is equally attracted by her physical graces.

Her Masculine Qualities – As a farmer, on her farm, Bathsheba is a very strong worker. She works hard to supervise the labourers. In every agricultural operation she is deeply interested. She takes care to supervise almost all the activities on the farm. The ordinary rustics working on her farm are under her direct control. The women workers are quite affectionately dealt with. Thus, her nature as a farmer, is beyond any question.

The faithlessness of Bathsheba – Many critics have levelled charge of flirtation or faithlessness against Bathsheba. She first encouraged Gabriel Oak to love her. When in a sudden impulse she wrote a love letter to Boldwood and he was always under the impression that Bathsheba would marry him. When Troy appeared on the scene, she was very much attracted by his refined and attractive manners. Again one can say that she was not true to Boldwood. Boldwood tried his utmost to convince Bathsheba that he was her true lover.

In order to avoid the knowledge of her marriage with Troy she left the Weatherbury farm and went to Bath. There she married Troy clandestinely. When she came back to the farm in the company of Troy, her workers, Gabriel and Boldwood came to know about the secret marriage with Troy.

All these shifting acts of Bathsheba give the readers the impression that she was a flirt and faithless woman. But this is a very superficial view of her character. If we watch the actions of Bathsheba from the beginning to the end, we can say that she was in the grip of the instincts of love. Her nature was very whimsical, that is, why she does not stick to one lover. She is the greatest sufferer for her faults. Ultimately, she has to marry Gabriel after the death of Troy and the imprisonment of Boldwood. Thus we can say that Bathsheba is an impulsive woman as most of the heroines of Hardy are. The opinion of Duffin on the character of Bathsheba is worth noting :

"Here is Bathsheba, a sane, strong, successful woman : in her way comes Troy, whom any man knows to be a dirty scoundrel, the moment he sets eyes on him; she is at once attracted, and with little difficulty wooed and won. The explanation lies in the personal attitude that a

the direction of an ideal passion. The disturbance was as the first floating weed to Columbus – the possibilities of the infinitely great. When Boldwood went to bed he placed the valentine in the corner of the looking glass. He was conscious of its presence even when his back was turned upon it. It was the first time in Boldwood's life that such an event had occurred. The same fascination that caused him to think it an act which had a deliberate motive prevented him from regarding it as an impertinence. He looked again at the direction. The mysterious influences of right invested the writing with the presence of the unknown writer. Somebody's – some woman's hand had travelled softly over the paper bearing his name; her unrevealed eyes had watched every curve as she formed it, her brain had seen him in imagination the whole. Why should she have imagined him? Here mouth were the lips red or pale, plump or creased? – had curved itself to a certain expression as the pen went on – the corners had moved with all their natural tremulousness; what had been the expression? The vision of the woman writing, as a supplement to the words written, had no individuality. She was a misty shape, and well she might be, considering that her original was at that moment sound asleep and oblivious of all over and letter-writing under the sky. Whenever Boldwood dozed she took a form, and comparatively ceased to be a vision: when he awoke, there was the letter justifying the dream. The substance of the epistle had occupied him but little in comparison with the fact of its arrival. He suddenly wondered if anything more might be found in the envelope and searched it. Nothing more was there. Boldwood looked, as he had a hundred times the preceding day, at the insistent red seal: "Marry me", he said aloud. The solemn and reserved yeoman again closed that letter, and stuck it in the frame of the glass. In doing so he caught sight of his reflected features, worn in expression, and insubstantial in form. He saw how closely compressed was his mouth and that his eyes were widespread and vacant. Feeling uneasy and dissatisfied with himself for this nervous excitability he returned to bed."

From the very beginning we can see that Boldwood is somewhat insane. He is an introvert and most of the introverts are abnormal. That is why he attacks Troy and shoots him. As a lover, Boldwood is a total failure. It is on account of the abnormal state of his mind that he committed the crime of shooting Troy and for this he is awarded imprisonment.

woman generally takes on questions of ethics. The man's behaviour is obviously offensive, but it apparently proceeds from admiration of Bathsheba's person; therefore it is praiseworthy. He gives evidence of no solid qualities – makes indeed, little attempt to hide qualities of a very different order : but women are capable of the most astonishing errors in the judging of men : so although Oak and Boldwood went in silent greatness, this tinsel and tin soldier carries the day. It is as distressing a picture of feminine folly as one may well desire, and the most distressing thing about it is that the picture is absolutely true to life. Never was the ruthless veracity of Hardy's character-drawing made more plainly manifest."

(3) BOLDWOOD

One of the lovers of Bathsheba is Boldwood. He is a middle-aged man with a beautiful face and stern looks. He is a rich farmer not very much interested in women. In the beginning we find that Boldwood is quite careless about Bathsheba or any other woman. We can quote Mrs. Coggan describing Boldwood in these words :

"Never was such a hopeless man for a woman ! He has been courted by sixes and sevens – all the girls gentle and simple, for miles round have tried him. Jane Perkins worked at him for two months like a slave, and the two Miss Taylors spent a year upon him, and he cost Farmer Ives' daughter nights of tears and twenty pounds worth of new clothes, but Lord ! – the money might as well have been thrown out of the window."

The Mental Make-up of Boldwood

The picture of Boldwood as drawn by Hardy makes him a stern bachelor who is full of self-restraint and self-control but once his passions are aroused he becomes as passionate as a man can be capable of strong passions. An eminent critic says about Boldwood :

"His equilibrium disturbed, 'he was in extremity of at once'. Altogether, he seems a man of iron self-control, a discipline which is the only alternative to an unbalanced frenzy. His final insanity seems inevitable; several times in the course of the story he trembles on the brink. Although this inhuman quality tends to banish the sympathy of the reader, there are moments when he appears a pathetic figure and it must also be remembered that the situation in which he is placed is primarily due to Bathsheba's girlish prank with the valentine."

The Effect of the Valentine on Boldwood

The one incident that reveals the profound passion of Boldwood is a letter sent by Bathsheba to him. In this letter the words written on the top were "Marry Me." This fired the passion of love in the heart of Boldwood. After receiving this letter, he became literally mad for Bathsheba. He often felt that he will be successful in marrying Bathsheba. The effect of the letter has been described by Hardy in the most graphic manner :

"Since the receipt of the missive in the morning Boldwood had felt the symmetry of his existence to be slowly getting distorted in

...atures and propensities are united by Hardy in marriage. These two opposite
Thus we see that Oak possesses human qualities of sobriety, patience, loyalty and sincere love. He is therefore, the hero of the novel, *Far From the Madding Crowd*.

(2) BATHSHEBA

Her Physical Features — Almost all the heroines of Hardy are quite charming and beautiful. Bathsheba is also no exception to this general rule. When Gabriel meets Bathsheba, Hardy describes her appearance very graphically. This description gives us a complete pictorial assessment of Bathsheba's physical features. "The adjustment of Gabriel's hazy conceptions of her charms to the portrait of herself she now presented him which was less a miniature than a difference. The starting point selected by the judgment was her height. She seemed tall, but the pail was small one; and the hedge diminutive; hence, making allowance for error by comparison with these she could have been not above the height to be chosen by women as best. All features of consequence were severe and regular. It may have been observed by persons who go about the Shires with eyes for beauty that in English women a classically formed face is seldom found to be united with a figure of the same pattern, the highly finished feature as being generally too large for the remainder of the frame; that a graceful and proportionate figure of eight heads usually goes off into random facial curves. Without throwing a Nymphean tissue over a milkmaid, let it be said that here criticism checked itself as out of place, and looked at her proportions with a long consciousness of pleasure. From the contours of her figure in her upper part she must have had a beautiful neck and shoulders but since her infancy nobody had ever seen them. Had she been put into a low dress she would have run and thrust her head into a bush. Yet she was not a shy girl by any means; it was merely her instinct to draw the line dividing the seen from the unseen higher than they do it in towns."

It is on account of her physical charm that she is courted and pursued by Oak, Boldwood and Troy.

Her Passionate Nature — From a close study of the character of Bathsheba it is clear that she is a very passionate woman. Pointing out this quality Cyril Aldred says, "Like most of Hardy's great characters, however, she is fundamentally a passionate creature; and the essential woman is seen in her when she demands of Troy the attentions he is giving to the corpse of Fanny. With a morbid dread of being thought a gushing girl, this guileless woman too well concealed under a manner of carelessness the warm depths of her own emotions." Her lack of guidance is the chief cause of her indecision, and there is significance in her statement that she wants somebody to tame her. External forces eventually sober her high-spirited nature, and then her resolution becomes the dominant part of her character. It is at this point that we may say with Hardy that she was of the stuff of which great men's mothers are made. Bathsheba fascinated

A Calm and Sincere Lover

Oak is the best character in the novel. He begins to love Bathsheba at first sight. Even when Bathsheba favoured him with the offer of kissing her hands, Gabriel has no mind to kiss her. This is the way of a simple man, certainly not the manner of a lover. Gabriel Oak knows that a woman is always passive, she never takes the initiative herself and yet she wants to be possessed by the lover. Oak is direct antithesis of Troy, who can play all tricks and mischiefs to win his beloved. He understands the various shifts in the attitude of Bathsheba. All along he has sincerity and truthfulness in his behaviour towards Bathsheba. He is a primal character in the novel. He continues to love Bathsheba. Even when his rivals get the chance of Bathsheba's love, he remains unperturbed.

The Element of Rusticity in Gabriel Oak

Gabriel Oak is an ordinary farmer with little education; he has not cultivated modern, refined and cultured manners. Being a rustic, he has been deprived of all the benefits of urban culture. He stands for all those virtues which a primal character is generally associated with. He is the model of innocence, self-sacrificing spirit, honesty and loyalty, unsuspecting nature and simplicity. Being just the opposite of Troy, he does not have any of the vices in him. As he takes outward glamour, he fails to impress Bathsheba. He has no major vices except the minor faults of being blunt and outspoken.

His Professional Qualities

As a farmer working on the farm of Bathsheba, Gabriel Oak shows qualities of punctuality, dutifulness, regularity, efficiency. He is a fine farmer. When some seventy sheep of Bathsheba are ill and about to die by eating a poisonous weed, Bathsheba falls back on the professional skill of Gabriel Oak. He had become estranged because Bathsheba had started loving Boldwood, he soon forgets all ill will against Bathsheba and goes to look after the sheep of Bathsheba. In all activities, harvesting, shearing, Gabriel is the most efficient of all. He has shown his heroic qualities in many emergencies.

He is so sincere about his work that he seems to believe in the maxim that silence is golden. If Bathsheba's loquacity tells nothing, Gabriel's silence says much. He is rugged in his sincerity and gives advice which although honest, is seldom tactful. Unmoved in prosperity as in adversity, he resigns himself to the loss of Bathsheba with as much stoicism as he does to the destruction of his sheep. Ecclesiastes in his chap-book. In this he is to be compared with the shrewd Diggory Venn of *The Return of the Native* than with the sensitive and more emotional Giles Winterborne of *The Woodlanders*.

His Altruistic Nature

Of all the characters in *Far From the Madding Crowd* Oak is the most liberal and kind. In the cut-throat competition of love Gabriel Oak has been able to balance himself. While Bathsheba is wayward, impulsive,