Hardy's Far from the Madding Crowd is fundamentally a fictional celebration of his passionate love for and faith in the pristine forms of human existence, embodied in a traditional, rural society. Judging from the totality of his major fictional works, Far from the Madding Crowd is a uniquely eloquent statement of Hardy's cultural imagination. It is informed by a unique vision of the necessity of establishing a harmonious relationship with nature and society—a vision that would be disrupted as he continues his imaginative journey. Hardy's novels may be studied as a transition from a state of innocence to that of experience, encountering the universe and society in their multifarious facets. In Far from the Madding Crowd there is no disturbing tension between man and universe or between man and society. However, echoes of Hardy's unsettled fictional concerns with which his later novels are so occupied, can be heard in the partly pathetic tale of Gabriel Oak and in the self-indulgent life of Sergeant Troy. Despite Oak's unrelenting loyalty to the laws of nature and society, his share of happiness in life is disproportionate to his moral integrity. Troy's

Page references to Far from the Madding Crowd are to the Penguin edition (1978).
life and character may be seen as Hardy's apocalyptic vision of the dawn of a new civilization that would endanger the serenity and integrity of a traditional society. Bathsheba Everdene, though endowed with traditional virtues, does display tendencies of individualistic assertiveness which will find its full flowering in Eustacia Vye and later in Sue Bridehead. As in Hardy’s other novels in *Far from the Madding Crowd* too, we find untamed human impulses driving man to irrevocable adversities. For instance, Farmer Boldwood’s unsymmetrical personality eventually drives him to madness after the murder of Troy. These are the unfocussed, yet potential tragic elements which compel critics like Ian Gregor to observe that the novel contains ‘the tensions which are later to characterize and define Hardy’s whole fictional world.’

While *Far From the Madding Crowd* is an early elucidation of Hardy’s primary cultural and moral imagination, it contains the seeds of tension that will find more subtle expression in his later novels. Though pastoral in feeling, many critics and reviewers have recognized the novel’s underlying difference from the conventional pastoral. The essential passions of the human heart find uninhibited expression in the first major fictional work of Hardy. Like William Wordsworth Hardy idolizes the authenticity of rustic existence for it’s truthfulness to all that is natural
Though set away from the urban ambience, the novel is an exploration of the deterministic nature of human existence. Within such deterministic scheme human happiness can be achieved, limited though it is, only through recognition of the mystery of the universe. That is why many critics refuse to see *Far from the Madding* as a traditional pastoral novel. Merryn Williams, for instance, observes that 'it is not a rustic idyll—although most people thought it was or a simple romance about three men and a girl.'\(^2\) Modifying the conventional pastoral, Hardy is trying to explore more particularly the inevitable tragedy of the individual who lacks the capacity to control the destructive, egoistic impulses that are in opposition to the moral and cultural fabric of the community. While acknowledging Hardy as a celebrant of rural life, Noorul Hasan contends that 'the use of the term “pastoral” calls up somewhat alien associations, that is, alien to the true shape of experience in this novel.'\(^3\)

Free from any contrasting, ambivalent attitude *Far from the Madding Crowd* is an eloquent statement of Hardy’s inalienable early belief in the strength and values of traditional mode of living. The Weatherbury community is a fictional recreation of the ancient, isolated, primitive world before the experience of the poignancy and bitterness of modern civilization. It is still free from the traumatic experiences of socio-economic changes that would intrude upon Hardy’s Wessex relentlessly.
with the dawn of modernism. The “ache of modernism” experienced by
Tess is still alien to the central cultural sensibilities of Weatherbury. By
large it is still a stable, agrarian community. However, within the
cultural, pastoral ambience of the novel lie some vital and consistent
fictional concerns of Hardy—the conflict between man and nature; between
man and the universal forces; and the tension between the warring
impulses within the individual self. The Weatherbury community’s
Arcadian existence is marred by the turbulent passions, tragedies and
injustices of human condition. Unlike Hardy’s later novels in *Far from the
Madding Crowd* there is no tangible tension between the individual and
society. However, there are signs of the tension ‘between rural and urban,
traditional and modern, customary and educated life.’

Though both Bathsheba and Troy offend the cultural sensibilities of Weatherbury
community in their own ways, Bathsheba’s essential nature remains intact.
But Troy is an example of both the corruptive influences of the emerging
new world as well as a victim of his own natural impulses. Through Troy’s
character Hardy seems to prophesy the gradual disintegration and decline
of traditional values. To some extent Troy may be studied as a destructive
urban figure invading a peaceful agrarian community. Yet, apart from his
own dissipated life, Troy does not pose any serious threat to the social
fabric of Weatherbury. For instance, he makes no efforts to modernize the
agricultural sector as Farfrae does. He is more a representative of untrammeled sensuality than an authentic modern voice. He is an embodiment of expediency, intemperance and recklessness that can, however, destroy the moral structure of a community. By and large, Weatherbury is 'not threatened from outside by the growth of urbanism as confronted with a series of internal crisis which grow out of man's perpetual struggle with nature.' When we speak of the term, "nature" in Hardy's fictional world, it refers to two things—"nature" as the incomprehensible, mysterious, external force, and "nature" as the expression of the "self" in its unfragmented, uninhibited state. While the former implies a "metaphysics of presence", to quote Jacques Derrida, the latter refers to spontaneity of living. Hardy has not been able to discover any intrinsic relationship between the two. Hence, the conflict between the natural and nature in his novels. Nature as an external impersonal force has been more often than not, opposed to the natural in man.

What then is the moral vision embodied in *Far from the Madding Crowd*? One may agree with Dale Kramer and say that it is the 'necessity to control the impulses which put one in opposition to the forces of the universe.' Unconscious and callous as they are, it is of no avail for man to fight against them. Besides, in *Far from the Madding Crowd* Hardy seems
to regard social laws as a manifestation of the laws of nature, no matter how indifferent nature is. But in his last two novels—Tess and Jude—Hardy reveals his skepticism with regard to the relationship between the laws of nature and those of society. Given the enigmatic cosmic design, Hardy’s approach in this novel is one of balance and practicality. Dale Kramer, perhaps, sums up the true essence of the novel:

Taken as a whole, however, Far from the Madding Crowd offers a mature view of life. The themes of Hardy’s later novels are extensions of this early schematic expression in this novel.

What qualifies Hardy’s views as mature is his deep insight into the very mystery of human life. Within this mysterious scheme Hardy suggests a mode of living that is more conformist than individualistic. The primary concern of Hardy is ‘the relation between man and his circumambient universe at the living moment.’

Hardy’s fundamental moral vision is given expression in Far from the Madding Crowd with an illustration of the diametrically opposing communal responses of the four major characters—Gabriel Oak, Bathsheba Everdene, Farmer Boldwood and Francis Troy. Hardy’s perception of the complexity of human living rejects culturally disoriented sensibilities and social behaviour. Such tendencies are shown to be potentially capable of
causing individual as well as social tragic possibilities. In spite of the multiple, often apparently ambivalent perspectives he presents in his novels, the conventional endings of his works point to his inexorable cultural imagination. While sympathizing with the self righteousness of the protesting individual, he does not reject the sanity of the collective wisdom of a long established traditional community. His keen perception of the external universe and an equally acute understanding of human life call for accommodation to the general, proven patterns of social living. His imaginative journey as a novelist has been a relentless attempt to show the futility of revolting against the universal as well as social forces which remain intransigently immutable. Though Hardy does not approve of the societal attempts to obliterate the essential individual self, yet he tries to show the futility and tragedy of vacuous individualistic resistance to age old cultural ethos. And in Far from the Madding Crowd this vision unveils itself with brilliant clarity through the varying, often opposing communal responses of the major characters that play out their lives in the predominantly agrarian Weatherbury community.

The structural design and the simple pastoral plot of the novel are conceived so skillfully and executed with meticulous care to present Hardy's deep rooted faith in the traditional forms of living. Any egocentric deviation, Hardy cautions, is potentially detrimental to the
individual himself and the community of which he is an integral part. The
chief protagonists of the novel, with more or less similar social roles, Troy
being an exception, respond variously to their immediate surroundings and
receive in turn reward or reprisal in accordance with the measure of their
capacity to accommodate themselves to the cultural matrices of their own
natural community. According to Irving Howe, like The Woodlanders the
world of Far from the Madding Crowd represents for Hardy, 'the
seemliness of an ordered existence, of all that is natural, rooted and tried.' And
tragedy is imminent for those who ignore society's collective wisdom
and code of conduct.

In Far from the Madding Crowd Hardy's primary imagination
focuses the danger of indulgent egoistic pursuits in a conventional society
where silly individualism is destined to tragic failure. Young Bathsheba's
early escapades and audaciously unorthodox mode of social behaviour
involve her in a series of physical and mental ordeals before she is
schooled in the grim realities of life. When the novel ends we encounter a
Bathsheba who is educated through bitter experiences to gain insight into
the affairs of common life and collaborative existence. We encounter with
much relief and delight 'a subdued female anxious for the protective
strength of a Gabriel Oak.' She has, indeed, gone through chastening
experiences before being able to attain self realisation. Driven by the
vagaries of her whimsical private self and the invincible forces of the mysterious universe, she is humbled to say:

I don't want much; bare justice- that's all! Ah! Once I felt I could be content with nothing less than the highest homage from the husband I should choose. Now anything short of cruelty will content me. Yes! The independent and spirited Bathsheba is come to this! (p.333)

This disillusionment is the outcome of her bitter experience with life. She realises that there is an unbridgeable gap between what one desires and what one actually gets from life. And it is her moral education. At Bathsheba's passionately jealous plea to Troy to kiss her after he had kissed the dead Fanny and her child, Hardy makes a pertinent authorial comment on her:

There was something so abnormal and startling in the childlike pain and simplicity of this appeal from a woman of Bathsheba's calibre and independence that Troy, loosening her tightly clasped arms from his neck, looked at her in bewilderment. It was such an expected revelation of all women being alike at heart, even those so different in their accessories as Fanny and this one beside him, that Troy hardly seem to believe her to be his proud wife Bathsheba. (p.360)

In this connection Ian Gregor's observation is worth quoting:

The novel then emerges as the moral education of Bathsheba in which she learns to reject the illusory world of Troy and accept the prosaic world of Oak. It becomes the story of the humbling of a spirited, vain and self-willed woman, and we are well on the way to seeing Bathsheba Everdene as a latter-day Emma Woodhouse.
Early Bathsheba's idiosyncrasy, independent spirit, and unthinking behaviour are vindictive in a traditional, rural community. Inordinate individualism is impermissible in Hardy's moral imagination. Bathsheba in her characteristically flirtatious ways shatters conventions, threatening the conventional stability of the community. One is at first shocked to hear a young lady say: "I hate to be thought men's property in that way, though possibly I shall be had someday." (p.78) And again, "well, what I mean is that I shouldn't mind being a bride at a wedding, if it could be one without a husband." (p.80) Though these utterances are only the fleeting fancies of an inexperienced girl, yet they are invested with serious implications in her personal and social life. However, with the accumulation of painful experiences, her youthful tomfooleries vanish, giving place to a mature understanding of social living.

From the very outset Hardy exercises utmost restraint in projecting Bathsheba as an incorrigible individual. On the contrary, she is the only amenable character in the novel apart from Gabriel Oak. She is more than the emotional and intellectual equal of the three men who court her. Moreover, as the narrative trajectory of the novel reveals, Bathsheba is intensely receptive to experience unlike the incorrigible Troy or immoderate Boldwood. Even in her occasionally unconventional behaviour Hardy is anxious to dote on her habitual awareness of the ingrained ethical
code of the rural community which is her naturally assigned station in life. However, she gets the right retribution for her dashing, reckless behaviour in the community. Her sufferings are the right nemesis she deserves; they are the corollaries to her unthinking, uncritical impulsive life. Bathsheba’s early life has been guided by impulses:

--- She felt her impulses to be pleasanter guides than her discretion ---
Her culpability lay in her making no attempt to control feeling by subtle and careful enquiry into consequences. She could show others the steep and thorny way, but ‘reck’d not her own rede. (p.244)

Bathsheba’s display of independent spirit must not be mistaken as an antecedence of postmodern feminist tendencies as those of Sue, for they are not informed by any radical thoughts or intellectual vigour; nor do they have the socially and individually elevating feminine concerns of Jane Austen’s Elizabeth Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice*. Elizabeth Bennett – a powerfully appealing character – may be viewed as reacting moderately and rightly so, to the male text of nineteenth century female status. But Bathsheba’s thoughts and actions are not kindled by any such intellectual or moral motives to enhance her own social position or that of her own species. Rather, her anomalous, culturally offensive behaviour is something that surfaces temporarily for want of proper experience in life. Jane Austen’s Elizabeth Bennett is solidly anchored in her cultural milieu
while protesting against the social mode of existence imposed upon the women of her time. Unlike her, Bathsheba does not protest against anything, but drifts aimlessly. It is this urgency which she openly confesses to Oak: “I want somebody to tame me; I am too independent; and you would never be able to, I know.” (p.80) And it is this amenability of Bathsheba that her creator wants to focus as a redeeming trait of her animated personality, especially when she is contrasted with Boldwood and Troy. Redeemed, indeed, she is in the end with the unfailing devotion of Gabriel Oak— the Community’s moral conscience. Speaking of Bathsheba’s character Andrew Enstice observes:

In many ways, she is the perfect counterpart to Oak. Her emotional uncertainty, her forwardness, her apparent recklessness, are all tempered by an inborn respect for the way of life she leads, and an instinctive knowledge of how far she can bend the day-to-day rules of the farm.

Hardy refuses to endorse neglect of the collective wisdom of a traditional community for mere unthinking, and self destructive fancies of the individual. While one loves Elizabeth Bennett from beginning to the end, the early unchastened Bathsheba has to wait for the lessons of life to prepare her for a happy, meaningful communal life. The essence of Hardyan moral vision pre-supposes that ideologies, unconventional thoughts, radical thinking and actions should not be opposed to the collective wisdom of society. He seems to opt for the known certainties of
the present rather than the unknown probabilities of the future. This is the
fundamental, consistent vision of Hardyian morality.

The tragic aspect of Bathsheba is that it is her irrationalities which more
often than not grow into deeds:

Bathsheba’s was an impulsive nature under a deliberative aspect. An
Elizabeth in brain and a Mary Stuart in spirit, she often performed
actions of the greatest temerity with a manner of extreme discretion.
Many of her thoughts were perfect syllogisms; unluckily they always
remained thoughts. Only a few were irrational assumptions; but,
unfortunately, they were the ones which most frequently grew into deeds.
(p. 182)

Vanity is an essential part of Bathsheba’s total make up. In the opening
Chapter of the novel Oak discovers this predominant element of her
closest character. When the Waggoner goes searching for the Tailboard of the
Wagon, Bathsheba indulges in a spontaneous display of her vanity.
Looking into the mirror without doing any adjustment on her hat or hair or
face she simply “parted her lips and smiled.” (p.54) Gabriel then inferred a
strong vein of vanity in her character:

She simply observed herself as a fair product of Nature in the feminine
kind, her thoughts seeming to slide into far-off though likely dramas in
which men would play a part – Vistas of probable triumphs – the smiles
being of a phase suggesting that hearts were imagined as lost and won.
(p.55)

And again, as Oak is travelling to Weatherbury he overhears a conversation
about Bathsheba by a group of Weatherbury rustics: “Yes – she’s very
vain. 'Tis said that every night at going to bed she looks in the glass to put on her right cap properly." (p.92) Bathsheba is motivated to send the valentine to Boldwood by her own vanity and false pride. Her false ego has been hurt when the dignified, old bachelor refused "to afford her the official glance of admiration which cost nothing at all," and it was too much to think that "the most dignified and valuable man in the Parish should withhold his eyes, and that a girl like Liddy should talk about it." (p.147) But at the second market day, Bathsheba attracts Boldwood’s attention and her vanity finds full gratification in his interest in her. And the authorial voice captures Bathsheba’s psychic state:

This was a triumph; and had it come naturally, such a triumph would have been the sweeter to her for this piquing delay. But it had been brought about by misdirected ingenuity, and she valued it only as she valued an artificial flower or a wax fruit. (p.169)

True to her flippant nature, when her whimsicalities are fulfilled, she withdraws after disturbing the placidity of a highly respected and sober man. This act, though carried out playfully, is the turning point of her life and of the narrative.

When Bathsheba frivolously sends Boldwood a Valentine with the inscription, "Marry Me", she sets in motion a series of repercussions which prove disastrous not only for Boldwood but also for her own very existence. Her action is immoral for ‘the moral character of an action is
necessarily bound up with its effect in the way of harm or injury to others." Her coquetry becomes a lethal blow to the serene life of Boldwood. This inane act of sending the valentine is simply a humorous frolic on her part. Hardy comments on this idle action:

So very idly and unreflectingly was this deed done? Of love as a spectacle Bathsheba had a fair knowledge; but of love subjectively she knew nothing. (p.148)

But unintentionally she has triggered off a chain of events over which she would have no control. In her singularly mindless act of playing pranks upon Boldwood, Bathsheba has betrayed her own immaturity and a pitiful lack of understanding of a bereaved man whose life would change irretrievably henceforth. Speaking about the effect of Bathsheba’s antics on Boldwood, Hardy remarks:

Since the receipt of the missive in the morning, Boldwood had felt the symmetry of his existence to be slowly getting distorted in the direction of an ideal passion. (p.149)

Bathsheba’s frivolous nature is observed even by the ordinary rustics like Henry: “A headstrong maid, that’s what she is – and won’t listen to no advice at all.” (p.154) Much of the personal sufferings of Bathsheba, and especially of Boldwood, originate from this puerile act of the heroine. What Hardy stresses in this episode is the disparity between the intention and the consequences of that intention enacted imprudently; Boldwood
read illusory motives into her playfulness. However, Hardy emphasizes the inescapability of the consequences of one's action. It is further evident and morally admirable as well, when Bathsheba maintains a sense of justice in her decision to accept Boldwood that "having been the one who began the game, she ought in honesty to accept the consequences." (p.182) Hardy further echoes the anguished mind of his heroine that "it would be ungenerous not to marry Boldwood, and that she couldn't do it to save her life." (p.182) It is this instinctive awareness of natural justice in her personality which makes her a redeemable individual.

Even in Bathsheba's early association with Gabriel Oak her attitude and behaviour have been characterized by vanity and pride. In her desire to be continually loved by Oak, although his love would remain unrequited, Hardy reveals the kind of feminine capriciousness and selfishness she is infected with. To Oak's opinion of her conduct with Boldwood she retorts:

'I may ask, I suppose, wherein in particular my unworthiness lies? In my not marrying you, perhaps!' 'Not by any means,' said Gabriel quietly. 'I have long given up thinking of that matter.' 'Or wishing it, I suppose,' she said, and it was apparent that she expected an unhesitating denial of this supposition. Whatever Gabriel felt, he coolly echoed her words – 'or wishing it either' (p.185)
This is not what she wished to hear; she wants the constancy of Oak’s love and loyalty for the gratification of her own ego. Oak’s outright denial of any further interest in her makes her very angry. Hardy shows Bathsheba as one who wants to be praised very often and who is not to be mastered, and one with more nonsense than common sense. Both Gabriel and Boldwood have failed in their romantic advances towards her, for they have lacked tactfulness and an understanding of female psyche. Neither of them has ever told her that she is beautiful. Oak, when he proposes to her, is only eager to provide her all possible material goods, but forgets to admire her beauty. It is Sergeant Troy who manages to win her over by pandering to her vanity through flattery and cunning; she gets what she wants from the deceitful soldier; and she becomes a victim to his aggressive sexual appeal. “Oh! Why did you come and disturb me so” is the reply of Bathsheba after the second long meeting between them.(p.224) The tragedy of Bathsheba’s relationship with Troy lies in her “believing cajoleries that she knows to be false .......” (p.243) In this connection Hardy further remarks that

Bathsheba, though she had too much understanding to be entirely governed by her womanliness, had too much womanliness to use her understanding to the best of her advantage. (p.243)
In spite of discovering that "it was all pretence", Bathsheba succumbs to Troy's superior, overpowering personality. (p.224) And when she marries him at Bath, it is "between jealousy and distraction." (p.311)

Ever since Bathsheba's marriage with Troy, her life undergoes a radical change. Her real taming begins and ends with Troy. Her transition from an independent, vivacious girl into a married woman does not bring with it fulfilment or the real happiness of marriage; rather she is disillusioned by her romantic husband:

She was conquered; but she would never own it as long as she lived. His pride was indeed brought low by despairing discoveries of her spoliation by marriage with a less pure nature than her own. (p.333)

Troy's apathy towards agricultural works, his gambling habit, and finally Bathsheba's painful discovery of his relationship with Fanny shatter all her romantic feelings about her husband and life in general. To her utter despair she learns about the treachery and hollowness of Troy's pretentious love for her: "you are nothing to me – nothing", said Troy heartlessly: "A ceremony before a priest doesn't make a marriage. I am not morally yours." (p.361) This blunt confession of Troy's hatred for her is the final blow to her prospect of finding even a modicum of happiness with him. From this moment nothing goes well with Bathsheba: Troy's supposed death drives her again to agree to a forced long six years' engagement with
Boldwood; his abrupt appearance and the consequent murder by
Boldwood; and the latter's insanity— all weigh too heavily upon
Bathsheba's already afflicted personality. However, Bathsheba is amenable
and receptive to experience. She is able to retrieve herself and learn from
the mistakes of her tumultuous past life. She is gradually prepared to begin
a new life with the constant help and guidance of Gabriel Oak — the moral
touchstone of the community. And eventually she remains an epitome of
susceptibility to experience.

Of all the protagonists it is through the character of Oak, who has an
enviably symmetrical personality, that Hardy communicates his moral and
cultural vision more vividly and concretely. He is an antithesis of untamed
Bathsheba, devious Troy and ungovernable Boldwood; he is a negation of
all that they stand for; he is the embodiment of happiness derived from
close proximity with his immediate surroundings; and he is the country's
best product, a personification of its ancient wisdom. His life is evocative
of the memory of a time in which man and nature were at peace. 'Oak is a
focus for all that is best and most skilled in man's effort to achieve a
perfect harmony in life.' 14. Throughout the novel Oak displays a deeper
understanding of and love for nature, and an undiminishing respect for the
existing cultural paradigms — the governing structures of traditional
thoughts and practices. Hardy seems to communicate that 'those who are
most likely to make a success of their lives are the resourceful and preserving, whose qualities are based on a real love and understanding of nature.' In the midst of the violators of natural law, Oak stands apart as the good angel of God. He has an intuitive understanding of his natural world and an enviably powerful hold over his existential situation. His awareness of the mysteries of the universe and the place of man in the cosmic design is the sustaining force of his character. Like his creator Oak is aware of nature as a force; he feels in it a spirit that can sympathize or mock or remain an indifferent spectator of human fortunes. It is in this frame of mind that Oak is able to overcome the adversities of immensely depressing circumstances. For instance, his early failure in his romance with Bathsheba does not frustrate him to the point of self annihilation as it does to Boldwood; and again his strength of character is tested when he remains composed and cool with the spirit of a stoic after the destruction of his sheep by a malicious combination of events. In spite of huge financial losses and the prospect of a bleak future, he continues to put up an amazing show of absolute placidity. This tragic event vividly illustrates his exceptional capacity for 'open-eyed endurance without flinching.' Though the death of his two hundred ewes is a devastating event he remains unnerved and imperturbable. Rather it transforms him into a stronger personality. His "ordeal of wretchedness ...... had given him
more than it had taken away." (p.88) For him this unprecedented calamity has been a positive contribution to his personality and character. He was left with

a dignified calm he had never before known, and that indifference to fate which, though it often makes a villain of a man, is the basis of his sublimity when it does not. And thus the abasement had been exaltation, and the loss gain (p.88)

Driven by this tragic incident, Oak goes to Casterbridge, looking for a job. While waiting at the market to be hired by prospective employers he plays his flute "in the style of a man who had never known a moment of sorrow." (p.90) What is eloquently manifested in Oak's character is 'the dignity, heroism, nobility, stoicism and simple humanity with which man confronts an omnipotent and indifferent Fate.' 17. In all this excruciating experiences of life, Oak is assisted by his phenomenal understanding of nature, combined with 'a larger tragic awareness which makes personal losses bearable and less completely destructive of human integrity.' 18. Like his creator he seems to hold the view that:

Let me enjoy the earth no less
Because the all-enacting might
That fashioned forth its loveliness
Had other aims than my delight.
Gabriel Oak is the personification of self-possession and sobriety. Whether it is frustration in love or personal financial losses, he has an incredibly tenacious hold over himself, never letting circumstances to drive him to despair or hopelessness. In Oak emotion 'is calmed, restrained and tempered by the reason which is the real ruling power of his being.' To have outlived with exemplary fortitude his unhappy romance with Bathsheba as well as the loss of his sheep is the early indication of Oak's incontrovertible personal integrity, for he “belonged to the even – tempered order of humanity …..” (p.120) One of the chief experiences of the novel is the expression of emotions. All characters including Oak are subject to this overwhelming force of feelings and emotions. However, what differentiates Oak from the rest of the protagonists is that whereas they become subservient to their passions, Oak withstands them with a singular equanimity, summoning to his aid the exercise of his disciplined mental power. Though without any formal education, Oak has never given up the pursuit of knowledge. He has “acquired more sound information by diligent perusal than many a man of opportunities has done from a furlong of laden shelves.” (p.120) Even a rustic like Joseph Poorgrass is able to discern the learning of Gabriel: “Oak is a very understanding shepherd, and learned in books.” (p.338)
The incipient failure of Oak to win over Bathsheba is caused by his tactlessness and Bathsheba’s spirit of over independence, coupled with her lack of experience in life. Oak’s inadequacy of the understanding of feminine psyche is a barrier to any romantic relationship with her. From his first encounter with Bathsheba he reveals a pathetic want of tact in dealing with women. An early example is his frank admission of seeing Bathsheba’s scabrous antics on her pony during her journey to Tewnell Mill: “His want of tact had deeply offended her – not by seeing what he could not help, but by letting her know that he had seen it.” (p.69) And again, after being saved by Bathsheba from being suffocated in his hut, he misses the best opportunity of displaying his love for her. He fails miserably as a prospective lover of Bathsheba:

‘I am sorry,’ he said the instant after.
‘What for?’
‘Letting your hand go so quick.’
‘you may have it again if you like; there it is.’ She gave him her hand again. Oak held it longer this time — indeed, curiously long. ‘How soft it is — being winter time, too — not chapped or rough, or anything!’ he said. ‘There — that’s long enough,’ said she, though without pulling it away.
‘But I suppose you are thinking you would like to kiss it? You may if you want to.’ I wasn’t thinking of any such thing,’ said Gabriel simply;
‘but I will .’ ‘That you won’t!’ she snatched back her hand. Gabriel felt himself guilty of another want of tact. (Pp.71-72)

During Oak’s proposal to Bathsheba, she suggests to him to marry a rich woman, and he bluntly replies: “That’s the very thing I had been thinking myself!” And Hardy’s authorial comment is worth noting: “Farmer Oak
had one-and-a-half Christian characteristics too many to succeed with Bathsheba: his humility, and a superfluous moiety of honesty. Bathsheba was decidedly disconcerted.” (p.81) However, Oak is not a mere object of ridicule as he may appear in the opening chapters of the novel. As the narrative unfolds itself he gets more significant opportunities to prove the strength of his personality. He remains true to his natural self without pretensions or hypocrisy. It is in contrast with the communal as well as personal responses of other characters that he stands out distinctly as a man of principles and moral integrity. That Oak’s prosaic attitude and unconventional romantic advances to Bathsheba are the chief barriers to his building of a mutually satisfying relationship with her is only partially true. Equally responsible is Bathsheba’s quaint romantic fancies and lack of worldly wisdom for which she would pay a dear price.

Though initially unobtrusive, the Oak-Bathsheba relationship is at the imaginative centre of the novel. It is essentially a celebration of the rural way of life. Gabriel Oak is already in possession, by design or by nature, of such a communal bond; and Bathsheba is potentially capable of being restored into the orbit of communal ethos. Quite early in the novel, the natural interdependence of Oak and Bathsheba is suggested. Oak’s timely rescue of Bathsheba’s farm yard from devastating fire recalls Bathsheba’s rescue of him from being suffocated at Norcombe. Theirs is an
intuitive bond which no power can thwart. In spite of the apparent physical
estrangement, both Oak and Bathsheba respect and care for each other.

Bathsheba has no doubt about the honesty and devotion of Oak:

And the outspoken honesty of his character was such that on any subject,
even that of her love for, or marriage with another man, the same
disinterestedness of opinion might be calculated on, and be had for the
asking. (p.184)

According to Bernard Williams, the man with ‘the extended
sympathies, the ability to think about the needs of people beyond his own
immediate environment, is recognizably in the world of morality.’ That
Bathsheba always turns to Oak in times of crisis – whether in sheep
farming or mental crisis – is an index of her initiation into the community’s
ethos. At all crucial stages of her life she consults Oak and takes him into
full confidence. The probity of his character is the greatest strength in him,
and he never let it go even in times of most oppressive circumstances. He
finds safety, identity and even happiness in his almost religious self denial.
The happiness of the one he loves becomes a constitutive part of his own
happiness. And his undeviating effort at it is a deeper and rare kind of
morality. He practises Christ’s message: “Love your neighbour as you
love yourself,” even if he is your enemy. He refrains from harming others
even if that means harm to himself. This is morality in its purest form.
The most eloquent example of the intuitive rapport that exists between Oak
and Bathsheba is the great storm scene in chapter 37. It is their instinctive allegiance to the agrarian community which spontaneously brings them together to salvage the grains from storm and rain. It is emblematic of their deeply ingrained cultural values. This superb effort suggests how naturally these two central characters are bound together in feeling and communal allegiance. Their intuitive sense of camaraderie is the loveliest and the most striking feature of their personalities. Both are animated by a sense of communal responsibilities.

Gabriel Oak seems to embody the eighteenth century protestant belief of man as the steward of God's creation. The individual and the society are, Hardy believes strongly, inalienable constituents of the cosmic design – one enhancing the stature of the other rather than standing in opposition to each other. Oak finds delight and meaning in work. He is capable of discovering a peculiar power in the activity of simple, creative agricultural work, signifying the possibility of integration between individual and landscape, spirit and body. In contrast neither Boldwood nor Troy can find such delight in work. Boldwood neglects his entire farm works while frustrated in love whereas Oak finds refuge in it; Troy is totally indifferent to the agricultural works. What is striking about Bathsheba is that she never ignores her agricultural responsibilities even in the midst of most afflicting circumstances. According to Roger Ebbatson,
the emphasis on work and custom is vital to Hardy. Oak is animated by
the vitality of the living, rural ideal. The thought of Bathsheba’s grains
being destroyed by storm and rain is beyond his cultural imagination.

Seven Hundred and fifty pounds in the divinest form that money can
swear – that of necessary food for men and beast: should the risk being
run of deteriorating this bulk of corn to less than half of its value,
because of the instability of a woman? Never, if I can prevent it (p.301)

Far from the Madding Crowd is fundamentally a fictional
celebration of ‘the triumph of sobriety over passion, moderation over
excess, work over play.’ This theme is fully developed in the character of
Oak. It is the victory of oak and the traditional, rural community over the
disruptive, aberrant forces represented by Troy and Boldwood. The novel
tries to show ‘the rural community as a mainstay against the chaos of an
absurd universe and the warring impulses within the human personality.’

It is only Gabriel Oak who recognizes this truth along with an awareness of
his own vulnerability. Hardy’s experience of life impels him to see man as
an entity constituted of dichotomous impulses. Consequently, the
individual is called upon to abandon socially detrimental impulses. In the
novel only Gabriel Oak has any mastery over the opposing tendencies of
his personality. What Bathsheba, Troy and Boldwood lack is the social
and personal equilibrium. And the ultimate triumph of the novel lies in the
moral education of Bathsheba to comprehend and appreciate the strength of
Oak’s prosaic world. It is exhilarating to learn that Bathsheba has eventually found her source of strength in a prosaic man like Oak who rescues her ‘from the destructive desolation of her physical and spiritual weakness.’

Apart from the moral education of Bathsheba – which is one of the chief concerns of the novel – Hardy demonstrates the ceaseless conflict between man and his circumstances, between the individual and the inscrutable impersonal forces. No power on earth can deflect the malicious workings of the mysterious, omnipotent Fate. Nevertheless, human resilience, adaptability, patience and stoicism are the effective armours to shield oneself against the onslaught of the unknown. Whereas characters like Troy, Boldwood, Eustacia, Fitzpiers and Arabella strive with selfish passion, Gabriel, Tess, Venn and Giles Winterborne are prepared ‘to sacrifice their own happiness to ensure that of other people.’ And ultimately they enjoy at least limited possibilities of happiness and create an environment for harmonious social living. Conventions of society are seen by Hardy as a means of keeping its members from falling into chaotic disorder. Those who attempt to violate them for their own selfish motives always meet with tragic sufferings. D. H. Lawrence in an unfinished essay on Hardy’s novels observes that ‘transgression against the social code is made to bring destruction as though the social code worked our irrevocable
fate.\textsuperscript{26} Though Hardy had lost his faith in God and religion at the age of twenty-seven, he continued to cherish the simple values of that faith. It was the faith of an innocent rustic in the simplicity of rural life. Except Oak no character in the novel displays the Hardyan awareness of the dark, incomprehensible forces of the universe. And in the final union of Oak and Bathsheba, Hardy reinforces the moral aspect of the novel: Oak has deserved Bathsheba; he has patiently served his apprenticeship and merits the reward he gets. He has preserved with unflinching loyalty his incipient love for Bathsheba till the end: “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.” (p.180) This honest, sincere passion of Oak remains undiminished throughout his life. Their union is an illustration of how patience and work can be more meaningful and rewarding than irrational passions. Ian Gregor observes that ‘work as learning, this is a counterpoise that Hardy offers to the demands of passion------ to the isolating self-absorption of passion.’\textsuperscript{27} Bathsheba’s eventual recognition of the blessings of unambitious existence vividly reiterates and revalidates the sustaining properties of Oak’s prosaic world.

\textit{Far from the Madding Crowd} contains the core of Hardy’s cultural and moral vision – the inevitability of constructing a communal and cultural personality within a seemingly indifferent, if not hostile, universe.
Socially deviant behaviour and attitudes cannot go unpunished. Hardy’s sense of morality is inextricably linked with the individual’s relationship with his social world. For him morality is the instinctive behaviour that ought to be guided by the cultural paradigms of the given society. It is not a universal, timeless one; it is particular, local or contextual. For Hardy it is accommodation to and compromise with the cultural forces of the given time which can guarantee at least limited success and happiness. If one looks for an authentic way of life in Hardy’s imaginative works, it is certainly traceable in rural community where life is primitive and elemental, uncorrupted by the sophisticated ways of the modern world. The agrarian Weatherbury community is deeply rooted in age old traditions and superstitions. Bathsheba, Troy and Boldwood act in opposition to the inherent ideals enshrined in their cultural community. Hardy’s acute perception of the individual as an integral part of his immediate society compels him to withdraw sympathy from anyone who turns irrationally individualistic. Instinct for Hardy does not imply the absence of reason; it is spontaneity uncorrupted by egoistic indulgence. Irresponsible behaviour of Bathsheba and Troy can find no toleration in a traditional society. Troy alienates himself irrevocably from his natural environment. He never tries to become part of the consciousness of the community around him. We learn that Troy was a native of the Weatherbury community, but was
alienated from it by the circumstances of his life. His mysterious birth, his early exposure to the outside world, and his own peculiar nature have conspired to make him what he is:

**IDIOSYNCRASY** and vicissitude had combined to stamp Sergeant Troy as an exceptional being—— He was a man to whom memories were incumbrance, and anticipation a superfluity. Simply feeling, considering, and caring for what was before his eyes, he was vulnerable only in the present. (p.219)

Though the circumstances of his peculiar birth and his early exposure to the outside world may be partly responsible for his unprincipled life, yet he can't be absolved of his offensive behaviour in a community like Weatherbury. He does not make any effort to correct and improve his character. He does not respect the cultural values and moral tenets which are the chief guiding forces of Oak and the ordinary peasants. For him “the past was yesterday; the future tomorrow; never the day after.” (p.219) Whereas Oak’s emotions and feelings are swayed by reason; Troy’s is governed by the sole consideration of sensual gratification: “His reason and his propensities had seldom any reciprocating influence, having separated by mutual consent long ago.” (p.220) Consequently, and tragically too, there is no symmetry of reason and emotion, rationality and impulse in his predominantly epicurean mode of living. Troy indulges in physical pleasures recklessly. His life is characterized by recklessness; and he is a menace to the otherwise tranquil and immutable rural landscape.
Troy's entire course of life is marked by extreme contradictory absolutes:

He spoke fluently and unceasingly. He could in this way be one thing and seem another; for instance, he could speak of love and think of dinner; call on the husband to look at the wife; be eager to pay and indeed to owe" (pp.220-21)

And this fidgety, unsettled personality of Troy wrecks havoc on the life of the community. His refusal to integrate himself with Weatherbury community is both socially and morally offensive. His indifference to the community ethos is an irresponsible act as a social being. Unlike Oak who maintains a burning passion to preserve the communal values and nature's bounty, Troy is completely unmindful of his communal responsibility as an individual. For instance, Oak's warning of storm and rain during Troy's infectious revelry with the labourers is dismissed in an idle manner. His supercilious reaction that he "can't stop to talk to you about such fidgets" (p.299) is suggestive of the grim threat he poses to a community that is chiefly dependent upon agriculture.

Though not in the same fashion as Troy, Boldwood, too, is incapacitated for harmonious social living by virtue of his extremities. His intrinsic nature is marked by extreme absolutes like that of Troy:

The phases of Boldwood's life were ordinary enough, but his was not an ordinary nature. That stillness, which struck casual observes more than anything else in his character and habit, and seemed so precisely like the
rest of inanition, may have been the perfect balance of enormous antagonistic forces – positives and negatives in fine adjustment. His equilibrium disturbed, he was in extremity at once. If an emotion possessed him at all, it ruled him; a feeling not mastering him was entirely latent. Stagnant or rapid, it was never slow. He was always hit mortally, or he was missed. (p.171)

This dignified, sober looking old bachelor is stirred out of his hitherto repressed emotional life after being provoked by Bathsheba’s unintentional romantic advances. Once his dormant passions are kindled they enslave him to the extent of throwing to the wind all his concerns for social propriety. He lacks the capacity for temperate, refined emotion. “Bathsheba was far from dreaming that the dark and silent shape upon which she had so carelessly thrown a seed was a hotbed of tropic intensity.” (p.171) In the words of John Bayley ‘Boldwood has his own natural and absolute kind of being, which is not that of a lover.’ 28 It is an insane obsession with a passion that is inexplicable in the ordinary world of romantic relationship. Benevolence, altruism or a concern for the happiness of the one he professes to love occupies a secondary or no place at all in him. It is an example of immorality in human relationships. It is more in the nature of a devilish infatuation than pure love; it is emotion infused with a strong element of egoism, rather than the self-sacrifice of pure love as embodied in Oak:

Boldwood, who seemed so much deeper and higher and stronger in feeling than Gabriel, had not yet learnt, any more than she herself, the
simple lesson which Oak showed a mastery of by every turn and look he gave – that among the multitude of interests by which he was surrounded, those which affected his personal well-being were not the most absorbing and important in his eyes. Oak meditatively looked upon the horizon of circumstances without any special regard to his own standpoint in the midst. (Pp.354-55)

Boldwood’s want of emotional equilibrium has made his life a theatre of calamities. His hitherto well governed ‘Super ego’, to use the Freudian terminology, suddenly yields to his ‘Id’ which knows no moral restraint. He has succumbed to his own unbridled passions. So like Troy he too is a formidably aberrant element in a culturally cohesive community. His murder of Troy and consequent insanity is the outcome of his unbalanced life. What Hardy advocates is the cultivation of a balanced approach in our response to life. It is this pattern that is consistently developed in the novel through the personal drama of Troy, Boldwood and Bathsheba.

In Hardy’s fictional world, it is the ordinary peasants – who lack ambition, and are humorous, cheerful, accept things as they occur without any predetermined disposition – who are blessed with a comparatively serene existence, for they work ‘in partnership with nature.’ The ordinary peasants like Joseph Poorgrass, Coggan, Mathew Moon and others in Far from the Madding Crowd find their wisdom, guidance and happiness in the ancient peasant culture with all its limitations. The comforting gregariousness and communal allegiance of the simple rustics is a source
of strength and happiness for them; their particularly scintillating conversations in the country inns are not a deliberate veneer of any suppressed sadness or melancholy, rather they are natural expressions of their blissful existence; their banality is their bliss. The rustics are a real epitome of enduring cultural wisdom. They are naturally endowed with the capacity for maintaining a façade of indifference to the incomprehensible cataclysmic events in their lives. They ‘embody a morality, a fund of immemorial wisdom and experience.’ They have, like Oak and later Bathsheba, learnt to grow up “in the interstices of a mass of hard prosaic reality.” (p.458) And it is this knowledge of life which is central to Hardy’s cultural and moral imagination.

As a novelist, Hardy was a deeply divided man: on the one hand he presents the universe as a hostile force over which man has no control; and on the other, he holds man responsible for his own actions. This conflict between man and nature is illustrated through the tragic circumstances of the major characters in *Far from the Madding Crowd*. Gabriel Oak’s loss of two hundred sheep, Boldwood’s sudden awakening into unbridled passion for no fault of his own, Fanny’s mistaking the church on the day of her marriage with Troy – all these are a few instances over which the individuals have little or no control at all. The important question then to be asked is to what extent is man held responsible for his life? Though
Hardy has not completely solved the problem of pre-determination and individual freedom, the characters of Troy, Boldwood and Bathsheba, in contrast with Oak, reveal that man’s fate, to a great extent, is dependent upon the individual’s capacity for patience and self control. An awareness of the mysterious universe and a sense of social responsibility can ameliorate much of human sufferings. That each individual has to learn to adjust to the collective ethos of the given society is the ennobling lesson exemplified by Oak’s personality and incontrovertible life. If Bathsheba is rehabilitated into the fold of Weatherbury community, it is both because of her susceptibility to the transforming power of experience, and her flexibility to outlive the gloomy events of her past life. She does not evade the issues of life in their brutal manifestations. Of all Hardy’s novels, perhaps *Far from the Madding Crowd* is the most Hardyesque in its unequivocal, single-minded expression of his central moral perspective which would seek more subtle and intricate modes of expression in his later novels. Ultimately the novel proclaims that success belongs to those ‘whose life is in harmony with their world.’\(^{31}\). The renegades have been eliminated or won over, and the traditional, rural community of Weatherbury has triumphed. And Gabriel Oak, the community’s moral conscience, clearly reveals that ‘the general happiness is to some extent a constituent and to some extent a casually necessary condition of individual
happiness. \textsuperscript{32} His actions aimed at the general happiness of his community and its people indirectly realize his own happiness. Such uneducated, unformulated, instinctive response to life is the highest form of morality, and it is the essence of the Hardyan moral vision.
References


7. Ibid. p.47.


