Chapter- 4

Far from the Madding Crowd: ‘The Gospel of the Body’ and
‘Appreciative Throat’

‘Nobody can hurt a dead woman,’ [...]. ‘The woman’s past us—time spent
upon her is throwed away: why should we hurry to do what’s not required?
Drink, shepherd, and be friends, for tomorrow we may be like her.’

In Hardy’s fiction, besides the voice of the so-called ‘tragic
protagonists’, there is a distinctly audible voice of the laughing people which
seems to illustrate Bakhtin’s notion of the presence of ‘a plurality of
independent and unmerged voices’ in ‘polyphonic’ novels (Cuddon 219).
The spirit of mirth in the festivities carries the secret of their mental strength
and sustenance. Far from the Madding Crowd manifests this spirit brilliantly
and colourfully. Cecil observes, ‘Here the full-blooded joys and sorrows of
the rural scene compose a picture of a glowing Titian-like type, mingling
rich shadow and golden sunshine’ (98).

This novel is considered by Duffin to be Hardy’s first master-piece
which, he thinks, barely missed being his greatest: ‘Only Tess surpasses it,
and for sheer Hardian quality I doubt whether even The Mayor, even Jude,
quite reaches the wonderful heights of this first wonder of all’ (9-10).
The title of the novel alludes to the following lines of Thomas Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard':

Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,
Their sober wishes never learned to stray;
Along the cool sequestered vale of life
They kept the noiseless tenor of their way. (73-76)

Pinion observes that Hardy juxtaposes the 'noiseless tenor' of the jovial rustics and their sustained way of life with the considerably tragic destiny of the major figures (THD 97); he also says that Hardy 'lingers expansively in humorous scenes to which his melodramatic crises form startling contrasts. As in UGT he was more at home with his background than with that of PBE, his 'pastoral' owing much to his deliberate association with the labouring community of Puddletown as well as to his local heritage at Higher Bockhampton, where the novel was written'.

(97)

Refreshed by his premarital excursion with Emma, Hardy came back to his native Bockhampton in July, 1873 to start his new novel for the Cornhill Magazine at the request of its editor Leslie Stephen. The author
wished to draw materials for this new novel from his native countryside and its inhabitants for several of his scenes and characters.

Writing to Stephen in 1874 of his desire to stay in Bockhampton until the novel was finished he explained that his home was ‘within a walk of the district in which the incidents are supposed to occur’ — the village of Puddletown is clearly intended — and that he found it ‘a great advantage to be actually among the people described at the time of describing them’. (Millgate 153)

In this novel, for the first time he named as ‘Wessex’ the ‘horizons and landscapes’ of the ‘partly real, partly dream country’ (Preface to FMC) where several of his novels and stories are located. Here, the ‘real’ part is obviously Puddletown (‘Weatherbury’). While writing the novel in the seclusion of his native village he attended on 21 September the Woodbury-Hill Fair, most probably delineated in the novel as Green-hill Fair.

From his childhood Hardy enjoyed assisting his father in making cider from sweet apples. This autumn he participated in such a proceeding for the last time. This experience and the past reminiscences certainly influenced Hardy while depicting the scenes in Warren’s Malthouse.
After sustained work for more than a year the novel was concluded in July 1874. It appeared serially in the *Cornhill* throughout the same year. Primarily it was published anonymously but the authorship was disclosed in a review which came out in *The Spectator* in February as an early reviewer presumed that the first few chapters were written by George Eliot.

*Far from the Madding Crowd* had immediately struck the contemporary reader by its quality of freshness. While reviewing *Far from the Madding Crowd* in *Spectator*, [19 December 1874] R.H.Hutton observes, No one who reads this very original and amusing story will doubt for a moment that it is the production of a very high order of ability and humour. Everything in the book is fresh, and almost everything in the book is striking. The life of the agricultural districts in the South-Western counties — Dorsetshire probably — is a new field for the novelist, and at least so far as the physical forms of nature and the external features of the farm-work are concerned, it has been mastered by the author of this tale. The details of the farming and the sheep-keeping, of the labouring, the feasting, the mourning, are painted with all the vividness of a powerful imagination,
painting from the stores of a sharply-outlined memory (Cox 21).

The rustics in the novel manifest the immutability of the Wessex atmosphere. They are peacefully rooted in that ancient soil which had been ploughed by their ancestors since the reign of King Alfred. They have resisted change in their social customs and ways of life with the change of times. Obviously therefore their horizon is limited. But unstinted laughter in Hardy’s novels belongs solely to these rustics, and *Far from the Madding Crowd* is not an exception to it. The protagonists may suffer in the hands of providence but the ambience of the rural folk proves that the daily hardship may be compensated by uninhibited revelry during festive occasions. Irving Howe observes:

> When it suited his purpose Hardy could brush aside his philosophical interests, and in sections of novels like *Under the Greenwood Tree* and *Far from the Madding Crowd* the comic impulse is strongly at work. In the stylized presentation of his rustics, who form a kind of repertory troupe steadily reappearing in the Hardy theatre, he could be charming and playful. (67).
What Howe perceives as “stylized” rustics, can be considered in the light of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque as the “laughing outsidedness” (Emerson 196). Hardy, while introducing the Weatherbury folk, observes that they ‘were as hardy, merry, thriving, wicked a set as any in the whole county’ (33) and this observation is confirmed by the repeated illustrations of rustic mirth in the novel. There is a fine balancing of individual suffering and the enjoyment of the rustic bystanders. Duffin comments,

The book is one of those few among the Wessex novels in which beauty is commensurate with greatness. The action passes against a rich background of pasture and byre, sheep-fair and sheep-firm. And when we add to all this the constant and expert use of one of the grandest of the chorus groups — Smallbury, the aged malster, with Jacob and William his son and grandson, Joseph Poorgrass of the saintly profile (of whom it was told that he once said ‘sir’ to an owl), Jan Coggan, ‘Henery’ Fray, Mark Clark and Matthew Moon — we find we have a pattern woven so cunningly of love, courage and death, beauty, humour, and the basic meaning of life, that the annals of creative fiction will not often provide its sequel.(14)
Bristol observes, “The most intangible ‘semiotic material’ of Carnival is the organization of the festive crowd itself, which gives to its members an experience of larger human physicality where individual self-consciousness sharply diminishes and identification with the collective ‘other’ intensifies” (57). The same spirit is displayed flamboyantly by the rural bystanders at the Warren’s Malthouse where Bathsheba arranges a little refreshment as a token of gratitude to them who, led by Oak, has saved her barn from being ruined by fire. James Gibson observes,

Into the scenes in Warren’s Malthouse he [Hardy] pours the anecdotes and humour he has heard from his mother and grandmother and when fiddling away at parties in his youth. The sense of community in Far from the Madding Crowd is powerfully felt. The rustics share a tradition, a common stock of stories of the past, of folk-songs, ballads and jokes. (65).

The immutability of the rural ambience is typically represented by the owner of the malthouse — the ancient maltster — ‘whom neither news, fire, rain, nor thunder could draw from his hole’ who claimed that his age was hundred and seventeen (FMC 51), counting all the summers and winters he had lived through as separate years. The rustic congregation in the malthouse welcomes Gabriel no sooner had he steps in:
Come, shepherd, and drink. 'Tis gape and swaller with us — a drap of sommit, but not of much account', said the malster, (FMC 44)

He then asks his son Jacob, 'a young man about sixty-five' (FMC 43), to see whether the 'God-forgive-me' was warm or not. 'God-forgive-me' is a two-handled tall liquor-mug 'standing in the ashes, cracked and charred with heat'. The queer name of the mug may be traced back to 'its size' which 'makes any given toper feel ashamed of himself when he sees its bottom in drinking it empty' (FMC 44). Jacob abiding by his father's order, immediately dips his forefinger into the mug to feel the degree of its warmth and declares that it is ready for consumption. The maltster offers a clean cup to Oak which he humbly refuses declaring that he has no fuss 'about dirt in its pure state' (FMC 44). He takes the mug and drinks about an inch from it and duly passes it to the next rustic. When Oak remarks that he will not give trouble to any of the neighbours of washing when there is plenty of work to be done in the world, he is readily appreciated by Mark Clark, 'a genial and pleasant gentleman, whom to meet anywhere in your travels was to know', and 'to know was to drink with, and to drink with was, unfortunately, to pay for' (FMC 44). The cider is consumed along with some victuals sent by Bathsheba. 'God-forgive-me' is handed round among the rustics —
'Drink, Henry Fray—drink,' magnanimously said Jan Coggan, a person who held Saint Simonian notions of share and share alike where liquor was concerned, as the vessel showed signs of approaching him in its gradual revolution among them.[...]

'Come, Mark Clark—come. There's plenty more in the barrel', said Jan.

'Ay—that I will; 'tis my only doctor', replied Mr. Clark, who, twenty years younger than Jan Coggan, revolved in the same orbit. He secreted mirth on all occasions for special discharge at popular parties.

'Why, Joseph Poorgrass, ye han't had a drop! said Mr. Coggan to a self conscious man in the background thrusting the cup towards him. (FMC 45)

The rustics in the malthouse are in a Bacchanalian or Dionysian mood of joviality being oblivious of their everyday struggle. Without being overpowered by their dearth of affluence they manifest their capacity of having mirth when circumstances offer them such merry occasions. According to Bristol, 'Popular festive form celebrates and briefly actualizes collective desire for a freer and more abundant way of life. This desire is at once a forward-looking hopefulness and a memory of better times' (88).
During their conversation, they discuss each other's features to have fun for the moment showing the uninhibited delight in the body,— even in its distortions. They have, however, no intention to hurt any fellow creature. Thus when Jacob Smallbury observes that Joseph Poorgrass is such a modest and shy man that he could not look at Bathsheba's face while talking to her, he feels complacent that he has been given importance and readily confesses, "Twere blush, blush, blush with me every minute of the time, when she was speaking to me". Coggan assures him saying, 'I believe ye, Joseph Poorgrass, for we all know ye to be a very bashful man' (FMC 46). Joseph enthusiastically informs that this shyness concerning women has been his lot since boyhood. On enquiry whether he has tried to overcome it, Poorgrass furnishes a humorous account. He went to Greenhill Fair and 'into a great gay jerry-go-nimble show, where there were women folk riding round—standing upon horses, with hardly anything on but their smocks;' (FMC 46) but it did not cure him a bit. Then he was employed as an errand man at the Women's Skittle Alley in Casterbridge. But this too met with similar fate. Poorgrass concluded, 'Blushes hev been in the family for generations. There,'tis a happy providence that I be no worse'. (FMC 46)

When Gabriel enquires about the nature of the new mistress Bathsheba under whose farm he has lately been appointed as a shepherd, one
of the rustics informs that she has come to Weatherbury a few days ago to take over the farm of her bachelor uncle who had recently died. However Coggan remembers this Uncle with special admiration. The narration which follows next brings out the reason:

'I used to go to his house a-courting my first wife, Charlotte, who was his dairymaid. Well, a very good-hearted man were Farmer Everdene, and I being a respectable young fellow was allowed to call and see her and drink as much ale as I liked, but not to carry away any — outside my skin I mane, of course'.

'Ay, ay, Jan Coggan; we know yer meaning'.

'And so you see 'twas beautiful ale, and I wished to value his kindness as much as I could, and not to be so ill-mannered as to drink only a thimbleful, which would have been insulting the man's generosity —'

'True, Master Coggan, 'twould so,' corroborated Mark Clark.

'— And so I used to eat a lot of salt fish afore going, and then by the time I got there I were as dry as a lime-basket — so thorough dry that that ale would slip down — ah, 'twould slip down sweet! Happy times! Heavenly times! Such lovely drunks as I used to have at that house! [...]'(FMC 48).
Coggan's estimate of Bathsheba's uncle is entirely based on the extent of the gentleman's liberal allowance of liquor he was allowed to enjoy there. Apparently his inclination for drinking, which is a general feature of Hardy's rustics, seems more powerful than even his interest in courting. The conversation now shifts over to Bathsheba's parents as Oak wishes to have some information about them. Though they have been dead for years, the old maltster can recollect that Bathsheba's father was not so handsome but her mother was a lovely woman. Mr Levi Everdene was very fond of her as his sweetheart —

'Used to kiss her scores and long-hundreds o' times, so 'twas said', observed Coggan.

'He was very proud of her, too, when they were married, as I've been told', said the maltster.

'Ay', said Coggan. 'He admired her so much that he used to light the candle three times a night to look at her'.

'Boundless love; I shouldn't have supposed it in the universe!' murmured Joseph Poorgrass, who habitually spoke on a large scale in his moral reflections.

'Well to be sure', said Gabriel. (FMC 49)
However, almost immediately Coggan informs that after a while this Levi Everdene became ‘one of the ficklest husbands alive’ (FMC 49). He told Coggan, as the latter claims, that as Mrs Everdene became his registered wife, Levi’s heart started roving for some other woman. But ultimately, as Coggan believes, he cured himself by making his wife take off her wedding-ring and calling her by the name which she possessed before their marriage and sitting together after shutting his tailoring shop, he fancying that she was his sweetheart, and not married wife. Coggan also adds, ‘And as soon as he could thoroughly fancy he was doing wrong and committing the seventh, ’a got to like her as well as ever, and they lived on a perfect picture of mutel love.’ Poorgrass cannot help commenting, ‘Well, ’twas a most ungodly remedy,’ however, he concludes, ‘but we ought to feel deep cheerfulness that a happy providence kept it from being any worse’ (FMC 49). The venerated institutions of marriage and church are dethroned during the surge of carnival spirit, as it occurs here.

The conversation brings out these poor people’s keen interest in their social superiors. They would even give a twist or two to the real story in order to squeeze mirth by subverting the well-established gentry. Laughter is manifested here as a “burst” (according to Bakhtin, RHW) of the powerless at the empowered, the have-nots at the haves. The rustics, while
enjoying drinks and victuals, thus uncrown the comparatively affluent section sheerly to have fun for the moment. This Saturnalian delight in Hardy's novels is the sole property of the rural ambience.

That the rustics nurture no ill feeling towards Mr Everdene is brought out by the information furnished by Joseph and confirmed by Billy Smallbury. Joseph informs that in his later years Levi became so very religious that he used to say "Amen" almost as loudly as the clerk. Smalbury adds, 'One day Parson Thirdly met him and said, "Good-morning, Mister Everdene; 'tis a fine day!" "Amen," said Everdene, quite absent like, thinking only of religion when he seed a person. Yes, he was very Christian man' (FMC 50). That the bantering against the Church and its men is so mild and mellowed can be related to the mellowed quality of the backdrop.

'The immutability' of Wessex in general and Weatherbury in particular is portrayed in the sheep shearing at the great barn of Bathsheba. Timelessness and changelessness are inherent qualities of the Wessex scenario. Progress and development in the urban world fail to create any considerable impact on their daily activities or ways of life in this remote backwater, 'far from the madding crowd'. The rustics seem quite satisfied with their static circumstances. They have hardly any lofty ambition, which invariably involves depriving fellow creatures. Hardy observes —
In comparison with cities, Weatherbury was immutable. The citizen’s *Then* is the rustic’s *Now*. In London, twenty or thirty years ago are old times; in Paris ten years, or five; in Weatherbury three or four score years were included in the mere present, and nothing less than a century set a mark on its face or tone. [...] Ten generations failed to alter the turn of a single phrase. In these Wessex nooks the busy outsider’s ancient times are only old; his old times are still new; his present is futurity.

(\textit{FMC} 113)

On the day of sheep shearing the landscape is full of colour and life. ‘Every green was young, every pore was open, and every stalk was swollen with racing currents of juice. God was palpably present in the country and the devil had gone with the world to town’. (\textit{FMC} 112)

Mr Coggan acts as the master shearer; six other shearers including Henery Fray, Susan Tall’s husband and Joseph Poorgrass; Cain Ball performs the function of the assistant shearer and Gabriel Oak is appointed as their supervisor. They shear the sheep in the great barn under the watchful eyes of Bathsheba. During the short intervals of the shearing Gabriel is ‘handing round a mug of mild liquor, supplied from a barrel in the corner, and cut pieces of bread and cheese’ (\textit{FMC} 114).
As the shearing comes to an end, Cain Ball declares that the workfolk are going to have some ‘lordly junketing’ (FMC 119) that night, its preparation having been already started since the morning. Joseph Poorgrass ecstatically comments on the menu of the ensuing supper:

Yes; victuals and drink is a cheerful thing, and gives nerves to the nerveless, if the form of words may be used. 'Tis the gospel of the body, without which we perish, so to speak of it. (FMC 119)

Here is an uninhibited emphasis on ‘the body’. Ian Gregor appropriates and emphasizes the phrase ‘the gospel of the body’:

The authentic tones of Joseph Poorgrass sound out clearly in the Wessex air. ‘The gospel of the body’ is a gospel that has found willing converts in Warren’s Malthouse, and though it is a message which would have a natural appeal to those who have, in Coggan’s words, ‘the most appreciative throats in the district,’ it has its part to play in the novel as a whole. It gives a sense of the warmth of human companionship, of the delight that the locals take in each other’s company. (57)

In this context one may refer to Sancho Panza’s bearing in Cervantes’ Don Quixote. Bakhtin comments, ‘In Cervantes’ images of food and drink there is still the spirit of popular banquets. Sancho’s materialism,
his potbelly, appetite, his abundant defecation, are on the absolute lower level of grotesque realism of the gay bodily grave (belly, bowels, earth) which has been dug for Don Quixote’s abstract and deadened idealism.’ (RHW 22).

The shearing supper follows with appropriate gusto. A long table is placed on the grass plot beside Bathsheba’s house in such a way that one of its ends is pushed over the sill of the large parlour window, while one foot or two of the end remained in the room. Bathsheba sits at that end inside the window, the entire table being in front of her. This evening she is ‘unusually excited, her red cheeks and lips contrasting lustrously with the mazy skeins of her shadowy hair’ (FMC 120). All the shearers have happily gathered round the table. Even the uninvited presence of Pennyways, the bailiff who had been recently dismissed by Bathsheba from service for theft, cannot affect their excitement. The rustics, unlike the sophisticated urbans, do not nurture malice or grievance against their neighbours for long. Mr Boldwood, the gentleman farmer, also joins them in a cheerful and gay spirit. The supper continues with the consumption of ‘puddens’ and ‘lumps of fat as big as yer thumb’ [in the words of Cain Ball, apparently meaning pudding and mutton] (FMC 119) and other victuals.
The supper being concluded, Jan Coggan begins singing spontaneously:

‘I’ve lost my love, and I care not,
I’ve lost my love, and I care not;
I shall soon have another
That’s better than t’other;
I’ve lost my love, and I care not’ (FMC 120)

This simple defiant song brings out the indomitable spirit which does not yield itself in the hand of Providence, which refuses to be frustrated and optimistically hopes for better prospect.

When Coggan eventually asks Poorgrass to sing, the latter replies, ‘I be all but in liquor, and the gift is wanting in me ’ (FMC 121). However, when Bathsheba requests him, he yields and sings a ‘poor plain ballet’ of his ‘own composure’ (FMC 121). The supper party enthusiastically responds to the song.

Poorgrass, thus assured, trilled forth a flickering yet commendable piece of sentiment, the tune of which consisted of the key-note and another, the latter being the sound chiefly dwelt upon. This was so successful that he rashly plunged into a second in the same breath, after a few false starts:
'I sow — ed th — e...

I sow — ed...

I sow — ed the — e the — e seeds of love

I — it was all I — in the — e spring,

I—in—A—pril, Ma—ay, a—nd sun—ny June,

When sma—all bi—irds they do sing.

‘Well put out of hand,’ said Coggan, at the end of the verse.

“They do sing” was a very taking paragraph.’

‘Ay; and there was a pretty place at “seeds of love”, and ’twas well heaved out. Though “love” is a nasty high corner when a man’s voice is getting crazed. Next verse, Master Poorgrass.’

(FMC 121)

Though the performance may not be very fine, it is their rustic nature of appreciating their fellow creatures which inspires Coggan and another shearer to praise Joseph. The rustics do not generally look down upon or underestimate one another. However, there is a de-sentimentalizing touch of the carnival in the opinion about love; also a suggestion of the bawdy through the hint of ‘sowing the seeds of love’ cannot be ruled out. That the performance has not been at all up to the mark is brought out by the fact that Bob, the young son of Coggan cannot check his laughter. Though his father
instantly reprouses him, Poorgrass cannot continue his song. Jacob Smallbury manages the situation by voluntarily beginning 'a ballad as inclusive and interminable as that with which the worthy toper old Sileneus amused on a similar occasion the swains Chromis and Mnasylus, and other jolly dogs of his day' (FMC 122), and analogy which helps the reader to place the feast in the long tradition of carnival. Lance Butler observes,

The half-ironic vocabulary connects these classical figures with their Wessex counterparts — they too are topers and swains and would be thought jolly dogs. Soon they grow 'as merry as the gods in Homer's heaven', an ambiguous enough merriness, as a moment's thought must reveal. But the important point is that Hardy not only succeeds in associating this bucolic event with the thousands of years of shearing celebrations that have preceded it, but also weaves into it an appropriate development of the main action'. (24)

At the entreaty of the congregation Bathsheba agrees to sing 'The banks of Allan Water' after a moment's consideration, inviting Oak to assist her with his flute. She stands up before the opened window facing the shearers, Gabriel playing his pipe on her right and Boldwood providing a bass in his naturally profound voice standing on her left. At first her voice is mild and
trembling, but soon it becomes steady and clear. The rustics avidly enjoy the performance:

The shearsers reclined against each other as at suppers in the early ages of the world, and so silent and absorbed were they that her breathing could almost be heard between the bars; and at the end of the ballad, when the last tone loitered on to an inexpressible close, there arose that buzz of pleasure which is the attar of applause. (FMC 123)

The entire sheep-shearing scene and the following supper highlight some characteristic features of the Weatherbury-folk. They are not only industrious, energetic and sincere in their job, but they also manifest a profound fraternal feeling. As they can be boisterous during their eating and drinking (as seen at the Malthouse), they possess the power of appreciating genuine performance like that of Bathsheba. They also pass some comments on their social superiors, which deserve serious consideration. In the shearing scene when Temperence Miller, Coggan and Labban Tall contemplate that Bathsheba might be wedded to Boldwood, Henery Fray remarks both philosophically and with early pragmatism:

'I don't see why a maid should take a husband when she's bold enough to fight her own battles, and don't want a home; for 'tis
keeping another woman out. But let it be, for 'tis a pity he and she should trouble two houses'. (FMC 117)

The comment sounds feministic. There is plenty of native wit and wisdom too — in the remarks of the rustics and Hardy depends much on it for the delineation of rural humour. The Wessex folk may be simple but they are not simpletons.

The rustics' zest for the Dionysian spirit is wonderfully brought out in the Buck's Head inn episode where Poorgrass halts for refreshing his drooping spirit on his way to the church with Fanny Robin's hearse.

While carrying the corpse of Fanny and her child from the Casterbridge Unionhouse to the Weatherbury church, Joseph Poorgrass feels extremely lonely and the dark foggy weather of the evening induces him to step in at the old inn called Buck's Head situated only a mile and a half from Weatherbury. His intention is merely to recover his spent up energy before resuming his journey towards the destination. The old inn so rigorously follows its nice old ways that its frequenters are always reminded of the age-old formulae of such places –

Rap with the bottom of your pint for more liquor.

For tobacco, shout.

In calling for the girl in waiting, say, 'Maid!'
Ditto for the landlady, ‘Old Soul!’ etc., etc. (FMC 223)

Joseph is instantly relieved as he spots the signboard of the inn. He approaches towards it with strong hopes ‘for a mug of ale’ (FMC 224). He is glad to discover there the presence of Jan Coggan and Mark Clark, the owners ‘of the two most appreciative throats in the neighbourhood’ (FMC 224) and readily joins them. When Poorgrass informs them he has been travelling for the last four miles with a very sad companion and has not seen even the colour of victuals or drink since his breakfast, the two neighbours welcome him immediately with the offer of drinks:

‘Then drink, Joseph, and don’t restrain yourself!’ said Coggan, handing him a hooped mug threequarters full.

Joseph drank for a moderately long time, then for a longer time, saying, as he lowered the jug, ‘’Tis pretty drinking — very pretty drinking, and is more than cheerful on my melancholy errand, so to speak it’.

‘True, drink is a pleasant delight,’ said Jan, as one who repeated a truism so familiar to his brain that he hardly noticed its passage over his tongue, and, lifting the cup, Coggan tilted his head gradually backwards, with closed eyes, that his expectant soul
might not be diverted for one instant from its bliss by irrelevant surroundings. (FMC 224)

Joseph then observes that he must resume his journey to Weatherbury Church with the corpse of Fanny lest the parish lose confidence in him. However, Coggan assures him that as the poor woman is dead and he cannot bring her back to life, so he should not deprive himself of enjoying another bout of drink with them. Poorgrass instantly responds to sympathetic offer:

'I don't mind taking just the least thimbleful ye can dream of more with ye, sonnies. But only a few minutes, because 'tis as 'tis.'

'Of course, you'll have another drop. A man's twice the man afterwards. You feel so worm and glorious, and you whop and slap at your work without any trouble, and everything goes on like sticks a breaking. Too much liquor is bad, and leads us to that horned man in the smoky house; but after all, many people haven't the gift of enjoying a wet, and since we be highly favoured with a power that way, we should make the most o't.'

'True,' said Mark Clark. 'Tis a talent the Lord has mercifully bestowed upon us, and we ought not to neglect it. But, what with the parsons and clerks and school-people and serious tea-parties,
the merry old ways of good life have gone to the dogs—upon my
carcase, they have!' (FMC 225)

Bristol's observation on 'TREATING DEATH AS A LAUGHING
MATTER' [sic.] is relevant in this context: "Against the perspective of death
and burial all human effort is diminished, all the 'serious' claims of
economic, political or moral system become the object of laughter. The
doomsday image of the grave is from this viewpoint not something grim and
gloomy, but on the contrary, the occasion for 'drink' and merriment" (190).

About the verbal quality of the language Ian Gregor observes,

Their language has an exhilarating sense of play and humour, so
that the reader's attention is shifted, momentarily disengaged
from the action, he has a heightened sense of the medium which
conveys it, and his reading response is altered as if he were to
come upon italicized prose. (58)

The rustics consider themselves privileged as they have the power of
feeling the jovial mood following consumption of ale. Unlike their social
superiors, they can enjoy the bliss of intoxication being oblivious of the
tedium of literal journey or the lack of resources in the figurative journey of
life. The affluent gentry aspire for life-long abundance and are subsequently
frustrated whereas the rustics complacently enjoy every merry occasion
whenever life offers them. Thus the rural community cannot be daunted by the monotony of their everyday profession. Even the death of a neighbour fails to suppress their zest for merriment, which authenticates their realization that joviality cannot be suspended by death, which is but inevitable. This realization is finely reflected in Jan Coggan’s comment when Gabriel rebukes Poorgrass who delays to carry the corpse of Fanny to the churchyard and enjoys liquor at the Buck’s Head.

‘Nobody can hurt a dead woman,’ at length said Coggan, with the precision of a machine. ‘All that could be done for her is done — she’s beyond us: and why should a man put himself in a tearing hurry for lifeless clay that can neither feel nor see, and don’t know what you do with her at all? If she’d been alive, I would have been the first to help her. If she now wanted victuals and drink, I’d pay for it, money down. But she’s dead, and no speed of ours will bring her to life. The woman’s past us — time spent upon her is throwed away: why should we hurry to do what’s not required? Drink, shepherd, and be friends, for tomorrow we may be like her.’ (FMC 227)

The defiance of death and the *carpe diem* spirit of the carnivalesque manifested here can remind the reader of the grave diggers in *Hamlet* or the
drunken porter in *Macbeth*. Coggan’s philosophic attitude also recalls the memorable comment of Solomon Longways in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*:

‘Why should death rob life o’ fourpence…’ (MC 126). As Duffin puts it,

When Oak reproaches Joseph Poorgrass because he has loitered for drink while bringing Fanny’s body to the churchyard, it is the rhythmic voice of innumerable life-worn generations that replies through Jan Coggan. (150).

Mark Clark continues drinking ‘to run no further risk of losing his chance by the event alluded to’ (FMC 227) by Coggan. The latter adds to his contemplation of ‘tomorrow’ in the following song:

‘To-mor-row, to-mor-row!
And while peace and plen-ty I find at my board,
With a heart free from sick-ness and sor-row,
With my friends will I share what today may af-ford,
And let them spread the ta-ble to-mor-row.
To-mor-row, to-mor…’ (FMC 227)

Trivializing and thereby vanquishing the fear of death this song emphatically brings out the rustics’ profound faith in ‘carpe diem’ and their zest for indulging themselves in collective mirth. Apprehension of death cannot deter them from seizing any opportunity for carnival merriment. Nor does
the gloom following their neighbour’s death supersede their zest for revelry. Coggan’s song is bound to evoke the intense speech of Macbeth with the effect of subversive irony.

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. [Act V, Scene v, ll. 19-23]

When Poorgrass consumes plenty of ale and becomes too tipsy to resume his journey, Oak reprimands him severely for lacking the sense of duty and calls him a drunkard. The reply of Poorgrass who is suffering from ‘the affliction called a multiplying eye’ (FMC 227), is a rich source of verbal humour —

‘It always comes on when I have been in a publichouse a little time,’ said Joseph Poorgrass, meekly. ‘Yes; I see two of every sort, as if I were some holy man living in the times of King Noah and entering into the ark... ‘Y-y-y-yes,’ he added, becoming much affected by the picture of himself as a person thrown away, and shedding tears; ‘I feel too good for England: I ought to have lived in genesis by rights, like the other men of sacrifice, and
then I shouldn’t have b-b-been called a d-d-drunkard in such a way!’ (FMC 227)

It is an instance of daring irreverence for the Holy Scripture, albeit under the impact of liquor.

This affliction of multiplying eye, which frequents Poorgrass due to over-consumption of liquor, reappears in the late afternoon of the Sheep-Fair when he is supposed to drive Bathsheba back home from the fair. Due to excessive intoxication he becomes ‘hardly trustworthy as a coachman and protector to a woman’ (FMC 276). The venue of the fair is the summit of Greenhill which is termed as ‘the Nijni Novgorod’ (the central Russian city later known as Gorky, which had been the site of a huge long-established fair) ‘of South Wessex’ and the day is observed by the author as ‘the busiest, merriest, noisiest day of the whole statute number’ (FMC 264). Shepherds from remote parts gather there with their flocks for selling their sheep. Poorgrass and Coggan, along with many other rustics, are enjoying a holiday. They are elated by the drums and trumpets played from a tent announcing ‘The Royal Hippodrome performance of Turpin’s ride to York and the Death of Black Bess’ (FMC 266). Dick Turpin was a notorious highwayman of the eighteenth century who rode on Black Bess, a horse, at a stretch from London to York in twelve hours, causing the death of the horse.
Sergeant Troy in disguise plays the role of Turpin and the rustics witness the performance with enthusiasm. Popularity of outlaws among the simple folk is manifested in 'The Lord of Misrule'. Bristol identifies,

The Lord of Misrule who presides over much regularly occurring festive revelry borrows the gestures and the functions of constituted authority in order to actualize both 'law' and its 'transgression'. The Lord of Misrule does not rule and govern from above: he is immersed in the folly he undertakes to regulate. Transgression becomes law; the rule of abstinence and moderation becomes a rule of unrestricted consumption, the rule of deference and obedience is replaced by a rule of irreverent speech and rude gesture. Law can be replaced by its own violation with a framework of duly sanctioned forms, just as rationality can be displaced by folly. The Lord of Misrule mimics the center of authority and reveals that folly and transgression are the covert reality of rational government. (67)

The carnival is polluted and tilts towards the 'hideous' on the night of Bathsheba's marriage with Troy. However, in the last chapter, when after 'the most private, secret, plainest wedding' (FMC 314) Bathsheba is united with Oak, 'their ears were greeted by the firing of a canon, followed by what
seemed like a tremendous blowing of trumpets, in the front of the house' (FMC 317). The rustics, who never lose any chance for a festive occasion make their happy presence felt through the Weatherbury air. As the newly married couple come out in the porch they cry a loud ‘Hurrah!’ (FMC 317) and that very moment the bang with the canon-firing in the background resumes ‘followed by a hideous clang of music from a drum, tambourine, clarionet, serpent, hautboy, tenor-viol, and double-bass — the only remaining relics of the true and original Weatherbury band — venerable worm-eaten instruments, which had celebrated in their own persons the victories of Marlborough, under the fingers of the forefathers of those who played them now’ (FMC 318).

This performance brings out the burst of joviality of the rustics who celebrate the occasion with warm spontaneity. This carnivalesque spirit does not need any formal invitation for its arousal. However, when Oak invites them there to join him and his wife to have some refreshment, they prefer to have it at the Warren’s Malthouse and the proposal is instantly accepted by Gabriel who promises to send ‘a bit and a drop’ (FMC 318) to their preferred spot. Thus the novel ends with the prospect of a merry celebration at the Malthouse. After and beyond the tragic ordeals of life it is this carpe diem spirit or the carnivalesque jocundity that eventually reasserts itself.