

Thomas Hardy's Notion of Impurity in *Far from the Madding Crowd*: The Tragic Failure of a Ruined Maid or The Blessed Life of a Fallen Lady

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Abstract

As a prolific nineteenth-century novelist, Thomas Hardy witnessed how women were treated as well as the dreadful conditions in which they lived. Well aware of the nineteenth-century limitations on femininity, Hardy stood for women's downtrodden rights. Henceforth, so as to examine Hardy's personal thoughts and impressions towards the prevailing perceptions of the nineteenth-century femininity, Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1847) has been explored with focus upon the Victorian femininity in contrast with Hardy's fictional heroines. *Far From the Madding Crowd*, as a typical example of his fiction, is representative of Hardy's vision towards the Victorian ideal of femininity particularly the notion of impurity. This paper is an attempt to re-read Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd* to explore the discrepancy between Hardy's notions of impurity in accordance with the Victorian ideal perceptions of femininity to the Victorians extreme rigidity to the idea of impurity. This paper also concludes that despite his genuine commiseration towards women, Hardy was in line with the Victorian conservative view of sex where his fallen heroine –Fanny— is doomed to ignominious failure in the course of her life while Bathsheba's fall is redeemed through a conventional marriage trial.

Keywords: The Victorian era, Thomas Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, impurity

1. Introduction

1.1 Thomas Hardy: A Devoted Victorian Novelist or a Victorian Rebel

In the mainstream nineteenth-century England, gender prejudices dictated certain behaviors. The Victorian expectations of femininity were culturally set up in the form of the emergence of rigid disciplines to constrain female activities within the domestic hearth and men's social activities in the society. In the Victorian Christian view of femininity, a woman was honored as a domestic angel to consolidate the union of society in general and the nucleus of family in particular so as to fulfill her biological destiny; to color her social roles as a faithful wife and devoted mother to exemplify "femininity, morality, and maternal longing" (Chattopadhyay, 2011, p. 11). Concentrating more on the sexual differences, women were also defined to be biologically inferior to men whereof Itzin and Newman define gender assumption as follows: "Gender is the socially constructed and culturally determined characteristics associated with men and women, the assumption made about the skills and abilities of men and women based on these characteristics, the conditions in which men and women live and work, the relations that exist between men and women, and how there are represented, communicated, transmitted and maintained" (1995, p.1-2).

Moreover, men's authority over women was commonly accepted where men had the most impregnable position in the family, and the whole familial affair was mapped out to satisfy their taste. Women were also conventionally introduced as the last thing civilized by men—fortifying men's authority on women as well. The current issues of the time, later, take the stereotypical notion of Victorian conception of femininity as "Angel in the House" and "Cow Woman" so as to protect the Christian ideals of the family as well as to render support, comfort, and morality to the sacramental family unit.

It was towards the end of the nineteenth-century that the novelists were prone to dislocate the conditioned ideology of the time; in fact they made a blistering attack on the culturally-accepted perceptions of femininity. To put it differently, the period between 1880 and the end of the Great War — in Stubbs's words a time of the redefined image of women in

fiction—was the very reversal image of feminine ideology. Hardy was one of the promethean figures whose fiction was the product of his promethean spirit in both art and literature. Hardy's life was designed to offer a portrait of a prolific writer at the prime of his fame who was compelled to give up writing fiction due to the critics' mounting exasperation with his taboo-breaking works—most notably his last two novels *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895)—which cost at the price of threatening the Victorian sensibilities.

As a prolific new woman novelist, Thomas Hardy called for a redefinition of gender role particularly in the advantage of femininity in the patriarchal society through his long literary careers as both a novelist and poet. Hardy's diligent attempts in presenting a totally different aspect of femininity boomed in his reputation as a leading dissident to the Victorian oppressive social rules imposing on femininity. In a sense, his bold attempts were highly aimed at extending his genuine sympathy for women and their constant struggle to express their desires as well as aspirations in a constitutionalized patriarchal society, henceforth, Thomas Hardy was successful enough to project his perceptions of life as well as his own vision of femininity and masculinity through his characterization. Hardy's characterization provides readers with an opportunity to understand Hardy's vision about the crucially important issues of the time. By creating non-conformist characters, Hardy touches the contemporary Victorian sensibilities about femininity, marriage, and religion. In effect, his outspoken attitudes are strongly felt in his fictional prose whereof he chided the Victorian close-mindedness about femininity and the issues related to them. In Hardy's mind set, the dominant Victorian ideology expresses no sense of commiseration towards its oppressed femininity. In effect, throughout his novels Hardy gives voice to women and acknowledges them as complete human beings with individual and sexual rights.

Far From the Madding Crowd—known as Hardy's first literary venture—mostly relates the fate of two young, single, and immaculate girls whose lives are woven from the same pattern except for their social status designates their life differently. In effect, in *Far From the Madding Crowd*, Hardy highly dedicates himself to the issue of femininity through two markedly different poles. First, it is Fanny Robin's illegitimate relationship with a dashing sergeant of noble blood and good education—Francis Troy—which ends in Fanny's seduction, her outcast, and her final tragic death at child birth in the Union at Casterbridge. Secondly, Bathsheba Everdene's and sergeant Troy's relationship with each other, is legitimized through the marriage trial, is concerned.

Far from the Madding Crowd is representative of Hardy's vision towards the Victorian ideal of femininity particularly the notion of impurity. In effect, in *Far From the Madding Crowd*, the concept of fall is defined largely by how far a woman is deviated from the Victorian conception of idealized womanhood. It has been also argued that while society vehemently condemns women as fallen and morally corrupted, their fall can be redeemed through a conventional marriage trial.

Fanny, who later becomes a figure of suffering humanity, is seduced and, then, deserted by Francis Troy. Fanny's hardship and misery is forgotten since her illicit affair outside wedlock stigmatizes her as a “fallen woman” whereas Bathsheba who is seduced, is first married and then abandoned. Noticeably, their life pattern is alike except that Fanny's fall is blemished while Bathsheba's is virtually made respectable through a socially-informed marriage. As a matter of fact, In *Far From the Madding Crowd*, Hardy displayed a well-representation of the notion of fall independent of social advantage and individual personality which pervades the novel.

2. Discussion

2.1 Fanny Robin: A Forlorn Victorian Non-Conformist Maid

Fanny Robin's story interweaves a considerable portion of the plot whereof the seduction of an innocent young girl and her tragic death is related. Geoffrey Harvey opines that Fanny Robin's plot is “the traditional ballad tale of the young rural servant girl seduced and betrayed by a soldier tactfully counterpoints the main story” (2003, p. 64). Fanny Robin's introduction to the plot is in chapter VII where her misery catches Gabriel Oak's attention. On his way to Warren Malthouse, Gabriel Oak notices a young girl who is poorly dressed—“slim girl, rather thinly clad” (*FFMC*, p. 57)—and is in search of “how late they keep open the Buck's Head Inn”: “The girl hesitated and then went on again. Do you know how late they keep open the Buck's Head Inn?” (*FFMC*, p. 57)

Racked with guilt and misery, Fanny was resolute to find Troy, her seducer, and asks him to legitimize their relationships through marriage. Passing the highs and lows, Fanny is finally able to find her seducer “in the outskirts of a certain town and military station, many miles north of Weatherbury” (*FFMC*, p. 94), where Fanny's plea in the snow, outside Troy's barracks across the river, is made for legitimizing her past illicit relationship: “when shall we be married, Frank?” (*FFMC*, p. 98).

Hardy believed that an impure woman could be redeemed if society would give her a chance. Formalizing his thoughts, Hardy provides an opportunity for Fanny to legalize her fall through the marriage trial. Obtaining the consent of her seducer, Fanny is supposed to be in “All Saints' church” to become Troy's legitimate wife. Mistaking “All Souls” instead of “All Saints”—“oh, Frank I made a mistake!—I thought that church with the spire was All Saints”, and I was at the door at half-past eleven to a minute as you said. I waited till a quarter to twelve, and found then that I was in All Souls'. But I wasn't much frightened, for I thought it could be to-morrow as well. You fool, for so fooling me! But say no more. Shall it be tomorrow, Frank? She asked blankly. To-morrow! And he gave vent to a hoarse laugh. I don't go through that experience again for some time, I warrant you!” (*FFMC*, p. 130)—Fanny loses the opportunity to amend her fall since Troy is no longer consent to marry her.

As a Victorian novelist, Hardy was inevitably overwhelmed by the reigning ideology of the time that—a woman who falls from her purity can never return to ordinary society” (Mitchell, 1981, p. x). Hence, in spite of his profound

sympathy towards femininity in general and Fanny in particular, Hardy successfully shows that the perceptions of the time outweigh his thoughts and perceptions. In the Victorian's perspective, a ruined woman has no future ahead, thus, the ruined woman will be socially outcasted and pointed as a menace to the morality of the society. Hence, the authors' argument converge with Morteza Jafari—"Fallen Woman in Victorian Society: Eliot's *Adam Bede* and Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd*" (2012)—that Hardy successfully declares Fanny Robin as the conventional portrayal of the fallen woman who is seduced in her youth, brutally left behind by her seducer, and is roaming as a social ostracism who dies at childbirth. Fanny who experienced a fall—has affair outside wedlock—and loses her virginity is no longer worthwhile and does not deserve an ordinary life in the society. In the final pages of her plot, she is left homeless and without any supports expect a big dog "who was as homeless as she" (*FFMC*, p. 318): "She [Fanny] became conscious of something touching her hand; it was softness and it was warmth. She opened her eyes, and the substance touched her face. A dog was licking her cheek. He was a huge, heavy, and quiet creature..." (*FFMC*, p. 317) As a matter of fact, Fanny's fall prepares the ground for her final misery and guilt who was obliged to pay hard, almost through her life, since in the Victorian perspective Fanny—as a fallen maid—does not deserve to enjoy the beauty and sweetness of the life.

2.2 Bathsheba Everdene: A Blessed Victorian Non-Conformist Lady

Bathsheba Everdene, Hardy's "good-looking, excellent scholar," (*FFMC*, p. 35) propels the plot through her interaction with her various suitors; Gabriel Oak, William Boldwood, and Francis Troy respectively. Her acquaintance with Gabriel Oak—"twenty-eight, and a bachelor" farmer (*FFMC*, p. 9)—results in Oak's proposal of marriage whereof Gabriel finds enough temerity to open his heart to her "I love you far more than common" (*FFMC*, p. 37). Oak's hope is shattered by Bathsheba's outright rejection of marriage proposal: "I do not love you" (*FFMC*, p. 39). In the ensuing pages of the novel, Bathsheba's situation changes for better. She is known as the only left heiress of her uncle in Weatherbury. As a matter of fact, her social presence boosts as a prosperous farm owner who has "business in every bank in Casterbridge" (*FFMC*, p. 355).

Bathsheba's social presence in the Weatherbury, introduces her to the next suitor—William Boldwood—"a gentleman farmer at Little Weatherbury" (*FFMC*, p. 87). In effect, Bathsheba's social acquaintance with a "gentlemanly man, with full and distinctly outlined Roman features," (*FFMC*, p. 107)—who "took less notice of [her]" (*FFMC*, p. 109)—whips up her interest to start a valentine game playing which results in William Boldwood's passionate love for her. Ernest Sutherland Bates comments on Bathsheba's valentine game playing as she "sends a silly valentine to a neighboring farmer" (1905, p. 476).

Bored stiff, Bathsheba decides to send a valentine card but through Liddy's suggestion—"What fun it would be to send it to the stupid old Boldwood, and how he would wonder!" (*FFMC*, p. 114)—Bathsheba decides to send the valentine card to William Boldwood. As a matter of fact, lingering on the recipient of the valentine card—where Bathsheba is tentative to decide whether the prospective recipient would be the naughty Teddy Coggan or the seemingly level-headed affluent middle-aged neighbor, William Boldwood, the tossing of a hymn book, finally, decides who the prospective recipient of the valentine card would be. Bathsheba addresses Liddy: "Really, I don't care particularly to send it to Teddy; He's rather a naughty child sometimes" (*FFMC*, p. 114). Thus, William Boldwood is chosen as the recipient of the Bathsheba's game. Hence, Bathsheba's sudden whim disturbs the gentle life of William Boldwood. The affluent level-headed Boldwood is now in great curiosity to find out the secret identity of the sender of the valentine card; as a matter of fact, he was in the grip of an obsession which "caused him to think it [the valentine card], an act which had a deliberate motive prevented him from regarding it as an impertinence" (*FFMC*, p. 118).

Determined to think seriously about Boldwood's proposal of marriage in chapter XXIII—particularly in Bathsheba's shearing-supper—Bathsheba's promise of marriage to Boldwood was made: "I will try to love you, she was saying, in a trembling voice quite unlike her usual self-confidence. And if I can believe in any way that I shall make you a good wife I shall indeed be willing to marry you" (*FFMC*, p. 189). In the period of the time that she promised Boldwood to think over her proposal, Bathsheba becomes acquainted with a sergeant of nobility; Sergeant Francis Troy who is described as "a man to whom memories were an incumbrance, and anticipations a superfluity. Simply feeling, considering, and caring for what was before his eyes, he was vulnerable only in the present. His outlook upon time was as a transient flash of the eye now and then: that projection of consciousness into days gone by and to come, which makes the past a synonym for the pathetic and the future a word for circumspection, was foreign to Troy. With him the past was yesterday; the future, to-morrow; never, the day after" (*FFMC*, p. 199).

Seriously treated Troy first, Bathsheba demonstrates resilience gradually. As a matter of fact, Bathsheba's interest grows for Troy since she is lauded for her beauty where the narrator comments "it was a fatal omission of Boldwood's that he had never once told her she was beautiful" (*FFMC*, p. 198). Henceforth, in great vanity, Bathsheba evinces interest in Troy. Troy's attention to Bathsheba as well as his glib comments on her beauty propels the "Queen of the Corn-market" (*FFMC*, p. 203) towards her fall. Bates also supports the idea that Sergeant Troy a "dashing, fickle soldier" with his "light-hearted speech and brilliant sword-play" intrigues Bathsheba (1905, p. 479). After further acquaintances; Bathsheba is invited to see the "sword exercise". Hesitating momentarily over Troy's invitation, Bathsheba finally accepts "yes; I should like to see it very much" (*FFMC*, p. 215). In reality, she has never seen sword practicing "she had heard wondrous reports from time to time by dwellers in Weatherbury, who had by chance sojourned awhile in Casterbridge, near the barracks, of this strange and glorious performance, the sword-exercise. Men and boys who had peeped through chinks or over walls into the barrack yard returned with accounts of its being the

most flashing affair conceivable; accoutrements and weapons glistening like stars—here, there, around—yet all by rule and compass” (*FFMC*, p. 215).

The sword exercise where Bathsheba’s lock of hair is dropped – “the lock dropped to the ground” (*FFMC*, p. 220)—can be thought as her fall which is emphasized by Troy’s kiss on her mouth “the circumstance had been the gentle dip of Troy’s mouth downwards upon her own. He had kissed her” (*FFMC*, p. 222). As a matter of fact, the sword practice scene is marked as Bathsheba’s fall and her later trip to Bath substantiates that claim. Bathsheba is prompted to enter into a hasty marriage with Troy when she is put in a twinge of jealousy: “he [Troy] suddenly said he had that day seen a woman more beautiful than I and that his constancy could not be counted on unless I at once became his” (*FFMC*, p. 301). In effect, when Bathsheba is threatened to lose Troy’s love forever hence “between jealousy and distraction” (*FFMC*, p. 301) she gives her hand in marriage with Troy.

Painfully aware of Troy’s interest in Bathsheba, Boldwood stands against Troy. Trying to warn Troy about Boldwood’s menace, Bathsheba takes a trip to Bath where she later returns as Mrs Troy. In reality, being aware of the social status of a fallen woman in the Victorian conservative society of Weatherbury, Bathsheba formalizes her relationship with Troy through marriage. In effect, she thinks that if she returns unmarried, she would be shunned by the society: “I saw, when it was too late, that scandal might seize hold of me for meeting him alone in that way” (*FFMC*, p. 301).

Much like Fanny, Bathsheba experiences the same fall except for some dissimilarities rooting in their social status. As a matter of fact, it seems that Fanny is seduced and abandoned due to her poor social privilege. The voluptuous sergeant Troy prefers Bathsheba to the latter since she is the only left heiress of her deceased uncle whereof in the eyes of the villagers, Bathsheba is described as “a rich one” who “took on her uncle’s farm, who died suddenly” (*FFMC*, p. 56). In effect, Bathsheba passes the same course but due to her social advantage her fall is compensated through a socially-informed trial although it did not yield a result.

3. Conclusion

All in all, in the mainstream nineteenth-century England, gender prejudices dictated certain behaviors. The Victorian expectations of femininity were culturally set up in the form of the emergence of rigid disciplines to constrain female activities within the domestic hearth and men’s social activities in the society. In effect, a woman was honored as a domestic angel to consolidate the union of society in general and the nucleus of family in particular so as to fulfill her biological destiny. As a promethean forerunner of women’s downtrodden rights, Thomas Hardy acquired his reputation for challenging the prevailing perceptions of the nineteenth-century femininity which seem to him to extend no sympathy for the ruthlessly suppressed women. Henceforth, Hardy was successful enough to project his perceptions of life as well as his own vision of femininity and masculinity through his characterization. Hardy’s characterization provides readers with an opportunity to understand Hardy’s vision about the crucially important issues of the time. By creating non-conformist characters, Hardy touches the contemporary Victorian sensibilities about femininity, marriage, and religion. In effect, his outspoken attitudes are strongly felt in his fictional prose whereof he chided the Victorian close-mindedness about women and the issues related to them. Repeatedly emphasized, Hardy’s fiction is very much a product of his uncompromising vision of life in the Victorian society. He was daring enough to unleash a blistering attack on some of the traditionally-accepted perceptions of the time particularly femininity. Hence, Hardy’s *Far From the Madding Crowd*— his first successful literary attempt in writing a novel— is counted as a unique specimen of the Victorian vision of the fallen woman; illustrating the fate of two young, single, innocent girls whose lives were woven from the same pattern except for their social status designated their life differently. In effect, Hardy touches the Victorian sensibilities through creating and developing non-conformist heroines, Bathsheba Everdene and Fanny Robin. In *Far From the Madding Crowd*, Hardy displays a well-representation of the notion of the fall independent of social position and individual personality which pervade the novel. Fanny and Bathsheba are both seduced by a man who is highly respected as the Victorian pillar of the society—Francis Troy— a dashing sergeant of nobility and good education. Fanny Robin’s plot and Bathsheba’s are juxtaposed to represent the discrepancy between Hardy’s notion of femininity in general and women’s impurity in particular with that of the Victorians. In line with the Victorian conservative view of sex, Hardy leads Fanny’s plot in total resignation, social ostracism, and her final tragic death in the workhouse at childbirth while Bathsheba Everdene’s plot seems more favorable to the readers; since her fall is redeemed through a social trial although it did not yield a result.

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