



## *Far From the Madding Crowd* : the Pathetic Tragedy of the Sexes

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# EPI-REVEL

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**Stéphanie BERNARD** is Assistant Professor at the University of Rouen, France, where she is in charge of teacher training. She wrote a thesis entitled « De Thomas Hardy à Joseph Conrad : vers une écriture de la modernité ». Her research work deals with the tragic in the early days of modernism, through the novels of Thomas Hardy (*Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*) and Joseph Conrad (*Lord Jim* and *Under Western Eyes*). It also takes into account voice and gaze as two major vectors of the tragic. In addition, she has been focusing on the questions of femininity and of rewriting, widening her approach to other texts by Hardy (such as *The Return of the Native*, *Far From the Madding Crowd*, short stories in *Life's Little Ironies*, or poems), by Conrad (*Heart of Darkness*, *The Secret Agent*, *Nostromo*, "An Outpost of Progress"), or by other authors (*Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys).

*The appearance of normality at the end of Far From the Madding Crowd is not satisfactory. The reward Gabriel receives for his patience and loyalty seems a high price to pay for Bathsheba. Deprived of her feminine and independent voice, she is now a silent object in the collection of her husband's possessions. Bathsheba stands for the woman subjected to the univocal voice of her master and of patriarchal law, by the way announcing Hardy's later and darker works.*

Hardy and tragedy is a long story. The author is famous for his pessimistic vision of life, for his novels imbued with cosmic irony, his poems full of nostalgic feelings, the dreary existences and tragic destinies depicted in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*. The latter works even rely on an Aristotelian definition of tragedy. The author of *Tess* suggests that when the story ends, it means that "the President of the Immortals (in Æschylean phrase) had ended his sport with Tess" (384). In his preface to *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy explains his choice in depicting the protagonist's sad fate through his marriage, his love story and his disillusion:

[...] it seemed a good foundation for the fable of a tragedy, told for its own sake as a presentation of particulars containing a good deal that was universal, and not without a hope that certain cathartic, Aristotelian qualities might be found therein. (Hardy 1996, viii)

*Far from the Madding Crowd* is also about love, marriage and disappointments. However, the novel does not fit into an Aristotelian definition of tragedy and offers not so dark a reality. The pastoral tone lowers the potentially tragic ring of the text without silencing it entirely. Tragedy is here in seeds, often attenuated into pathos, especially as far as Bathsheba is concerned. She has nothing of Antigone in the way Tess has, but a veil of sadness is discreetly deposited on the text.

*Far from the Madding Crowd* seems to depict the outlines of a tragedy of the sexes without going into the depths of it. A number of tragic ingredients are unquestionably present, but the focalisation on Bathsheba's love stories and her endurance in the tale show how they are contained and underplayed, while at the same time they infect the story and give it its particular nostalgic hue, its undertones of pathos.

# The inevitable

The first chapter in *Far from the Madding Crowd* opens on the presentation of Gabriel Oak. The title, 'An incident', echoes Hardy's interest in *co-incidente* that usually sets the course of subsequent events. It suggests that something of import will inevitably take place between Gabriel and the young girl who soon makes her appearance.

In the opening scene of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, the heroine's father meets Parson Tringham who discloses to him the link between the decayed Durbeyfields – i.e. Tess and her family – and the noble but extinct d'Urbervilles; the unveiling triggers tragedy, entrapping Tess in her family story through the power of the given word, be its content true or false.

In the same manner, the first chapter of *Jude the Obscure* weaves an unbreakable thread between the young protagonist and the schoolmaster Phillotson who tells about his plan to go to Christminster and take a university degree there: Jude will try to act in the very same way, and will fail in the very same way. The words exchanged acquire a performative value as the unfolding story shows.

The initial situation in *Far from the Madding Crowd* is lighter both in tone and meaning than in the other two novels mentioned. However the words spoken in the first scene do have a lasting and decisive impact on the narrative. They remain imprinted in each character's itinerary. From the start we know that Gabriel and the "handsome girl" (9) will meet again and that they will be part of the main story.

For if Hardy's text, rich with information and details about the personae and action, does not tell us so in clear-cut letters, what remains unwritten can be imagined. Something invisible takes place in the act of reading, just as something ungraspable happens in a conversation due to the non-verbal expressions of the body. The written text is made of letters that let the unsaid and the understated emerge in the interstices.

It is the "the textual voice understood as that part in the enunciative act over which the author has no control" (Maisonnat, 20), that modifies the ring and colour of the text through the uncontrolled effects of language and silences of the text. It is the characters' voices that intermingle and weave a web of meanings that confirm or contradict the narrative voice. For what escapes the letter bears particular significance and returns in the text as a driving force. The spoken word remains, endures and modifies the course of events.

In the second major scene of Gabriel's proposal to Bathsheba, the refusal she pronounces is all the while undermined by what she does not say but show, or by what she says against her will: the language of the body – her blushes, her running after Gabriel, her self-contradictions – enters the text like a foreign voice that blurs the message. What is unsaid or unconfessed can be all the same heard through her hesitations and her looks. Here are her words to Gabriel:

'It seems dreadfully wrong not to have you when you feel so much!' she said with a little distress, and looking hopelessly around for some means of escape from her moral dilemma. 'How I wish I hadn't run after you!' (29)

Such hesitation in her speech characterizes Bathsheba in her dealing with men. Aware of her attractiveness, of something in her that escapes her own will and mastery, she is trapped between her wish to uphold moral standards and her desire to please – "the craving to attract and captivate" (Hardy 1996, 422) in Sue's words. The language of the body – a body that Bathsheba fails to contain – is not univocal; it is complex and *intrusive* because it is *unobtrusive*. In Marjorie Garson's words:

Male voices [...] speak through print, they are the pure 'presence' to which the written words point; they come out of the past as history, religion, culture; they are univocal [...]. Female voicing is more complex: it is oral rather than *écriture* [...]; it is of the body (involving clothing, gesture, body-language as well as actual speech); it is double, deceptive, contradictory [...]. (Garson, 163)

The narrative tells about Bathsheba's refusal and Gabriel's dismay. On the other hand, the hidden, interiorised story that writes itself through Bathsheba's mind and body is one of both attraction and repulsion for Gabriel. She fears the male in him, as a representative of patriarchal power. She fears that he might come to possess her: "I *hate* to be thought men's property in that way, though possibly I shall be had some day" (27).

Bathsheba's words are prophetic and put again into relief the gap between the apparently simple and linear narrative, and the intricate web of coincidences and understatements that orientate the story toward not so plain a tale. She tells Gabriel:

‘[...] you are a farmer just beginning, and you ought in common prudence, if you marry at all (which you should certainly not think of doing at present) to marry a woman with money, who would stock a larger farm for you than you have now.’  
(29)

Her words announce the epilogue of the novel. She speaks here in terms of property, finances, social status. Her feminine voice is suddenly traversed by the voice of reason, by the law of patriarchy that decides what is right or wrong.

As her voice becomes an echo of the univocal, male voice of culture and history, Bathsheba is gradually subjected to patriarchy in the novel. In the first chapter, despite an appearance of “neutrality” (7) and “a quiet modesty” (8), Gabriel decides for Bathsheba: he pays for her passage through the turnpike, he speaks while she remains silent, because “he had lost her her point” (11). In other words he vanquishes her. He symbolically buys and possesses her. He, and not Bathsheba, is the one who indulges her in “[b]eating people down” (11). Her story, therefore, seems to be written already and her doomed character could acquire a tragic dimension.

A close reading of the text reinforces such an impression of the inevitable. Bathsheba is presented in the following way when Gabriel catches a glimpse of her: “The girl on the summit of the load sat motionless, surrounded by tables and chairs with their legs upwards, backed by an oak settle [...]” (9). The signifier oak in the text recurs to remind the reader unobtrusively of Gabriel’s continual presence in the story and of the ineradicable link that has been tied with Bathsheba in spite of her reluctance and of appearances in that first scene.

## Salutary irony

The use of the word oak in that context is ironical and reminds the reader of the first description we get of Gabriel’s character, with his too large boots and his little watch. The allusion to his “small clock as to size”, the fact that it keeps stopping, and the efforts required to take it out of his pocket mark him as a potentially ridiculous character:

It may be mentioned that Oak’s fob being difficult of access, by reason of its somewhat high situation in the waistband of his trousers (which also lay at a remote height under his waistcoat), the watch was as a necessity pulled out by throwing the body to one side, compressing the mouth and face to a mere mass of ruddy flesh on account of the exertion, and drawing up the watch by its chain, like a bucket from a well. (8)

The description both echoes and contrasts sharply with the episode in which Bathsheba takes out her mirror to watch her own reflection in it. The mention of the looking-glass highlights Bathsheba’s refinement and attractiveness, but also points to her vanity. The watch, on the contrary, suggests that Gabriel is a humble man, “a bachelor” although “at the brightest period of masculine growth” (8) – i.e. a somewhat uncomfortable position.

Bathsheba is far superior to him in beauty. She is “young and attractive” (9) whereas “Gabriel’s features adhered throughout their form so exactly to the middle line between the beauty of St. John and the ugliness of Judas Iscariot, as represented in a window of the church he attended” (10). She is well-dressed in her “crimson jacket” (9) while Oak is wearing, as usual on working days, “ordinary leather leggings and boots emphatically large” (7).

Significantly, he has to look up to her (10) as she is sitting on top of the carriage. By paying for her passage at the turnpike he symbolically brings her down from her pedestal. But Gabriel’s superiority and empowerment in chapter 1 remain awkward and counterbalanced by the way he is introduced in the narrative. Her refusal to speak to him or look at him is also a way for her to affirm her independence. From then on, they are invariably at one remove from each other and never entirely in tune with each other.

This discrepancy appears clearly in the major confrontation between Gabriel and Bathsheba when he proposes to her. The idea of marriage does not entirely frighten her and her running to meet Gabriel shows she is not opposed to the eventuality of becoming his wife. But Gabriel goes too fast and fear soon crops up. Each time she seems more acquiescent, he makes a mistake and she recoils. She is “decidedly disconcerted” (29). The feeling of a chaotic relationship is heightened by the reversal of functions in the first part of the novel: Bathsheba, the “tomboy” (57), looks masculine in her handling of her love affairs, her witty repartee, and her audacious remarks. Gabriel, on the contrary, is feminised by allusions to his blushing (19, 55) or to his “bosom [that] thrilled gently” (57).

The thwarted love story between them never becomes tragic as there is no dramatic *passage à l'acte*. The inaction on both sides, the repeatedly disrupted intercourses could at best recall Hamlet's procrastination, but without leading them to death and without endowing them with any sort of grandeur. It is rather a matter of irony or inadequacy between the sexes – an absence of “sexual relationship” in Lacanian terms (“Il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel” (Lacan 1975, 17)) – that will end up in a fairly happy resolution, a reasonable marriage that does without passion. For as Bathsheba tells Gabriel about Boldwood's proposal to her: “Love is an utterly bygone, sorry, worn-out, miserable thing with me—for him or any one else” (272), including Gabriel himself.

In the mean time though, Bathsheba manages to weave love stories with her men. Unlike Sue, who after living unmarried with Jude gives herself up to Phillotson in spite of her disgust for him and in order to atone for her sin, Bathsheba marries Troy because she thinks she loves him. She is not sinful as she becomes his lawful wife although people around her – Gabriel, the rustics – believe in her elopement with Troy. Although it threatens to turn out so on the night of Fanny's death, her unhappy life with Troy is not tragic either: his absence takes away from her his reproachful and contemptuous gaze. Her fearful expectation of his return turns her into an inverted figure of Penelope<sup>1</sup> whose longing is pathetic and faithful but not tragic.

The menace of Boldwood's consuming passion also leaves her untouched. While Tess is deflowered – being either raped or seduced by Alec – Bathsheba does not lose her honour. The engagement with Boldwood remains unpronounced (199) until the very end and she is very soon free from it. Paradoxically her husband's death liberates her both from Troy and from Boldwood, making her, or so it seems, a free woman.

## Far from the tragic?

The pangs of tragedy that will envelop the whole of Tess's life only scratch Bathsheba's existence. The male characters too seem only lightly touched by the tragic. Gabriel's successive disappointments with his beloved might destroy him, however he remains a dignified character, repeatedly praised by those around him. His constancy and loyalty lead him to silence his feelings in the text. During the shearing, he feels content because Bathsheba is near him although he cannot woo her: “Poor Gabriel's soul was fed with a luxury of content by having her over him” (115). He so effaces himself that his desire and sadness can be felt but are eventually hardly remembered. In spite of the numerous allusions to Gabriel's love for his mistress (115, 150, 190), his position is typified by self-forgetfulness as this short exchange with Coggan, one of the rustics, highlights:

‘What difference does it make whose sweetheart she is, since she can't be yours?’

‘That's the very thing I say to myself,’ said Gabriel. (174)

He, therefore, is not tragic in a classical meaning. His tragedy would be a tragedy of silence, a tragedy of extinction and of the loss of the object. He is more of a ‘pastoral king’ than a hero in a tragedy. On the other hand, Troy, after Fanny's death, could appear like a Romeo to those who believe him dead. Yet the reader is informed without delay that he does not attempt to kill himself after his Juliet's death. His drowning, had it been fatal, might have acquired tragic undertones. However its being accidental reinforces the idea of irony instead of tragedy:

Suppose that Troy had followed Fanny into another world. Had he done this intentionally, yet contrived to make his death appear like an accident? Nevertheless, this thought of how the apparent might differ from the real—made vivid by her bygone jealousy of Fanny, and the remorse he had shown that night—did not blind her to the perception of a likelier difference, less tragic, but to herself far more disastrous. (252)

There is no lofty intention behind Troy's desire to plunge into the sea. The two possible readings of Troy and Fanny's story are suggested by Bathsheba as she contemplates her husband's watch containing a lock of Fanny's hair. But she clearly opts for an unromanticized version that excludes Troy from the tragic pattern and disqualifies him as a hero:

‘He was hers and she was his; they should be gone together,’ she said. ‘I am nothing to either of them, and why should I keep her hair?’ She took it in her hand,

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<sup>1</sup> Her beauty and her numerous wooers make Bathsheba a double of Penelope. Her doubts as to Troy's death echo the Greek heroine's faithful waiting for Ulysses as well as her refusal to believe in his return at first.

and held it over the fire. 'No—I'll not burn it—I'll keep it in memory of her, poor thing!' she added, snatching back her hand. (252)

In the highly dramatic scene in which Troy is shot dead by Boldwood, the text may seem to gain "certain cathartic, Aristotelian qualities" to quote Hardy. The spectacular events not only recall Aristotle's discourse in his *Poetics*, but they also enact Boldwood's menacing words to Troy in chapter XXXIV. The notion of fate seems adequate to describe the final consequence of Boldwood's rage against Bathsheba's husband. For after having been tricked by Troy, Boldwood expresses his fury in terms that foreshadow the end of the novel. Troy seems doomed to die from that moment and his death may function as purification from what is evil:

Boldwood shook his clenched fist at him. 'You juggler of Satan! You black hound! But I'll punish you yet; mark me, I'll punish you yet!'

Another peal of laughter. Troy then closed the door, and locked himself in.

Throughout the whole of that night Boldwood's dark form might have been seen walking about the hills and downs of Weatherbury like an unhappy Shade in the Mournful Fields by Acheron. (182)

Troy's satanic laughter is silenced and order is restored after his death. Gabriel can at last marry Bathsheba who, on her second wedding, looks just the same as on the occasion of the proposal in chapter IV:

[...] there was a certain rejuvenated appearance about her:—

As though a rose should shut and be a bud again.

Repose had again incarnadined her cheeks; and having, at Gabriel's request, arranged her hair this morning as she had worn it years ago on Norcombe Hill, she seemed in his eyes remarkably like a girl of that fascinating dream, which, considering that she was now only three or four-and-twenty, was perhaps not very wonderful. (306-307)

Such apparent recovery of the past and restoration of order could become markers of the tragic in *Far from the Madding Crowd*. Nevertheless the reader receives the fact of Troy's death as mere justice. It is at best a mock-catharsis. The notion of catharsis, understood as the purification of those emotions which are pity and fear for the reader, does not function properly. If Bathsheba's predicament is fearful and awe-inspiring, our pity for Boldwood is checked by his insensitivity and even cruelty in his treatment of his beloved before the murder scene. As for Troy, he has become such a highly despicable character at that point of the narrative that his death is but the necessary wiping out of the narrative of a disruptive element.

Similarly, catharsis as the purging of the protagonist's guilt does not function either for Troy has achieved no heroism. His death is so sudden that he is not even aware of the punishment he receives:

Troy fell. The distance apart of the two men was so small that the charge of shot did not spread in the least, but passed like a bullet into his body. He uttered a long guttural sigh—there was a contraction—an extension—then his muscles relaxed, and he lay still. (289-290)

He is never allowed to express his guilt and is significantly depicted in a way that makes him a figure of evil, dressed up in "a heavy grey overcoat of Noachian cut, with cape and high collar, the latter being erect and rigid, like a girdling wall, and nearly reaching to the verge of a travelling cap which was pulled down over his ears" (280), and laughing "a mechanical laugh" (289).

The only male character who can be deemed tragic in the text is Boldwood. His worthiness is obvious as the narrator remarks that "there had been qualities in the farmer which Oak loved" (296). A Byronic aura is bestowed upon him: his first visit to Bathsheba, while his name is not even known to her and though they do not meet, conjures up in her mind "a crowd of romantic possibilities" (61). When she first catches sight of him in the male universe of the cornmarket at Casterbridge, she sees a dark, dignified gentleman, endowed with "mystery" as he does not seem attracted to her:

But the smallness of the exception made the mystery.

She soon knew thus much of the recusant's appearance. He was a gentlemanly man, with full and distinctly outlined Roman features, the prominences of which glowed in the sun with a bronze-like richness of tone. He was erect in attitude, and quiet in demeanour. One characteristic pre-eminently marked him—dignity. (74-75)

After sending the valentine, Bathsheba is “to him simultaneously a delight and a torture” (175). His sudden discovery of love and his devouring passion for the girl make him suffer unspeakable pain:

Those who have the power of reproaching in silence may find it a means more effective than words. There are accents in the eye which are not on the tongue, and more tales come from pale lips than can enter an ear. It is both the grandeur and the pain of the remoter moods that they avoid the pathway of sound. Boldwood’s look was unanswerable. (156-157)

He becomes all but mad: he lets himself be fooled and trapped by Troy (chapter XXXIV); he takes no heed of the threatening storm and fails to shelter the crops at the end of the summer (198); he cruelly forces Bathsheba, “weeping as if her heart would break” and “fairly beaten into non-resistance” (287), to give up her freedom and her soul by promising to be his wife; he eventually commits a crime of passion.

When Troy reappears after months of absence, Boldwood knows that Bathsheba is lost to him forever. “Bathsheba, go with your husband!” he orders (289). His murderous act is a way for him to achieve some heroism as he frees the woman he loves from her bondage to her unworthy husband and tries to kill himself to free her from his own passion.

Tragedy brushes his name, but then the tale drifts away from the tragic again towards irony, as Boldwood is denied the relief and grandeur of death. Having failed to take his own life he declares: “There is another way for me to die” (290). So he leaves abruptly and heads for Casterbridge jail in the night, “and he walked the world no more” (290). Such could be his tragic end but of this he is deprived too. Tragedy is displaced again: this ironic, even sarcastic obstinacy of the narration in refusing to let Boldwood die brings him to discover and undergo a tragedy of emptiness and absence.

## **The tragedy of femininity**

Tragedy in terms of diegesis is abortive in *Far from the Madding Crowd*. The characters are not given the depth and greatness of either Tess or Jude. However, there is something tragic in the text which announces Hardy’s later novels. “The most tragic woman is cowed by a tragic man [...]” (160), says the narrator about Bathsheba and Boldwood. Bathsheba is not “the most tragic woman”, but the expression is significant. First, it points to the link between the notion of tragedy and the question of gender. Second, the generalizing tone of the narrative comment allows for wide interpretation: the man in question is Boldwood but it could also be understood that her other men, including Gabriel, overawe Bathsheba.

While the protagonist’s name evokes the archangel, his role in the novel so evolves as to become disquieting. Boldwood’s silenced will, for instance, is mainly Gabriel’s doing. The latter takes care to visit the convict in Casterbridge Gaol (295) and is anxious to prevent Boldwood from being sentenced to death. The text does not say so clearly but it may be assumed that Gabriel is one of the main actors in the signing of the petition that aims to soften the sentence because of Boldwood’s alleged insanity: “Gabriel’s anxiety was great that Boldwood might be saved, even though in his conscience he felt that he ought to die” (296).

The narrator suggests Gabriel is acting so because of his sympathetic feelings for Boldwood. But Liddy points out that Bathsheba’s own physical and mental health depends on the sentence: “‘I do so hope his life will be spared.’ said Liddy. ‘If it is not, she’ll go out of her mind too’” (296). Both Bathsheba’s and Boldwood’s fates are literally in Gabriel’s hands. Tragedy is brought to a halt and death stops its course because of Gabriel, the right man at the right place (*l’homme de la situation*). He sets things right by depriving Boldwood of his voice and ultimate desire. Similarly, he silences Bathsheba: she becomes Gabriel’s wife and he speaks for her – “me and my wife” (307).

Boldwood’s consuming, destructive desire has been quenched. Troy’s evil spirit has been eliminated. The angel-like Gabriel, on the contrary, goes against the tide. At the beginning of the novel, he is subjected to Bathsheba who has the power to choose her men – as lovers or workers – and who has the money. He is even feminised, as we have suggested, and appears almost as weak and poor as Fanny when he first meets her (44). As his rivals come in the foreground, his character fades and becomes fairly dull in the course of events. But when he emerges again as a protagonist because the rivals have been eliminated, he appears suddenly manlier. His patience is rewarded a hundredfold and the irony of the tale looms up again. There is something excessive in the itinerary of the modest and ruined shepherd, the awkward bachelor, who becomes a powerful landlord and contented husband.

Bathsheba's fate is even more ironic. Her newly acquired freedom from Troy's evil power and Boldwood's fearful desire soon vanishes with her union to Gabriel who now owns her and her property, as Troy had done before. After the wedding, Gabriel and Bathsheba

[...] sat down very quietly to tea in Bathsheba's parlour in the evening of the same day, for it had been arranged that Farmer Oak should go there to live, since he had as yet neither money, house, nor furniture worthy of the name, though he was on a sure way towards them, whilst Bathsheba was, comparatively, in a plethora of all three. (307)

From then on, her property is his, her person is his. Like Troy earlier, Gabriel is now "ruling in the room of his wife" (185), in agreement with nineteenth century custom. From the moment she marries Gabriel, she stops speaking. She is not even heard laughing: "Bathsheba smiled (for she never laughed readily now)" (308).

The tone, however, is not tragic: she took the first step toward that wedding, she admires "Oak's example" (227), she is joyful before the wedding (306). But it is pathetic in that it stages the slow invasion and empowerment of patriarchal order into a sphere that seemed to allow for feminine freedom. The tragedy, therefore, is the tragedy of femininity. The voice of woman is silenced – just like Boldwood's voice which, for being *other* and discordant in the end, can be called *feminine*.

The ultimate embodiment of the feminine in the text is Fanny. She stands for woman at a loss about her position in human society, confronted with the impossibility to know where she belongs. For she belongs nowhere. Fanny's death is like the logical and smooth continuation of her shadowy half-existence. In the scene of the barracks she looks like an element of the natural setting, a mere spot on a dark background:

About this hour the snow abated: ten flakes fell where twenty had fallen, then one had the room of ten. Not long after a form moved by the brink of the river. By its outline upon the colourless background, a close observer might have seen that it was small. This was all that was positively discoverable, though it seemed human. (70)

She is always on the margin and objectified by the other's gaze: she is not "she" but "it" in this passage; she is the lock of hair in Troy's watch; she is the dead body lying in her coffin and offered to Bathsheba's intrusive gaze.

Fanny is a lonely suffering figure isolated from the rest of the world: on the night of the fire she is reportedly missing; Gabriel later meets her near the churchyard outside Weatherbury without knowing who she is; Troy will never manage to see her at the appointed time, either on the occasion of the failed wedding or on her return to Casterbridge. She evolves in that space which Lacan called "l'entre-deux mort" (315) in reference to Antigone – in-between life and death. Her uncommon beauty, like Antigone's, makes her fall prey to evil, incarnated by Troy. Combined to her youth, innocence and extreme suffering, Fanny's death has a tragic ring and causes Bathsheba to run away, thus achieving a form of catharsis for her and, consequently, for the reader:

'Oh-h-h!' she [Bathsheba] said, and the silent room added length to her moan.

Her tears fell fast beside the unconscious pair in the coffin: tears of a complicated origin, of a nature indescribable, almost indefinable except as other than those of simple sorrow. [...] The one feat alone—that of dying—by which a mean condition could be resolved into a grand one, Fanny had achieved. [...] In Bathsheba's heated fancy the innocent white countenance expressed a dim triumphant consciousness of the pain she was retaliating for her pain with all the merciless rigour of the Mosaic law: 'Burning for burning; wound for wound; strife for strife'. (228)

The tragic is decentred onto Fanny whose silent burden points to the condition of woman without bringing it to the foreground. The ending of *Far from the Madding Crowd* focuses instead on the return to a previous order in a pastoral world and reassures the reader as to Bathsheba's fate for she is never dishonoured: the female protagonist starts again with a clean slate, having been given no child by Troy whose existence is carefully wiped out. The time that has elapsed too is reduced to nothing. It is this disappearance of what has been, the denial of past errors and emotions, as well as the muffling of female voices that is tragic. Only with Tess will Hardy dare to give full voice to and shed a crude light on the tragedy of femininity.



Tragedy as a genre is abortive in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, although most of its characters experience “life’s little tragedies”. Yet the text is already disturbing in its treatment of the gender question. This is in fact what characterizes Hardy’s style and vision. Even in *Under The Greenwood Tree*, a gentle pastoral novel, the question is dealt with in a fairly subversive manner. The unconfessed lie stands for the flaw in the marriage that creeps into the last pages, ruffles the smooth surface of the tale and disturbs the reader.

The appearance of normality at the end of *Far from the Madding Crowd* is not more satisfactory. The reward Gabriel receives for his patience and loyalty seems a high price to pay for Bathsheba. Deprived of her feminine, “double, deceptive, contradictory” voice, she is now a silent object in the collection of her husband’s possessions. Bathsheba stands for the woman subjected to the univocal voice of her master and of patriarchal law. Thomas Hardy’s forthcoming writings, both poetical with the “She to Him” poems, and fictional with the characters of Eustacia, Tess and Sue, will be repeated attempts to give woman her voice back. The intrusion of the feminine will gradually overshadow the novels and overpower the seraphic male characters such as Angel or Gabriel, giving way to the flamboyant darkness of *Jude the Obscure*.

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