"Balanced Between Poetry and Practicality": The Agrarian Figure in Thomas Hardy's Far From the Madding Crowd and Tess of the D'Urbervilles

Rebecca Puelle

University of Connecticut - Storrs, rapuelle@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.uconn.edu/srhonors_theses

Part of the Literature in English, British Isles Commons

Recommended Citation

Puelle, Rebecca, ""Balanced Between Poetry and Practicality": The Agrarian Figure in Thomas Hardy's Far From the Madding Crowd and Tess of the D'Urbervilles" (2013). Honors Scholar Theses. 305.
http://digitalcommons.uconn.edu/srhonors_theses/305
“Balanced Between Poetry and Practicality”:
The Agrarian Figure in Thomas Hardy’s
*Far From the Madding Crowd* and *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*

By Rebecca Puelle
Honors Thesis Advisor: Eleni Coundouriotis
Acknowledgments

I could not have completed this project without the advice, wisdom, and encouragement of my thesis advisor, Professor Eleni Coundouriotis. You have encouraged me to think deeply, read closely, and write creatively. Thank you for all the support, interest, and understanding you have put into me and my project during my time at UConn.

I would also like to thank the UConn English department. This department, in particular those professors who allowed me to convert their classes to honors (Professors Eleni Coundouriotis, Brenda Murphy, and Veronica Makowsky) and my honors advisor, Professor Jonathan Hufstader, have challenged and inspired me for the last four years. Also, I must thank UConn Libraries and Interlibrary Loan for bringing me books and articles from across the pond in a timely and convenient fashion.

Lastly, I want to thank my family and friends for their constant faith and motivation. Without you I would not be reading, writing, or investigating the world of literature. Thank you!
## Table of Contents

Approval Page............................................................................................................. 1  
Title Page .................................................................................................................... 2  
Acknowledgements .................................................................................................... 3  
Table of Contents .................................................................................................... 4  
Abstract ..................................................................................................................... 5  
Chapter 1: Introduction .............................................................................................. 6  
  Geography ................................................................................................................ 10  
  Labour ...................................................................................................................... 11  
  Figure 1.1 ................................................................................................................ 17  
  Figure 1.2 ................................................................................................................ 18  
Chapter 2: *Far From the Madding Crowd* ................................................................. 19  
  Introduction ............................................................................................................. 20  
  The Rustic Chorus .................................................................................................. 22  
  Gabriel Oak ........................................................................................................... 36  
  Conclusion ............................................................................................................. 41  
Chapter 3: *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* .................................................................... 43  
  Introduction ............................................................................................................. 44  
  Learning, Love, and Labour ................................................................................. 49  
  Conclusion ............................................................................................................. 60  
Chapter 4: Conclusion .............................................................................................. 63  
Bibliography ............................................................................................................... 66
Abstract

A surface reading of any of Thomas Hardy's novels of the fictional world of Wessex - the south-England county based on the real-life counties of Devon, Dorset, Somerset, Wiltshire, Berkshire, and Hampshire - invites readers to revel in the silly quandaries of the villagers, farmers, malsterers, and labourers that populate this idyllic, pastoral world with quaint phrases, delectable dialects, and jovial camaraderies. Even when Hardy’s vision is deeply tragic, he maintains an interest in a colorful, and sometimes even comic, cast of bucolic people. A closer reading of Hardy, however, challenges readers to chart the changing course of agricultural labour in mid to late nineteenth century Britain. Though many of Hardy's novels demonstrate the contrast in opportunities, attitudes, and atmosphere of the mid to late nineteenth century rural Englander, an analysis of his first major success, Far from the Madding Crowd, and his scandalous depiction of a "pure woman," Tess of the D'Urbervilles, presents an intriguing comparison of changing times and characters. This project serves as an analysis of the agrarian figure in these novels, focusing on Hardy's portrayal of the changing identity of the countryman in response to the altering agricultural landscape, class structure, and gender expectations of mid to late nineteenth century Britain, and seeks to encourage an analytical reading of Hardy, an understanding of the rural Englander of his time, and an appreciation for the artistic and compelling way he describes the privileges and plights of Wessex's myriad personalities.
Chapter One

Introduction
R.J. White writes, “The one art that may safely be declared outside [Thomas Hardy’s] scope […] is that of historian” (White 10). Nineteenth century novelist Thomas Hardy was a well-educated classicist, keen observer of human nature, and excellent student of archaeology—not a historian. Even though Merryn Williams writes that Hardy “built [his novels] out of the actual situation in rural Wessex: real villages, real towns, real history” (M. Williams 199), she and other modern critics agree that Hardy never aimed to simply record history. According to White, Hardy’s historical observations, though acute, were clouded by “passion and philosophy,” making him “incapable of keeping his eyes closed sufficiently to the heights or depths of human experience for the fulfillment of the historian’s […] task” (White 10). White, like other critics, believes that Hardy becomes too emotionally invested in his characters to allow his novels to reflect “real” history (or an accurate depiction of everyday life in his region). In fact, Hardy’s contemporaries chastised him for not fulfilling what they perceived to be a novelist’s primary task: “a novelist is after all but a historian, thoroughly possessed of certain facts, and bound in some way or other to impart them” (James 28). Many critics believed that Hardy’s novels were too full of witty repartee and descriptive fluff to be highly praised. His novels, though “realistic,” are not “realism,” and do not paint what intellectuals believed was a true historical picture of the English countryman. Hardy’s goal, however, was never to catalogue occurrences of everyday life—he sought to examine and reveal human nature and human emotion, not just human events. When studying Hardy, readers must remember the height and depth from which he wrote: universal and romantic, melodramatic and tragic.

Critics and theorists agree that Hardy relied heavily on his life experiences, education, and interests to influence his novels and poems. Many characters, of both prose and poetry, are based on his family and friends (Gibson 37, 46, 56, 61). He never sought, however, to publish a historical account or any autobiographical novels during his lifetime. In his preface to *Far From the Madding Crowd*, Hardy writes: “I ask all good and idealistic readers to forget this [the realism of Wessex], and to refuse steadfastly to believe that there are any inhabitants of a Victorian Wessex outside these volumes” (Hardy xxx). Adamant that no one should try to seek
out the characters of his novels in real life, Hardy made sure to explain that his Wessex, though based on reality and history, was not an actual place of which he was simply reporting. Hardy wrote about the life and place he experienced through a creative lens. In this paper, England’s history will be used as a point from which to theorize and examine the events and people of Hardy’s work. Therefore, Hardy’s accurate or inaccurate depictions of workers, their masters, and their homelands are essential to his imaginative world. These depictions must not be judged as “coincidence” or “a mistake” when they align or not with reality.

Hardy grew up with a mixed background of yeoman, professional, and labouring classes. He was born in a cottage in Bockhampton, Dorsetshire (aka Dorset), a home to which he returned several times throughout his life. His father was a practicing stonemason, his mother a maid and cook (Gibson 3, 7). Their socioeconomic situation mirrored that of the Durbeyfields in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, prior to the death of their horse. Hardy writes that this class was: “[a] better informed class, ranking distinctly above the [labourer] […] and including the carpenter, the smith, the shoemaker, the huckster, together with nondescript workers other than farm labourers” (Hardy in *Tess*, 346). In other words, this class was mainly comprised of non-agricultural professionals and craftsmen. Of the Hardy’s financial situation and that often faced by other members of this “better informed class,” White writes, “[Hardy] came from a stratum of society that has always lived close to poverty and loss, suffering and rough weather” (5). Both his parents had distant landowning roots and his father had a non-agricultural or domestic profession. However, like others of this class, money was tight during Hardy’s childhood, and these uncomfortable circumstances never vanished (Gibson 6, Sherman 111). Hardy recognized his and his countrymen’s struggle in the English class system, and he included his observations, troubles, and experience in his novels (Gibson 30). Eager to help his mother, diminish his own economic hardships, and achieve as much as he could, Hardy apprenticed as an architect starting in 1856 at the age of 16 (Gibson 14). Though Hardy never became fully-qualified in this field, he spent years drawing and restoring churches, overseeing work sites, and playing “second in command” to his bosses until well into the 1870s (Millgate 116-59).
Hardy’s social class dictated his education and professions. According to the expectations of the English class system, his formal schooling, though quite superior to what most other boys of his class experienced, was not enough to merit him enrollment at a university. Therefore, Hardy took it upon himself to study, read, and write on his own during his time as an architect in both Dorset and London (Gibson 14, 20). In quoting Hardy’s *The Life and Works of Thomas Hardy*, edited by Michael Millgate, James Gibson writes:

> A life twisted of three strands – the professional life, the scholar’s life, and the rustic life, combined in the twenty-four hours of one day. [...] [Hardy] would be reading the *Iliad*, the *Aeneid*, or the Greek Testament from six to eight in the morning, would work at Gothic architecture all day, and then in the evening rush off with his fiddle under his arm (Gibson 19).

Long after money was no longer a necessity, Hardy remembered his past and the hard work it took to become who he wanted to be. Throughout his life he continued to write about the struggles of the poor, the routine of the labouring class, and the ups and downs of country living.

Within each strata of his life (professional, scholarly, and rustic), Hardy had distinct hobbies and interests, all of which greatly influenced his novels. His architectural experience shows itself particularly in his descriptions of old churches and in the lives of young professionals, like in *A Pair of Blue Eyes* and *Jude the Obscure* (Gibson 46, 19). His interest in music, shared by his father, grandfather, and other family members, presents itself in a variety of country dances, events, and characters, most notably in *Under the Greenwood Tree*, about a local church choir (Gibson 4). Lastly, his passion for archaeology and ancient civilizations greatly influences the geography and circumstance of several novels, most notably *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (White 9-10). Hardy never lost sight of his education or his Dorset roots.

As Hardy developed professionally, first as an architect then as a writer, his views on reality widened. Gibson writes, “[Hardy’s] life [was] a conflicting mixture of the old and new, of Bockhampton and London, of studies of the past and of the present, of the Bible and of Darwin, of ancient and modern architecture” (Gibson 85). Inspired by the past, the present, and
the possibility (both positive and negative) of the future, Hardy used every chance to let his education and growing experiences color his novels. At the same time, he was eager to remain connected to his humble, Bockhampton childhood and to include his growing knowledge of science, history, and art into his work. Hardy never lost interest in the lives of those around him in his native land.

**Geography**

Most of Hardy’s novels and short stories take place in a fictional land called “Wessex.” Calling it strictly “fictional,” however, can lead to criticism. Hardy explains the name Wessex in his preface to *Far From the Madding Crowd*. He writes:

I first ventured to adopt the word ‘Wessex’ from the pages of early English history, and give it a fictitious significance as the existing name of the district once included in that extinct kingdom. […]my novels] seemed to require a territorial definition of some sort to lend unity to their scene. Finding that the area of a single county did not afford a canvas large enough for this purpose, and that there were objections to an invented name, I disinterred the old one. (Hardy xxix)

Providing one setting in which all of his novels could take place provided Hardy, and his audience, with a sense of “unity.” Landmarks and traditions could be learned once and remain familiar over several novels. Readers familiar with Wessex’s “territorial definition” would recognize settings and understand when characters were acting with or against local customs and expectations. Wessex keeps its “fictitious significance” by being named with an ancient, accepted label of the region and by being populated with people like the ones readers may have known without any of the awkwardness or discomfort caused by actually being about them. Hardy made sure to set up a kingdom that was familiar yet distant, rooted in reality but not limited by it.

Thus, Wessex was born. Most historians focus their comparison of Hardy’s fictional Wessex with only one of its real-life counties: Dorset, the county closest to Hardy’s heart. This
is the county in which Hardy grew up, wrote, prospered, and died, and even when he spent
seasons in London or traveling the continent, he always returned. Hardy was aware, however, of
the misapplication of the Wessex name to just this county. In *Thomas Hardy’s Public Voice: The Essays, Speeches, and Miscellaneous Prose*, Michael Millgate presents the thoughts of an
anonymous reviewer of the 1902 book, *The Wessex of Thomas Hardy* by Bertram Windle. This
reviewer proclaimed error in Hardy’s apparent attribution of Dorset as the singular county of
Wessex (173). The reviewer argued that, of any county, Hampshire was more historically
accurate, to which Hardy responded:

> far from my ever having identified Wessex with Dorsetshire, I have invariably shown that
I do not so identify it, but make it to include six counties; I have described Winchester
under the old name of Wintonceaster as its capital; have mentioned the Thames as its
northern boundary, and above all, exhibited its area in a map whose outline coincides
with that given to the old kingdom by historians of early England. (Hardy in “The
Wessex of Thomas Hardy,” 173-4)

In this passage Hardy outlines the physical geography of Wessex. It is bound in the north by the
Thames; its capital city is Winchester (aka Wintonceaster in the novels); and it shares the area
that was outlined by historians long ago. In analyzing how the changes in labour and economy
affected the people of Wessex, researches must keep in mind its total geography. However,
focusing on Dorset keeps Hardy’s experience close at hand and allows for defending Hardy’s
home and the place that he described as having the unfair label of “the most narrow-minded of
English counties” (Hardy in “First Meeting of the Dorset Men in London,” 211). See Figure 1.1
for a map of the real-life region on which Wessex is based and Figure 1.2 for an artistic
representation of a map of Wessex.

**Labour**

This section will look at the general population and agricultural labour trends of England
during the nineteenth century as a platform from which to analyze Hardy’s fictional work. The
nineteenth century is known as a period of industrialization in England, and this industrialization greatly changed both urban and rural life. Population and labour shifted drastically between the first and second halves of the century. Hardy, growing up in these times and receiving a reasonable education, was well aware of these changes and the impact they had on his countrymen. Of the early nineteenth century, Michael Winstanley writes:

historians now increasingly accept that the late eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century constituted a, if not the, critical period of structural change, regional specialization, commercialization and productivity gains in agriculture which enabled a much larger urban population to be fed, albeit sometimes at the expense of the rural poor. (Winstanley 209)

In other words, during Hardy’s formative years, the agricultural and urban areas of England experienced incredible changes, all of which were required to feed the growing population. These changes, though helpful and arguably necessary, had many consequences on the lives of rural labourers, especially those in the region equivalent to Hardy’s Wessex. While many people flourished with these changes, others suffered greatly at the hands of machines, factories, and other products of urban growth.

No singular event caused the shift from the agriculture-focused England of the early nineteenth century to the industry-focused England of the latter half, and historians agree that myriad factors contributed to the vast shifts in labour. At the start of the nineteenth century, England’s population grew rapidly and peaked between 1811 and 1821. Census data reveals that a peak in agricultural population mirrored this spike in overall population (Lawton 57). Starting in the 1820s and picking up after the 1850s, the agricultural sector’s claim over labour decreased steadily, due to several factors: agricultural economic depression (leading to the inability of farmers to hire workers), increased accessibility to big towns and urban areas (thanks to innovations like the new railway system), and high wages and demand for labour in factories and other urban jobs. This system of “push” from the countryside and “pull” to the city meant that labourers felt compelled to leave their struggling rustic home regions for the promise of growth,
money, and opportunity in urban areas (Collins 41, Lawton 57). Merryn Williams goes so far in explaining this system as to say, “agricultural labourers had shown quite clearly that they refused to stay on the land if there was any alternative” (1). Why would anyone stay in the struggling countryside when the city promised wealth, security, and happiness? Furthermore, technological innovations of the latter part of the century exacerbated the push of the land, already felt by labourers. These innovations opened Britain to the world market, and they included steamships, railways, deep-freezing, and refrigeration. World-wide transportation of perishable products (like milk, meat, and grain) from North and South America, Denmark, Russia, India, Australia, and New Zealand to the British consumer reduced the demand for locally-grown products and, as a consequence, the need for agricultural labourers (Winstanley 209). Though all of England experienced these changes, the region which suffered the most was the southern country on which Wessex is based.

Along with the rest of England, the real-life counties of Hardy’s Wessex experienced the changes of industrialization. The counties of Wessex, however, were the regions from which people fled. E.J.T. Collins writes, “[I]n many parts of the south […the connection between town and country] had already largely ceased by the 1830’s as the urban population became more exclusively ‘town bred’ and lost its ‘rural tastes’” (Collins 40). The connection between town and country, which is so important in novels like The Mayor of Casterbridge, steadily weakened over the course of the nineteenth century as life in northern towns improved and life in the southern countryside worsened. As people became accustomed to constantly improving town life, they grew more and more “distasteful” of what was often miserable, inconsistent country living. This distaste was rooted in real pain and hardship; life in the counties on which Wessex is based was drastically different from the overall progress of industrialized England and often exacerbated by it.

Although England’s agro-economic history can be studied in very broad terms as a rise at the beginning of the century and a steady decline towards the end, its general sloping pattern did not extend to the southernmost counties. Quoting a newspaper from May of 1886, Merryn
Williams writes: “In the Northern counties the labourers are enabled to feed and clothe themselves with respectability and comfort, while in some of the Southern counties their wages are insufficient for their healthy sustenance” (quoted in M. Williams 2). Those who remained agriculture labourers in southern counties faced conditions like “starvation wages, overlong hours of work, disgraceful housing, little or no education, and generally [treatment] as of lowly estate and as being of no account […] with no prospect of improving his lot” (M. Williams 7). Even as early as the 1840s, when other regions of England, even agricultural ones, were doing quite well, the south suffered and had been suffering since the start of the century (Maxton 459, 461).

A seemingly countrywide improvement in technology and industry did not trickle down to the labouring class. Collins writes, “[I]n the nineteenth century employers and not the rural community as a whole, that is capital rather than labour, derived the greater benefit” (Collins 54). These conditions began as early as the 1810s and 20s in response to the spike in England’s population growth, allowing booming industrialists and exploitative estate owners to treat an excess of workers in inappropriate ways, like hiring them temporarily on lower-than-average wages. Of all English labourers, those in the southern part of the country suffered the most hardship for the longest time.

Although these difficult conditions existed for labourers all over England, particularly for those in the southern counties, the county whose labourers suffered the most was Hardy's native Dorset. While the highest paid labourers of other counties earned up to 13 shillings per week in 1837, the labourers of Dorset often made a mere seven shillings six pennies for the same tasks and time. The labourers of Dorset, Wiltshire, and Devonshire consistently made less money than their countrymen (M. Williams 7-8). These pittance wages led the men of Dorset and its surrounding counties to seek reparation and reform. They attempted change through many means, including organization, political discourse, and even violence. One such attempt was made by James and George Loveless in 1834; these two men (and five compatriots) were jailed for forming an organization that, among other things, sought to raise the weekly wage from
seven to ten shillings a week (Sherman 113). This violence and rebellion did not easily take root and did not cause many changes until much later in the century. In fact, real progress was never fully achieved, even with the creation of Joseph Arch's National Agricultural Labourers' Union in 1872 and others like it in the last quarter of the century (Winstanley 217, Sherman 115). Raymond Williams notes, however, that “in many villages, community only became a reality when economic and political rights were fought for and partially gained, in the recognition of unions, in the extension of the franchise, and in the possibility of entry into new representative and democratic institutions” (104). Although the grand expectations of many unions and activists were never fully reached in the nineteenth century, these organizations still had an undeniable influence on community life; as R. Williams notes, communal suffering and united opposition and action served to create communities, even if their ultimate political goals were only “partially gained.” As Hardy does not concern himself in *Far From the Madding Crowd* or *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* with these organizations or revolts, this is the extent to which they will be discussed in this project. Hardy recognized communities that existed before these revolts happened and ones that existed in their afteraths. To him, simply partaking in village life and participating in agricultural labour helped to make one part of the community. However, these rebellions are important to note because they led to future transformation of the role of the agricultural labourer from the early to late nineteenth century and his relationship with his community and master.

All the above knowledge comes from historians of population, labour, economics, and demographics. What of the emotions and daily life of the labourer? Michael Winstanley writes, “Casually employed labourers […] of southern England and the Midlands […] are usually portrayed as poor, vulnerable, exploited, landless males casually hired on a weekly basis and dependent on poor relief, charity, pilfering or poaching to see them and their families through the winter” (Winstanley 214). Undeniably, hundreds of starving labourers and their families participated in these unfortunate attempts to feed and care for their loved ones. However, the word “portrayed” is very significant here: these claims are strongly based in truth to reflect the
hardship caused by the undisputed spike in population growth, but readers must remember that not every southern Englander of the nineteenth century was a welfare-dependent, “pilfering or poaching” man. The plights of women and children were often just as bad, if not worse, than those of men; their problems will be discussed further in the section of this paper preceding Tess of the D’Urbervilles. In his novels, Hardy offers a deeper glance into the life of the labourer, far beyond what any contemporary historian would find from the often inaccurate numbers of the census and other statistical data.

1 Hardy’s only autobiographical work, The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy, was published after his death with author credit given to his second wife, Florence Emily Hardy; it is now known, however, that Hardy was the main author and that he explicitly wished for this work to be published posthumously (Millgate 2-4).
Figure 1.1: the real-life region of Wessex, comprising of Devonshire, Dorsetshire, Somerset, Wiltshire, Berkshire, and Hampshire. (“Map of the Coast and Counties of Wessex 1928”)
Figure 1.2: the Wessex of the novels of Thomas Hardy. (“Thomas Hardy’s Wessex”)
Chapter Two

*Far From the Madding Crowd*
In 1874, Henry James wrote in his review of *Far From the Madding Crowd* (*FFtMC*) that: “we are inclined to think that, in the long run, [this novel] will be defeated in the struggle for existence” (James 29). Not high praise for what turned out to be one of Hardy’s most widely read novels and one which has successfully fared the test of time. Despite the pessimistic prediction of James and a few other critics, *FFtMC* was the novel that critics kept asking Thomas Hardy to write again after he started publishing others of a more tragic tone. The first novel to earn mostly high praise from literary critics and the general public, *FFtMC* put Hardy on an upward trajectory towards becoming one of England’s most admired authors (Gibson 67-8). As Hardy neared the end of his novel writing career, and published increasingly tragic fare (such as *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*) critics continually asked for another *FFtMC* (M. Williams 130). They missed the bucolic images of this early novel, the lightness of tone, the romantic subject matter, and the ornate descriptions of country fairs and the Wessex landscape.

Due to the pleasant story and relatively happy ending of *FFtMC*, many readers who are familiar with England’s agricultural history of the mid-nineteenth century might be inclined to think the time of action is during the first half of the century, decades of relatively high economic return and prosperity for most farmers (Maxton 459). During untested times, Gabriel, Bathsheba, and Boldwood maintain successful, productive farms; the most debilitating obstacles they face are natural or emotional, not economic, and they prosper while they tend their flocks and fields in the appropriate ways. However, the novel’s setting is much later and much closer to the time of publication.

First released in January of 1874, *FFtMC* takes place in the late 1860s or early 70s, as determined by critics’ analyses of Bathsheba’s house (an estate manor converted to an independent farmhouse as required by economic depression) and Hardy’s inclusion of particular country songs (specifically the then new hymn, “Lead Kindly Light,” not heard until 1868) (White 3, Gibson 64). This puts the action right in the center of the economic “slump” of 1867-70 and in the continuous decline afterwards, which, historians note, lasted through the Great War...
(Collins 41-2). However, Hardy does not make this national crisis a device for any of the novel’s events. Rather, he creates a story that could take place during any of England’s happier economic times or in a part of the country far removed from the pressures of the economy.

Troubles on the farms in the novel arise from ignorance, neglect, distraction, and natural disaster, not countrywide economic factors. Readers must keep these details in mind when analyzing the plot and characters of *FFiMC* as Hardy makes a conscious decision to place this seemingly idyllic story during times of economic depression, a depression that was still going on during the writing and release of this book. Are Gabriel, Bathsheba, and Boldwood faced with any of the same economic problems as their real-life contemporaries? Why do these farmers face the problems they do, and what aspects of their expectations, actions, and circumstances lead them to their ends? There are very few, if any, explicit signs of economic depression or labour dispute throughout the course of the story. The problems that do arise, and all their various factors, will be discussed further later on in this paper.

In addition to studying the profits and losses of the farmers, readers must also pay close attention the rustic chorus which surrounds and supports them. Though often the source of humor and gossip, these characters serve to illuminate audiences about the admirable traits of their time and place, the proper (and expected) relationships between master and servant, and the true values of the typical Dorsetshire native. Although some critics chastise those who refer to the villagers of any Wessex story as a “chorus,” the term, as used in this paper, is meant to be fluid (M. Williams 198; R. Williams 168). In this project, the term “chorus” refers to all of the characters except Farmers Oak, Everdene, Boldwood, and Sergeant Troy, and it serves to unify the villagers without conflating them into any one “type.” These men and women are all unique, and along with the story’s protagonists, offer excellent examples of the agrarian figure of Hardy’s time and place. In exploring this novel, an analysis of the chorus and an examination of Gabriel reveal Hardy’s goals and intentions in creating this particular story. A discussion of the chorus will precede one of Gabriel, allowing readers to understand exactly what kind of people inhabit Hardy’s world and why Gabriel is such a unique and perfect fit within it. A lot of
Gabriel’s quality comes from his ability to recognize the talents of the chorus which surrounds him, so an understanding of that chorus is essential to an understanding of Gabriel.

This novel serves as a wonderful example of what people in nineteenth century England wanted to read. Throughout the nineteenth and current centuries, people love reading about a tight-knight community that supports one another, protects hard workers, and recognizes threats. In his novels, Hardy paints portraits and landscapes which captivate the minds of all readers (causing them to cry out for more during his lifetime and to keep his books on bookshelves and in curriculum today). On the surface, this novel seems like an ideal reflection on the England of yesteryear and the quaint and quirky people who lived then. However, Hardy sought to create a novel that spurred more than just a nostalgic yearning in readers. During a time when many Englanders thought Wessex was a sad, impoverished, and desolate place full of starving children and desperate, thieving men, Hardy wrote a defense of the people of Wessex, a love story which explores the values of men and women as individuals within a tiered society, and a lesson in how the people who work the land can know the most about life.

The Rustic Chorus

So who exactly is “the madding crowd”? R.J. White quotes Hardy as once describing “the mob” as, “a creature whose voice exudes from its scaly coat and who has an eye in every pore of its body” (quoted in White 116). This evokes images of a paranoid monster which always has a beady eye on its surroundings. The word “madding,” meaning “in a frenzied state” or “acting or behaving as if mad” certainly does not help to quash assumptions about the characters of *FFiMC*. The “crowd” most present in this novel, however, though certainly willing to defend itself and keep track of all the goings on of its homeland, does not fit the animalistic, predatory connotations of this particular description. The crowd of the title most likely refers to the urban, industrialized Englander’s of regions to the north of Wessex or to the “type” of starving, desperate political activists who, though present in the region in which Hardy was writing, do not have a strong presence or connection to the pastoral concerns of the characters of
this particular novel. Hardy’s chorus is a group that has existed for a long time and did not need the turmoil of a strike to band them together, as R. Williams suggested. The crowd, or rather community, of people who interacts with the heroes in this novel is a much different creature.

Apart from Farmers Oak, Everdene, and Boldwood (and the completely non-agricultural Sergeant Troy), there is an entire caste of individuals very important to building the story and portraying the agrarian figure of FFtMC and Hardy’s other novels. In the preface of her book, *Folkways in Thomas Hardy*, Ruth A. Firor writes, “Hardy […] worked with a collaborator – the folk” (Firor). These “folk,” the men, women, and children who surround the main characters, serve very important roles in the Wessex countryside, both in supporting their masters and mistress and in creating an atmosphere and society that allows for the adventures and travails of the protagonists. They are the foundation on which Hardy’s heroes build their drama. In this project, and in contemporary reviews of the book, these supporting men and women are referred to as the “rustic chorus.” Like the chorus of a Greek play, they serve to inform readers of local events and expectations, as well as to give voice to the setting.

One particularly telling clue of the chorus’s connection to their homeland comes in the way they speak. Mathew Moon, one of the Weatherbury locals, talks “as the rustle of wind among dead leaves” (Hardy 83). In this description and others, Hardy fuses the labourer with the land by making him speak with the sounds of nature, solidifying the connection these workers have with their countryside. Their presence is natural and necessary, and they work the land just as much as they live on it. The chorus is indispensable in this novel, and, as Hardy would likely argue, also to life in Wessex and the real-life region on which it is based.

Many contemporary critics of *FFtMC* found its chorus to be unrealistic and far-fetched, serving as a faceless voice of Hardy’s own personal and political musings (“From an unsigned review, *Athenaeum*” 19; Hutton 25; James 28-9; “Unsigned Review, *Saturday Review*” 41). In reviews, these rustic peasants are called “illiterate clods” and “cider-drinking boors” who could not possibly have said or thought any of the ideas presented as theirs in the novel (“From an unsigned review, *Athenaeum*” 19; “Unsigned Review, *Saturday Review*” 41). One critic writes:
No objection could be taken to the treatment of these choruses of agricultural labourers if it were confined to [Hardy’s] descriptions. But when we find one of these labourers—‘a cherry-faced’ shepherd lad, ‘with a small circular orifice by way of a mouth’—discourse on ecclesiastical politics […] we feel either that we have misjudged the unenfranchised agricultural classes, or that Mr. Hardy has put his own thoughts and words into their mouths. And this suspicion necessarily shakes our confidence in the truthfulness of many of the idyllic incidents of rustic life which are so plentifully narrated. (‘Unsigned Review, Saturday Review’ 41-2)

For this and other reviewers, Hardy’s chorus seems suspicious—how dare they discuss “ecclesiastical politics”?. Many thought of these workers as Hardy describes them in his essay, “The Dorsetshire Labourer”: “Hodge[.] […] a degraded being of uncouth manner and aspect, stolid understanding, and snail-like movement. His speech is such a chaotic corruption of language that few persons of progressive aims consider it worthwhile to enquire what views, if any, of life, of nature, or of society, are conveyed in these utterances. […] He hardly dares to think at all” (38-9). This is Hardy’s description of a typical Hodge, an archetype he fights in this essay, written in 1883 after the publication of *FFtMC* (Millgate 37). Critics’ issues with what they assume to be the “Hodge” characters of *FFtMC* spawn from the juxtaposition of Hardy’s description of these labourers in the novel and their rather intelligent thoughts and competent farm work; a well-educated, sophisticated Londoner or northern-Englander would never have expected these labourers, supposedly suffering from low wages, union struggles, and hopeless living conditions, to be able to discourse on anything beyond their bare necessities, let alone anything as intellectual as politics or divine as religion. Due to this one seemingly inaccurate detail, the rest of Hardy’s “idyllic incidence” comes into question.

Critics had trouble believing the actions of Hardy’s chorus, thinking that these characters were unrealistic and a false representation of the real-life people of Wessex. Henry James goes so far as to write: “By critics who prefer a grain of substance to a pound of shadow it will, we think, be pronounced a decidedly delusive performance” (28). James accuses Hardy’s work of
being deliberately “delusive,” suspicious, and unbelievable. Andrew Lang, in his 1875 review of the novel, writes: “Few men know the agricultural labourer at home, and it is possible that he is what Mr. Hardy describes him. […] Do labourers really converse like this?” (37). By asking this question and qualifying Hardy’s knowledge of them by writing that “few men know,” Lang insinuates that Hardy, a well-educated man like himself, could hardly know what agricultural labourers really talk of and sound like. His and his fellows’ skepticism proves two things: first, that very few critics or people in the rest of England had any idea what the typical southern labourer was like, and second, that they doubted Hardy’s knowledge of him, even while lauding the realistic depictions of other authors like Walter Scott, George Eliot, and Shakespeare.

Hardy took pains to address these harsh criticisms and defend his depiction of his countrymen. In 1877, Hardy addressed the language of the rustic chorus, writing:

The dialect of the peasants in my novels is, as far as it goes, that of this county [Dorset], but it is necessary to state that I have not, as a rule, reproduced in the dialogues such words as would, from their approximation to received English, seem to a London reader to be mere mispronunciations. But though I have scarcely preserved peculiarities of accent and trifling irregularities with such care as could have been wished for purposes of critical examination, the characteristic words which occur are in every case genuine, as heard from the lips of natives. (Hardy in “[Using the Dorset Dialect],” 11)

He explains that he purposely avoids writing dialogue that would appear difficult to read, full of “peculiarities” and “trifling irregularities.” Rather, he preserves the words and content without replicating what would appear to the London reader as brutish or uneducated sounds. Nearly a year later, when critics continued to revile the seemingly inaccurate language of his rustic chorus, Hardy’s explains further:

writing is intended to show mainly the character of the speakers, and only to give a general idea of their linguistic peculiarities.

An author may be said to fairly convey the spirit of intelligent peasant talk if he retains the idioms, compass, and characteristic expressions, although he may not
encumber the page with obsolete pronunciations of the purely English words, and with mispronunciations of those derived from Latin and Greek. […] if a writer attempts to exhibit on paper the precise accents of a rustic speaker he disturbs the proper balance of a true representation by unduly insisting upon the grotesque elements; thus directing attention to a point of inferior interest, and diverting it from the speaker’s meaning, which is by far the chief concern where the aim is to depict the men and their natures rather than their dialect forms. (Hardy in “Dialect in Novels,” 14)

In other words, Hardy wants readers to focus on what his characters are saying, not how they are saying it. In his writing, he aims to maintain the “spirit of intelligent peasants” without having urban readers wade through what they might think is unsophisticated and clunky speech. Furthermore, he does not want his audience to look down on his chorus because they might mispronounce a Latin word, but rather admire them for using a Latin word correctly. “The men and their natures” outweigh any plea from a critic to be phonetic in depicting their speech. In his essay, “The Dorsetshire Labourer,” Hardy further defends the language of his countrymen. He writes that a Londoner visiting one of the Wessex workers would note, “the language, instead of being a vile corruption of cultivated speech, was a tongue with a grammatical inflection rarely disregarded by his entertainer, though his entertainer’s children would occasionally make a sad hash of their talk” (Hardy in “The Dorsetshire Labourer,” 40). Although the language may be different, it does have a very distinct set of rules, rules which its speakers “rarely disregard.” In their own way, the Dorsetshire locals speak their own language, which should not be violated by the intrusion of the different rules of supposedly better speakers.

Of this language, Hardy had a very distinct knowledge. He had very tangible connections to the types of people inhabiting his chorus. These were his neighbors, the men and women he and his family entertained with their music, the people who surrounded him in his everyday life at Bockhampton and Max Gate. Firor writes, “[Hardy’s] people are what they are because of their environment and ancestry” (Firor 306). As deeply rooted in this environment as his chorus, Hardy can be trusted with the portrayal of his peasant class. He works very hard to represent a
class with its own type of intelligence and value, even if it, and its portrayal, was unappreciated and scorned by the intellectual British elite. The mass of middle and upper class people who bought this book loved it and its nostalgia feel. As Hardy’s first commercial success, *FFtMC* entranced readers of all classes, even if it left England’s literary critics sceptical and underwhelmed.

Astute readers of *FFtMC* learn to rely on the wisdom of the rustic chorus, as it has the least-biased impressions of all of its masters, and these judgments prove to be steadfast and accurate for the whole novel. Readers’ first glimpse of the chorus comes via Gabriel overhearing a conversation about Bathsheba held by two of her labourers. They discuss the novelty of having an attractive, inexperienced woman farmer as their new boss, marveling at her vanity and pride (Hardy 44-5). Readers next encounter them after Gabriel fights the fire of Bathsheba’s wheat rick, and they discuss his heroic actions amongst themselves and with their mistress, practically forcing her to hire her ex-suitor as shepherd (Hardy 47-51). Bathsheba knows Gabriel is a good worker, but she only hires him because her workers leave her no choice: she would rather not hire him because of their past. The beauty and vanity of Bathsheba are enough to ensconce her as a wealthy mistress— to whom one has to listen— but the hard work and kind-heartedness of Gabriel (required to put out the fire of a stranger’s harvest) spark the chorus’s admiration, support, and, most importantly, respect. Their respect of Gabriel never wavers, nor does their acknowledgment of Bathsheba’s faults. Inherent in the society in which they live is a sexist expectation that the chorus will never get to truly appreciate Bathsheba’s ability as a farmer. By the time they get over the shock of her establishment, Troy steps in, and the chorus is forced to listen to him. Even though “Bathsheba [runs] the farm far better than does […], Sgt. Troy, [she has] no legal right to do so after her marriage” (Kurjiaka 88). Due to the demands of the chorus’s work and the harsh guidelines of a society that require labourers to listen explicitly to the “man in charge,” even when he is completely incompetent and they know their mistress knows better, Bathsheba’s strengths get overshadowed by her weaknesses and the chorus has very little power to oppose Troy. Furthermore, while Bathsheba’s faults are obvious and
damaging to the chorus (causing them confusion, embarrassment, scandal, etc.), Gabriel’s are few and far between.

At first, Bathsheba is quite a puzzle to the chorus. She is an anomaly in British society, a woman farmer who goes to the market herself and is her own bailiff. The chorus knows, at first, that she is beautiful and vain, but what else? They watch as she works hard and becomes successful on her own, loses herself in a relationship with Troy, and plays hot and cold with Farmer Boldwood. A telling moment comes when Bathsheba confesses her love of Troy to her servant, Liddy. After lamenting the misery of being a woman in love and spilling her innermost secrets, Bathsheba threatens Liddy by saying, “Liddy Smallbury, if you repeat anywhere a single word of what I have said to you inside this closed door, I’ll never trust you, or love you, or have you with me a moment longer” (Hardy 212). Liddy holds her ground against her hysterical mistress and replies, “I don’t want to repeat anything, but I don’t wish to stay with you. […] I don’t see that I deserve to be put upon and stormed at for nothing!” (Hardy 212). Liddy acknowledges that her mistress is being ridiculous and abusive in her power because she forced Liddy to hear her confession and then threatened her for knowing the information. She neither seeks, nor enjoys, this excess knowledge of Bathsheba’s lust for Troy, and she certainly never wished for her mistress to confide such explicit details to her. Liddy, an astute member of the chorus, knows she is being abused and will take none of it. This is not appropriate information to be exchanged between mistress and maid; Liddy knows this and resists unjust threats and punishment from her hysterical boss. This is just one instance of a member of the chorus refusing to take any abuse from her mistress and masters, despite her lower social standing. She can get away with her brash words because Bathsheba is the one acting against the social norm: no typical mistress would ever reveal so much about their love lives to her maid, and it is only when Bathsheba crosses this line that Liddy can react, free from fear of her retribution or dismissal.

Of worse abuses, such as those which inspired the creation of labour unions, only one example shines some light on how this chorus might act. As was mentioned earlier in this
project, Hardy never directly addresses the labour issues and rebellions that were occurring at this time in the south of England. However, there is one passing instance worth noting. When Bathsheba distributes the pay to her men, Andrew Randle, a stutterer, has his speech impediment justified by fellow labourer, Henerey Fray. Fray explains, “’A’s a stammering man, mem, and they turned him away because the only time he ever did speak plain he said his soul was his own, and other iniquities, to the squire” (Hardy 83). Bathsheba, a new mistress getting to know the men, pushes this comment aside and offers Randle his pay, no questions asked. An astute reader, however, sees hints in this explanation of Randle’s (possibly violent) past. The people of Weatherbury accept his stammer because, in this idyllic setting, no hint of rebellion exists, no harm will come to Randle for either speaking or keeping silent, and there are no questions of who owns whose soul. In the past, however, Randle must have suffered from conditions so terrible that he was able to stop stuttering long enough to lament his “iniquities” and claim ownership of his soul. Fray, unsure of how Bathsheba might treat his companion when she discovers Randle’s past, tiptoes around the issue by equaling Randle’s defense of his soul with a mere “iniquity,” protecting both his and Randle’s employment until he can gauge the temperament of their new mistress. Hardy includes this statement to acknowledge the struggles of his countrymen without having them distract from the plot. Rather than give audiences the stereotypes that they expected of the Wessex region (ie a desperate, starving, radical, criminal workforce), he plants subtle hints of the region’s issues without allowing his story to become an example of what many Northerners imagined was the violent workforce which needed to be stopped in the South. Hardy aims to acknowledge the legitimate struggle and work of his countrymen without having to resort to the extreme images held by different regions of England.

Payday with Farmer Everdene reveals a lot about the attitudes of the rustic chorus. For the ease of analysis in this project, the chorus is being discussed primarily as one body, but in the novel it is made up of a wide variety of characters. The chapter “Mistress and Men” allows Hardy to introduce many of the chorus’s personalities at the same time as establishing Bathsheba as an eager and experimenting woman farmer. Some of the humor of the Wessex crowd can be
gauged by the workers’ responses to Bathsheba’s practical questions. When answering his new mistress’s questions, “And what are you?,” Joseph Poorgrass says, “Nothing in my own eye. In the eye of other people—well, I don’t say it; though the public will out” (Hardy 82). Not wanting to seem arrogant or proud— and also to avoid listing his own faults—Poorgrass leaves the better judgment of himself up to his peers. The men and women all approach Bathsheba in their own ways, some loudly, others timidly (Hardy 82-85). This range of outward emotion reflects the obvious difference in personality among people of the working class in Wessex, and indeed people anywhere when confronting a new and untested boss.

By introducing these characters to readers at the same time as introducing them to Bathsheba, Hardy invites readers to sympathize with them and their new mistress. As Firor argues, “These Wessex people are people we have known” (Firor 309). People reading *FFtMC* have all experienced a new work place, new people, and the judgments and praises of their neighbors. Readers most likely know people like the nagging wife of Laban Tall, a woman who dictates exactly what her husband will do while describing him to his boss as “a simple tool” and “a poor gawkhammer mortal” (Hardy 84). By placing within this chorus familiar character types, ranging from incredibly shy to outspoken and stubborn, Hardy emphasizes the many colors of the working people of Wessex. These many characters are quite competent when left to their own devices. Only when following the orders of their bosses, or by being actors in a stage set by their bosses, do they come to trouble and not complete their duties in a proper and effective way.

Some of the chorus’s best and worst moments involve drinking. After Oak and the chorus douse the fire at her wheat rick, Bathsheba rewards them by paying for a round of drinks at Warren’s Malthouse. She has been told that her men can “knock in a bit and a drop a good freer” there than at Bathsheba’s initial invitation, her house (Hardy 52). This scene at the malthouse allows readers to meet the chorus in their own space, rather than in the space of their mistress. Though they are drunk, they are friendly and harmless. Unlike the passage discussed above, where the men (and women) are introduced via their work on the farm, here the men are
introduced based on their drinking and churchgoing habits, their pet peeves, their looks, their relationship with their own and each other’s families, and their interactions within the community. In their own space they can speak freely about their impression of Gabriel (even in his company), their own lives, their opinion of Bathsheba, and their thoughts on local gossip (like the crimes of Pennyways and the disappearance of Fanny Robin) (Hardy 56-67). The malster is an old man who has been creating the same malt for (seemingly) hundreds of years, and it has been consumed by this community the entire time. This aspect of time draws people towards them; Firor writes, “[these are] people we seek instinctively to identify with actual places, and to assign a niche in time” (Firor 309). Readers want to be able to “look back” at England’s past and know that men like this existed here in this corner of the country.

Furthermore, the men here love and trust each other, and all readers glow inside reading about a community that loves one another. The chorus welcomes Gabriel with open arms, so readers know that Gabriel will do well in his new place and that he will gladly participate in his new community (actions never seen of Troy). Even though the men become tipsy, they never lose track of their surroundings or let any harm come to each other or their dependents. No one is responsible for them at this moment, and that is completely acceptable because they know their own boundaries.

At the next meeting at the malt house, the chorus continues to lay praise upon Gabriel and voice concern about Bathsheba. While they continue to lament Bathsheba’s “pride and vanity” as a “headstrong maid,” they laud Gabriel as an “extraordinary good and clever man” (Hardy 112, 115). Although they’ve known the two for relatively similar periods of time (Gabriel for slightly less time than Bathsheba), their opinions are fully formed and solidifying. Throughout the course of the novel, they are not proven wrong. Creating this space, a space most likely present in many Wessex villages, Hardy invites his readers (outsiders to the Wessex realm) into the daily lives and concerns of his countrymen. Like people everywhere, they enjoy a good drink and speculation about the new boss and workers. Scenes like this, even while reviewers doubt the language, provide the warmth and nostalgia that kept people returning to new volumes
of the story. The chorus maintains, within its general familiarity to readers, its individual personalities and sense of community. As Hardy writes in “The Dorsetshire Labourer,” “the typical Hodge, as he [is] conjectured–was somehow not typical of anyone but himself” (Hardy 40). Here Hardy maintains that there is no “type,” no “typical Hodge,” and that though there may be many common labourers, they are all individuals. Hardy does not resort to types to maintain his malthouse, but rather allows the natural and different personalities of his chorus to meld into comforting presences, like the regulars of any English pub. In the malthouse, the chorus has a safe haven, a place where they can express their feelings and concerns without worrying about backlash from the mistress or master.

In contrast to this warming scene, the scene of “the Revel” held by Sergeant Troy is decidedly tragic. Troy, thinking that his workers must want to celebrate the same way that he does (or not thinking about them at all), orders brandy for all of his men. Even when they weakly protest (not wanting to blatantly refuse their new master), Troy insists, threatening that “if any of the men show the white feather, let them look elsewhere for a winter’s work” (Hardy 259). Troy orders the men to drink the strong alcohol, and if they do not, he will fire them. He abuses his power. He does not take the time to get to know his men, let them decide for themselves what to drink, or even let them celebrate how they might choose. John Plotz notes that the most powerful crowd is “the crowd that gathers strength from watching itself, that depends on the shared celebration of its own existence” (Plotz 105). This explains the chorus’s strength when at the malthouse- this is the place they visit to discuss each other and where they go after their personal and communal victories (like the long life of the malster, the brewing of their beloved malt, the hiring of Gabriel, or the dousing of the rick fires). It further explains their complete paralysis when forced to celebrate with Troy. At this feast, they are forced to celebrate a marriage in which they had no part and do not approve, and none of them have the power to step back and watch their decline into drunkenness. The celebration is not their own and they cannot control it, so they lose their power as a crowd and community. However, the drunkenness Troy causes cannot be considered weakness on the part of the chorus because they
act as they must to save their jobs. Gabriel, in his liminal space between the chorus and the master, avoids the direct consequences of Troy’s abuse, but still suffers because none of his inebriated fellow labourers or neighbors can help him. With this scene, Hardy demonstrates the importance of understanding and flexibility that must exist between the master and labouring classes, something that Troy thoroughly lacks.

Apart from in this one pivotal scene, the chorus rarely interacts with Troy. The women find him attractive, the men find him intimidating, but beyond that they do not have the opportunity or desire to say more. He is gossiped about when he courts Bathsheba, and he is obeyed when he gives orders (even harmful ones) when he becomes master. During his entire matriculation process, Troy has a distinct dislike for Weatherbury, which only grows when he is forced to play the role of farmer (Hardy 367). Dislike of the setting of Weatherbury practically equals a dislike of its rustic chorus, the people who represent and speak for the countryside. The chorus recognizes Troy’s dislike and destructive powers, and when his return “from the dead” is imminent, one labourer reflects, “Nothing has prospered in Weatherbury since he came here” (Hardy 396). Regression comes from Troy, not from the land or the people who have always inhabited it. The locals fear for what Troy’s return will mean for their mistress and Boldwood, because they know what he did to their own pastoral lives and what danger he could do if he returns. Bathsheba, unfortunately, was never able to see Troy as clearly as her workers do.

While focalizing through Bathsheba, Hardy writes: “Troy’s deformities lay deep down from a woman’s vision, whilst his embellishments were upon the very surface; thus contrasting with homely Oak, whose defects were patent to the blindest, and whose virtues were as metals in a mine” (Hardy 202). Entranced by Troy’s glitter and shine, Bathsheba ignores his faults and forgets Oak’s “hidden” virtues. The chorus, on the other hand, is bullied into following the flashy Troy, even when their better nature tells them not to (such as in the drunken slumber discussed above). On the other hand, they choose to respect Oak whole-heartedly throughout the entire course of the novel, despite his homeliness. Oak, of the same economic status as the chorus for much of the story and with his deep commitment to work and responsibility, earns
more respect than Troy, the master, ever does. Regarding Bathsheba’s marriage to Troy, the chorus has tough words, feeling that Bathsheba was either too “self-willed and independent” or too much of a “girl mind” (Hardy 395). In either case, she was hardly deserving of too much of their sympathy and only truly earned it by her marriage to Oak. This is because the chorus has an innate ability to recognize the real talent and kindness of one of its own and the greed and empty pomp of an intruder.

The strongest sign of love that the chorus ever shows for its mistress comes at the conclusion of the story, when Bathsheba and Gabriel finally wed. The chorus comes out in full to congratulate the newlyweds and sing their praises, saying, “Here’s long life and happiness to neighbor Oak and his comely bride!” (Hardy 431). This sentiment is very telling. Although Bathsheba is a recipient of their praise, the full focus of the congratulations and happiness belongs to Gabriel. First, even though all the well-wishers are working for Gabriel at this point, they lovingly call him “neighbor,” a term which puts him on the same level as themselves. Second, they congratulate Gabriel by name and Bathsheba as “his comely bride,” putting her marriage to him as a greater step up for her than his marriage to her was for him, even though, in the past, she had the higher socioeconomic status. Third, in the chorus’s minds, marriage to someone as sensible and down-to-earth as Gabriel will keep Bathsheba out of trouble, something they truly want for her after such scandalous consequences with relationships with Troy and Boldwood. And finally, their happiness for this wedding far outshines any feeling they had for Bathsheba’s marriage to Troy.

The chorus celebrates the happiness of one of their own, feeling much more deeply for Gabriel than they ever had or would ever feel for Bathsheba. Even a member of the chorus who hates Bathsheba, her fired bailiff, Pennyways, recognizes Gabriel’s talents and Bathsheba’s reliance on him. In talking to Troy, he says, “She can’t do without him, and knowing it well he’s pretty independent,” even while Troy insists on calling his wife “a finer tissue” (Hardy 389). Pennyways, like the rest of the chorus, knows that no matter how “fine” a tissue Bathsheba may
be, Gabriel is far superior, and this respect remains for him even when it is long gone from Bathsheba and Boldwood.

Many of the comments about the chorus from reviews and criticisms of *FFiMC* claim that these men and women are uneducated and dumb. Words like “clod,” “boor,” and “simpleton” suggest an animalistic, instinct-driven group of people. However, they have a very keen intelligence about country life. Only Gabriel recognizes the talents of these men and women and uses them to productive ends (Gabriel’s subtle differentiation from the chorus will be discussed in the next section of this chapter). One scene which demonstrates at least one member of the chorus’s intelligence and Gabriel’s recognition of it occurs in the chapter “Night—Horses Tramping.” The household believes someone has stolen one of Bathsheba’s horses, and to find the thief, Gabriel and Jan Coggan must track the horse down. Gabriel relies on Coggan, who recognizes the tracks of the horse (which help him identify the missing horse and how fast it was going) and knows that the horse will be stopped at a gate kept by the “sleepiest man between here and London” (Hardy 226-7). Coggan’s knowledge proves invaluable in tracking down the missing horse. None of the gentlemen in the area would have known how to track the missing animal or known about the sleepy gatekeeper. Additionally, Boldwood, the only local gentleman, is out of reach and therefore useless. Gabriel is the only character who knew that a member of the chorus would be able to help in this mystery. Even though the chorus may not be book-educated, the people from whom it is made up are certainly not “clods” and their knowledge fits very appropriately into the Wessex setting.

Hardy grew up surrounded by a rustic chorus. At times, he and his family were the rustic chorus. To him, the people working the fields, going to church, playing fiddle at gatherings, and having a drink at the malthouse all played an important part in the drama of Wessex and its real-life region. White claims, “[Hardy] makes [readers] realize that such groups are never less than a composite of human flesh and blood” (116). Hardy reminds readers that the chorus, although often discussed with the term “crowd,” is made up of individuals of human flesh and blood. They are a community which lives, fights, suffers, and celebrates together. Although they serve
to inform readers about which heroes and heroines to fight for, what values to support, and what life was like in the south of England in the nineteenth century, they are also simply human. Studying them allows readers to study humanity at its most communal roots. In the context of Hardy and England, without these men and women, there is no Wessex.

**Gabriel Oak**

In his essay, “Pitying the Sheep in *Far From the Madding Crowd,*” Ivan Kreilkamp writes that “Hardy depicts Gabriel [Oak] as a caretaker and giver of life” (Kreilkamp 476). Shepherd/Farmer Oak is the undeniable hero of *FFtMC.* He gives life to sheep, to his fellow labourers, and to his mistress. He is the pillar of the Weatherbury community and the leader of flocks of both sheep and people. He rises up and falls down the social pyramid as first a small-time independent farmer, then a lowly shepherd, a bailiff, and finally master of not one, but two successful farms. Through his expert agricultural work, collaboration with the rustic chorus and countryside, and selfless heroics, Gabriel exemplifies all that “could be” of the agrarian figure in nineteenth century England.

Hardy introduces Gabriel in very simple terms which suggest a deep significance. Readers first learn his surname, then his Christian name and Sunday habits (Hardy 1). Gabriel’s full name cannot be ignored because it demonstrates his connection to both the divine and the natural. Gabriel, one of the Bible’s angels who interacts with common people the most, reminds readers of the shepherd’s connection to the stars and the heavens and hints at his future interactions with his countrymen. Unlike any of the other characters in the book, Gabriel is able to tell time by the movement of the stars; Matthew Moon says, “We hear that ye can tell the time as well by the stars as we can by the sun and moon, shepherd” (Hardy 116). Gabriel has the same earthly talents as his neighbors, plus a spark of the divine. Unlike Moon, named for the mere physical, celestial body, Gabriel, named for an angel, suggests divinity and power. His surname, Oak, is what reminds readers that, despite his angelic label, Gabriel remains planted firmly to the ground. Like an oak tree, Gabriel is tied to the land (a connection which will be
examined later on in this chapter). Through his name, readers can see Gabriel’s literal connection to the heavens and the earth, and these connections prove indispensable throughout the novel.

Gabriel has been called by a number of different names in this paper, including Gabriel, Oak, Shepherd Oak, and Farmer Oak. This is due to two main ideas: 1) Gabriel’s changing economic positions within the community, which range from paupered shepherd to comfortable farmer; and 2) Gabriel’s unique ability to fit many titles, something none of the other characters in the book can do. Gabriel adapts to his many positions and levels of importance, living just as productively as a poor shepherd as when he becomes a wealthy farmer. None of the other characters manage to live comfortably while in abnormal roles. For example, Sergeant Troy is at his “best” (ie happiest and swarthiest) when he fulfills the role of soldier. When he is forced to become a farmer he neglects his duties, and he only enters his next profession, actor, when pushed by grief to escape his marriage. Farmer Boldwood, pushed by jealousy, becomes a murderer, no longer a farmer and no longer deserving of the title. Bathsheba has a more fluid identity, though she is never as comfortable as Gabriel in her changing roles (ie farm mistress, wife, widow, etc.). This is why she, like Gabriel, has been referred to by her Christian name or her title throughout this project. The many names and titles of the characters reflect their flexibility and their ultimate success or failure within the novel, in particular of Gabriel.

Gabriel is an artist in the demands of agriculture. Contemporary critics agree that Hardy is a master in describing the tasks at which Gabriel excels, saying “The details of the farming and the sheep-keeping, of the labouring, [...] are painted with all the vividness of a powerful imagination, painting from the stores of a sharply-outlined memory” (Hutton 21). Through Gabriel, Hardy exemplifies his personal knowledge of the agricultural duties of the region. Gabriel is the only character with all of this knowledge, and his expertise is required in several emergencies. However, the bulk of the book, taken up by Boldwood and Troy’s wooing of Bathsheba, represents Gabriel at his most basic, and arguably best, position in society. It is during these chapters that Gabriel serves Bathsheba and the community as shepherd, leading
such typical duties as lambing, sheep-washing, and sheep-shearing (Hardy 113, 119, 133, 140, 155-6). Gabriel’s job as a shepherd suggests an allusion to Christ, and that, plus his musical abilities, can be likened to King David, both powerful Biblical figures known for their influence over the people around them. As the story progresses, Gabriel assists in non-shepherd duties, like reaping and harvesting (Hardy 233). While Bathsheba struggles to extinguish Boldwood’s affection and manage Troy’s greed and incompetence, Gabriel quietly works in the background, keeping the sheep and the harvest maintained. During instances where Bathsheba and Gabriel work together, the farm works, but these instances are few and far between as she becomes caught up with Boldwood and enamored with Troy (Hardy 130, 140). Oak, on the other hand, “daily [trotted] the length and breadth of about two thousand acres in a cheerful spirit of surveillance, as if the crops all belonged to him” (Hardy 354). Oak takes up the lost cause of Bathsheba and Boldwood’s farms, not from greed, but from sincere enjoyment in farming and a love of the country. It is Gabriel, constantly interacting cooperatively with the other labourers in these tasks, and not Bathsheba or Boldwood, who maintains the productivity of these farms.

Unlike the other characters of higher economic status (Boldwood, Bathsheba, and Troy), Gabriel has a distinct connection to the land. He knows the language of the sun and stars. He recognizes the signs of the animals, both domestic and wild. When the storm approaches, he reads the actions of the “creeping things” (spiders) to learn about the rain and the behavior of the sheep to learn about the thunderstorm (Hardy 260). His oneness with the barn (ensconced in the community for hundreds of years), the lambs he raises, and the labourers he works with make him an indispensable part of the society of Weatherbury and the Wessex countryside. This closeness to nature and the farm makes him a far superior master than Troy, Boldwood, and even Bathsheba, whose vanity keeps her from ever truly communing with nature.

Bathsheba, though an able mistress at the start of the novel, becomes a distraction to herself and others. Bathsheba’s mishandling of Gabriel, due to her problems with Boldwood and Troy, lead to problems on both her farm and her neighbor’s. After asking Gabriel’s opinion of her “conduct”- of Boldwood and the valentine- and receiving a painfully honest answer (“That it
is unworthy of any thoughtful, and meek, and comely woman”), Bathsheba orders Gabriel from her sight and employment. Unfortunately, disaster strikes right after this: an episode of “sheep-blasting,” of which only Gabriel has the tools and skills to fix (Hardy 142-151). Bathsheba’s careless actions and haughty arrogance produce a smitten Boldwood, a banished Oak, and dozens of blasted sheep. Farmer Everdene resorts to begging her shepherd to return, owing to the possibility of future disasters and his solidarity in taking care of her flock. In the next chapter, Gabriel expertly shears sheep and only spills blood when he gets distracted by Boldwood and Bathsheba’s interactions (Hardy 158). When Troy drowns his labourers in brandy, Gabriel runs to save Bathsheba’s crop from flooding, just as he had saved it from fire earlier in the novel. She comes to help him because she realizes she has neglected her duties when trusting them to the agriculturally-illiterate Troy (Hardy 264, 267). Boldwood, completely obsessed with Bathsheba, has no equivalent hero to save his crop, and his whole harvest, and thus his claim to being a farmer, is lost (Hardy 275).

Gabriel is the only saving force for this community at its most desperate hour. He is the only character to completely overcome obstacles other characters fail to, like the loss of his flock (equivalent to Boldwood’s loss of his crop), and rejection or loss of his love (equal in significance to Boldwood’s rejection by Bathsheba or Fanny Robin’s death to Troy). The reason Oak can do this is because, as Hardy writes, “[he] showed a mastery […] that among the multitude of interests by which he was surrounded, those which affected his personal well-being were not the most absorbing and important in his eyes” (Hardy 315). Unlike Boldwood (who is obsessed with Bathsheba and wallows in his own infatuation), Troy (who laments the loss of Fanny and focuses solely on seducing, and later despising, Bathsheba), and Bathsheba (who gets wound up in her lovers), Farmer Oak puts the sheep, the harvest, his labourer companions, and a genuine love of Wessex life ahead of his own concerns. Everything he does helps maintain life in Weatherbury, and even when he claims that he acts for love of Bathsheba, his main goal is always to save the wheat, heal the sheep, or protect the community.
Unlike Gabriel, who harbors a love for Bathsheba while also maintaining his talent as a shepherd, bailiff, and farmer, Farmer Boldwood could never be the appropriate man for a lady-farmer. Hardy writes that Boldwood, “in contemplating Bathsheba as a woman, […] had forgotten the accidents of her position as an agriculturalist that—that being as much of a farmer, and as extensive a farmer, as himself” (Hardy 132). When Boldwood loses sight of Bathsheba’s career, he loses sight of her as a heroine. He is unable to recognize the unique niche Bathsheba maintains in Weatherbury society, one equal to his own. Additionally, unlike Gabriel, whose comings and goings are followed with enthusiasm by the local townspeople, Boldwood inspires little interest. Hardy writes that:

genteel strangers […] who might happen to be compelled to linger about the nook for a day, heard the sound of light wheels, and prayed to see good society, to the degree of a solitary lord, or squire at the very least, but it was only Mr. Boldwood going out for the day. They heard the sound of wheels yet once more, and were re-animated to expectancy: it was only Mr. Boldwood coming home again. (Hardy 127)

He is a disappointment to his own class and to his underlings, and can therefore never achieve the happiness and love of Oak.

Contemporary reviewers had very mixed opinions of Gabriel Oak. In 1874, one critic wrote, “Bathsheba then marries Gabriel Oak, who has loved and waited in silence, and is, in our opinion, much too good for her” (James 30). In 1875, a different critic wrote, “We thoroughly sympathized with [Oak] and pity him, and we must say that he deserved a far better woman for a wife than such a vain and selfish creature as Bathsheba Everdene” (“Unsigned Review, Westminster Review” 33). In another review of that same year, yet another reviewer wrote, “[Oak] serves [Bathsheba] like a faithful dog for many weary years, suffering patiently more than the usual share of ill-treatment, until, after various vicissitudes in her existence and in that of her two more favoured lovers, he finally reaps the reward of his dumb devotion” (“Unsigned Review, Saturday Review” 44). One final critic described Oak as, “the man of single eye, who waits and works patiently, scarcely hoping even for recognition, but ready to help the woman he
loves, literally through fire and water” (“From an unsigned review, *Athenaeum*” 19). These descriptions vary in support of Gabriel and acknowledgment of his power, motivation, and intelligence. Based on the above discussion of Gabriel, the first description seems the most accurate; Bathsheba seems hardly deserving of such a hero, due to her failure to recognize his good qualities for years while being distracted with the pomp of Troy. Although readers certainly sympathize with Gabriel, especially at the initial loss of his sheep, he does not really need readers’ pity, and works hard never to wallow in hopelessness or self-pity. Next, his devotion to Bathsheba could never truly be called “dumb.” As discussed above, he always has another motive for doing the tasks he does, even if, on the surface, he believes he has done them for Bathsheba. His devotion to the mistress really translates to a devotion to the community and countryside, as seen, among other things, in his careful harvesting and protecting of the local crop and in his deliberate care for his flocks (both of sheep and people). The last description of Gabriel has this same shortcoming, recognizing his heroics but mislabeling the motivation behind them. These critics acknowledge the shortcomings of Bathsheba but fail to examine the complexities of Gabriel. He is a true man of Wessex, inspired by love of the land.

In his essay, “The Dorsetshire Labourer,” Hardy writes, “A pure atmosphere and pastoral environment are a very appreciable portion of the sustenance which tends to produce the sound mind and body” (Hardy 41). Of all of Hardy’s characters, few have a sounder mind or body than Gabriel Oak. Oak’s connection to the land, as demonstrated in his interaction with the Wessex chorus, harvest, and sheep, solidify him as a man with the most sustenance anyone could ask for. After closing *FFtMC*, readers know that Oak is going to continue working the land, helping his countrymen, and supporting his community.

**Conclusion**

More so than any of Hardy’s other novels, *FFtMC* promotes the idyllic image of the Wessex countryman. Absent are any mentions of the starvation wages, labour rebellions, union struggles, separated families, or economic depression which plagued this region. In this novel,
Hardy introduces the Wessex labourer as a hard worker, poor drinker, and astute judge of character, a person integrated in a community who sees the competing ideas about farming around him (from Bathsheba, Farmer Boldwood, and Sergeant Troy) and knows what is best. The people of real esteem in this novel are the people who work the land, not the people who own it. Mistress Everdene is heightened when she acknowledges the land and her flock, and she falls when she loses sight of them. Shepherd-turned-farmer Oak never loses sight of the countryside and its people, and therefore gains the most from his life and experiences. Hardy urges readers to look past the economic struggles of his region to the people who work tirelessly to make it a productive home.

\[\text{Unless otherwise noted, all citations of Hardy in this chapter are from } \textit{Far From the Madding Crowd}.\]

\[\text{In praising Scott, Eliot, and Shakespeare, one critic writes that these authors never really described the typical agriculturalist, and that they specifically created their realistic characters by making them “special” (ie with the Scottish nationalism of Scott’s peasants, the political radicalism of Eliot’s cast in } \textit{Felix Holt}, \text{ and the witty, jokiness of Shakespeare’s clowns), not by striving to make them “genuine” (“Unsigned Review, Saturday Review” 41).}\]
Chapter Three

*Tess of the D’Urbervilles*
Introduction

Far from having the atmosphere of light-heartedness and whimsical nostalgia of *Far From the Madding Crowd*, Hardy’s penultimate novel, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (*Tess*), envelopes readers in a cloud of pessimism and tragedy. Readers recognize, like critics, that “Hardy the writer of the 1890s is a very different writer from the Hardy of the 1870s” (Gibson 132). With *Tess*, unlike with *FFtMC*, Hardy makes a “serious criticism of life, concerned with man’s inhumanity to man – and particularly to women” (Gibson 92). *Tess* urges readers to think critically, while *FFtMC* aims more to correct stereotypes and open eyes. Raymond Williams writes, “The very complicated feelings and ideas in Hardy’s novels, including the complicated feelings and ideas about country life and people, belong very much in a continuing world” (197). In this statement, R. Williams both addresses the mislabeling of Hardy as “the last representative of old rural England or of the peasantry,” and cautions readers in their approach to two novels as seemingly different in subject and tone as *FFtMC* and *Tess* (197). While *Tess*, published in 1891, certainly demonstrates the transition from the “old” days of relatively stationary agricultural labour to the later nineteenth century trend of migratory labour, it does not serve as a mere reflection or memorial.

Now, why should *Tess* be discussed in a study of the agrarian figure in Hardy? Apart from the obvious reasons of Tess spending most of her working life working in agriculture, Tess and her lovers demonstrate the widening of the definitions of social strata in nineteenth century England. *FFtMC* offers a relatively simple hierarchy of characters: from bottom up, the social ladder goes 1) the chorus, 2) Shepherd Oak, 3) Farmer Everdene, 4) Farmer Boldwood, 5) Farmer Oak (the complexities and variations of this ladder, of course, having been discussed previously in this paper). All of these characters fit into the agricultural world. Contrastingly, the cast of *Tess* does not fit neatly into any defined categories. Individual characters find their fortunes changing constantly, and not all of them have sustainable connections to agriculture. Their approaches to the land and labourers greatly influence the events of the novel and their ultimate fates.
Before examining the novel, audiences must know about the changes which occurred in English agricultural labour during the end of the nineteenth century. When historians look back at this period (and the preceding decades), they notice a hole in the data. In calculating labour trends, two common groups of workers are often ignored, under-reported, and neglected: women and children (Winstanley 213-4). Not only were these groups simply not counted, but they were also fleeing the agricultural sector. Historians note that “studies of rural areas […] show the marked deficiency in male, and especially, female age-groups under 35 and above 17. Conversely the growing towns frequently had an excess of people in these age-groups” (Lawton 56). This shows that not only were women and young people not included in the agricultural data of the nineteenth century, but they were also leaving the agricultural sector altogether.

Seasonal labourers, whether male or female, were also often under-reported in data collection, or labeled as “general” or “domestic” labour, even when they participated in field work (Winstanley 214). All this missing data, and its inherent sexism, make it difficult to make any general statements about female labour at this time. However, Hardy, who was a keen observer of both the city and the country, can be trusted to provide an accurate picture of what female agricultural labourers faced during this period. Although he was not a female labourer, he lived in close proximity to them and their families.

Tess’s many jobs throughout the novel demonstrate the growing industries during the last decade of the nineteenth century. Certain sectors, like “market-gardening, fruit-growing, poultry-keeping and particularly milk production […] expanded, particularly from the 1890s” (Winstanley 210-11). The most Edenic part of the novel, Tess’s time at Talbothays Dairy, reflects the current boom of the dairy industry, a trend Hardy recognized. Knowing that the sheep, corn, and wheat productions that were the idyllic industries of *FFtMC* (and other Hardy novels, in particular *The Mayor of Casterbridge*) no longer provided great rewards or steady jobs for agriculturalists, Hardy chose to represent in *Tess* the industry that was currently generating the most profit: milk. Furthermore, these industries had different work-patterns than those of previous novels; the work required of caring for sheep or planting and harvesting wheat meant
labourers were required nearly year-round, while work at a dairy, like Talbothays, meant mostly seasonal labour (Collins 41). Hardy also made sure to include in Tess the migratory trends of agrarian labourers of the late nineteenth century. Historians note that most labour migration during Hardy’s time was actually local and within regions and industries (Whyte 276). Undeniably there was movement out of the country and into the city, but the reverse movement also occurred, as did movement within the countryside (Whyte 276, 279). This means Tess’s movements throughout the novel make a lot of sense—she remains within the region of Wessex even while pursuing a slew of different agriculturally based jobs. Hardy knew what was happening in his region and the country and had Tess migrate just like her contemporaries.

Women’s labour changed significantly throughout the 1800s, due primarily to the various industries which came and went during the century and an increase in Victorian ideals. In the eighteenth century and early in the nineteenth century, women and children were often the cheapest labourers, and as such they were desired in most industries, from farming to factory work (Ashworth 227). As the nineteenth century progressed, however, even though women remained cheap sources of labour, people began to believe that they belonged strictly in the domestic sphere (Ashworth 227-8). Finally, the increase in machines and the increase in female-centered industries, like glove making, also contributed to the lower numbers of female agrarians. These changing industries and ideals, plus the under-reporting of farm-working women, led to the seemingly great decrease in female agricultural labour in the mid to late nineteenth century.

During the Victorian era, keeping women “pure” was a large concern. Working women faced many obstacles and expectations when trying to maintain their living and that of their families. Jane Humphries explains, in her essay “‘…The Most Free From Objection…’ The Sexual Division of Labor in Women’s Work in Nineteenth-Century England,” the many steps that were taken by families, rich and poor alike, to “guard their daughters” from “sexual misadventures” which could lead to predation, illegitimate children, unfortunate marriages, and overall disgrace (Humphries 930). Before industrialization, women faced relatively few barriers
in the workplace, working side-by-side with men in a variety of sectors, even those primarily based on manual labour (Humphries 931). “Natural” barriers existed to keep women and men from mingling in unacceptable ways: entire families worked at the same places; daughters remained home while the rest of the family went out to work; and bosses supervised their mixed workers because they wished to avoid being “affected by any sexual lapse” of their employees, something which would reflect badly on them (Humphries 936-7). From the mid to late nineteenth century, however, women faced excessively fewer “guarded” labour opportunities at the same time as worsening economic situations at home. The result:

women had to contribute to their own and their families’ survival, [but] they could no longer secure a sheltered and chaperoned work environment, so [they] were at risk from sexual predation or breach of promise [and] As work for women increasingly became waged work, which often had to be undertaken away from family supervision and alongside unfamiliar and less socially accountable workmates, it became increasingly “respectable.” (Humphries 943, 947)

This is especially relevant to Tess, because poor Tess suffers from exactly these “unguarded” circumstances, which, while limiting her agency, also lead her to harassment, rape, and unplanned pregnancy. Due to the financial situation of her family- exacerbated by the death of their horse, for which Tess feels personally responsible- Tess has no choice but to embark on an ongoing job search for waged work far from home. Hardy recognized the difficulties of young women from working families, and, in Tess, brings their tragedy front and center to the middle and upper class English public.

Tess, in the original text, makes readers examine the bitter circumstances of poor working women of the late nineteenth century. Unfortunately, publishers were so worried about public reaction to the original events of Tess that they asked Hardy to make several modifications during its serialized release. These “bowdlerizations” included “omitting Tess’s seduction and the baby,” tweaking the last chapters to remove the assumption that Tess lived with Alec as his mistress “by referring to their separate rooms,” and, in the scene where Angel carries Tess and
the three milkmaids across the flood, adding a wheelbarrow to remove all chance of physical contact (Gibson 115). These small changes hardly stemmed the incurring flood of harsh reviews or the current of money Hardy made off the novel for the rest of his life (Gibson 115-7). Hardy restored Tess to its nearly original form for its first three-volume edition, and the text studied in this project is the completely restored text (Gibson 116). One anonymous critic wrote in 1892:  

Was it needful that Mr. Hardy should challenge criticism upon what is after all a side issue? His business was rather to fashion […] a being of flesh and blood than to propose the suffering woman’s view of a controversy which only the dabbler in sexual ethics can enjoy. Why should a novelist embroil himself in moral technicalities? (“Unsigned Review, Athenaeum” 183) 

This particular critic wonders why Hardy, after accomplishing the task of creating a sympathetic and heart-wrenching female protagonist, had to delve into sexual politics. Other contemporary critics and readers blanched at the idea that Hardy labels Tess as a “pure woman” (Hutton 193). While they praised his descriptions of the dairy and the Vale, they criticize his portrayal of Tess and wonder why he bothered. However, due to the novel’s presence on bookshelves and in classrooms more than a century after its release, Hardy’s effort to create, or at least explore, controversy seems justified.

This project will focus on the characterizations of Tess, Angel Clare, and Alec D’Urberville and their respective positions in the English agrarian world. All three have their hand in agricultural labour, and though Angel and Alec might not seem very agrarian on the surface, their connection to Tess and their ideas about land, work, and ownership make them perfect candidates for a study of the agrarian figure in Hardy’s work.

Critic R.H. Hutton wrote, in his 1892 review of Tess, that “While we cannot at all admire Mr. Hardy’s motive in writing this very powerful novel, we must cordially admit that he has seldom or never written anything so truly tragic and dramatic” (193-4). This neatly summarizes the critical response to Tess upon its release in 1891: like today, readers were entranced by the beauty of the bucolic scenes, but unsure of how to approach the sexual implications of Tess
Durbeyfield, the pure woman. As one of Hardy’s most controversial books, *Tess* serves as an in-depth look at the trials and circumstances of one particularly beautiful labouring girl and her suitors. Through Tess’s experiences, readers learn about the expectations and opportunities of the myriad undefinable social classes of the late nineteenth century. Hardy took the economic and moral situations of his time and the experiences of the people of his region to create this tragedy, the story of one girl’s education in labour and love.

**Learning, Love, and Labour**

It is easy to say, as many critics and readers of the past have said, that Tess Durbeyfield, a simple country maid, was seduced by the glitz and sophistication of the urban playboy, Alec D’Urberville (of the Stoke-D’Urbervilles). However, Tess’s story is much more complex and labeling her as a “simple country maid” is inaccurate, as is classifying Alec as an “urban playboy” or Angel Clare as a “gentleman farmer.” The niches in which these characters reside are much more ambiguous than those of traditional nineteenth century English society. Raymond Williams begins to explain the subtleties of Tess and Alec’s relationship, and the position of Tess and her father, when he writes, “Tess is not a peasant girl seduced by the squire; she is the daughter of a lifeholder and small dealer who is seduced by the son of a retired manufacturer. The latter buys his way into a country-house and an old name” (R. Williams 210). R. Williams points out the danger in simplifying Tess and Alec’s relationship, both to each other and to English society. Tess’s socioeconomic status is superior to that of “peasant,” and Alec’s is definitely not that of a true squire.

Tess does not fit neatly into a single social class. Instead, due to her education, both formal and romantic, she experiences circumstances ranging from lowly swede-hacker to bedazzled kept-woman to murderer. Unlike her parents, who are also not peasants but who have more “country” tendencies than their daughter, Tess refrains from using the local dialect. Hardy explains that “[Tess], who had passed the Sixth Standard in the National School under a London-trained mistress, used [the dialect] only when excited by joy, surprise, or grief” (Hardy 15). Tess
is not only educated above her parents, but more likely to hide her roots through her use of language, resorting to the dialect only when deprived of time to carefully plan her words. Hardy sums up the difference between mother and daughter quite quaintly, saying:

   Between the mother, with her fast-perishing lumber of superstitions, folk-lore, dialect, and orally transmitted ballads, and the daughter, with her trained National teachings and Standard knowledge under an infinitely Revised Code, there was a gap of two hundred years as ordinarily understood. (Hardy 17)

Hardy demonstrates that even within the same social class exists a huge generational gap. The people of Wessex (and presumably the rest of England at the time) cannot be classified by single categories like education or money—they cross boundaries everywhere, and to be studied within the contexts of literature, they must be taken as individuals rather than types. Tess demonstrates the changing identity of the agrarian worker. She is not the “typical,” ancestral farm labourer, and she represents an emerging and expanding identity. Just as the crowd of *FFE:MC* was more than just a clownish peasantry, the characters of Tess are more than their surface social strata.

As mentioned above, Tess’s formal education places her above that of her parents. However, it does little to impress anyone of any higher social class. For example, though Angel recognizes Tess’s aptitude to learn, he does not think her education or her enthusiasm for learning brings her “up” to his level. Hardy writes:

   It was for herself that [Angel] loved Tess; her soul, her heart, her substance – not for her skill in the dairy, her aptness as his scholar, and certainly not her for simple formal faith-profession. […] He held that education had as yet but little affected the beats of emotion and impulse on which domestic happiness depends. (Hardy 160).

Angel claims to love Tess for “herself,” with which he equates “her soul, her heart, her substance.” What exactly does Angel think are her soul, heart, or substance? Which of her qualities does he label with these general, idealistic terms? His actions (like leaving his bride after discovering her past and asking Izz Huett to accompany him to Brazil mere weeks after his marriage) belie his motivations for wanting to marry Tess. When he thinks “that education had
as yet but little affected the beats of emotion and impulse on which domestic happiness depended,” he predicts how perfect it will be to have a wife who does not know enough about the world to have any strong feelings about it beyond the emotional requirements of running a farmer’s house. What Angel loves most of Tess are her physical attractiveness and the idea of her as an “unsullied country maid,” not her “practical” traits- like her work abilities, her kindness, her sensitivity- the ones he claims to love. He loves her “type” of angelic agrarian girl. Regardless of his wife’s formal education or agricultural talents, Angel sees her as he wants to see her, and though he has seemingly better intentions than Alec, he is just as superficial and, in the end, destructive.

Alec has different expectations of Tess. Hardy writes of Tess’s early experience with Alec: “Almost at a leap Tess thus changed from simple girl to complex woman” (Hardy 94). Tess learns by force the lessons of being a working class woman in the world of the rich. In particular, Alec is a man with none of the chivalry or established honor of “old money.” Throughout the novel, Alec provides the “liberal education” taught to unfortunate women everywhere (Hardy 94). His exact methods of “wooing” Tess will be discussed later in this project, but in summary, he charms her, he rapes her, he abandons her. These are lessons which women of higher classes would have had a much easier time avoiding due to their chaperones and selective teaching (on the ways to avoid the unsought advances of rich men). Due to Alec’s obvious monetary superiority to Tess, and her position as his mother’s hired-help, Tess cannot refuse his “lessons” or leave her post. Alec sees Tess as a flower ready to be plucked, a “type” of labourer that he is used to abusing. Unlike Angel, who strives to educate Tess to be a perfect and modest wife, Alec educates Tess on the dirtier side of life. These lessons on sex and violence ultimately win out as Tess’s last passionate act is murdering Alec. Tess ends life well-educated and swinging for the murder of her teacher.

Before Tess becomes the focus of Angel’s tutelage or Alec’s abuse, she suffers at the hands of her family. Though Alec provides the tragic lessons of what can happen to needy
women, Tess’s family does little to protect her from the dangers of her situation. To summarize the harsh treatment she received at the hands of Alec, Tess moans:

O mother, my mother! How could I be expected to know? I was a child when I left this house four months ago. Why didn’t you tell me there was danger? Why didn’t you warn me? Ladies know what to guard against […] but I never had the chance of discovering […] and you did not help me! (Hardy 77)

Due to the expectation that a young woman should go out to support her family, combined with the possibilities of what she was likely to find when sent to a rich relative’s house, Mrs. Durbeyfield sends her daughter off thinking that she will return only one way: married and rich. However, she fails to inform Tess about how to manipulate the system (ie get Alec to marry her) so that this is the only possible outcome of working for the D’Urbervilles, and thus Tess returns pregnant, disgraced, and abandoned. Tess did not know about sex or the possibility of rape when she was sent to work; she was never told, by her mother, family, or friends about the danger of men like Alec; and she received no help in discouraging Alec or raising Sorrow. Jane Humphries explains the difficulties faced by families with daughters, noting that, as the century progressed, the “safe” jobs at home were “exploited by mothers” (947). Mrs. Durbeyfield goes one further in exploiting both the safe circumstance at home and her daughter: 1) she inhibits Tess from having at a safe job at home; and 2) she sets her up to entrance Alec (recognizing her “trump card” as “her face” and her “fulness of growth”) without providing her with the knowledge or means to slow or stop his advances (Hardy 37, 47). As Humphries writes, “The income of a family determined its ability to afford respectability for its daughters,” an option which the Durbeyfields, like other poor families of mixed agricultural and merchant classes, cannot afford (947). For the slim chance that they could mooch off a rich relative at the expense of their pretty daughter, Tess’s family forces her to her fate.

Angel and Alec go about “educating” Tess in drastically different ways. The methods these men use to “woo” Tess also represent the different ideals of their niches in English society. Angel’s courting of Tess utilizes her connection to the land and her agrarian background, while
Alec ignores Tess’s work and aims to charm her with his wealth. As Andrew Lang wrote in his review of the novel, “Poor Tess is set between the lusts of one Alec D’Urberville and the love, such as it is, of one Angel Clare” (195). Neither Alec’s lust nor Angel’s love provide her with a free path through life. Their abuses ultimately lead her to her crime and her death, forever separating her from the agrarian world which, through her own agency, kept her safe.

Alec approaches Tess as a prize to be won. He uses a variety of methods to “win” Tess, who never has the power or knowledge to avoid his advances. At every attempt Alec makes to seduce Tess, he acts on his own terms and in his own space, a space far outside the agricultural realm in which Tess feels comfortable. He uses three primary methods to court her: bribery, fear, and violence. First, his use of bribery, through food, gifts, and help for her family, makes Tess feel obliged to satisfy him (Hardy 36, 56, 359). These actions, all based on money and hardly agrarian, seduce the Durbeyfield family (Hardy 42). This family, especially Mr. Durbeyfield, does not like to work, and so when offered a quick fix to life in the money offered by Alec, they take it. Tess, more in favor of working hard, hates having to rely on Alec’s inherited fortune. However, due to her naivety and selflessness, Tess cannot refuse her family the riches of a connection to Alec D’Urberville when their need is greatest (at the start and end of the novel). She cuts off her connection to the land when her family ultimately forces her to become Alec’s prize. With his bribes and influence over Tess’s “lazy” family, Alec begins an abusive relationship which ultimately ends with his murder.

In addition to bribery, Alec woos Tess with fear. During Tess’s work at the Slopes, Alec “saves” her from two dangerous situations: a runaway cart and villainous working women. In the first circumstance, Alec creates a dangerous cart ride, forcing Tess to cling to him to remain safe (Hardy 48-50). Even though Tess pleads with Alec to let her go, she has no power in this scene; even when she tricks Alec into letting her out of the cart, she must walk beside it (Hardy 51-2). This cart ride contrasts greatly with the one she later takes with Angel to deliver milk. To Tess, a wild horse and rickety wagon have no place in a productive agricultural world. Tess quickly learns that Alec created this dangerous circumstances to demonstrate his power over her
and to force her into intimate physical contact. When he sees that Tess will not be so easily manipulated again, he waits until another danger naturally occurs, leaving him to “save” her without the appearance of contriving the rescue. Alec overhears the words exchanged between Tess (his current prize) and the Queens of Spades and Diamonds (his past conquests), recognizes the imminent danger faced by Tess, and jumps to the rescue. Tess, as Alec’s pet and a formally educated daughter of a lifeholder, is of higher social status than the women who threaten her. She does not have the crass methods of protecting herself of the lower classes and she lacks the safeguards of being a true lady. Furthermore, in observing this situation, Alec makes two correct assumptions: 1) the labouring “queens” of his past will become jealous or angry by any “higher class” actions or phrases from Tess, and 2) Tess, in her liminal space between labourer and landowner, will not know how to protect herself in a situation brought about by her crass companions. Alec steps in at an opportune moment, a moment he transforms to fit his next method of romantic capture: violence.

The nature of Alec’s violence changes over the course of the novel, and each increasingly violent act stretches Tess’s distance from the English countryside. At first, he commits small offenses, mostly of a mental nature (forcing Tess to eat strawberries from his hand, manipulating her family to rely on him and pressure her, hiding behind curtains to watch Tess work). These tiny psychological acts work towards small physical acts of violence (such as the wagon ride mentioned above and his encircling of her waist after her “rescue” from the queens). Only when Tess is at her most vulnerable, trapped in his presence by night and the fog and immobilized by exhaustion, does he perpetrate the most physical damage to Tess (Hardy 68). This one act leaves Tess pregnant and “defiled,” forever darkening her attitude towards the world and, in her mind, her value as a woman. The rape occurs in an almost limbo-like state, not an identifiable or agrarian setting. When Alec re-enters Tess’s life (after going through a supposed religious reformation), he returns to psychological abuse (stalking her, approaching her at work and in other public and private places, and forcing her to become a kept-woman) because Tess no longer reacts to physical violence. Alec’s situation as a rich, idle landowner gives him the
opportunity and means to abuse Tess, create situations that endanger her, and physically hurt her without any possibility of repercussions. The socioeconomic situations of his family and hers guarantee that he will walk away unscathed from any situation while she will be forever shamed and cut off from the world she loves.

Everything done by Alec to Tess is outside of the agrarian world. Though he observes Tess work as a bird-keeper at the Slopes and as a swede-hacker in Flintecombe-Ash, Alec himself never approaches the agricultural world. He inherited his wealth from his merchant father and beyond this has no clear career. Though he enters the religious world for a short while, he quickly abandons this profession. Alec never recognizes Tess’s role as an agricultural labourer. Tess only has power over herself when working in the agrarian realm, and, because Alec is so much outside of it, she never has agency in her interactions with him. The reason for creating such a character and placing him in Tess’s life is to demonstrate what Hardy writes in “The Dorsetshire Labourer,” what is such an important concept in an analysis of the agrarian figure in Hardy: “A pure atmosphere and a pastoral environment are a very appreciable portion of the sustenance which tends to produce the sound mind and body, and thus much sustenance is, at least, the labourer’s birthright” (Hardy in “The Dorsetshire Labourer,” 41). Alec, never a member of “a pastoral environment,” is abusive, vicious, lonely, and ultimately, dies a violent death. Just like Sergeant Troy in FFTMC, who fails to connect with or appreciate the agricultural world around him, Alec never maintains a truly “sound mind and body” because he is completely absent from the “pure atmosphere” of the agrarian world. Neither Troy nor Alec manages to maintain their passing careers (as preachers or actors). Due to Alec’s complete absence from the agrarian world and Troy’s ignorance of it, they fail to recognize its importance to anyone else, especially to their women. Alec goes one worse than Troy and does not allow Tess to access the world which would allow her happiness. Hardy believes that connection to the agrarian way results in the best life, so he deprives this essential place to his swarthy villains.

Angel’s approach to wooing Tess is much healthier. Although Angel and Tess’s marriage fails, their courtship in the agrarian world provides them with great happiness and
fulfillment, and in this setting, Tess has much greater agency than at any other point in the novel. Throughout their relationship at Talbothays, Angel and Tess work side-by-side. Together they work in close proximity to the fields, the cows, the other labourers, and the products of the dairy. The most sensual acts of their relationship (and of the novel as a whole) are when Tess and Angel interact with the dairy products. In one such instance, Hardy writes:

Angel […] laid his hands flat upon [Tess’s]. Her sleeves were rolled far above the elbow, and bending lower he kissed the inside vein of her soft arm.

[…] her arm, from her dabbling in the curds, was as cold and damp to his mouth as a new-gathered mushroom, and tasted of the whey. But she was such a sheaf of susceptibilities that her pulse was accelerated by the touch, her blood driven to her finger-ends, and the cool arms flushed hot. (Hardy 171)

Tess’s skin takes on the qualities of a mushroom and whey. Though some readers might find this unappealing, in the context of a dairy, and with Angel as a man learning to appreciate agriculture, these descriptors make sense. Tess, like nature, has a unique beauty. The physical connection between the curds and the workers underscores the importance of a close relationship with the land and its products. This same closeness can be observed in another sensual description. As Tess’s “temple press[ed] the milcher’s flank,” Angel watches and becomes aroused, “[watching Tess] sent an aura over his flesh, a cold breeze through his nerves, which wellnigh produced a qualm; and actually produced, by some mysterious physiological process, a prosaic sneeze” (Hardy 146). Tess’s closeness to the cow, as observed by Angel (also at a cow), produces a physical reaction. Tess, hard at work, produces a wave of lust in Angel, who has little power to curb his body’s biological reflexes. Unlike Alec, who enjoys watching Tess simply be pretty or endangered, Angel gains the most pleasure from watching his lover work. Tess and Angel have their best moments when working at the tasks of the milk industry: milking the cows, making the products, delivering the milk. This connection to each other, as enabled by their participation in this particular agricultural industry, makes this part of their relationship the most desirable.
Angel’s courtship of Tess keeps them close together in the field. However, unlike Alec’s unwelcome stalking, in which he penetrates a world never meant for him and for which he has little interest, Angel’s eager learning and respect for the dairy business mean that his advances are much more welcome. Tess’s rejections of Angel come from a much different source than her rejections of Alec. Alec interfered in her life, ignored her talents, and inhibited her from doing the work she loved. Angel, before he learned of Tess’s past, strove to learn of her work, engage in life at the diary, and become an agriculturalist. Tess rejected Angel because she believed that her “defiled” body and imperfect past were not worthy of Angel. She rejected Alec because he used and abused her. Angel remained an admirable suitor as long as he engaged in the experience at the dairy. Once he leaves, the two wed, and Tess tells Angel of her past, Angel cuts himself loose of his ties to the English countryside, going so far as to flee to Brazil. Hardy does not reward him with a free Tess at the end of the novel because, when abandoning Tess, he also abandons the English earth. Brazil cannot offer Angel what England can in the way of agriculture or romance, and so he returns from it sick and miserable. Hardy made sure to punish Tess’s suitors when they distanced themselves from the “pure atmosphere” and “pastoral environment” of the English agrarian world, of which Tess is the symbol. Tess, unlike her lovers, tries her whole life to remain connected to the earth, even when she has to travel across the region and perform increasingly strenuous tasks.

During the course of her courtships with Alec and Angel, Tess works her way through a series of jobs. Her happiness closely corresponds to these jobs and the connection they create with the men discussed above. As Merryn Williams writes, “Tess […] really fulfills herself and is happy and skilled at her work” (175). Undeniably, Tess’s happiest moments are during her time at Talbothays Dairy as a dairymaid. In this context she has regular contact with the controlled nature of the English countryside in an industry that, during the writing of the novel, was booming. Furthermore, the dairy provides a many-leveled yet fully agrarian community: the labourers live and work side-by-side with the dairyman, who works side-by-side with the cows who, in their turn, are cared for by the labourers. Tess never finds herself far from either human
or animal love, and she thrives. During his stay at the dairy, Angel learns to appreciate the work involved in this particular sector and the work done by Tess. Because he cares about this particular work and environment, Tess can be happy. None of Tess’s other jobs allow such a close connection between her work tasks and her romance, so she never experiences the happiness of the dairy again (her short flight with Angel at the end of the novel is marked with tragedy because of its predictable end). Her other jobs are marred by either separation from nature or an all too strong reliance on Alec.

Tess’s next brightest moment comes at an unexpected job. After working at the dairy, Tess works close to home harvesting corn, helping her heal from her time at the Slopes. Though burdened with the birth, care, and death of Sorrow (as well as the scandal surrounding her after her stay with Alec), Tess can forget her troubles for a short time while working the land. Hardy writes, “a field-woman is a portion of the field; she has somehow lost her own margin, imbibed the essence of her surrounding, and assimilated herself with it” (Hardy 83). At this point in the novel, these words are not as oppressive as some readers may find them. Tess wishes to separate herself from her past, and field work allows her to do so. Unlike field men, who are “a personality afield,” field-women are expected to simply merge with the landscape, allowing them asylum from an outside world which may harm or shame them. Tess takes advantage of the work available close to her home and the camouflage it provides during her recovery period.

The above jobs gave Tess a space far from Alec in which to work. All other jobs, including her post at the Slopes and her commitment at Flintcombe-Ash, prohibit a direct connection to the land and create a bond to Alec. Even though she cares for poultry at the Slopes, a seemingly agricultural task, the environment is so contrived that Tess has no real connection to nature. Hardy describes the “community of fowls” as living in “an old thatched cottage standing in an enclosure that had once been a garden, but was now a trampled and sanded square […] The lower rooms were entirely given over to the birds, who walked about them with a proprietary air, as though the place had been built by and for themselves” (Hardy 52). The animals in her care live practically as humans, living in a refurbished cottage and acting as
though they had built it. The cottage itself has no remnants of nature, as the garden is long gone and covered with sand. This entirely unnatural space does not allow for the closeness to nature which enables Tess to live happily. When teaching bullfinches to whistle becomes one of Tess’s tasks, Tess finds herself even further removed from nature, forced into the fancy training of entirely non-agricultural creatures. As mentioned above, both these tasks put Tess in harm’s way, as she cannot avoid Alec when working and living at his estate. Not only is Tess separated from any work closely related to the land, but she is also trapped in the space of a family with no agrarian roots or industry.

At Flintecombe-Ash, Tess faces three enemies: Farmer Groby (the abusive overseer); the threshing machine; and Alec. All three of these personalities limit Tess’s movements and separate her from nature. First, the overseer forces Tess to work at particularly strenuous tasks. Hardy writes:

by [Farmer Groby’s] orders Tess was placed on the platform of the machine, close to the man who fed it, her business being to untie every sheaf of corn handed on to her […] so that the feeder could seize it and spread it over the revolving drum. […] Groby gave as his motive in selecting Tess that she was one of those who best combined strength with quickness in untlying. (Hardy 318-9)

Groby’s placement of Tess on the top of the machine means that she cannot talk or engage with any of her fellow workers. Additionally, her physical position on the machine means that, not only is she at a great distance from the ground, but she is also, “shaken bodily by [the machine’s] spinning, and this incessant quivering, in which every fibre of her body participated, had thrown her into a stupefied reverie in which her arms worked on independently of her consciousness” (Hardy 327-8). Tess’s literal separation, from her companions and the earth, plus the physical jostling she receives at the hands of the machine, come as a direct result of her boss distancing her from traditional agricultural work. Her body and her consciousness do not work together, unlike at the fulfilling labour of the dairy. The threshing machine, which Hardy says, “was in the agricultural world, but not of it” adds to the distance between Tess and happiness. This machine
is what allows Farmer Groby to situate Tess as far from her agrarian roots as possible. Hardy recognized the consequences of the mechanizing of the agricultural industry and inserts this machine into Flintecombe-Ash to add to the tragedy of Tess’s life. Finally, Alec’s presence is all too strong. He converts from priest to fancy-man during Tess’s stay at the farm, and it is only through his power (and discussion with Farmer Groby) that Tess finds any relief from her back-breaking labour. Alec, the overseer, and the threshing machine all contribute to Tess’s isolation from the people and atmosphere of the agricultural world, making her suffer and keeping her from truly achieving happiness, even while working on a farm.

Throughout her journey, Tess struggles to maintain her connection to the agrarian world. Her relationships with Alec and Angel, as well as those with her family and various jobs, created obstacles to ever achieving the fulfilling life Hardy believed all labourers deserved. The societal and romantic obstacles faced by Bathsheba in *FtMC* are enhanced two-fold by Tess. Men who keep women from participating in the agricultural world plague the women of both novels. Poor Tess, inhabiting a novel written by a very pessimistic Hardy, suffers the most. Due to her inability to be anyone but herself- a well-educated, beautiful, talented yet desperate labourer-Tess Durbeyfield faced the noose as a result of being abandoned by one lover and murdering the other.

**Conclusion**

Tess can be seen as a victim of rape, circumstance, destiny, or all three, depending on readers’ interpretation of the text. Perhaps Tess “accepts” her end so graciously because, like her mother, she believes, if only subconsciously, in the folk-traditions of her region, traditions most often believed by the agrarian classes. Ruth Firor explains this type of belief, writing:

believers […] are the sort of people to whom the most commonplace happening seems fraught with hidden significance. We may expect to see them do unusual things, and to accept extraordinary events, […] as quite in the order of things. […] the tragic irony
which pursues [Hardy’s characters] […] is an irony that the peasant himself would be the first to accept. (307)

In this passage, Firor attempts two tasks: 1) decry some of the accusations of Hardy as “melodramatic” and 2) explain why Hardy’s most tragic characters, including Tess, do not do more to change their fates. She explains that though Hardy may create “unusual things” and “extraordinary events,” the reason these work in the context of his novels is that they are occurrences which the liberal believers of folklore in his region would see as significant and meaningful.

Throughout her story, Tess experiences small events and gives them huge significance. One particularly telling sequence is her attempt to visit Angel’s parents after he has abandoned her and gone to Brazil. After overhearing the exchange between Angel’s brothers and Mercy Chant (and seeing her boots hijacked to be given to “some poor person”), Tess weeps: “She knew it was all sentimental, all baseless impressibility, which had caused her to read the scene as her own condemnation; nevertheless she could not get over it; she could not contravene in her own defenseless person all these untoward omens” (Hardy 295-6). Even though she desperately wishes she had not read into this scene all that she did, and she does not understand why she should constantly be pushed down by fate, Tess cannot escape the superstitious beliefs of her upbringing. She cannot overcome her embarrassment and misery to seek the sympathy of her in-laws at a time when she desperately needs it. Though some readers may find this scene improbable, to the believers in superstition and folklore to whom events like these occur, the scene loses its unlikelihood and maintains its tragedy.

Blinded by the prestige that comes with an old name and an old family, Mr. Durbeyfield, Alec, and even Angel alter their lives and make assumptions of Tess to fit an expectation, and these actions cause her significant damage. Due to an “unwillingness” to fit any one type, Tess finds herself committing murder and, ultimately, being sentenced to death. She flounders when separated from the agricultural world or the companionship of other enthusiastic labourers. Only when she has the power to do what she wants to do without suffering the burdens of the past can
she gain the “sound mind and body” that Hardy recognized came from life and work in the agricultural world. In justifying his creation of such a woman, James Gibson quotes Hardy as saying, “As to my choice of such a character after such a fall, it has been borne in upon my mind for many years that justice has never been done to such women in fiction” (Gibson 117). In fiction, as in life, women faced with the struggles of Tess never had the agency to tell their stories or voice their sorrows. In Tess Durbeyfield, Hardy creates a lesson on England’s social hierarchy and the difficulties of being a woman in the nineteenth century.

---

1 Unless otherwise noted, all Hardy references in this section are from *Tess of the D’Urbervilles.*
2 Emphasis added.
Chapter Four

Conclusion
Far From the Madding Crowd and Tess of the D’Urbervilles are vastly different novels. However, they are unified by the agrarian labourer. By examining these two particular stories with their wide-range of characters, plot twists, and dramas, readers can learn of the changing social and agricultural landscapes of nineteenth century England. Hardy captured the varied and multi-faceted human experiences of his countrymen in all his novels, and these two in particular provide an interesting contrast of ideals, agency, and connection to the land. In both novels, the best outcomes happen for the characters who maintain a close connection to the Wessex countryside. Additionally, violent deaths come to the men who abuse the agrarian women around them. Gabriel Oak, the quintessential Hardy agrarian hero, has no equivalent in Tess. Perhaps the pessimistic Hardy of the 1890s no longer believed that a connection to the land as strong as Gabriel’s was possible in the increasingly mechanized and stratified world. The chorus of FFtMC is forced to become migrant workers, like Tess, in the time of this latter novel. Hardy took the changes he saw around him and put them into his novels. Through these works, readers learn to love Wessex as Hardy did while reflecting on a changing world.

“[Thomas] Hardy’s greatness lies in the fact that he transformed into literature a whole area of central human experience which had never yet been explored” (M. Williams 199-200). The experiences of the “common” people, ranging from the peasantry to the merchant classes to the nouveaux riche and everything in-between, are the focus of Hardy’s novels. Unlike his predecessors, Hardy aimed to accurately portray his countrymen in a fictional setting. By publishing novels, Hardy brought the lives of his southern countrymen into the homes of the English middle and upper classes without the desperation of starvation or the violence of rebellion. Through his powerful descriptions and vivid characters, Hardy captured the struggles and strengths of the Wessex region and all of its peoples.

The traditional economic hierarchy of England began to burst in the nineteenth century, creating a new and extremely complex social order. Hardy, the nearly impoverished son of a professional and a domestic servant, had the unique experience of then becoming a wealthy celebrity. In his novels, Hardy introduced his countrymen to men and women of all levels of
society, from “lowly” peasant to snobby landowner. The relatively simple social hierarchy of *FFtMC* and the earlier nineteenth century explodes into scads of new and obscure levels by the time of *Tess* at the close of the century. While introducing this new order and filling it with characters, Hardy tried to discourage stereotypes, particularly those of the peasantry, and encourage introspection on the treatment of some of England’s most necessary workers.

While Wessex is the literal setting of Hardy’s novels, Raymond Williams sees it differently. He writes, “[T]he real Hardy country, we soon come to see, is that border country so many of us have been living in: between custom and education, between work and ideas, between love of place and an experience of change” (R. Williams 197). Like never before, the experiences of the people of the English countryside were shared with the world. Their experiences could no longer be categorized by their birthplace, their occupation, or their ancestral past, and they were living more and more in that “border country.” Across the English countryside, people were traveling, learning, and working hard to improve their lives, and Hardy captured these changes like no other author of his time. He recognized the complex education brought on by formal schooling combined with superstition and folklore. He valued the pride people have in their homes and the courage it takes to seek work far away. Lastly, he honored the ability of even the most seemingly stubborn people to change with the times in an effort stay happy and healthy.

Side-by-side with the beautiful landscapes and picturesque pastoral scenes of his novels, Hardy created realistic characters with genuine problems and concerns. The two novels discussed in this thesis, *Far From the Madding Crowd* and *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, represent the economic and cultural changes of agricultural England over the course of the nineteenth century and provide an excellent picture of the nineteenth century agrarian figure. Through these works, Hardy explores what it really meant to be a member of the agrarian world in an ever-changing English society.
Bibliography

The Novels:


Other writing by Hardy:


**Contemporary Reviews:**


Maps:


Other works:


