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Bathsheba's Choice

Female Agency in Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd*

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Thomas Hardy's Far from the Madding Crowd explores themes of female agency and independence through its protagonist Bathsheba Everdene, who inherits her uncle's wealth as a young, unmarried woman in the nineteenth century. This elevates her status in society and affords her the privilege to make her own decisions in matters of finances and personal freedom.

This thesis examines the characterisations of Bathsheba and the three men who wish to marry her, with a focus on their relationships with her and the ways in which they interact with and influence her. An analysis of Hardy's writing in a historical context provides insight into Victorian gender norms, societal expectations and how these subjects factor into and shape the characters' choices and relationships. The examination of the novel highlights the central element of female agency, and the choices Bathsheba makes reflect a broader commentary on it.

Key words: Far from the Madding Crowd, Thomas Hardy, Bathsheba, agency, female protagonist, Victorian era literature

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1 Introduction

Resilient, active and strong-willed are some words brought to mind by the character Bathsheba Everdene. A remarkably modern woman in a bygone era, Bathsheba is the protagonist and heroine of Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874). In order to understand the significance of a woman like Bathsheba in fiction, it is important to view her through the lens of Victorian era society and its norms. To understand what it meant to acquire wealth as a married, versus an unmarried woman – the very basis of Bathsheba's ability to have agency of her own. Who are the men who sought her hand, and how do they illustrate Hardy's subversion of gender-specific ideals?

For the basis of my thesis, I use the novel *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874) by Thomas Hardy. My focus is divided into several topics which each have their own sections. Firstly, background on the reception of the novel and particularly Bathsheba's character by contemporary critics, and from there moving on to how socio-economic factors transform Bathsheba's life and allow her to make choices outside of the sphere of the average 19th century Englishwoman. Secondly, Bathsheba's interpersonal relationships with her three suitors – what kind of archetypes do they adhere to, which traits do they possess and how they fit into Bathsheba's journey throughout the novel. And lastly, parallels the present-day reader can draw between elements in Bathsheba's story and other modern tales about women and their autonomy. *Far from the Madding Crowd* offers a great deal to any reader, whether they are interested in the story and its characters or Thomas Hardy's fictional area of Wessex and its lush landscapes. The novel explores themes of female independence and women's position in an unusual manner for its time, as well as the topic of courtship and marriage.

Over the course of the novel Bathsheba has three suitors, who all come from a different social class and background. They include farmer Gabriel Oak, the steadfast, down-to-earth type, whose point of view contributes to much of the story. Another suitor, William Boldwood, often referred to by his surname, is a wealthy gentleman farmer of forty. Finally, the reader is introduced to Sergeant Francis 'Frank' Troy, a charming military man, Bathsheba's third admirer. I argue that each of the men represents a different archetype, as well as a lesson. They each also offer a different type of life for Bathsheba, should she accept their proposal. In my thesis I will refer to each of the men by their surname and Bathsheba by her first name to amplify her role.

2 Nineteenth Century Society

In this section, I will examine nineteenth century society and its social structures with a focus on gender roles, societal expectations and property ownership, all of which play a part in the lives of Bathsheba and other Hardy's characters.

2.1 Property, Gender and Social Norms

For much of history, property ownership and financial matters were structured in favour of men. Laws governing inheritance and women's rights to earn and manage money –such as the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882– were still recent developments or had not yet been enacted at the time in which *Far from the Madding Crowd* is set. At this point it is good to note that the internal dating of the book has been set at 1840, the 1860s and 1869-73 by various sources, and since Hardy himself did not go into specifics, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact decade he had in mind for the events of the book, though his mention of a young Mr. Boldwood in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (Hardy, 1886), which is set during the 1840s, seems to indicate one of the latter options to be most likely (Morgan, 396). Regardless, Jill Rappoport (2016) describes the historical developments of both Property Acts in the following passage:

> In the decades between the 1856 petition for married women's property rights and the 1870 and 1882 Acts that granted them, advocates fought to secure married women the same economic rights that unmarried women had: unlike a wife, the *feme sole* could earn, inherit, possess, or transmit considerable property. (Rappoport 2016, 644)

With this information in mind, the effects on Hardy's Wessex become clearer. Bathsheba's station rose considerably as she became an unmarried heiress, not only privileged and wealthy but someone with agency to court and marry whom she wished, if she indeed wished so. For many women marriage was not a union of love but a necessity out of limited prospects or little money. Rappoport notes how, in Victorian fiction, the men who seek to access a wealthy woman's funds are "often scoundrels or at least scapegraces, and ends rarely justify the means" (2016, 645). This ties in well with the characterisation of a certain Sergeant Troy who, apart from his other transgressions, spent Bathsheba's money on booze and gambling once she became his lawfully wedded wife. Further discussion on him will take place in Section 3.

2.2 Hardy's Wilful Women and Their Critics

A period of great societal changes, the late Victorian era saw many authors of fiction gravitate towards experiments in their novels, in which the traditional mould of the woman is broken somehow to make room for contemporary ideas and worldviews. "Marriage is no longer the goal toward which everything inevitably tends; it is, instead, an object of the text's ethical scrutiny," writes Jil Larson (2001, 44). Larson cites "preconceptions about women, emotions and ethics" as the reason Hardy has been considered "significantly less feminist than his female contemporaries," and that Hardy in his fictional works rejects the absolutism present in Victorian literature and ethics (Larson, 48-49). Indeed, in my own study of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, I found that several of the characters in the novel challenge Victorian era notions of what it is like to be a man or woman. A great example of this would be the obsessive-in-love Mr. Boldwood who is led by his emotions and his contrast to Bathsheba, who advises Gabriel Oak to marry a well-to-do woman instead of herself at the beginning of the novel. In doing so, Bathsheba demonstrates her detachment from the situation emotionally and emphasises her logical side.

In terms of genre, *Far from the Madding Crowd* was perceived by the critics of the era to be a pastoral novel. Pastoral literature is characterised by its depiction of rural life as idyllic and harmonious (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2025). The focus is often on one shepherd or a group of shepherds and the relationship between nature and humanity, with idyllic descriptions of landscapes in a central role. Though suffused with pastoral ideals and imagery, Hardy's writing combines elements outside of the sphere of pastoral literature. The subject of relationships and class play a large role in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, along with what many have described as feminist characterisations of its female characters, especially Bathsheba.

What sets Hardy apart from his contemporaries is not only the central presence of wilful female characters throughout his works, but also the uncensored manner in which he describes their experiences. As noted by Rosemary Morgan (1982, 114-116) there is a distinct lack of moralising tones or comments on the actions of Bathsheba, which display unusual or frowned upon behaviours. An example of this can be seen in the first meeting between Bathsheba and Frank Troy, which takes place in the woods at nighttime. Bathsheba's gown becomes entangled with his garments, and this leads to a rather intimate encounter atypical for two strangers of the opposite sex in this era. Hardy (169-175) describes the events

in a matter-of-fact manner, from the conversation between the two characters to Bathsheba's sprint home and her subsequent gossip with her maid and confidant, Liddy, about the identity of the handsome soldier Bathsheba just encountered. Through all this, Hardy does not endeavour to explain his protagonist's actions to the reader, or to openly chastise her for behaving in what could be considered an unladylike manner. Morgan (1982) writes the following:

> The author does not defer to his reader's sense of propriety at any point – there is no cautioning or censuring of the heroine whatsoever. It is easy to see how the Victorian, deeply sensitive to appearances, behaviour and decorum, would have found this episode offensive. (Morgan 1982, 115)

Indeed, Hardy's portrayal of Bathsheba in particular faced criticism from his contemporaries. The Observer (1875, 18) described her as an "incorrigible hussy" in the aftermath of her first meeting with Troy, which presented her "in so odious a light, if women in whatever rank of society, are supposed to any trace of modesty and reserve, that we confess we do not care one straw about her afterwards." This is likely a reference to the way she exits the scene, but also to her attitude towards the stranger and his flirtatious language, as she does not shut him down entirely. However, much of this can be attributed to her young age and inexperience, instead of choosing to interpret these factors as inherent character flaws. Such reviews do a fine job of encapsulating the morals and expectations of their time, but to a modern-day reader, the sentiment fails to translate into anything other than an outdated opinion. Morgan also notes how the manner in which Hardy represents his female characters "springs not from a masculine-superior consciousness or from misogynistic leanings, but from a deeply empathetic, psychologically perceptive sensibility" (Morgan, 392), another interesting assessment which paints Hardy in a good light. Hardy's other work also includes female protagonists and other prominent female characters, who live atypical lives and face challenges due to the social and moral attitudes which were commonplace during Victorian era Britain, so it is safe to say this is a theme across his many literary works.

2.3 The Struggle for Agency: Gender and Fallenness in Hardy's Era

Before mass-literacy and equal rights to acquire academic schooling, oral traditions carried stories from generation to generation. The Bible and moral instruction books offered guidance in matters of daily life and subjects of morality, aligning with Christian and conservative values of the time. Victorian English society emphasised virtues such as chastity and charity and warned against behaviours such as gambling and promiscuity, which were seen as vices to be denounced. According to Amanda Anderson (1993, 15) "a repressive approach to feminine sexuality undeniably informs the construction of gender in Victorian era Britain," of which fallenness is a good example. Though many may be familiar with the notion of fallenness in relation to prostitution from other literary works and media, there is more to the concept than just what is commonly perceived.

Anderson argues that fallenness in the Victorian era "should be understood principally in relation to a normative masculine identity seen to possess the capacity for autonomous action, enlightened rationality, and self-control." (1993, 13). This implies that fallenness, a disproportionately female-attributed concept, could be thought of as a failure to live up to those ideals. Women were considered to be more prone to emotional behaviour, whereas men were judged to be better capable of logical thought. This is something I consider Hardy to actively challenge in his characterisation, as he introduces a strong-willed female protagonist and a male suitor who loses his rationality in his romantic obsession, but more on that in section three. Anderson further explains how social norms of the time placed men in the spheres of business and politics, while women are confined to the realm of domesticity. When this balance is challenged, in the example of a woman who opts to take on a more traditionally masculine role or embody some of its characteristics, she risks her position in society and invites the judgement of her peers. In her discussion on fallenness Anderson interestingly brings up agency (16-17), which is a pivotal element in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, in particular due to how it allows Bathsheba to step outside of the rigid constraints of Victorian era rules as she makes her own decisions in regard to marriage, the work on the farm and numerous other issues. Bathsheba herself is on the brink of becoming a "fallen woman" when her marriage to Troy begins to disintegrate due to the revelation of his extramarital relationship with Fanny Robin, whose corpse is brought to Bathsheba's estate along with her deceased infant, the child of Troy. In the Victorian era world, this news would have roused gossip and ruined Bathsheba's reputation in the eyes of fine society.

In a similar vein to the notion of fallenness, there are readings which present Bathsheba as the *femme fatale* who "ruins Farmer Boldwood's life and, for a considerable span of time, unbalances Gabriel Oak's existence," as described by Norbert Lennartz (2008, 5). He also draws a comparison between Bathsheba's crimson jacket and its "scarlet glow" with the whore of Babylon in the Book of Revelation (2008, 6). Though wholly interesting, I lack the capacity to include analysis of this fascinating article in any great detail but simply wish to include a mention of it for the sake of inclusion of a modern-day example of this strain of criticism on Bathsheba's character.

2.4 Bathsheba's Image and the Male Gaze

Bathsheba faces prejudice and scepticism when she takes over the farm and familiarises herself with its various chores. She decides not to hire a new bailiff and chooses to man that station herself, a decision met with astonishment from her labourers. Hardy (94-95) describes Bathsheba's participation at the market-day how, at her entry, conversation ceased, and she became the centre of attention. The village merchants make remarks about her presence amongst them as she comes to sell her grains and ponder at her self-reliance.

Throughout the novel the spirited Bathsheba is repeatedly seen through the eyes of her male contemporaries, whether it be the farmers at the market, the trailing gaze of Mr. Boldwood or various other occurrences. Her very introduction in *Far from the Madding Crowd* happens through Oak's point of view, as he watches her and another woman on horseback. While the novel makes use of an omniscient narrator, Bathsheba and her thoughts are explored throughout, which gives the reader insight into her character and inner workings. Barbara A. Schapiro (2002, 13-14) notes how Hardy's depiction of women often presents them as ambivalent objects of the male gaze, yet this is countered by a competing perspective that acknowledges their "separate, complex subjectivity".

3 Three Branches – Three Suitors

Next, I discuss Bathsheba's three suitors as archetypes and as individuals to determine what are their most prominent character traits, how this plays into the story and how these men treat Bathsheba and the prospect of marrying her.

3.1 Frank Troy

Sergeant Francis 'Frank' Troy embodies the rake archetype, which is to say he is highly hedonistic in both character and lifestyle. The rake is often described as someone who partakes in gambling and womanising, something which can also be attributed to Troy. According to Erin Mackie (2009, 9-11, 39) the rake is a figure of extravagant masculinity, who is viewed more favourably than a criminal mostly due to the privilege he possesses by means of wealth, noble birth or other. He represents danger and excitement and is presented as an opposite to the calm of Gabriel Oak. On a deeper level, Troy symbolises a sinful life, as he is an avid drinker and gambler and engages in an extramarital relationship with Fanny Robin, a servant girl on the farm. It is not long after their marriage that Troy begins to treat Bathsheba poorly, and on the night of their wedding feast he prefers to spend his time indulging in drink with the farm workers rather than making time for his newly wedded wife. Later on in the book it is also revealed that Bathsheba married Troy in haste in order to keep him, as he had made her jealous with talk of other women and their beauty in comparison to Bathsheba.

3.2 Mr. Boldwood

The character of William Boldwood, the gentleman farmer in his forties serves as a contrast to Troy's flippantness through his serious and respectable demeanour. Ellie Cope (2010, 36-37) describes him as a man governed by a strict moral code, a person who supresses his instinctive desires as he lives a solitary existence. New layers of his character are revealed when he falls in love with Bathsheba after he receives a Valentine's Day card from her. From Bathsheba's point of view, the situation lacks any sweetness or romance, given how she sent the card as a practical joke, with a mind to catch his attention. Koehler (2017) also notes how in *Far from the Madding Crowd* the valentine is given a large role, which advances the plot instead of portraying it merely in the context of the holiday. On this, she writes the following:

> The device is used to call into question the normative categories – of masculinity and femininity, reason and emotion, publicity and privacy, domestic and political life – that structure representations of human behaviour and relationships in nineteenth-century fiction. (Koehler, 404)

Both Koehler and Cope emphasise the assessment of traditional gender roles in Hardy's novel. Cope (2010, 38) presents this as the subversion of the psychical hierarchy, and goes on to point out that Boldwood is controlled by his emotions, which was considered to be a feminine trait, whereas the headstrong and wilful Bathsheba "asserts an active power of choice in her rejection and selection of a husband that subverts the established patriarchal order and effectively disempowers Boldwood (Cope 2010, 38)." Bathsheba tells her servant and confidante Liddy that they will "toss, as men do" to determine whether the recipient of the valentine will be Boldwood or a farm boy. Koehler points to this action as another event in which Bathsheba appropriates "conventionally masculine behaviour" (Koehler 2017, 404) and thus challenges the status quo.

In the aftermath of Bathsheba's valentine, the reader is presented with a very different version of Mr. Boldwood, one who is love-struck to the point he has no mind for anything else. His relentless pursuit of Bathsheba places her in the role of an object to be possessed and fought over, and when she writes to him to turn down his offer of marriage, he goes as far as to sharply remind her of how she "drew him on" (Hardy 193, 200) and encouraged him with her Valentine's Day card. To a contemporary reader it seems peculiar that a serious man such as Mr. Boldwood would so duly consider the valentine and its hidden message of "marry me" a serious proposition, but Koehler (2017) shines light on this followingly:

> It becomes necessary to acknowledge that every aspect of Bathsheba's valentine, from the stationery to the seal, signals serious rather than mocking intentions. The exquisite print may have appeared humorous when addressed to a little boy, but it gains an entirely different resonance when it is delivered to an eligible bachelor. (Koehler, 406)

Koehler provides historical background on the popularity of the postal holiday at the end of the 19th century, and references Hardy's detailed description of the Valentine's Day card itself in the novel, which paired with what we know of Boldwood's background in terms of personality and social status, further explains why he became so consumed with the idea of Bathsheba's love for him and the valentine being a genuine representation of it.

For him, Bathsheba plays the role of the unsullied ingenue, an idealised version of herself. Boldwood fights hard to keep her in this position even after he overhears the romantic plans Bathsheba and Troy have made for the evening, as he begs Troy to marry her and uphold her honour. Schapiro (2002, 11) points out how Boldwood never sees Bathsheba for who she really is, a flawed human being.

3.3 Gabriel Oak

Farmer Gabriel Oak embodies pastoral ideals of Hardy's time as the kind, unwavering shepherd with an appreciation of animals and a closeness to nature. Out of the three suitors, he has the least amount of material wealth and is, after Bathsheba receives her inheritance, below her in terms of social class. Regardless of this, Oak wishes to marry Bathsheba and make her happy, live together in a harmonious existence with a vegetable garden and several babes. Hardy presents Oak as a romantic hero, as unwavering as his namesake tree, who stays by Bathsheba's side through various trials and tribulations. Although he is less problematic than his counterpart suitors, Oak too is guilty of treating Bathsheba as a bird to be caged in some instances of the book, as well as assuming the moral authority to chastise her behaviour (Hardy 134). Karin Koehler (2017) has a rather prickly opinion on the conclusion of the novel:

> Troy's death and Boldwood's imprisonment do not restore Bathsheba's independence, but merely make room for a man who, according to her own society's sexual ideology, deserves to possess and has the strength to master her. (Koehler, 407).

In the final chapter of the novel, Hardy describes the relationship between Bathsheba and Oak as a camaraderie, and calls the couple tried friends. To me this illustrates Hardy's ideal in the realm of romantic relationships – perhaps not something as passionate and exciting as what Bathsheba and Troy had, but a real love that grew from deep friendship, a long history and similar interests. In Hardy's words, "Theirs was that substantial affection which arises (if any arises at all) when the two who are thrown together begin first by knowing the rougher sides of each other's character, and not the best till further on, the romance growing up in the interstices of a mass of hard prosaic reality" (419). In comparison with the above block quote by Koehler, my own thoughts lie with Hardy's description. The relationship that develops between Bathsheba and Oak is distinctly different from what is present at the beginning of the novel. Oak may have been infatuated with her then, and hoped to have her for his own,

but it is through the events of the novel that he learns to truly know her and become what she needs – and vice versa. “For Gabriel Oak true and heartfelt love is inseparable from sacrifice, reliability, loyalty and endurance. He is the only one of Bathsheba’s three suitors who has all these qualities,” writes Andrzej Diniejko (2020). This seems to be the case in my reading of the novel as well. Hardy does not paint Bathsheba as the “trophy” Gabriel Oak “earns” at the end of the story through good deeds or steadfast devotion. Instead, *Far from the Madding Crowd* depicts a relationship that is shaped by the passage of time, adversity and personal transformation. Through the obstacles they both face, Bathsheba and Oak come to understand one another on equal footing.

3.4 Analysis

Now to contrast these men to one another. Bathsheba’s initial reluctance to accept Oak’s proposal seems to have roots in how she sees him as a safe choice in comparison to Troy, who does not share his gentle and respectful nature. Troy fascinates Bathsheba specifically because of his wildness, which in my reading is what Bathsheba is drawn to. Troy as a character is a seducer and has a way with words, something Bathsheba is not used to. In contrast, Oak is less talented when it comes to oral output: he struggles with putting his feelings into words, which often makes him come across as clumsy and either too forward, or rather cold and uncaring. Troy is flirtatious and disregards social norms in the way he approaches Bathsheba, whereas Oak is of a more traditional mind. To put it plain, Oak and Troy could scarcely be more different from one another.

Boldwood then also stands out from the other suitors. Whilst he is a farmer like Oak, he is in possession of a more elevated status as he owns and runs his own farm. He is on occasion referred to as a “gentleman farmer,” which further demonstrates his position in society as well as his wealth. As noted above, his demeanour is rather humourless and stern, and he is well-respected by his peers. Whilst the latter also applies to Oak, he embodies more affable characteristics, partly due to his lower social status and direct communication with the other workers. Oak is also seen to be helpful and caring while Boldwood prefers his own company to mingling, with the exception of Bathsheba’s romantic pursuit.

What comes to their vision of Bathsheba, for Boldwood she is undoubtedly an idealised fantasy from the very moment he receives her valentine. The card and the message of affection it conceals within causes Boldwood to lose sight of what is real and imagined in his romantic pursuit, which is the root of his downward spiral. For Troy then, it seems that Bathsheba was intended to be a fleeting conquest during his stay in the area, but perhaps her wealth and ownership of the farm persuaded him to linger. It appears to me that only Gabriel Oak was genuinely interested in her person, though his initial assessment of Bathsheba was hasty. In spite of his recognition of her flaws, Oak still idealises her, as noted by Schapiro (19), who goes onto explain this further:

> Our subjective projections onto others are precisely what make those others emotionally meaningful to us. [..] Gabriel is equally able to see Bathsheba as "the woman who owed him twopence," as a real, fallible human being who is simultaneously more and other than his projected ideal. (Schapiro, 20)

Bathsheba's initial reluctance to enter married life, as previously noted, seems intertwined with her desire to preserve her own agency. "I hate to be thought of as men's property (32)" is a clear rejection of the role she is expecting to fall into, and so she does later on with Troy, who seizes control of her assets as her husband.

4 Modern Readings: Women's Choices and Independence

The notion of choice is an old one, though considerable leaps towards women's rights to self-sufficiency have mostly taken place only within the last century. What makes agency so crucial lies in the way in which it moulds your experience in the world – what you may or may not do, or be or say, for that matter. As noted above, during the 19th century finding yourself in a position of total independence as an unmarried woman was an event of some rarity. Bathsheba's case is rather unique in this sense, as she is young and remains unwed out of her own choice, and her ability to maintain this position has much to do with the inheritance which made her financially secure. It is, however, important to remember Bathsheba's desire for independence even before the passing of her uncle and her subsequent wealth as his heiress. As she turns down Gabriel Oak (Hardy, 24) Bathsheba tells him she hates to be thought of as a man's property, a rather blunt statement and a feminist thought for its time. When she turns down Mr. Boldwood, Bathsheba puts her own ideals and desires first, choosing instead to marry Troy, who she is smitten with. Yet despite her financial independence, Bathsheba cannot break free from all societal expectations. She still has to adhere to some of the same rules in terms of cultivation of a good reputation, and should her husband desert her or spend all her money, she would find herself on the road to becoming a "fallen woman."

Although Bathsheba's situation is relatively unique for its era, the dilemma of selection transcends time. In the 1963 novel *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath contemplates these issues through her protagonist Esther, who is torn between choosing a branch from a fig tree, one representing family life, another offering her a career as a brilliant professor, with yet another fig branch suggesting an existence full of travel and excitement. But she cannot make her mind when presented with an abundance of options, and one by one the figs blacken and fall at her feet. Though Bathsheba showcases agency throughout *Far from the Madding Crowd*, she, too, finds herself torn choosing the kind of life she wants to live. It is also important to remember that Bathsheba's agency is largely tied to the inheritance she receives, which then makes it possible for her to hold the reins of her own life, rather than follow the conventional route of marrying for convenience to secure her livelihood and overall safety, as well as her place in society. Plath writes the following:

> I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor. [..] beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out. I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet. (Plath, 73)

Plath's narrator on the other hand struggles with a more modern existential dilemma, where more options are available for her, but societal expectations still hold weight over her decision-making. The ample choices available result in a paralysis of sorts, which renders her unable to move towards any of the branches at all. The two stories may have been published nearly a century apart, yet the themes of choice, particularly for women, intertwine in an interesting manner, and underline how the struggle of choice and identity persists in the modern world. They both touch on how personal ambition and social norms intersect in these women's lives, and both illustrate feminist themes. The historical perspectives may be quite different but underneath lies the same concept of creating your own destiny.

While Bathsheba's struggle lies in the assertion of her right to choose, Esther, on the other hand, feels the burden of too many possibilities. In my reading of the poem, it would seem that Plath suggests the over-abundance of choice to be a different kind of prison from a world where you have little to no choice – but a prison, nonetheless.

5 Conclusion

In all respects Bathsheba comes across as a multi-faceted character with a will of her own, who does not allow herself to be assigned to the mould of a woman of her day. Instead, she makes her own decisions – the good, the bad – and the outright tragic, which should be the right of each and every individual to do. The portrayal of a female character's personal agency in Victorian era literature challenges the social norms of the time and aligns with a modern-day idea of what autonomy is and who it belongs to. In Hardy's Wessex the characters do not adhere to the prescribed expectations of the Victorian era, something that makes them appear remarkably human as they embark on their journeys accompanied not only by their high moral standings and well-perceived traits but also their weaknesses and flaws. Through Bathsheba and his other female characters, Hardy demonstrates an awareness and empathy to the plight of women during his lifetime, and these are some of the important details in his novels which make them such enduring works with readers to date. The contemporary reader can easily identify themselves with the key female characters and their predicaments, while some of the men function more as cautionary examples with their conduct. However, it is important to note Hardy's work with Gabriel Oak, who is kind-hearted and loyal to Bathsheba throughout the story and faces his own challenges in the background. The themes of female choice are still very much relevant today and reflect on present-day literature in various ways.

Ultimately, *Far from the Madding Crowd* is more than a story of love set to a pretty scenery. It is a richly layered narrative packed with societal criticism, feminist themes and a heroine who, despite the constraints of her time, is afforded the freedom to make her own choices in life. These concepts remain as relevant today as they were in Hardy's time.

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