Thomas Hardy’s *Far from the Madding Crowd*, was published in serial form in *Cornhill*, a respected literary magazine, between January and December 1874. It was thereafter published the same year in London in book form.

Hardy had already published several novels, but this was the first that would assure his place in literature.
Hardy took the title of his novel from Thomas Gray's poem
*Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751)

"Madding" means "frenzied" here. The title may be ironic: the five main characters – Bathsheba, Troy, Boldwood, Oak, and Fanny Robin – are all passionate beings who find the "vale of life" neither quiet nor cool!

Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife
Their sober wishes never learn'd to stray;
Along the cool sequester'd vale of life
They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.

(Lines 73 – 76)
The plot of *Far from the Madding Crowd* concerns a young woman, Bathsheba Everdene, and the three men in her life:

**Gabriel Oak**, a poor sheep farmer who loses his flock in a tragedy and ends up working as an employee on Bathsheba’s farm;

**William Boldwood**, the respectable, boring owner of a neighbouring farm who takes Bathsheba’s flirtations too seriously; and

**Frank Troy**, a dashing army sergeant who treats her like just another of his conquests.

In chronicling their hopes, plans, and disappointments, Hardy presents to readers an example of Victorian Romanticism. At the same time, his understanding of the lives of farmers and ranchers in rural England makes him a forerunner to the realistic tradition in literature.
Gabriel Oak is an up-and-coming shepherd, twenty-eight years of age. With his savings, he has leased and stocked a sheep-farm. He falls in love with a newcomer, eight years his junior, Bathsheba Everdene. She is a proud and vain young woman who arrives in the area to live with her aunt. She comes to like him and even saves his life once. When he makes her an offer of marriage, she refuses.

Bathsheba values her independence too much and him too little. Gabriel's blunt proposal only serves to drive her to haughtiness.

After a few months, she moves to Weatherbury, a village some miles off.
When next they meet, their circumstances have changed drastically. An inexperienced new sheepdog had driven Gabriel's flock over a cliff, ruining him. After selling off everything of value, he manages to settle his debts, but emerges penniless. He seeks employment at a work fair in the town of Casterbridge. When he finds none, he goes to another fair in a town about ten miles from Weatherbury.

On the way, he becomes involved in extinguishing a dangerous fire on a farm and in fact, leads the bystanders in putting it out. When the veiled owner comes to thank him, he asks if she needs a shepherd. She uncovers her face and reveals herself to be none other than Bathsheba Everdene. She has very recently inherited the considerable estate of her uncle and is now a wealthy woman. Though somewhat uncomfortable with the situation, she hires him.
Fanny Robin goes to a town where the military regiment that had been in Weatherbury has been sent, and summons Frank Troy to come to the window. She asks when he is going to marry her. He tells her soon.

Troy had promised to marry Fanny. On the wedding day, however, Fanny, guided by a cruel Fate goes to the wrong church.

Sergeant Troy waits at *All Saints’ Church* to marry Fanny. She shows up an hour late, saying that she mistakenly went to *All Souls’ Church*. Troy, humiliated at being left waiting at the altar, angrily calls off the wedding. When they part, unknown to Troy, Fanny is pregnant with his child.

Traveling to the malthouse to find lodging, Oak runs into a pale girl who is later identified as Fanny Robin, and he gives her money.

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Not realising the valentine was a jest, becomes obsessed with Bathsheba, and soon proposes marriage. Although she does not love him, she toys with the idea of accepting his offer as he is the most eligible bachelor in the district. She postpones giving him a definite answer. When Gabriel rebukes her for her thoughtlessness, she fires him.

Oak receives a letter from Fanny Robin, repaying the money he gave her and mentioning that she is going to marry Sergeant Frank Troy. Boldwood, who has been thinking constantly about the anonymous valentine, has Oak identify the writing as Bathsheba's. Soon Boldwood asks Bathsheba to marry him. She explains that the valentine was a joke, but he swears his love and says he will ask her again.
Boldwood’s love for Bathsheba grows, although she is disinterested. She discusses Boldwood with Oak, who says she should consider marrying Boldwood after the trick she played on him. Because Oak criticizes her behaviour, Bathsheba fires him.

With Oak gone, no one feeds the sheep. The sheep break the fence and get into a field of clover, which makes them sick. The only person around who can heal them is Oak.

Bathsheba sends him a note begging him to come back, saying, “Do not desert me, Gabriel.”

Boldwood asks Bathsheba to accept his proposal when he returns from his trip.
When Boldwood returns, Bathsheba declares her love for Troy. She elopes to Bath, where Troy has gone on. When Boldwood next sees Troy, he offers him money to marry Fanny. Troy indicates that he and Bathsheba have already been intimate, so Boldwood offers him even more money to marry Bathsheba and make an honest woman of her. Troy takes the money and then announces that they are already married. Boldwood withdraws, humiliated and vowing revenge.

That night, walking home, Bathsheba meets Sergeant Troy, who is back on furlough from his regiment. He flirts with her in the dark. A few days later she finds him helping her workers tend her farm. In private, he demonstrates his swordsmanship and then steals a kiss. Gabriel observes Bathsheba's interest in the young soldier and tries to discourage it, telling her she would be better off marrying Boldwood.
Bathsheba soon discovers that her new husband is a gambler with little interest in farming. Worse, she begins to suspect that he does not love her. In fact, Troy's heart belongs to his former servant, Fanny Robin.

Oak, meanwhile, senses a storm rolling in that could ruin the crops. When he goes to the barn, everyone is passed out and no one is available to help him save Bathsheba's harvest except Bathsheba herself. Oak races to cover the stacks while the storm rages. The next day he meets Boldwood, who has allowed his own harvest to be ruined.

Having used Bathsheba's money to buy his way out of the army, Troy establishes himself as the head of the farm. After the harvest, he provides hard liquor to all of the farm hands.
Months later, Troy and Bathsheba meet Fanny on the road, destitute, as she makes her way toward the Casterbridge workhouse. Troy sends his wife onward in the carriage before she can recognise the girl, then gives her all the money in his pocket, promising more in a few days. Fanny uses the last of her strength to reach her destination. A few hours later, she dies in childbirth, along with the baby.

Bathsheba and Troy fight when he asks her for money, and he leaves. Liddy brings news that Fanny Robin has died, and Bathsheba sends one of the farm hands to bring back her body.

Mother and child are then placed in a coffin and sent home to Weatherbury for burial. Gabriel, who has long known of Troy's relationship with Fanny, tries to conceal the child's existence - but Bathsheba, guessing the truth, and wild with jealousy, arranges for the coffin to be left in her house overnight.
The next day, he spends all his money on a white marble tombstone with the inscription "Erected by Francis Troy in beloved memory of Fanny Robin..."

Loathing himself and unable to bear Bathsheba's company, he leaves. After a long walk to the sea, he bathes there to refresh himself, leaving his clothes on the beach. A strong current carries him out to sea, where a boat picks him up.

On Fanny's coffin, the people at the poor house have written "Fanny Robin and child". Gabriel Oak who can come in search erases the mention of the child, to protect Bathsheba.

Bathsheba becomes suspicious. She opens the casket with a screwdriver, finding the corpse of an infant child with Fanny's. Troy comes in and sees it too. Seeing the body of Fanny, he gently kisses the corpse and tells the anguished Bathsheba, "This woman is more to me, dead as she is, than ever you were, or are, or can be."

Chapters 41 – 47
At a fair late in the summer, Troy, who has been travelling with a carnival, notices Bathsheba and disguises himself. Boldwood, taking Bathsheba home from the fair, begs her to promise to marry him after six more years; when she stalls, he gets her to promise to announce her decision by Christmas.

Word soon comes that Troy has drowned. Oak becomes the bailiff of Bathsheba's farm and also of Boldwood's. Months later Boldwood learns from Liddy that Bathsheba will not consider marrying again for seven years after Troy's disappearance, long enough to have Troy declared dead.

Chapters 48 – 51
Bathsheba, chastened by guilt and grief, buries her husband in the same grave as Fanny Robin and their child. She adds a suitable inscription to the marker.

At the grave, she meets Oak, with whom she has not talked in months.

Chapters 52 – 57

Boldwood throws a festive Christmas Eve party. He makes it clear he wants Bathsheba to marry him in six years and offers her a diamond ring.

Boldwood is imprisoned and sentenced to die. Facts come out about his mental state. On petition, he is sentenced to life imprisonment.

Troy enters the party and insists that Bathsheba leave with him. Boldwood shoots Troy and tries to shoot himself before others stop him.

Bathsheba, chastened by guilt and grief, buries her husband in the same grave as Fanny Robin and their child. She adds a suitable inscription to the marker. At the grave, she meets Oak, with whom she has not talked in months.
Oak gives notice that he is leaving her employ. She goes alone to visit him in his house, to find out why he is deserting her. Pressed, he reluctantly reveals that it is because people have been injuring her good name by gossiping that he wants to marry her.

She exclaims that it is "...too absurd - too soon - to think of, by far!" He bitterly agrees that it is absurd, but when she corrects him, saying that it is only "too soon", he is emboldened to ask once again for her hand in marriage.

She accepts, and the two are quietly wed.
The Theme of Marriage

*Far from the Madding Crowd* Hardy explores the proper basis for a happy marriage. Bathsheba's physical attraction to the sword-wielding Troy leads to a disastrous marriage that might have ended in financial ruin.

A marriage to the sober Boldwood, to whom she is bound only by feelings of guilt and obligation, would have meant emotional suffocation.

Gabriel Oak is her colleague, friend, and advocate. He offers her true comradeship and sound farming skills; and, although she initially spurns him, telling him she doesn't love him, he turns out to be the right man to make her happy.
Wessex, the location for *Far from the Madding Crowd*, is an imaginary English county. Hardy first employed the term "Wessex" in *Far from the Madding Crowd* to describe the "partly real, partly dream-country" that Hardy coloured with fine details throughout the course of his writing career.

**HARDY’S WESSEX**

It is similar to Dorset, where Hardy lived most of his life, but its fictitious nature gave the author freedom to describe the landscape at will.

Hardy wrote *Far from the Madding Crowd* in the Dorset cottage in which he was born and which his grandfather had built in 1800.

The village of Puddletown, near Dorchester, is the inspiration for the novel's Weatherbury. Dorchester, inspired Hardy's Casterbridge.

Though fictional, the residents of Wessex—farmers, land owners, labourers, servants, and the like—are considered true representations of people living at the time the novel was published.
When an uncle dies and leaves her his farm, Bathsheba takes control. She fires the bailiff for stealing, and instead of hiring another bailiff, begins to manage the farm herself. She is flirtatious and on Valentine's Day she sends an anonymous valentine to the stuffy bachelor who lives next door. When he takes this claim of love seriously, she feels guilty and finds herself unable to refuse him outright.

Bathsheba is a conscientious employer. She gives her workers bonuses when work is going well. When news arrives that Fanny Robin, who worked for her uncle, has died, Bathsheba arranges for the body to be brought back to Weatherbury, to be buried in the local cemetery.

Bathsheba is the central figure of the novel. At the beginning of the novel she is around twenty years old and poor, helping to tend her aunt's farm. She is vain. The first time Oak sees her she takes out a mirror and examines her face, unaware that anyone is looking. She flirts with Oak but does not accept his proposal of marriage because she does not believe he can put up with a strong-headed woman like herself.
Bathsheba becomes a colder, more pragmatic person after Troy leaves. She is hesitant to give Boldwood any hope of marrying her, because she is concerned about the way she hurt his feelings in the past. She focuses on business and tries to forget about men.

In the end, when Boldwood is in jail and Troy is dead, Bathsheba rekindles the same playful, flirtatious relationship with Oak that she had at the beginning of the novel. She recognizes his loyalty through all that has happened and realizes she has loved him all along.

When she meets the dashing Sergeant Troy, she falls for his extravagant flattery, falls in love with him, and ends up marrying him. He spends her money, ignores her, and almost ruins her farm. Throughout these difficult times, she relies on Oak, both for help in managing her farm and as a sympathetic ear to listen to her troubles.
Oak is a conscientious and intelligent worker, who intuitively understands the problems of grain and livestock. Oak is completely devoted to Bathsheba, watching after her farm so that she will profit from it.

Unlike Boldwood, who is never able to get over the idea of Bathsheba’s rejecting his offer of marriage, Oak goes for years without mentioning the feelings that he once had for her. He does not forget about his love, but instead channels it into labour on her farm. Oak takes on the role of a counsellor for Bathsheba in her romantic entanglements with Boldwood and Troy. She goes to him for advice about men, even though they are both aware of their romantic past.
In the end Oak tells Bathsheba he plans to go to California. This decision, like other decisions in his life, is not made for his own benefit, but because he does not want people to gossip about Bathsheba, since they all know he is in love with her.

Oak becomes Boldwood's friend. Boldwood recognizes and admires the way Oak is able to control his love for Bathsheba and also admires Oak's skill as a farmer. When Boldwood devotes his time to pursuing Bathsheba, he hires Oak to watch over his farm as well as hers.

Her decision to marry him in the end stems from her clear understanding of how much he means to her.
In courting Bathsheba Everdene, Troy shows himself to be skilful and witty. In his marriage to Bathsheba, Troy exhibits confidence.

Troy cheats Boldwood out of money that Boldwood offers him to make Bathsheba an honest woman. He takes the money although he and Bathsheba are already married. Troy spends Bathsheba's money on liquor for the farm hands, who are not used to hard liquor, and as a result almost ruin a year's work. He also loses heavily at the horse races.

Sergeant Troy is presented as a contradiction. Throughout the novel, his actions show him to be an opportunist and a womanizer. He is first introduced as responding to Fanny Robin, who has walked miles in winter to the town to which his battalion has moved. Fanny asks Troy when he is going to marry her, but Troy says he cannot come out and see her. Then there is laughter inside the barracks, as if he is mocking her. He does agree to marry her, though, but when she shows up late to the wedding he uses it as an excuse to call off the wedding.
On the other hand, he is, at heart, a romantic. When he hears of Fanny's death, he is truly grieved, to such an extent that he is willing to lose his comfortable position as Bathsheba's husband. He tells Bathsheba she means nothing to him, that Fanny was his true love. He erects a tombstone to Fanny that says he was the one to put it up, despite the scandal that could ensue. He then runs away, eventually joining a travelling show, in order to forget his one true love.

Finally, Troy returns to being a scoundrel. He is dragging Bathsheba out of the Christmas party, saying she should obey him. He is shot by Boldwood and killed.
Boldwood is a bachelor, about forty years old. He owns the farm next to the Everdene farm. He takes responsibility for Fanny Robin when her parents die. Bathsheba first becomes aware of Boldwood when he comes to visit soon after she takes over her uncle's farm. Her maid explains that Boldwood is a confirmed bachelor, which spurs Bathsheba to send him an anonymous valentine.

Boldwood becomes convinced that he is in love with Bathsheba. He pressures her to marry him and is confused when she is reluctant. When she marries Troy, Boldwood feels she has been stolen from him and lets his farm go to ruin.

When Troy is thought dead, Boldwood interprets Bathsheba's refusal to consider marriage for seven years to mean that at the end of that time, she will marry him. When she says she will give him an answer at Christmas, he prepares a lavish party, assuming she will become his fiancée.

When Boldwood is jailed for killing Troy, the extent of Boldwood's delusions becomes apparent. Locked closets are found in his house, full of dresses, furs, and jewellery, all inscribed to "Bathsheba Boldwood," with a date seven years in advance, when he expects her to marry him. Because he is clearly insane, Boldwood is not hanged for Troy's murder.
Fanny is a tragic young woman who is used by the womanizing Sergeant Troy and then abandoned. She ends up malnourished and pregnant. Fanny worked on the Everdene farm for years and leaves a few days after Bathsheba's arrival because Troy's regiment was relocated. She goes to the new barracks to ask when Troy will marry her. He promises to do so soon.

She is late to the wedding ceremony because she went to the wrong church, Troy refuses to marry her. Troy runs into her after he is married to Bathsheba. Fanny is destitute. Troy wants to help her, but she dies before he can get money to her.

Oak tries to keep secret the fact that Fanny dies unmarried and with a child. When Troy finds out about it, though, he shows that he is truly sad. Instead of his beautiful wealthy wife Bathsheba, he declares that Fanny was his only true love.
Cainy Ball
Appointed assistant shepherd to Gabriel. Named him Cain as his mother was confused about the story of Genesis, thinking it was Abel who killed Cain!

Jan Coggan
Often stands witness to weddings and baptisms in the county. Becomes a confidante of Oak's and knows his past relationship with Bathsheba.

Henry Frey
One of the workers on the Everdene farm. He always signs his name "Henery" and is often called that by others.

Matthew Moon
One of the workers on Bathsheba Everdene's farm.

Joseph Poorgrass
A shy man, with a weakness for alcohol. Deputed to bring Fanny Robin's body back to the Everdene farm. Stays so late drinking at the ‘Boar's Head’ that he cannot make it back in time for the funeral.
Pennyways
The bailiff of the Everdene farm. Is caught stealing half a bushel of barley by Bathsheba, who fires him. At the Greenhill Fair, he recognizes Troy as one of the performers but fails to point him out to Bathsheba. He becomes Troy's accomplice in Troy's drive to re-establish himself at the farm.

Laban Tall
Married in middle age for the first time. He is bossed by his wife. Known as 'Susan Tall's husband.'

Susan Tall
Wife of Laban Tall. A domineering woman who makes all of the decisions for the couple.

Jacob Smallbury
Son of "the maltster," who owns the village tavern. Around sixty-five years old.

William Smallbury
Son of Jacob Smallbury. About forty. Has "a cheerful soul in a gloomy body."

Liddy Smallbury
Daughter of William Smallbury. The maid of Bathsheba Everdene. About the same age as Bathsheba. Serves as a confidant from time to time.
Realism and Romanticism

Far from the Madding Crowd is considered by some to be an example of realism that arose in the nineteenth century.

Romantic writers often presented the world as being changeable by sheer willpower and, therefore, were inclined toward happy endings, realistic writers tended to show the harsher aspects of life.

In Far from the Madding Crowd, the realistic world view is represented by incidents such as the sudden and senseless manner in which Oak's flock of sheep die.

Hardy exposes the social standards of his time by making Fanny Robin not only a jilted woman but also pregnant out of wedlock.
There are many romantic elements in the book. The thunderstorm in chapter 37 mirrors the emotional turmoil of Gabriel and Bathsheba is a standard romantic device.

Strained coincidences constitute romantic device such as the boat that picks up Troy before he drowns and Troy subsequently encounters Bathsheba at the Greenhill Fair. Fanny and Troy’s marriage coming to naught due to a mix up of the Churches’ names.

The book’s happy ending, with the long-time acquaintances finally free to admit their mutual love and marry one another, is a sign that, for all its realistic elements, this novel is basically a romantic novel.