Refining for Romance: How Bathsheba and Gabriel Change to Make Their Relationship Last
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“I hate to be thought men’s property
in that way—though possibly I shall
be to be had some day” (Hardy 26).
—Bathsheba

Thus, Bathsheba Everdene responds to Gabriel Oak’s first proposal of marriage in Thomas Hardy’s novel *Far From the Madding Crowd*. Originally published in 1874, the novel is set in Victorian England, a time where strict rules governed society, especially in the case of courtship and marriage. During the Victorian era, women lost all of their independence once they married. They no longer possessed money or property; they did not even have a legal claim to their children (“Victorian England: An Introduction”). Everything they had, everything they were, belonged to their husbands, making them, as Bathsheba words it, “men’s property.”

However, this is not the only reason Bathsheba gives Oak for refusing his proposal. When Oak first asks for Bathsheba’s hand, he tells her all the ways he can provide for her (Hardy 26). At this point in the story, he is wealthier than she since he owns land and livestock, while she has almost nothing. Bathsheba recognizes this and tells Oak that he should be pursuing a woman with money who could help him invest in more land (Hardy 28-29). This difference in class is one of the two obstacles that continually prevents Bathsheba and Oak from being together. Once Bathsheba’s rejection is finalized, for she considers becoming his wife for a minute, Oak tells her that he is already in love with her and that he will love her forever, establishing an important character trait that he will never deviate from (Hardy 28). To this, Bathsheba responds that she does not love him, suggesting that she finds love an essential part of marriage. She also states that she wants someone who can tame her. She believes she is too independent for Oak (Hardy
This dialogue and the few scenes involving Bathsheba and Oak preceding it establish a starting point for their relationship that grows and changes throughout the novel. Although Gabriel’s alterations are subtle, while Bathsheba continuously evolves, they both must undergo a transformation for their relationship to work in the end.

When Bathsheba and Gabriel meet again for the first time since his proposal, their positions have switched—Bathsheba is a landowner, and Gabriel is seeking employment as a lowly shepherd. Gabriel has recently lost all of his livestock because his young dog drove his sheep over a cliff. Dr. Kathryn Hughes, Professor of Victorian history, writes that during the Victorian Age, a man was expected to have enough financial stability to support a wife and children if he wanted to marry (Hughes). Thus, when Gabriel realizes the extent of his poverty, he praises God that he is not married, for he would have dragged a wife into that state with him, demonstrating his selfless nature (Hardy 33). He eventually reaches Weatherbury, where he finds himself face to face with Bathsheba as he rushes to put out a fire on her farm (Hardy 39). Except this time, their exchange consists of his asking for a job as a shepherd “in an abashed and sad voice,” and Bathsheba feels both pity and triumph in finding him in this state and herself in a higher one (Hardy 43). Their new relationship thus starts out very formally and somewhat awkwardly. Assuming the role as a landowner, Bathsheba gathers all her workers in her kitchen to discuss their wages and positions. Gabriel is surprised by the impartiality with which she treats him. He observes no one would guess that they had known each other previously (Hardy 72). However, Gabriel does not show any sign of wishing to renew the sentiments he once expressed to Bathsheba due to the change of circumstances. However, their relationship becomes more involved and tumultuous when Bathsheba begins to ask Gabriel for advice. After Mr. Boldwood begins pursuing her due to the Valentine she sent him, and Gabriel honestly confronts her about
toying with Boldwood’s emotions, Bathsheba becomes furious that someone would judge her so and orders Gabriel to leave the farm by the end of the week. Oak, hating that he is so disposable to her, tells her he would rather leave at once (Hardy 118). Both of their tempers get the best of them in this situation.

By now, Gabriel has already begun making steps toward improving his station by becoming an essential part of the farm, even before Bathsheba orders him away. Soon after Oak leaves, all of Bathsheba’s sheep become sick, and Oak is the only one who can save them. Bathsheba expects Gabriel to do whatever she demands, so at first, she simply insists he return. When this does not work, she pleadingly writes to him, saying, “Do not desert me, Gabriel!” (Hardy 123). He returns and saves Bathsheba’s farm from ruin, showing his importance to her business. When Bathsheba’s crops are on the verge of being destroyed by a storm, Oak resolves to save them, while the man who should be concerned about them, Sergeant Troy, who is now Bathsheba’s husband and the master of all she owns, remains in the barn in a drunken haze. While Oak tries to rationalize his extreme effort to save Bathsheba’s crops to himself, the narrator remarks that his true reason is this: “I will help to my last breath the woman I have loved so dearly” (Hardy 213). Once Bathsheba learns that Troy has supposedly drowned, she seems to give up, slipping into a state of detachment. She comes to terms with her limitations. This results in Bathsheba officially appointing Oak as bailiff (Hardy 289). Oak also begins to supervise Boldwood’s Lower Farm at the request of Boldwood himself, who is already slipping into madness. Oak steadily becomes wealthier and some even consider him to be a “near man,” meaning almost a gentleman (Hardy 290). He finally returns to the point of once again becoming a landowner at the end of the story when he is to take over the Lower Farm from Boldwood, who
has been given himself up for the murder of Bathsheba’s husband (Hardy 343). For the first time in the novel, Bathsheba and Oak are of an equal class.

It is now incumbent on Bathsheba to change herself, meaning something within herself. In order to marry Gabriel, she must fall in love with him. To do this, she has to discover that having a man by her side is not something that will weaken her but giver her strength. When Bathsheba inherits her uncle’s farm, she finds a new companion in Liddy. After Bathsheba declines to meet Boldwood when he first comes to her house, the subject of courtship arises and Liddy asks Bathsheba if she has ever been proposed to. Bathsheba answers that she has but that he was not good enough for her. This is interesting remark because one of the excuses Bathsheba originally gives Oak for refusing him at Norcombe Hill is her own poverty at the time when she was working for her aunt. Therefore, it is possible that Gabriel is not deemed worthy of her because she does not love him. This also seems ironic because at the time, she did not want a husband, so she is altering the story. She does admit to Liddy that she likes him, without mentioning who he is (Hardy 68). By this time, Bathsheba is also very busy running her own farm. Hughes describes the separate spheres of Victorian England as women, who were considered more fragile, remaining in the home, while men worked all day to provide a living for their families Therefore, Bathsheba defies the ideals of a Victorian women. She is more like a man, at this, point, even managing her own farm after firing her bailiff. However, Bathsheba’s independent streak alters significantly as soon as she attracts the attention of suitors. Boldwood is well-off and considered the closest thing to an aristocrat by society. Because of this, Bathsheba entertains the idea of marriage to him despite her lack of love for him. Troy, on the other hand, represents the passion she seeks. In her first moments of meeting Troy after his spur catches itself on the hem of her dress, the narrator remarks that “Bathsheba really knew not what to say”
to his bold and charming remarks, hinting that this may be the type of man Bathsheba needs to “tame” her (Hardy 144). Because of this, she ignores the fact that Troy is well below her social class. However, both men turn out to be a source of weakness for Bathsheba. Much later, after marrying Troy, Bathsheba confronts him about the other woman’s locks of hair in his watch. After fighting over this, Bathsheba exclaims how her once spirited self has been reduced to her current state—emotional, groveling, and pathetic (Hardy 239). Likewise, Boldwood also takes away part of Bathsheba’s independence, although it is subtler and more manipulative. After Troy supposedly drowns, Boldwood begins his old pursuit of Bathsheba. After conceding that she will consider marrying Boldwood in six years, Bathsheba finds herself discussing her problems with Gabriel after reviewing paperwork for the farm. She confesses, “I believe that if I don’t give my word he’ll go out of his mind” (Hardy 311). Because of her conscience, Bathsheba is coerced into an engagement into which she does not wish to enter, showing the Boldwood has a certain influence over her actions.

However, this is not the first time Bathsheba confides in Oak about her problems. While the other two men weaken her, she looks to Gabriel as a source of help and guidance. When Boldwood first begins pursuing Bathsheba, she goes to Oak and asks him to contradict any gossip he hears about her and Mr. Boldwood (Hardy 116). Here she goes to him with an agenda, but soon she will go to him as a confidant. After discovering Fanny had borne Troy’s son and that they have both died, Bathsheba longs to speak to Oak to gain strength. She even walks to his house, but upon arriving, decides she cannot bear to let him know the extent of her suffering (Hardy 258). In one of her final meetings with Oak, in which she tells him of her feeling responsible for Boldwood’s sanity, Bathsheba tells Oak that she likes to hear his opinion when it comes to morals (Hardy 312). She then reflects with disappointment that Gabriel does not speak
of marrying her himself. Although she believes him too poor to do so, she is still hurt that he does not convey this desire (Hardy 313). While Bathsheba has always been vain in the sense that she longs for men to notice her, she has never once mentioned that she wishes for a man to speak of marriage up until now, suggesting that something within her has changed in regards to Gabriel.

What ultimately brings Gabriel and Bathsheba together is a final change in Gabriel—his willingness to actually leave Bathsheba, believing that she will never be his. After Troy has been killed by Boldwood, Gabriel reveals to Bathsheba that he is leaving England and going to California (Hardy 343). Bathsheba finds herself distressed that Gabriel will be “leaving her to fight her battles alone” (Hardy 344). She has also taken Gabriel’s presence in her life for granted. The narrator states, “She was aggrieved and wounded that the possession of hopeless love from Gabriel, which she had grown to regard as her inalienable right for life, should have been withdrawn just at his own pleasure in this way” (Hardy 345). It is the sudden realization that she could lose Gabriel forever that drives Bathsheba to seek him out at his home, an action that violates all rules of Victorian courtship. But it is her willingness to finally break society’s standards in regards to Gabriel that results in their engagement. After they decide to marry, the narrator remarks that the best love results from people first knowing one another’s flaws. He further argues that they have a companionship of “similar pursuits” and that it is the only love stronger than death (Hardy 348). And they do marry, creating such a union.

Thus, Bathsheba and Gabriel’s relationship evolves into an ideal Victorian relationship. Not only are they of an equal social class, making their relationship acceptable in Victorian society (“Victorian Era Courtship Rules and Marriage”), but they are also in love. And while their love takes a considerable amount of time to grow, it results in a relationship that will outlast
not only Bathsheba’s entanglement with Boldwood and terrible marriage to Troy, but it will also outlast any other obstacles and challenges life decides to hand them. When reflecting, it becomes clear that all the change experienced by both characters had to happen so that Bathsheba would consent to their marriage. Gabriel is prepared to marry Bathsheba at the beginning of the story, despite her being of a lower social class and her lack of love toward him. He seems to have always known that they would be good for each other. However, Bathsheba has a certain ideal of marriage that has been presented by society. While she defies gender roles in other ways throughout, she seems adamant about achieving what everyone, including herself, would consider a proper marriage. This is why Gabriel must rise to a higher social class, and she must fall in love with him before she can accept his hand. Therefore, Bathsheba’s relationship with Gabriel represents the sense of duty towards society women can feel, even though they wish to be so much more than what society allows. But despite all the feelings of obligation experienced by Bathsheba, Oak has always loved her for herself, something that a mentally-unhinged Boldwood and Troy, “a rake” (Hardy 180), could not do. She is fortunate to have found someone so consistent and steady, despite all of the trials she has put him through. Although Bathsheba believed that Oak was not the type of man to tame her, he does. He brings her a sense of security and peace that no one else could provide.
Works Cited


The stunt to romantic relationships has been the cherry on top of the massive devastation that Covid has left people across the US, with nearly 500,000 people dead from the virus and millions of Americans unemployed. It is a sad but unsurprising fact that rates of anxiety and depression have soared during the pandemic. Psychologists and relationship experts say the pandemic has no doubt made people reconsider their relationships, especially as quarantine began to highlight longstanding issues. Kerry Lusignan, a licensed mental health counselor and founder of Northampton Couples Therapy said her clinic had been getting up to a hundred calls a week from couples seeking help.

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