Far from the Madding Crowd [1874] by Thomas Hardy

Session 4, February 2026 - Points to Ponder

1. **Chapter 36, provides a very long run up to the storm. What is the purpose of this chapter what does it tell us and how does that information add to the story?**

2. **"Bathsheba, don't be so fitful and jealous. You knew what married life would be like, and shouldn't have entered it if you feared these contingencies."**
   What does this quotation say about the relationship between Troy and Bathsheba?

3. **The narrator comments on Bathsheba's situation by saying : "Oh, if she had never stooped to folly of this kind, respectable as it was, and could only stand again, as she had stood on the hill at Norcombe, and dare Troy or any other man to pollute a hair of her head by his interference!**
   What does this imply about women and marriage?

4. **Why does Hardy include the chapter on Joseph's journey with Fanny's coffin? Is it necessary?**

5. **Looking at Chapter 40 of *Far From the Madding Crowd* and the two extracts below from Gaskell's *Mary Barton* and *Ruth*, what are the similarities and differences in the way fallen women are treated?**
   Which author do you feel is the most sympathetic and why?

Mary Barton

"Why, Esther! Where han ye been this many a year? Where han ye been wandering that we none of us could find you out?"

The question was asked thoughtlessly, but answered with fierce earnestness.

"Where have I been? What have I been doing? Why do you torment me with questions like these? Can you not guess? But the story of my life is wanted to give force to my speech, afterwards I will tell it you. Nay! don't change your fickle mind now, and say you don't want to hear it. You must hear it, and I must tell it; and then see after Mary, and take care she does not become like me. As she is loving now, so did I love once; one above me far." She remarked not, in her own absorption, the change in Jem's breathing, the sudden clutch at the wall which told the fearfully vivid interest he took in what she said. "He was so handsome, so kind! Well, the regiment was ordered to Chester (did I tell you he was an officer?), and he could not bear to part from me, nor I from him, so he took me with him. I never thought poor Mary would have taken it so to heart! I always meant to send for her to pay me a visit when I was married; for, mark you! he promised me marriage. They all do. Then came three years of happiness. I suppose I ought not to have been happy, but I was. I had a little girl, too. Oh! the sweetest darling that ever was seen! But I must not think of her," putting her hand wildly up to her forehead, "or I shall go mad; I shall."

"Don't tell me any more about yoursel," said Jem, soothingly.

"What! you're tired already, are you? but I'll tell you; as you've asked for it, you shall hear it. I won't recall the agony of the past for nothing. I will have the relief of telling it. Oh, how happy I was!"—sinking her voice into a plaintive child-like manner. "It came like a shot on me when one day he came to me and told me he was ordered to Ireland, and must leave me behind; at Bristol we then were."

Jem muttered some words; she caught their meaning, and in a pleading voice continued,

"Oh, don't abuse him; don't speak a word against him! You don't know how I love him yet; yet, when I am sunk so low. You don't guess how kind he was. He gave me fifty pound before we parted, and I knew he could ill spare it. Don't, Jem, please," as his muttered indignation rose again. For her

sake he ceased. "I might have done better with the money; I see now. But I did not know the value of money. Formerly I had earned it easily enough at the factory, and as I had no more sensible wants, I spent it on dress and on eating. While I lived with him, I had it for asking; and fifty pounds would, I thought, go a long way. So I went back to Chester, where I'd been so happy, and set up a small-ware shop, and hired a room near. We should have done well, but alas! alas! my little girl fell ill, and I could not mind my shop and her too; and things grew worse and worse. I sold my goods any how to get money to buy her food and medicine; I wrote over and over again to her father for help, but he must have changed his quarters, for I never got an answer. The landlord seized the few bobbins and tapes I had left, for shop-rent; and the person to whom the mean little room, to which we had been forced to remove, belonged, threatened to turn us out unless his rent was paid; it had run on many weeks, and it was winter, cold bleak winter; and my child was so ill, so ill, and I was starving. And I could not bear to see her suffer, and forgot how much better it would be for us to die together;—oh her moans, her moans, which money would give me the means of relieving! So I went out into the street, one January night—Do you think God will punish me for that?" she asked with wild vehemence, almost amounting to insanity, and shaking Jem's arm in order to force an answer from him.

But before he could shape his heart's sympathy into words, her voice had lost its wildness, and she spoke with the quiet of despair.

"But it's no matter! I've done that since, which separates us as far asunder as heaven and hell can be." Her voice rose again to the sharp pitch of agony. "My darling! my darling! even after death I may not see thee, my own sweet one! She was so good—like a little angel. What is that text, I don't remember,—that text mother used to teach me when I sat on her knee long ago; it begins, 'Blessed are the pure'"—

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

"Ay, that's it! It would break mother's heart if she knew what I am now—it did break Mary's heart, you see. And now I recollect it was about her child I wanted so to see you, Jem. You know Mary Barton, don't you?" said she, trying to collect her thoughts.

Yes, Jem knew her. How well, his beating heart could testify!

"Well, there's something to do for her; I forget what; wait a minute! She is so like my little girl;" said she, raising her eyes, glistening with unshed tears, in search of the sympathy of Jem's countenance.

He deeply pitied her; but oh! how he longed to recall her mind to the subject of Mary, and the lover above her in rank, and the service to be done for her sake. But he controlled himself to silence. After awhile, she spoke again, and in a calmer voice.

"When I came to Manchester (for I could not stay in Chester after her death), I found you all out very soon. And yet I never thought my poor sister was dead. I suppose I would not think so. I used to watch about the court where John lived, for many and many a night, and gather all I could about them from the neighbours' talk; for I never asked a question. I put this and that together, and followed one, and listened to the other; many's the time I've watched the policeman off his beat, and peeped through the chink of the window-shutter to see the old room, and sometimes Mary or her father sitting up late for some reason or another. I found out Mary went to learn dress-making, and I began to be frightened for her; for it's a bad life for a girl to be out late at night in the streets, and after many an hour of weary work, they're ready to follow after any novelty that makes a little change. But I made up my mind, that bad as I was, I could watch over Mary and perhaps keep her from harm. So I used to wait for her at nights, and follow her home, often when she little knew any one was near her. There was one of her companions I never could abide, and I'm sure that girl is at the bottom of some mischief. By-and-bye, Mary's walks homewards were not alone. She was joined soon after she came out, by a man; a gentleman. I began to fear for her, for I saw she was light-hearted, and pleased with his attentions; and I thought worse of him for having such long talks with that bold girl I told you of. But I was laid up for a long time with spitting of blood; and could do nothing. I'm sure it made me worse, thinking about what might be happening to Mary. And when I came out, all was going on as before, only she seemed fonder of him than ever; and oh Jem! her father won't listen to me, and it's you must save Mary! You're like a brother to her, and maybe could give her advice and watch over her, and at any rate John will hearken to you; only he's so stern and so cruel." She began to cry a little at the remembrance of his harsh words; but Jem cut her short by his hoarse, stern inquiry,

"Who is this spark that Mary loves? Tell me his name!"

"It's young Carson, old Carson's son, that your father worked for."

There was a pause. She broke the silence.

"Oh! Jem, I charge you with the care of her! I suppose it would be murder to kill her, but it would be better for her to die than to live to lead such a life as I do. Do you hear me, Jem?"

Ruth

Iss, indeed, miss; the carriage drove from the door as I came upstairs. You'll see it now on the Yspytty road, if you'll please to come to the window of No. 24."

Ruth started up, and followed the chambermaid. Aye, there it was, slowly winding up the steep white road, on which it seemed to move at a snail's pace.

She might overtake him—she might—she might speak one farewell word to him, print his face on her heart with a last look—nay, when he saw her he might retract, and not utterly, for ever, leave her. Thus she thought; and she flew back to her room, and snatching up her bonnet, ran, tying the strings with her trembling hands as she went down the stairs, out at the nearest door, little heeding the angry words of Mrs Morgan; for the hostess, more irritated at Mrs Bellingham's severe upbraiding at parting, than mollified by her ample payment, was offended by the circumstance of Ruth, in her wild haste, passing through the prohibited front door.

But Ruth was away before Mrs Morgan had finished her speech, out and away, scudding along the road, thought-lost in the breathless rapidity of her motion. Though her heart and head beat almost to bursting, what did it signify if she could but overtake the carriage? It was a nightmare, constantly evading the most passionate wishes and endeavours, and constantly gaining ground. Every time it was visible it was in fact more distant, but Ruth would not believe it. If she could but gain the summit of that weary, everlasting hill, she believed that she could run again, and would soon be nigh upon the carriage. As she ran, she prayed with wild eagerness; she prayed that she might see his face once more, even if she died on the spot before him. It was one of those prayers which God is too merciful to grant; but despairing and wild as it was, Ruth put her soul into it, and prayed it again, and yet again.

Wave above wave of the ever-rising hills were gained, were crossed, and at last Ruth struggled up to the very top and stood on the bare table of moor, brown and purple, stretching far away till it was lost in the haze of the summer afternoon; and the white road was all flat before her, but the carriage she sought and the figure she sought had disappeared. There was no human being there; a few wild, black-faced mountain sheep quietly grazing near the road, as if it were long since they had been disturbed by the passing of any vehicle, was all the life she saw on the bleak moorland.

She threw herself down on the ling by the side of the road in despair. Her only hope was to die, and she believed she was dying. She could not think; she could believe anything. Surely life was a horrible dream, and God would mercifully awaken her from it. She had no penitence, no consciousness of error or offence; no knowledge of any one circumstance but that he was gone. Yet afterwards, long afterwards, she remembered the exact motion of a bright green beetle busily meandering among the wild thyme near her, and she recalled the musical, balanced, wavering drop of a skylark into her nest near the heather-bed where she lay. The sun was sinking low, the hot air had ceased to quiver near the hotter earth, when she bethought her once more of the note which she had impatiently thrown down before half mastering its contents. "Oh, perhaps," she thought, "I have been too hasty. There may be some words of explanation from him on the other side of the page, to which, in my blind anguish, I never turned. I will go and find it."

She lifted herself heavily and stiffly from the crushed heather. She stood dizzy and confused with her change of posture; and was so unable to move at first, that her walk was but slow and tottering; but, by-and-by, she was tasked and goaded by thoughts which forced her into rapid motion, as if, by it, she could escape from her agony. She came down on the level ground, just as many gay or peaceful groups were sauntering leisurely home with hearts at ease; with low laughs and quiet smiles, and many an exclamation at the beauty of the summer evening.

Ever since her adventure with the little boy and his sister, Ruth had habitually avoided encountering these happy—innocents, may I call them?—these happy fellow-mortals! And even now, the habit

grounded on sorrowful humiliation had power over her; she paused, and then, on looking back, she saw more people who had come into the main road from a side path. She opened a gate into a pasture-field, and crept up to the hedge-bank until all should have passed by, and she could steal into the inn unseen. She sat down on the sloping turf by the roots of an old hawthorn-tree which grew in the hedge; she was still tearless with hot burning eyes; she heard the merry walkers pass by; she heard the footsteps of the village children as they ran along to their evening play; she saw the small black cows come into the fields after being milked; and life seemed yet abroad. When would the world be still and dark, and fit for such a deserted, desolate creature as she was? Even in her hiding-place she was not long at peace. The little children, with their curious eyes peering here and there, had peeped through the hedge, and through the gate, and now they gathered from all the four corners of the hamlet, and crowded round the gate; and one more adventurous than the rest had run into the field to cry, "Gi' me a halfpenny," which set the example to every little one, emulous of his boldness; and there, where she sat, low on the ground, and longing for the sure hiding-place earth gives to the weary, the children kept running in, and pushing one another forwards, and laughing. Poor things; their time had not come for understanding what sorrow is. Ruth would have begged them to leave her alone, and not madden her utterly; but they knew no English save the one eternal "Gi' me a halfpenny." She felt in her heart that there was no pity anywhere. Suddenly, while she thus doubted God, a shadow fell across her garments, on which her miserable eyes were bent. She looked up. The deformed gentleman she had twice before seen, stood there. He had been attracted by the noisy little crowd, and had questioned them in Welsh, but not understanding enough of the language to comprehend their answers, he had obeyed their signs, and entered the gate to which they pointed. There he saw the young girl whom he had noticed at first for her innocent beauty, and the second time for the idea he had gained respecting her situation; there he saw her, crouched up like some hunted creature, with a wild, scared look of despair, which almost made her lovely face seem fierce; he saw her dress soiled and dim, her bonnet crushed and battered with her tossings to and fro on the moorland bed; he saw the poor, lost wanderer, and when he saw her, he had compassion on her.

There was some look of heavenly pity in his eyes, as gravely and sadly they met her upturned gaze, which touched her stony heart. Still looking at him, as if drawing some good influence from him, she said low and mournfully, "He has left me, sir!—sir, he has indeed—he has gone and left me!"

Before he could speak a word to comfort her, she had burst into the wildest, dreariest crying ever mortal cried. The settled form of the event, when put into words, went sharp to her heart; her moans and sobs wrung his soul; but as no speech of his could be heard, if he had been able to decide what best to say, he stood by her in apparent calmness, while she, wretched, wailed and uttered her woe. But when she lay worn out, and stupefied into silence, she heard him say to himself, in a low voice:

"Oh, my God! for Christ's sake, pity her!"

Ruth lifted up her eyes, and looked at him with a dim perception of the meaning of his words. She regarded him fixedly in a dreamy way, as if they struck some chord in her heart, and she were listening to its echo; and so it was. His pitiful look, or his words, reminded her of the childish days when she knelt at her mother's knee, and she was only conscious of a straining, longing desire to recall it all.

He let her take her time, partly because he was powerfully affected himself by all the circumstances, and by the sad pale face upturned to his; and partly by an instinctive consciousness that the softest patience was required. But suddenly she startled him, as she herself was startled into a keen sense of the suffering agony of the present; she sprang up and pushed him aside, and went rapidly towards the gate of the field. He could not move as quickly as most men, but he put forth his utmost speed. He followed across the road, on to the rocky common; but as he went along, with his uncertain gait, in the dusk gloaming, he stumbled, and fell over some sharp projecting stone. The acute pain which shot up his back forced a short cry from him; and, when bird and beast are hushed into rest and the stillness of the night is over all, a high-pitched sound, like the voice of pain, is carried far in the quiet air. Ruth, speeding on in her despair, heard the sharp utterance, and stopped suddenly short. It did what no remonstrance could have done; it called her out of herself. The tender nature was in her still, in that hour when all good angels seemed to have abandoned her. In the old days she could never bear to hear or see bodily suffering in any of God's meanest creatures, without trying to succour them; and now, in her rush to the awful death of the suicide, she stayed her wild steps, and turned to find from whom that sharp sound of anguish had issued.

He lay among the white stones, too faint with pain to move, but with an agony in his mind far keener than any bodily pain, as he thought that by his unfortunate fall he had lost all chance of saving her. He was almost overpowered by his intense thankfulness when he saw her white figure pause, and stand listening, and turn again with slow footsteps, as if searching for some lost thing. He could hardly speak, but he made a sound which, though his heart was inexpressibly glad, was like a groan. She came quickly towards him.

"I am hurt," said he; "do not leave me;" his disabled and tender frame was overcome by the accident and the previous emotions, and he fainted away. Ruth flew to the little mountain stream, the dashing sound of whose waters had been tempting her, but a moment before, to seek forgetfulness in the deep pool into which they fell. She made a basin of her joined hands, and carried enough of the cold fresh water back to dash into his face and restore him to consciousness. While he still kept silence, uncertain what to say best fitted to induce her to listen to him, she said softly:

"Are you better, sir?—are you very much hurt?"

6. **Leslie Stephens, the editor of the *Cornhill*, refused to publish the part with Fanny and the baby in the coffin? Why do you think Stephens believed this was not suitable for *Cornhill* readers? What are your views on this section?**

7. **Does Troy's response to Fanny's death and his visit to her grave in any way redeem him for his actions? How does this episode affect the reader's response to Troy?**

8. **How does Troy's portrayal stack up against Gaskell's portrayal of bad husbands?**

9. **In what ways does Bathsheba's isolation from a support network influence her decision to marry Troy? How far is Liddy a responsible and reliable confidante?**