

Chapter 7

Indifferent Tragedy in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*

The Incoherence of the Critical Tradition on *Mayor*

For the novels of Jane Austen, quantitative methods provide new evidence on disputed issues, offer opportunities for confirming and refining the best insights of traditional criticism, and provide a deeper and more systematic understanding of her underlying designs. For *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, quantitative analysis gives occasion for a more radical intervention in the critical tradition. On the thematic and tonal structures of Jane Austen's novels, critics have reached a very high degree of consensus. Most major differences arise only at the highest level of thematic reduction—the level at which common observations are located within global theoretical paradigms. In Austen's case, global theories have little impact on the analytic summary that constitutes the bulk of most criticism. *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, in contrast, presents a major interpretive puzzle.

Virtually all the previous criticism on *Mayor* has tried to interpret the novel by invoking one of three standard models of tragedy: retributive justice, Promethean revolt, and redemptive transformation. These three models are incompatible with one another, and none of them accords well with the demonstrable, quantifiable facts—the attributes of the characters and the emotional responses of readers. The critical tradition has failed to produce a consensus because none of the three models gives a satisfactory account of how the novel works. Each model leaves too much out, or distorts too much of what it tries to take in. Successfully reinterpreting *Mayor* would demonstrate that quantitative methods can solve problems that have baffled

traditional methods. In this chapter, we first give an exposition of our results, then examine the critical tradition on the novel, contrasting the traditional models with the implications of the data produced by our respondents.

In *Mayor*, Hardy fundamentally disrupts the agonistic structures that typically govern reader response. We had 62 respondents providing scores for the main character, Michael Henchard. A large majority (54) identify Henchard as a protagonist, but the scores they give him on motivations and personality are overwhelmingly those that usually characterize antagonists. In previous chapters, we have described several agonistically borderline characters—Becky Sharp, Dorian Gray, Catherine Earnshaw, Kurtz, and Marianne Dashwood. In each of those cases, we trace out predictable correlations among the agonistically mixed attributes of the character (motives and personality) and the emotional responses of readers. Problematic personalities produce dissonant emotional responses, and so it is also with Henchard. But the disruptions in the pattern of emotional response run still deeper in *Mayor*. The two characters who have protagonistic profiles, Farfrae and Elizabeth-Jane, are not designated as protagonists by our respondents. Henchard himself scores just at average on the emotional response factor Interest, and every other character scores far below average on Interest. Hardy has designed the novel in such a way as to disconnect readers emotionally from the events of the story.

These findings suggest two alternative interpretive approaches. If we were to assume that readers should be emotionally invested in the outcome of the story, we would have little choice but to declare the novel a failure. The alternative would be to ask what other psychological functions the novel might fulfill for the reader. Declaring the novel a failure would run up against its canonical standing as one of Hardy's major works. The fact that Hardy is the author would not in itself be sufficient to confer canonical status. Hardy's unevenness—his similarity to the little girl with a curl in the middle of her forehead—is notorious. How many literary scholars would claim major canonical standing for *A Pair of Blue Eyes* or *Two on a Tower*? It seems unlikely, then, that the novel is simply a failure. Here, we take the second approach, offering a new interpretation by identifying a different kind of psychological function that we think the novel fulfills.

The critics' failure to achieve consensus on *Mayor* runs deeper than might at first appear. It is not just that one set of critics disagrees with another set. Each set disagrees with itself. More than two-thirds of the 85 respondents on *Mayor* had published on some aspect of Hardy's

work, and nearly one-third (25) had published directly on *Mayor*. In using the data to demonstrate the inadequacy of the standard interpretive models, we thus turn the readers' observations against their own interpretations. The interpretive models do not fit the facts, and the facts are the particular observations made by the critics using the models. This situation might seem a little shocking, but disparities between particular observations and larger interpretive models are a common fact of everyday life. If they seem particularly disturbing in an interpretive, scholarly tradition, that is only because we wrongly assume that professional scholarly training eliminates conceptual incoherence. Such training usually produces high levels of fluency and acuity in arguing a case, but that sort of proficiency guarantees no ultimate conceptual coherence, either in theoretical vision or in practical criticism.

A Separate Website for *Mayor*

We set up a separate website for *Mayor* and solicited respondents separately from the solicitations for the other novels in this study. We wanted to collect enough data on enough characters to give a thorough quantitative analysis of at least one novel. We chose *Mayor* because it is relatively compact, has only a few major characters, and has unusual agonistic and tonal features that make it particularly inviting for comparative analysis—that is, for comparing scores on individual characters with average scores from the larger data set. The six characters we listed from *Mayor* are Michael Henchard; his wife Susan; his stepdaughter Elizabeth-Jane; his rival Donald Farfrae; Lucetta Templeman, the woman for whose favors Henchard and Farfrae enter into competition; and Newson, the sailor who, at the beginning of the novel, buys Henchard's wife and daughter from him.

The website questionnaire for *Mayor* differed from that of the larger data set in only one respect. For the website using a single questionnaire of 2,000 characters, we could not ask questions about romantic relationships between specific characters. The questionnaire had to be applicable to any character selected from the list. For the characters in *Mayor*, we could ask readers to identify the mate-selection criteria that each individual character uses in selecting another specific character for a mate.

We solicited participation in the *Mayor* study by directly contacting scholars who had published on Hardy and particularly on *Mayor* and on other Hardy novels. We also advertised the study on the

website of the Thomas Hardy Association and listservs associated with the study of Victorian literature. Using information on age, sex, level of education, when and why the novel was read, and the publishing history of the respondents, we determined that a total of 85 individual coders responded to the survey. Fifty-one were males, 34 females. The youngest respondent was 23, and only 8 respondents were under the age of 30. All had college degrees. Nine had a bachelor's degree, 21 a master's, and 55 a doctorate. In other words, 89 percent, nearly nine out of ten, had advanced degrees. Twenty-five had published on *Mayor*; another 23 had published on some other novel by Hardy; and another 10 had published on some other aspect of Hardy's work. Thus, a total of 58 out of the 85 (68 percent) had published on some aspect of Hardy's work. Sixty-seven respondents reported having read the novel within the past five years, and 31 within the past year. Fifty-five (65 percent) read it either for teaching a class or for "professional purposes." In sum, the respondents were well-informed, competent readers. They knew their Hardy. Several respondents completed more than one protocol. A total of 124 protocols were completed.

On scores for substantive categories such as motives and emotional responses, the respondents to *Mayor* had remarkably high intercoder reliability scores. As we note in chapter 4, in most psychological research, alpha values above .70 are considered acceptable, and alphas from .80 to .90 range are considered good. Values above .90 are normally achieved only by trained professionals. In the responses to the characters in *Mayor*, the averaged alpha values for the various categories were as follows: character success (.83); motives (.91); mate selection (.86); emotional responses (.78); and personality factors (.82). The lowest alpha values were for Newson, a relatively minor character who received only five codings. If we exclude Newson's alpha values, the averaged alpha values are as follows: ~~agonistic characteristics~~ (.87); motives (.93); mate selection (.86); emotional responses (.88); and personality factors (.91). All of these averaged alpha values are either good or very good. In other words, there was a high level of consensus among the respondents on all the substantive categories of analysis.

Clearly, the respondents converged to a high degree on their assessments of the attributes of the characters and also on their emotional responses to the characters. Role assignments are another matter. There, we find wider than usual variation (table 7.1). That variation is one of the main clues to the kind of interpretive puzzle that *Mayor* presents.

Table 7.1 Number of respondents voting for each role assignment in *Mayor*

Character	Protag	Good Minor	Antag	Bad Minor	“Other”	Sum	Consensus Rating ^a
Henchard	54	0	4	0	4	62	87%
Farfrae	1	7	9	1	3	21	43%
E-Jane	2	7	0	1	2	12	58%
Lucetta	2	3	3	1	1	10	30%
Susan	1	9	1	0	3	14	64%
Newson	0	0	3	1	1	5	60%

^a The consensus rating is derived by dividing the number of respondents voting for the majority role assignment by the total number of respondents.

Consensus ratings on Role Assignments

Respondents largely agree that Henchard is the protagonist. They are strongly divided about the roles to be assigned to Farfrae, Elizabeth-Jane, Lucetta, Newson, and Susan. All except Lucetta are in some ways more attractive or more typically “good” than Henchard, but their role assignment is defined in relation to him. If we add the total number of respondents for all the characters who agree on role assignment, and divide that number by the total number of respondents, the total consensus rating on role assignment for *Mayor* is 69 percent. The comparable consensus rating for all 206 multiply coded characters in the larger data set website is 81 percent.

“Interest” as a Key to the Tonal Structure of *Mayor*

Had we started with *Mayor*, and studied it alone, we could never have derived a clear idea of the standard agonistic structure of the novels of the period. The consensus level for assigning characters to roles in *Mayor* is low, and the assignment of roles puts strong pressure on the standard agonistic logic articulated in the relations among personality, motives, mate-selection criteria, and emotional responses. Henchard is a protagonist with an antagonistic profile, and he comes into sharp conflict, in one way or another, with Farfrae and with Newson. As a result, those two characters are identified as antagonists, but their scores on motive factors and personality factors are not like those of standard antagonists. Newson’s profile is that of a good minor character. In motive factors, Farfrae’s profile combines

protagonistic and antagonistic features, but his personality profile is emphatically that of a protagonist.

Elizabeth-Jane has a profile that is clearly that of a female protagonist, but she is identified as a good minor character. Moreover, her score on Main Feature (-.11) indicates that the success or failure of her hopes and efforts is not a main feature in the outcome of the story. She nonetheless has an important function in the story. She provides a point of view wider and more comprehensive than that of any of the other characters. As several of the best critics of the novel have observed, her perspective on the success or failure of other characters is very similar to Hardy's own. The attitude implicit in her motives and personality thus offers a guide to the emotional and tonal quality of the story as Hardy himself conceives it.

All novels perform some kind of psychological work. They activate the emotions and imaginative responses of readers and lead the readers through an integrated emotional process culminating in some kind of conclusion or point of rest ("resolution"). Most of the novels in our data set seek in a fairly simple and direct way to involve the reader in the story, to engage the reader's sympathy for one or more main characters. That sort of involvement is registered in part through the emotional response factor "Interest." This factor has moderate positive loadings from Admiration and Liking, but the main element in Interest is a strong negative loading from Indifference. Characters who score low on Interest typically receive very high scores on Indifference. That is, the readers indicate that they are highly indifferent to the character. A high score on Interest suggests that the readers care what happens to the character, though not always in a positive way. Count Dracula scores as high in Interest as Dorothea Brooke. Readers do not want Dracula to succeed, but they do care whether he succeeds or not. They want him to fail. (His score on Root For is -.88.) Interest is qualitatively distinct from the evaluatively charged response of Dislike, which constitutes a measure of positive or negative emotional valence. Otherwise, they would not be separate factors. Interest is qualitatively distinct also from Sorrow, which constitutes a measure of sympathy or compassion.

In one of the earliest published responses to *Mayor*, an anonymous critic observed that the novel "does not contain a single character capable of arousing a passing interest in his or her welfare."¹ As the scores on Interest in our study indicate, this critic's observation of the fact is correct, but the inference that the critic draws from that fact is erroneous. The critic presupposes that some sort of passionate involvement with characters is an indispensable requirement in all

novels, so that the absence of interest is merely a defect, and a large one. Passional involvement is indeed a common way in which novels work, but it is not the only possible way, and it is not the way *Mayor* works. What Hardy is after in this novel is something fairly unusual, peculiar to Hardy, and perhaps more fully exemplified in this particular novel than in any other novel by Hardy. What Hardy is after is in fact something like the reverse of Interest. The kind of psychological work that Hardy accomplishes in *Mayor* is that of gaining a reflective detachment from the story that he depicts. He seeks himself to achieve a defensive, stoic stance against both passion and the vagaries of circumstance. Within the story itself, as a participant observer, Elizabeth-Jane embodies that stance.

The actions in the plot of *Mayor* are like a roller coaster ride of wildly changing fortunes—especially the fortunes of Henchard, Susan, and Lucetta. In the opening chapter, Henchard is 21 years old. Embittered at being held back and burdened by family responsibilities, he gets drunk and sells his wife and infant daughter at a country fair. Within the next 20 years, he becomes a wealthy and respected corn merchant and is elected mayor of the market town Casterbridge. Meanwhile, his wife Susan has lived with Newson, the man who bought her. Her child from the marriage with Henchard has died, but she has another child with Newson. Both children are named Elizabeth-Jane. Newson is lost at sea, and Susan returns to Henchard, deceiving him by telling him that Newson's child, now grown, is his child. He remarries her, but she dies soon after. Shortly after her death, Henchard tells Elizabeth-Jane that she is his daughter and asks her to take his name, but almost immediately after that he discovers that Elizabeth-Jane is not in fact his daughter. He does not tell her that he had been deceived in believing himself her father, but he becomes cold and hostile toward her. Since her arrival in Casterbridge, Elizabeth-Jane has been romantically interested in Henchard's young protégé Farfrae, who had come to Casterbridge without place or prospect. Farfrae loses interest in Elizabeth-Jane and takes up instead with Lucetta, who previously, unbeknownst to him, was Henchard's mistress. Henchard began his relationship with Farfrae by being overbearingly friendly, but he becomes jealous of Farfrae's popularity. Henchard becomes bitterly antagonistic to Farfrae, and they become competitors in business. After Susan's death, Henchard also becomes Farfrae's rival for Lucetta, and her preference for Farfrae embitters Henchard still further. Farfrae and Lucetta marry. Henchard attempts to kill Farfrae by throwing him out of a hay loft, but relents and breaks down in remorse. Lucetta becomes pregnant with Farfrae's child, but her past

with Henchard is made public. She becomes hysterical, has a seizure, and dies through complications with the pregnancy. In the period of just a few years after Susan's return, Henchard's fortunes decline drastically, and Farfrae's fortunes steadily rise. Henchard eventually loses both his wealth and his social position and is compelled to work as a lowly employee for Farfrae, who now dominates the corn trade and also becomes the new mayor of Casterbridge. Having lost his worldly position, Henchard seeks solace in establishing a bond with Elizabeth-Jane. They live together companionably for a while, but Elizabeth-Jane secretly renews her romantic relations with Farfrae, and then her biological father Newson reappears. Fearing to lose her, Henchard tells Newson that Elizabeth-Jane is dead. When his lie is about to be discovered, Henchard leaves Casterbridge to take up laboring work in a far district. He returns for Elizabeth-Jane's wedding, but she rejects him. He falls into despair, declines to eat, and dies.

Hardy worried about having cluttered the serial publication of the novel with sensational events, and he pruned and simplified the plot in the book version (Mallett xiv–xv). Even in its chastened form, the pace of the story is such that the rapidly shifting fortunes and love entanglements are like a spectacle seen through the wrong end of a telescope, a fantasmagoria of passion and folly, tinged with absurdity and futility.

To get a comparative sense of the level of interest, we can line up the Interest scores for the 48 most frequently coded characters in the larger data set, add the six characters from *Mayor* to the list, and then sort the scores in descending order (high to low). Out of the 54 characters, the four lowest scores on Interest are all from *Mayor* (Newson, Farfrae, Susan, and Lucetta). Henchard, though he excites strong emotional responses in Dislike and in Sorrow, nonetheless occupies the thirty-seventh position in the Interest scale, and Elizabeth-Jane, though she excites feelings of Admiration and Liking, occupies the forty-second position. Because the scores in the data set for the multinovel website are standardized, the average score for all characters is zero. For the 48 most frequently coded characters, the average score on Interest is .17. For the six characters in *Mayor*, the average Interest score is $-.81$ —nearly a standard deviation lower than the average for the most frequently coded characters. Given the proportions of the normal curve, about 79 percent of all characters in the multinovel website—major and minor together—have Interest scores higher than the average score for the six main characters in *Mayor*. If it is true that Hardy is seeking to damp down excitement, to discourage the emotional involvement of readers, he has evidently succeeded.

Achieving reflective, stoic detachment—gaining a calm and distant perspective on the transient ambitions and passions of human life and the changes of fortune—is not the most common kind of psychological work that a novel accomplishes, but it is a common strategy for coping with life, and it is altogether consistent with Hardy’s melancholy and philosophical temperament. Late in life, Hardy wrote a poem titled “For Life I Had Never Cared Greatly.” The sentiment declared in the title was untrue, but it did reflect one of Hardy’s persistent philosophical ambitions. He felt this ambition as an exceptionally keen need, because for life he had always cared very much, and he was thus vulnerable to all its travails.

Most commentators on the generic structure of *Mayor* have assumed that the novel operates along the usual lines of passional involvement with the protagonist, and they have often inferred that the protagonist must therefore evoke some strongly positive imaginative response in the reader. As our data indicate, in the case of *Mayor* these assumptions are erroneous and misleading. By examining the connections between the scores on the attributes of the characters, the emotional responses of readers, and agonistic role assignments, we can illuminate the way in which the false assumptions about passional involvement and positive emotional response obscure the actual tonal and perspectival structure of the novel.

Character Success

Farfrae, Henchard, and Susan all score fairly close to average on Root For; Lucetta scores far below average (−1.08) (figure 7.1). Only Elizabeth-Jane scores within the normal range for protagonists (.65), but Elizabeth-Jane is clearly a minor character and scores below average (−.11) on Main Feature (figure 7.1).

Henchard is very decidedly a Main Feature in the story, more so than any other character. As Hardy remarks in the General Preface for the Wessex edition of the novel, “The story is more particularly a study of one man’s deeds and character than, perhaps, any other of those included in my Exhibition of Wessex life.”²

In respect to the tonal structure of *Mayor*, the scores on Achieves Goals can best be understood by observing their relation to Root For. The correlation between Root For and Achieves Goals is a concise measure of “poetic justice,” the plot pattern in which everyone gets his or her just deserts. For all 435 characters in the multinovel website, the correlation between Root For and Achieves Goals is .44, a moderately high correlation. In novels that are designed particularly

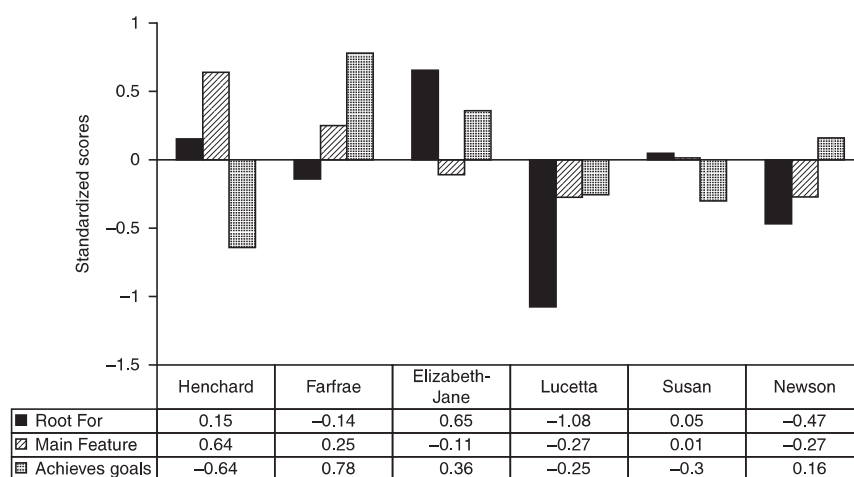


Figure 7.1 Character success in *Mayor of Casterbridge*.

to fulfill the readers' hopes and wishes, the correlation between Root For and Achieves Goals is very high. For the 17 Austen characters included in the 48 most frequently coded characters, the correlation between Root For and Achieves Goals is .77. For the four most frequently coded characters in *Jane Eyre*, the correlation is .92. For the six characters in *Mayor*, the correlation between Root For and Achieves Goals is .15—a very weak correlation. The low correlation between Root For and Achieves Goals in *Mayor* indicates that in this novel Hardy systematically disrupts any distinct pattern in the relation between the readers' sympathetic engagement with characters and the outcome of the story.

The issue of poetic justice is given a decisive priority in the culminating internal reflections on the meaning of the story. The last two paragraphs of the novel are devoted to summarizing Elizabeth-Jane's matured views on life, from her later perspective, and her final thoughts include reflections on the meaningless vagaries in the relations between merit and reward. "Her strong sense that neither she nor any human being deserved less than was given, did not blind her to the fact that there were others receiving less who had deserved much more."

Achieves Goals, Poetic Justice, and the 1880 Divide

To put Hardy's treatment of poetic justice into historical context, we compared scores for Root For and Achieves Goals before and after

1880. The period around 1880 forms a distinct historical watershed, a change in historical phase—the passing of the generation of the mid-Victorians, and the emergence of a new generation that was to be dominated creatively by James, Hardy, and Conrad. George Eliot died in 1880 and Anthony Trollope in 1882. (Thackeray had died in 1863 and Dickens in 1870.) On the basis of simple observation, a literary historian can recognize differences in the tone or mood of fiction in the mid-Victorian and later Victorian period. By scanning the plot outcomes for the major novelists of the later period, counting the number of happy and unhappy endings, and comparing these outcomes with outcomes in the works of the earlier major novelists such as Austen, Dickens, or Thackeray, one can readily enough see the difference. Austen, Dickens, and Thackeray have no endings for protagonists like those which occur for Hardy's protagonists Michael Henchard, Tess Durbeyfield, and Jude Fawley, for Decoult in Conrad's *Nostramo*, Edwin Reardon in Gissing's *New Grub Street*, or Dorian Gray in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

To gain a more precise sense of this difference, and assess its general validity across all the novelists represented in this study, we divided the novelists into those who flourished before 1880 and those who published most or all of their work after 1880, and we conducted a statistical test (one-way ANOVA) to compare the scores of the earlier and later protagonists on Character Success.

The total set of 435 characters in the multinovel website contains 128 protagonists—84 in novels by authors who flourished before 1880, and 44 in novels by authors who published all or most of their works after 1880. The protagonists of the two generations display no statistically significant differences on Root For or Main Feature, but they do display a statistically significant difference on Achieves Goals. (The protagonists of the earlier generations score .41 on Achieves Goals, and those of the later generation score $-.05$ [$p = .007$].) The protagonists of the later generation are simply not as successful, overall, in life.

Emotional Response Factors

There is a good deal of Sorrow in the story—for Henchard, Elizabeth-Jane, Lucetta, and Susan—but the low scores on Interest suggest a low level of intensity in emotional response (figure 7.2).

Henchard is unequivocally the protagonist, but he scores high on Dislike. Farfrae and Newson come into conflict with Henchard or present obstacles to him, and they are thus assigned roles as

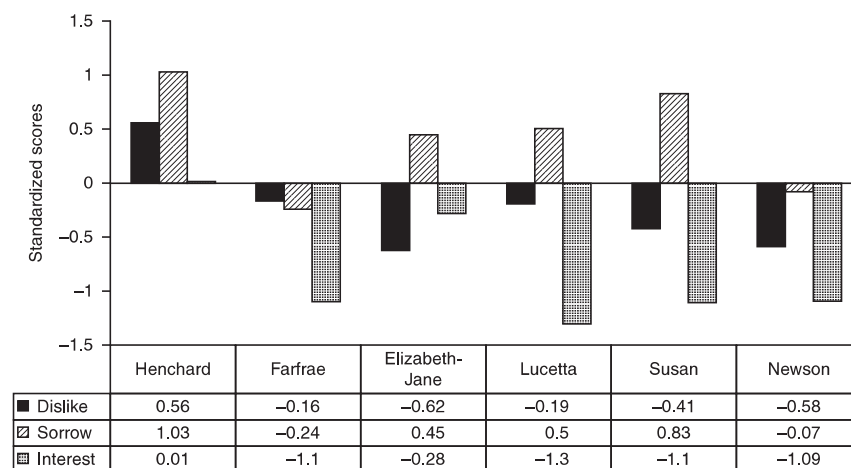


Figure 7.2 Emotional responses to characters in *Mayor of Casterbridge*.

antagonists, but neither scores in the antagonistic range on Dislike. In the scores for the larger data set, Root For correlates strongly and negatively with Dislike ($r = -.67$). For *Mayor*, the correlation is only $-.03$ —essentially no correlation. The confounding of normal agonistic role assignments disrupts the usual relationship between liking or disliking characters and becoming emotionally invested in the outcome of the story. This disruption evidently helps neutralize emotional responsiveness in readers and thus contributes to the low scores on Interest.

Motive Factors

The disruption in the normal correlations between Root For and Emotional responses works itself out in the attributes of characters: motives, the criteria for selecting mates, and personality. Henchard is the lynch pin. For the novels in the period as a whole, both before and after 1880, the most distinctive feature in the motivational profile of antagonists is Social Dominance. Henchard is unequivocally the protagonist, and yet he scores in the antagonistic range on Dominance (figure 7.3).

The typical expectations of readers are thus deeply disturbed, and the disturbance reverberates through the emotional responses to all the other characters. Farfrae and Lucetta also score high on Dominance, thus alienating readers from three of the four main characters. Only Elizabeth-Jane scores in the protagonistic range on

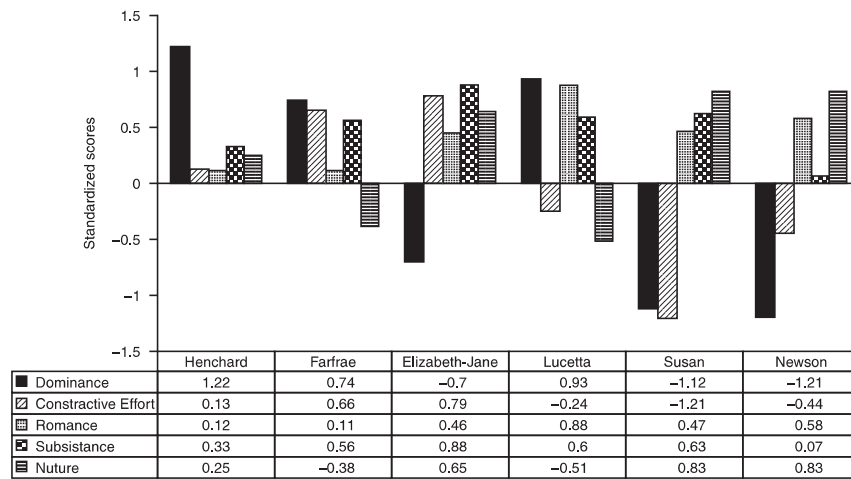


Figure 7.3 Motive factors in *Mayor of Casterbridge*.

Dominance, and she is a minor character. Only Elizabeth-Jane and Farfrae score within the protagonistic range on Constructive Effort, and Farfrae, though his role assignment is equivocal, is definitely not a protagonist.

Henchard has a volatile personality and goes through more profound changes of phase in motivation than most characters in novels. In assessing his motives, our respondents had to weigh the different phases of his life and decide what motives had the most weight for his life as a whole. By choosing Social Dominance as his central motive, they are evidently acknowledging that the desire for wealth, power, and prestige are the overmastering passions in the central portion of his adult life. He sells his wife and child because they are holding him back, and when he is free to pursue his own course, he single-mindedly sets about achieving wealth, power, and prestige. We see nothing of him in this period, but we know from his own report that he has been emotionally isolated. After Lucetta's death, Henchard seems to turn away from Social Dominance and fixates on creating a bond with Elizabeth-Jane, but when that also fails him, and he chooses to die, his final act of renunciation, his scrawled testament, has itself the appearance of a strangely inverted effort of dominance. He gives directions for the disposal of his remains, and the directions are intended, so far as possible, to obliterate his memory from the minds of men—Elizabeth-Jane not to be told of his death and not to mourn for him, not to be buried in consecrated ground, no sexton to toll the bell, no one to view the body, no mourners, no flowers on the

grave. The will concludes with the explicit command “that no man remember me.”³ If he cannot command as an acknowledged leader, he can still assert his power to control the image of himself in the minds of others. Rather than the image of a lowly and defeated man, better no image at all.

Sexual Romance in Casterbridge

When we listed relationships and asked respondents to identify the criteria by which characters selected each other as mates, we did not ask about Henchard’s choice of Susan or Susan’s of Henchard. We hear nothing about their motives in their first marriage, and we know that their motives in their second marriage are not a matter of choosing a person, for the sake of qualities in that person, but of dealing with a situation; Susan seeks a home for Elizabeth-Jane, and Henchard seeks to make reparation for a past misdeed. We asked about each of the relations involving Henchard, Farfrae, Lucetta, and Elizabeth-Jane. Except for the first episode between Henchard and Lucetta, all these relationships involve efforts at long-term mating. Accordingly, we standardize the mate-selection scores for *Mayor* relative to those for long-term mating in the larger data set (figure 7.4).

The scoring pattern for long-term mate selection in *Mayor* seems to have two chief effects (figure 7.4). One effect is to blur and confuse the value structures that usually channel the readers’ emotional

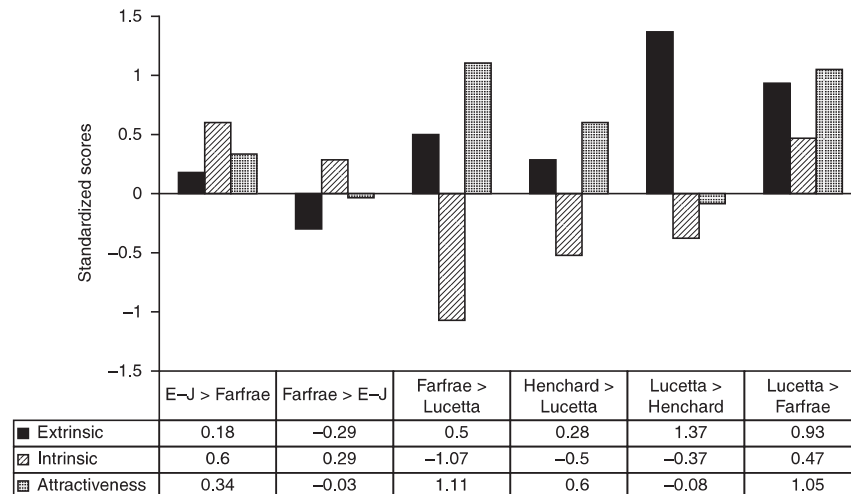


Figure 7.4 Criteria for selecting mates in *Mayor of Casterbridge*.

responses to characters. The other is to create a distinct and gender-neutral vision of sexual romance—a vision in which worldly ambition and sexual excitement are mingled in an affective mix that is hectic, volatile, and emotionally disorienting. The sexual relations in the novel confound the elements of good and bad, major and minor, and male and female. In this commingling of features, the sexual relations in the novel cooperate with all the other aspects in the novel that disrupt the usual agonistic organization of characters. The reader is left bemused and detached, with little inducement to identify closely with the romantic aspirations of any character.

For the six relationships on which we obtained scores, the score on preference for Intrinsic Qualities (–.1) is about average, but both Extrinsic Attributes and Physical Attractiveness run substantially higher than average (both .5). Mating relations in *Mayor* characteristically involve both the appeal of worldly advantages and the appeal of sexual excitement. In *Mayor*, these two criteria cross the usual gender boundaries. In responding to Lucetta, Farfrae and Henchard have very similar profiles—Farfrae’s being only more exaggerated—and in both profiles, the appeal of Lucetta’s Extrinsic Attributes—wealth and class status—intermingles with the sexual excitement of her physical appeal. Neither Henchard nor Farfrae is at all drawn to Lucetta for her Intrinsic Attributes—for intelligence, kindness, or reliability. In her response to Henchard, Lucetta’s profile is essentially that of a standard female antagonist, seeking Extrinsic Attributes and nothing else, but in her response to Farfrae, Lucetta is nearly as excited by his physical charm as he is by hers. In both her choices of men, Lucetta has a typically antagonistic female interest in Extrinsic Attributes, but in responding to Farfrae she is also attracted by his Intrinsic Qualities. In this respect, she is like Elizabeth-Jane and other female protagonists, but her emphasis on both Extrinsic Attributes and Physical Attractiveness is much higher than that of most female protagonists. In only two of the six relationships is Physical Attractiveness not an important criterion of mate selection: Lucetta’s choice of Henchard, and Farfrae’s choice of Elizabeth-Jane. The one culminating relationship in the story, and the only ultimately successful relationship, is that of Elizabeth-Jane and Farfrae, and from Farfrae’s side, that relationship is devoid of erotic excitement.

Elizabeth-Jane’s mate selection criteria are the closest to normal protagonistic criteria, but the very fact that she has chosen Farfrae casts a shadow over her personal romance. He is only weakly interested in her, and he does not respond to the deepest and best features of her identity. He has some slight interest in her Intrinsic Qualities, but

his appreciation of those qualities is shallow and inadequate. Hardy refers to Elizabeth-Jane as “a subtle-souled girl” and as a “discerning silent witch” (chs. 18 and 24). Farfrae merely calls her “thrifty,” and even for the thrifty Scotchman, the appeal of her domestic economy weighs very slightly in the balance against the sexual glamour that evidently emanates from Lucetta.

Elizabeth-Jane is not disappointed in her marriage with Farfrae, but the point of tonal resolution in *Mayor* is not that of her romantic fulfillment. The scores on Root For, Achieves Goals, and Interest tell us that. Readers root for her; she achieves her goals; and the readers do not much care one way or the other. If we listen to Hardy’s own judgment on the trajectory of her emotional career, the point of tonal resolution for Elizabeth-Jane is that of Stoic prudence and moderation. The strongest feature in her relation with Farfrae is an attraction to his Intrinsic Qualities, and the relationship thus constituted modulates easily enough into an “equable serenity” (ch. 45). The value of that serenity, in the general economy of the book, makes itself felt in contrast to the kinds of passions that have so disturbed the other characters. All the hectic agitations of worldly ambition and sexual excitement end in disaster for Henchard and Lucetta. Farfrae too has been shocked by misfortune, and he has been saved from tragic pathos only by the relatively shallow character of his attachment to Lucetta.

Personality and the Confounding of Agonistic Role Assignments

The reversal of normal agonistic role assignments in this novel is more vividly apparent in personality than in any other category of analysis (figure 7.5).

As we argue in the chapter on Jane Austen, the factors of personality are primary thematic terms on a par with the largest thematic reductions of the various critical schools. Like Austen and indeed like most or all great novelists, Hardy is a gifted intuitive psychologist. What that chiefly means is having insight into motives, the emotions that activate motives, and the dispositions of personality that orient people toward specific motives. The profiles for personality attributes in *Mayor* cohere tightly with the scores on motives and mating. They form a unified network that is convincing in its mimetic verisimilitude but alienating in its emotional impact on readers. Hardy knows what he is doing, but what he is doing violates normal expectations in the assignment of roles.

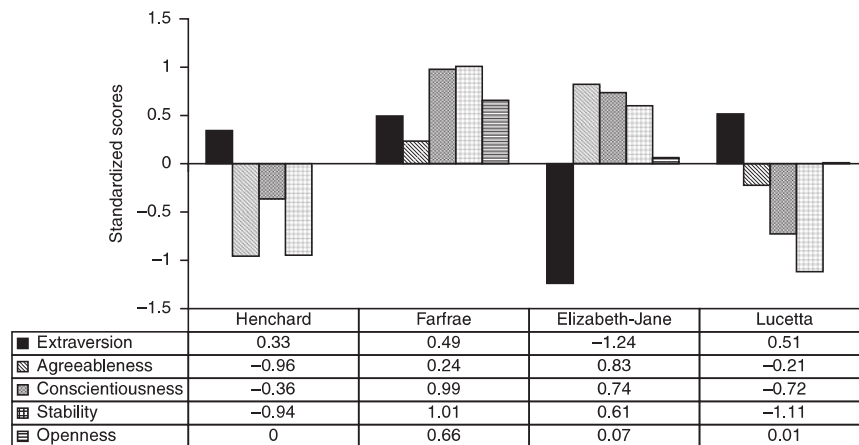


Figure 7.5 Personality factors for four main characters in *Mayor of Casterbridge*.

So far as role assignments go, Henchard is the clearly identified protagonist, but his personality is predominantly antagonistic. Henchard scores lower on Agreeableness than any of the other five characters for whom we obtained scores, and lower than 83 percent of the characters in the larger data set. His manners are harsh and abrupt, and he is habitually careless of the feelings of others. At one point or another, he comes into sharp conflict with most of the characters in the story. Throughout his career, Henchard displays a temperament at the mercy of extreme and erratic emotional impulses, and his emotional instability takes on a specific emotional cast from a strong tendency toward clinical depression. (The word “gloom” or “gloomy” is used repeatedly to describe his mood or the atmosphere around him.) Henchard is an extremely volatile character, and his volatility combines deficiencies in Conscientiousness with deficiencies in Emotional Stability.

Farfrae, in contrast to Henchard, has an unequivocally protagonistic personality profile. With respect to personality, he is a very paragon of a male protagonist. He is right at average for male protagonists on Agreeableness, and far above average on Conscientiousness, Stability, and Openness. He is reliable in business, he is consistently cheerful and even-tempered, and he scores higher on Openness than any other character. He likes to read; he invents a process for restoring damaged wheat; and he introduces new agricultural technology into Casterbridge. And yet, nine of twenty-one respondents identified him as an antagonist; seven identified him as a good minor character; one as a bad minor character; and three said “other.” Only

one respondent identified him as a protagonist. Farfrae's motivational profile mixes protagonistic and antagonistic features, but his personality is overwhelmingly protagonistic. Despite his apparently appealing personality, readers are indifferent to him. He excites little Interest, and his scores on both Dislike (-.16) and Root For (-.14) are close to average.

Farfrae is a bright, cheerful, friendly, young man, ambitious and successful, but also constructive and open to new experiences. He is a fortunate person, admirable, attractive, and successful, but within the emotional economy of this novel, that particular profile has no special claims on the interest or sympathy of the reader. The novel is designed around catastrophic losses and failures—those of Susan, first, and then of Lucetta, and ultimately of Henchard. Unlike a substantial portion of nineteenth-century novels, *Mayor* is not designed to align the reader's perspective with that of a Golden Youth, to engage the reader's sympathetic identification with that youth, to fulfill the reader's expectations concerning the hopes and fortunes of that youth, and to affirm the normative and central value of the personality and motives embodied in that youth. Within the perspectival and emotional economy of this novel, the concerns of a young man like Farfrae are relegated to marginal status, and the novel occupies itself instead in coping with forms of distress that remain outside the scope of Farfrae's empathic power.

If *Mayor* had been a standard Victorian novel, Farfrae or Elizabeth-Jane would have been the protagonist and Henchard the antagonist. It is because Hardy so thoroughly disrupts these standard role assignments that critics have been driven to desperate measures in trying to invest Henchard with characteristics that qualify him for protagonistic status in accordance with the usual templates for role assignment.

Hardy's disruption of the standard role assignments is not merely capricious. Much evidence, both quantitative and textual, can be marshaled to support the contention that he has a psychologically functional aim vested in the "equable serenity" achieved by Elizabeth-Jane. Apart from the scores on Interest and the quantitative evidence of anomalous agonistic role assignments, the main quantitative evidence supporting this interpretive contention are Elizabeth-Jane's scores on personality. She is intensely introverted. She lives quietly and studiously, apart from the bustle and gossip of the town. She is highly agreeable—warm and sympathetic—and also highly conscientious and emotionally stable. (The reader is invited to compare her scores with those of Elinor Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility* and those of Anne Elliot in *Persuasion*.) Even when she is suddenly and

painfully dropped by Farfrae, she never loses her poise or her capacity for reflective detachment. Watching both Henchard and Farfrae become sexually fixated on Lucetta, she is hurt by their indifference to her, but unlike Henchard and Lucetta, she is never wholly immersed in her own emotions. “The pain she experienced from the almost absolute obliviousness to her existence that was shown by the pair of them became at times half dissipated by her sense of its humourousness” (ch. 25). As with all her experiences, her own sensations become material for reflection and ultimately eventuate in a detached curiosity about the course of human affairs.

Elizabeth-Jane’s average scores on Openness reflect her anxiety not to offend against the conventional proprieties. The unseemly aspects of her parents’ history make her all the more sensitive to impropriety, and in respect to intimate sexual relations, she is quite straight-laced. Being willing to violate the conventional proprieties is one aspect of Openness, but cultural curiosity is another. For this aspect of Openness, the instrument we used to obtain scores on personality does not have the level of resolution we need to obtain a clear image of Elizabeth-Jane’s personality. (On this limitations in the Ten-Item-Personality Inventory, see chapter 2.)

When Susan returns to Casterbridge to reunite with Henchard, her chief motive is to provide opportunities for her daughter. Susan “had long perceived how zealously and constantly” Elizabeth-Jane’s mind “was struggling for enlargement.” Elizabeth-Jane’s deepest desire “was indeed to see, to hear, to understand” (ch. 4). Seeing, hearing, understanding, mental expansion—all these, too, are elements of Openness to Experience, and for Hardy they are the more important features. Were Elizabeth-Jane’s score on Openness actually to reflect those features, her profile would stand forth clearly as that of an exemplary female protagonist. Given the particular purposes of this novel, though, she would still not be a “passional” protagonist. She is not driven by her passions. Her fate is not centrally defined by success or failure in fulfilling the common aims of life—love, family, and friends. Within the passional plot, she is thus necessarily a minor character, but her minor status in the passional plot is merely the inverse of her major status in another dimension. She is a “perspectival” protagonist. Her chief goal is to gain a perspective adequate to comprehend the struggle and turmoil in the world around her—to comprehend it, and to rise above it.

She had learnt the lesson of renunciation, and was as familiar with the wreck of each day’s wishes as with the diurnal setting of the sun. If her

earthly career had taught her few book philosophies it had at least well practised her in this. Yet her experience had consisted less in a series of pure disappointments than in a series of substitutions. Continually it had happened that what she had desired had not been granted her, and that what had been granted her she had not desired. So she viewed with an approach to equanimity the now cancelled days when Donald had been her undeclared lover, and wondered what unwished-for thing Heaven might send her in place of him. (ch. 25)

This lesson of equanimity before the variable possibilities of life is a lesson that Henchard never learns and that it is not in his nature to learn. He seizes on one goal at a time and concentrates all his passion on it. In the depth of his despair, he turns to Elizabeth-Jane as to “a pin-point of light” (ch. 40), but he treats of this one possible good as the only possible good. “He was developing the dream of a future lit by her filial presence, as though that way alone could happiness lie” (ch. 41). In a world of circumstances as capricious as those in Hardy’s novels, no such fixation on a single source of happiness could possibly end well.

The Rustic Chorus

Restricting the analysis to six main characters eliminates no essential features of the plot in *Mayor*. With respect to a tonal analysis, the main thing that is lost by this restriction is the rustic chorus—the set of minor characters who observe the action and offer shrewd, humorous, and pithy observations on the character and behavior of the chief actors. Christopher Coney, Solomon Longways, Buzzford, Nance Mockridge, and Mother Cuxsom modulate the tragic perspective in ways similar to those of Shakespeare’s clowns and court jesters—the fool in *King Lear*, or the grave digger in *Hamlet*.

Early in the story, Elizabeth-Jane listens to an exchange between Farfrae and the rustics at the Three Mariners Inn. Her response provides a basis for assessing Hardy’s own relation to the three perspectives involved—Farfrae’s, Elizabeth-Jane’s, and that of the rustic chorus:

She admired the serious light in which [Farfrae] looked at serious things. He had seen no jest in ambiguities and roguery, as the Casterbridge toss-pots had done; and rightly not—there was none. She disliked those wretched humours of Christopher Coney and his tribe; and he did not appreciate them. He seemed to feel exactly as she felt about life and its surroundings—that they were a tragical rather than a

comical thing; that though one could be gay on occasion, moments of gaiety were interludes, and no part of the actual drama. It was extraordinary how similar their views were. (ch. 8)

Elizabeth-Jane is quite mistaken about Farfrae, and Hardy understands her mistake. Tragedy is outside the scope of Farfrae's imagination. Elizabeth-Jane projects onto Farfrae her own depth of feeling and her own meditative seriousness. At this point in the story, she is only about 19, and her experience hitherto has been narrow and rather somber. As her mind expands and her experience broadens, she gains more understanding of the "humorousness" of things. She sees for instance the comical side of the sexually overwrought attentiveness Henchard and Farfrae fix on Lucetta. Still, the tone of her mind remains fundamentally serious. Hardy's own tonal range takes in more of the jest and roguery of Christopher Coney and his tribe, and his humanity is thus broader and more complete than hers. Hardy nonetheless shares with her an emotional conviction that life is a tragical rather than a comical thing, and so far as this story is concerned, he agrees with her that interludes of gaiety are no part of the actual drama.

Models of Tragedy in the Interpretive History of *Mayor*

The three models of tragedy commonly used to interpret *Mayor*—retributive justice, Promethean Romantic heroism, and redemptive change—have retained their basic structural character through many theoretical metamorphoses: old fashioned humanism, New Criticism, Archetypalism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, Deconstruction, Feminism, and the various hybrid blends of postmodernism. In the late seventies and early eighties, literary studies underwent profound changes in theoretical and ideological orientation. The models used to interpret *Mayor* survived those changes with only superficial alterations of critical idiom. The models evidently function at imaginative levels deeper than the various fashions through which they have persisted, but none of the models is sufficiently deep and general to give a decisively superior account of the tonal and perspectival structure of *Mayor*. The models overlap in some ways but conflict in others, and the inadequacies of each help to explain the persistence of its rivals.⁴

Each of the three models depends on philosophical preconceptions that have their origins outside of Hardy's own structure of meanings, and they each seek emotional resolution in some form different from

that which is revealed in the structure of data from our study. All three models presuppose passional involvement with a protagonist as a central feature in the tonal structure of the novel, and they all seek resolution in some ultimately affirmative condition in the protagonist's own mind. Retributive justice eliminates the element of chance in Hardy's vision of the world and adopts a stance of vindictive satisfaction incompatible with Hardy's tolerant humanity. Promethean Romantic heroism glamorizes Henchard's character and strikes a note of vainglorious triumphalism incompatible with Hardy's shrewd irony. Redemptive change blurs the essential continuity of Henchard's character and posits a sentimental resolution that is alien to Hardy's tragic austerity. In all three models, the preemptive necessity of an affirmative resolution located in the protagonist's own mind sorts ill with the violence and bitterness of self-repudiation in Henchard's final will and testament.

John Paterson offers a transcendental version of the model of retributive justice. In his view, tragedy depends on "moral and religious universals" and reaches resolution in vindicating "the existence of a moral order, an ethical substance, a standard of justice and rectitude, in terms of which man's experience can be rendered as the drama of his salvation as well as the drama of his damnation." The role of the tragic protagonist in this scheme is that of acknowledging this transcendent ethical order. Henchard offends against the cosmic order, which destroys him, but he also "stands for the grandeur of the human passions." He is thus the tragic agent of a "heroic imagination."⁵ J. Hillis Miller offers an equally cosmic but nihilistic and emotionally negative version of this transcendental vision. In Miller's version, the baffling of all Henchard's desires constitutes "one of Hardy's most dramatic demonstrations of a condition of existence in his universe." In a less cosmic version, the model of redemptive justice requires neither the affirmation nor the negation of a transcendent ethical order; it requires only that the protagonist be "obsessed by guilt and so committed to his own destruction."⁶ Invocations of self-destructiveness as a primary, irreducible motive internalize the idea of retributive justice. The protagonist has violated some absolute ethical principle; he achieves tragic consciousness in acknowledging the lethally numinous character of that principle. This internalized version of the retributive model has usually been lodged within a Freudian context.

Like the model of retributive justice, the Promethean Romantic model focuses on the assertion of heroic though destructive grandeur. George Levine, for example, identifies "the romantic hero"

as a figure of “large aspirations” and “uncontrollable energies that destroy with the force of an Alpine torrent.” These heroic figures “desire beyond the limits of nature” and they thus exemplify qualities that are “quintessentially human.” The tragic hero achieves “a new freedom of imagination” and represents “a new conception of human dignity.” In the Romantic model, defiance is heroic because the universe itself is “imperfect.” Defiance is equated with the assertion of spiritual idealism. Adapting his view of Henchard to this Romantic notion, Keith Wilson declares that Henchard is “tortured by the lack of correspondence between the world as it is and the world as it should be.” In the Romantic model, as in the retributive model, the tragic hero is one of “the supremely conscious.” Henchard thus stands as “the type of the exceptional human being who experiences, recognizes and accepts the inevitability of suffering” (xxvii). In a politicized version of this model, Michael Valdez Moses argues that heroic tragedy is not possible within a modern bourgeois context but that “the peculiarly unmodern characteristics” of Casterbridge lend “heroic grandeur and tragic dignity to what would otherwise remain a typical novelistic tale of bourgeois life.”⁷

In contrast both to the model of retributive justice and to the Promethean Romantic model, the model of redemptive change deprecates the idea of heroic passion and emphasizes instead the deplorable and contemptible aspects of the protagonist’s career. Advocates of the redemptive model, like advocates of retributive justice, require that the protagonist feel contrition for his various misdeeds. As R. H. Hutton conceives it, Henchard’s “tragic career of passionate sin, bitter penitence, and rude reparation” serves ultimately to bring him “to a better and humbler mind.” In this model, the purpose of tragedy is to exemplify the way in which “circumstance” can serve “to chasten and purify character.” Hutton was Hardy’s contemporary, and his version of redemptive change seems typically Victorian in its commitment to the idea of human amelioration. Elaine Showalter offers a modern feminist version of the redemptive model. In her reading, Henchard undergoes a transformation “from a romantic male individualism to a more complete humanity.” By becoming less male, Henchard becomes more fully human, and he thus becomes “capable of tragic experience.” In Pamela Dalziel’s simpler version of this model, “Henchard’s journey towards self-knowledge is a journey towards love.”⁸

Each of these three models appeals to some historically conditioned articulation of a fundamental disposition in human nature. The model of retributive justice has an affinity with the ethos of the

Old Testament, and its proponents are wont also to cite antecedents from Greek tragedy. The model of redemptive change, with its emphasis on salvation through moral transfiguration, has an obvious affinity with the Christian ethos. Like the model of retributive justice, the Promethean Romantic model operates in a cosmic sphere, but it repudiates the justice of the cosmic order and, like the redemptive model, locates its resolution within the affirmation of specifically human qualities. As its name suggests, the Romantic model is closely associated with the spiritual defiance of a certain phase of Romanticism, a phase identified more closely with Byron and Shelley than with Wordsworth or Keats. Each model appeals to a specific emotional range and finds its resolution in the gratification of some deep emotional need—the desire for justice, the claim for self-abnegating affiliation, or the assertion of individual power. The assertion of power and the claim for affiliation constitute the two basic forms of human social interaction. Justice mediates between these two forms.

In invoking one or another of the three models of tragedy, Hardy's critics have been like the blind men touching the elephant—each describing just one part of the elephant and generalizing from that one part. The critics have selected one or another of three principles of social interaction—power, affiliation, and justice—generalized that aspect as a matrix principle for a model of tragedy, and used that model as a template for organizing the details of the narrative in *Mayor*. Because it is overgeneralized, each template is itself imperfect, and each correlates poorly with some important aspect of the novel. The templates are Procrustean beds, each stretching and distorting the novel, in different and irreconcilable ways, to make the novel fit the model.

At about the time that he was writing *Mayor*, Hardy wrote a note formulating a concept of tragedy that contains none of the distorting assumptions in the three models typically invoked to account for the thematic and tonal structure of *Mayor*. "Tragedy. It may be put thus in brief: a tragedy exhibits a state of things in the life of an individual which unavoidably causes some natural aim or desire of his to end in a catastrophe when carried out."⁹ This definition covers a broad spectrum of works typically regarded as tragic, and it is fully adequate to account for Henchard's fate in *Mayor*. It involves no commitment to a principle of poetic justice, transcendental or internalized; it does not derive affirmations of human nobility from the struggles of a tragic protagonist; nor does it presuppose a morally uplifting transformation in the tragic protagonist.

As many critics of the novel have recognized, Hardy identifies closely with the perspective of Elizabeth-Jane, and for Elizabeth-Jane,

the spectacle of Henchard's career culminates in a state of compassionate, detached meditation. That also is a form of resolution, but it is a form different from that of passional involvement with the protagonist, and it does not require that we locate resolution within some affirmative state of the protagonist's own mind. Critics who deploy models of heroic tragedy have sometimes characterized Elizabeth-Jane as an embodiment of conventional propriety—prim, cold, and imperceptive.¹⁰ Similar terms of indictment have been leveled at her from a postmodern perspective programmatically hostile to all affirmations of normative authority.¹¹ Bernard Paris, reading the novel within a framework of values derived from Karen Horney, describes Elizabeth-Jane as “fearful,” “rigid,” and “self-imprisoned.”¹²

Depicting Elizabeth-Jane as merely a personification of bourgeois propriety conflicts fundamentally with Hardy's own presentation of her, and treating her as a case study in stunted emotional development wrenches her violently out of Hardy's imaginative universe. Like Hardy himself, Elizabeth-Jane combines compassionate warmth with the power of detached contemplation. In all of Hardy's work, there is no other character who so completely occupies a position of interpretive authority on a level with his own. Hardy not only acknowledges her concern for propriety, excusing it as a reflex of her shadowed past, but he also unequivocally affirms her humanity and rectitude, her modesty, her self-effacing generosity, her perceptiveness, her resilience, balance, and fortitude, and the depth, scope, and wisdom in her general view of life.

One might anticipate that feminist critics would respond favorably to a female character invested with exceptional powers of observation and reflection, but with respect to Elizabeth-Jane, that is not the case. Writing from a feminist perspective, Pamela Dalziel observes that “in the recent proliferation of feminist readings of Hardy,” Elizabeth-Jane “has been largely invisible.” Dalziel observes that *Mayor* has not been a favored topic for feminist criticism and that in the one most prominent feminist reading, Elaine Showalter's, the focus is on the male protagonist. Comparing the depiction of Elizabeth-Jane in the original serial publication of the novel and the book version, Dalziel argues that in the serial version Elizabeth-Jane is more appealingly aggressive and self-assertive. In the revisions for book publication, Dalziel thinks, she has been reduced to “the bland consistency of stereotypical womanliness.”¹³

From Hardy's own perspective, aggressive self-assertion is neither peculiarly male nor particularly admirable. One of Hardy's most perceptive critics, Lord David Cecil, observes that while Hardy had

rejected Christian beliefs, his ethos remained deeply imbued with Christian values. “The Christian virtues—fidelity, compassion, humility—were the most beautiful to him.”¹⁴ In *Mayor*, those virtues are most fully exemplified by Elizabeth-Jane. In other Hardy novels, they are exemplified by both male and female characters, and more often by male than by female characters—for instance, by Gabriel Oak in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Diggory Venn in *The Return of the Native*, John Loveday in *The Trumpet Major*, Giles Winterborne in *The Woodlanders*, and Tess in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*. Hardy himself regards all of these characters with affectionate respect, but because he has more developed powers of reflective contemplation, he also stands apart from them, and above them. In the final chapter of *Mayor*, Hardy evokes Elizabeth-Jane’s most matured perspective, intermingling indistinguishably with Hardy’s own. She also stands apart from the action and above it, and she is thus not herself a passionate protagonist. So far as the passionate drama is concerned, she is only a good minor character. So far as the perspectival drama is concerned, she is the central character. It is in her mind, and not in that of the protagonist, that Hardy locates his own sense of resolution.

Some of the best critics of *Mayor* have registered the importance of Elizabeth-Jane’s perspective in modulating the tone of the story and in providing a medium for Hardy’s own interpretive reflections on the events of the story. Ian Gregor observes that “the developed consciousness of Elizabeth-Jane” is part of the meaning of the resolution in the final chapter of the novel. Michael Millgate observes that “her role is an extraordinarily interesting one, without a close parallel elsewhere in Hardy’s work.” Millgate points out that Hardy repeatedly uses Elizabeth-Jane “as the point of view from which events are viewed.” She is thus “kept constantly before the reader even during the stretches of the action in which she has no substantial part to play . . . She gradually establishes herself for the reader as much the most acute and reliable intelligence within the novel, the one whose judgments are most to be trusted. In a real sense, she becomes the reader’s representative within the novel’s world.” She becomes the reader’s representative, because she is the author’s representative. Robert Langbaum observes that through much of the book Elizabeth-Jane “acts as a surrogate for the author.” He comments perceptively on “the contrast between the serenity of her perceiving mind and the passionate material perceived.” The contrast between serenity and passion is the central dynamic in the tonal organization of the novel.¹⁵

Even though they recognize the interpretive authority invested in Elizabeth-Jane, Gregor, Millgate, and Langbaum all still fall under

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the sway of the Promethean Romantic model. The Romantic model presupposes that the tragic protagonist must necessarily be a “hero,” that the hero must exemplify human “grandeur” and “dignity,” and that the story as a whole must produce sublime affects that confirm some essential human nobility. Gregor declares that “for Henchard life has been tragic but never at any time has it lost dignity.” Millgate acknowledges the faults of Henchard’s character but declares that “Hardy nonetheless compels us to recognize in Henchard a man of almost superhuman grandeur, of great if uncontrollable passions, a tragic hero.” Langbaum too refers to Henchard as “a tragic hero.” He claims that “Henchard’s display of imaginative and emotional resources too large for success in life makes him tragic.”¹⁶

In contrast to his critics, Hardy seems to have felt no obligation to conform to the Romantic model of tragedy. He refers once to Elizabeth-Jane as “our poor only heroine” (ch. 43). He nowhere uses the words “hero” or “heroic” to refer to Henchard. The structure of Henchard’s motives is not a generic expression of romantic passion. His failures are not simply the manifestation of “resources” too great for “success in life.” Henchard seeks wealth, power, and prestige, forms a transient friendship with Farfrae, is briefly excited into a competitive sexual interest in Lucetta, and then forms a companionable bond with his stepdaughter. None of these desires go “beyond the limits of nature.” And there is nothing particularly “superhuman” about them.¹⁷ Henchard is strong willed and energetic, but he is also emotionally unstable, and as a result he is erratic and violent. Subsuming these various qualities under the general term “grandeur” would place an unusual strain on the connotative force of that word, and it is a word that Hardy does not himself use with respect to Henchard. In invocations of the Romantic model, the words “grandeur” and “dignity” are often linked, but Hardy does not identify dignity as one of Henchard’s signal characteristics. It would be strange if he did. Henchard often behaves recklessly and foolishly. He is more than once publicly humiliated, and performs acts of which he is himself deeply ashamed. Getting drunk at a fair and auctioning off one’s wife is not an act that can be conducted with dignity. Nor is he dignified when he bellows in public rage at hearing of Farfrae setting up a business on his own, when he competes eagerly and unsuccessfully for the favors of a fickle woman, when he is ejected drunk from an official public ceremony, when he crumples in sobbing remorse after trying to fling Farfrae out of a loft, or when confronted by Newson seeking his daughter, he speaks “mad lies like a child” (ch. 41).

We need not accept any of the main assumptions that have animated the standard tragic models used to interpret *Mayor*—that the novel must elicit passional involvement with a heroic protagonist, that the protagonist must achieve an adequate interpretive perspective on his experience, that the events of the story must affirm a morally meaningful order, that the story must culminate in the production of sublime affects, that it must exemplify moral improvement, or that it must provide some reassuring image of human goodness or nobility. The evidence will not support any of these assumptions.

Insofar as our respondents feel anything for Henchard, it is detached distaste, not passionate responsiveness. They recognize that he is the protagonist, but his motives and personality offer little for them to admire, and he excites strong feelings of Dislike. Our respondents' feelings are quite distinct, but their scores on Interest and Root For clearly indicate that they are not much absorbed, emotionally, in Henchard's story. Attaining an adequate interpretive perspective requires emotional maturity and implies a power of introspective meditation. Hardy tells us explicitly that Henchard is not introspective. All the evidence of the story confirms that judgment. Henchard's final will and testament indicate that his ultimate perspective does not remotely approach to the equable serenity that Hardy commends in Elizabeth-Jane, and indeed, a character with such low scores on Emotional Stability could hardly be expected to achieve serenity. Hardy's explicit declarations indicate that he admires Elizabeth-Jane's perspective and regards it as adequate to encompass the events of the novel. In temperament, as indicated by scores on personality, Elizabeth-Jane and Henchard could hardly be more different. Not only is she agreeable, conscientious, and emotionally stable, but her introversion, coupled with her other traits, also produces a profoundly meditative perspective. Nonetheless, she is not a protagonist.

The scores on Root For and Achieves Goals indicate the implausibility of claims that the story reveals a morally meaningful order. Elizabeth-Jane gets what she deserves, sort of, if Farfrac can be considered a prize. With respect to the other main characters, our respondents evidently concur with Elizabeth-Jane's opinion that the people in this imagined world end up being hurt and disappointed in ways that could not possibly correspond with any faults of their own, no matter how grievous those faults might be. "Hap" is a keynote poem in Hardy's poetic repertory. His whole body of philosophical poetry dedicates itself to the contemplation of the curious fact that terrible things happen, and keep happening, in an evidently random way. The

lack of correlation between Root For and Achieves Goals in *Mayor* indicates that “Hap” could also be the poetic anthem for *Mayor*.

The scores on motives and personality in *Mayor* are not compatible with sublime effects. An ambitious, violent, and unstable protagonist; and an ambitious, stable, but thrifty and prudent antagonist—these are not the materials for epic or tragic grandeur. If there were sublime effects, those effects would have to be realized in readers’ responses. The scores on emotional response indicate that readers dislike all the main characters except Elizabeth-Jane. What is more, they are indifferent to *all* the main characters, including Elizabeth-Jane. If there are sublime effects occurring in the story, they are not being registered by our respondents. Our own judgment is that the respondents give us a reliable account and that the critics who have argued for sublime effects have lost touch with the actual subjective reactions elicited by the story—even their own subjective responses. They have been carried away by an idea, and that idea does not correspond to the actual experience that most qualified readers have had in reading the novel.

Henchard does display some degree of moral improvement toward the end of the story—some dimly reflected illumination from the mental state he glimpses in Elizabeth-Jane. That illumination is clearly not sufficient to save him from bitter despair and self-destruction, conditions not typically included in stories culminating in redemption. Standing back and taking Henchard in the sum of his whole life-trajectory, our respondents identify the central phase of his life, seeking and attaining Social Dominance, as the defining phase. In this respect, the respondents and Hardy seem to concur. After Henchard leaves Casterbridge, Hardy observes that externally nothing prevents Henchard from starting over and “achieving higher things” than in his first career. But, Hardy says, by this time, Henchard’s disappointments have deprived him of the energy needed for starting over. “He had no wish to make an arena a second time of a world that had become a mere painted scene to him.” (ch. 44). The turning toward Elizabeth-Jane and affection come too late, bulk too small, and have too little motivating force to define the trajectory of the story.

If we reject the various assumptions animating the standard tragic models, we can avoid romanticizing or sentimentalizing the tragic protagonist. Henchard is a powerful, commanding personality, deeply flawed, often misguided, inadvertently self-destructive, and ultimately pathetic. The scores on motives, personality, and emotional responses support this specific characterization without difficulty, and one can affirm all of this without affirming any of the standard

patterns of tragedy. On the basis of his explicit declarations about Henchard and other characters, we can say with some confidence that Hardy does not himself feel that Henchard's career is a sublime or ennobling spectacle. On the basis of the respondents' scores, we can definitely affirm that our respondents, in any case, do not feel that way. By correlating Hardy's explicit statements on the characters with scores in multiple categories, and especially with scores on Interest, we can draw a firm interpretive conclusion: the spectacle of "The Life and Death of the Mayor of Casterbridge"—the full main title of the novel—challenges Hardy to devise a perspective adequate to the contemplation of destructive passions and the mischances of life. Henchard himself can attain to no such perspective. He is not a reflective man, and to achieve a philosophic view of his experience would require powers of detachment and of generalization that are alien to his nature. It is alien also to Lucetta's nature; and to Farfrae's nature, it is simply irrelevant. It is not alien to Elizabeth-Jane's nature.

In a thoughtful recent essay on *Mayor*, J. Hillis Miller describes Hardy's perspective in terms of his "narrative voice." He characterizes that voice as "grave and compassionate, but at the same time objective, dry, ironic, quizzical, detached." A "voice" articulates values and attitudes—a stance toward a given subject. More than half a century ago, Cecil gave a finely nuanced description of the stance that Hardy adopts toward Henchard. As Hardy sees him, Cecil claims, Henchard "is a pathetic figure, born with an unfortunate disposition but genuinely longing to do right, tortured by remorse when he does wrong, and always defeated by some unlucky stroke of Fate."¹⁸ Unlike the accounts that emerge from the three models of tragedy, these characterizations of Hardy's stance do not force Henchard into a mould out of keeping with his actual behavior, nor do they force Hardy's tone into a register out of keeping with his own actual statements. Hardy does not seek resolution in affirming that Henchard got what was coming to him, that he manifests some supremely conscious form of human nobility, or that he achieves salvation through a moral transfiguration. Putting the elements of thematic and tonal structure into quantitative form makes it possible to measure the distance between these strained interpretive models and the actual content and emotional character of the novel.

Conclusion: The Point of Point of View

Our data indicate that the agonistic structure of *Mayor* is very different from that of the average Victorian novel. It is not surprising,

then, that *Mayor* has presented an especially difficult challenge to interpretive criticism. By quantifying the elements of tonal analysis, we can break up the prefabricated affective and conceptual structures that have shaped criticism on this particular novel. Reducing affective structures to their component parts can render interpretive analysis more flexible and more precise. Advances in flexibility and precision can refine common perceptions of exceptionally accessible authors such as Jane Austen, and they can also help to solve intractable interpretive problems in exceptionally difficult novels such as *Mayor*.

Adopting a quantitative approach need not render a critic less sensitive to nuances of character and tone. Quite the contrary. It can free us from distorting preconceptions, making it possible to see an old and familiar text with eyes newly opened. Many of the particular observations that we make in this chapter converge closely with those of Hardy's other critics. It could hardly be otherwise. The questions in the questionnaire are couched in the common language and appeal to the common understanding. The data on which we base our conclusions have been contributed largely by professional scholars intimately familiar with Hardy's work. These scholars have not simply been blind to the attributes of the characters. They have only been unable to combine their particular observations and emotional responses into a coherent picture of the novel as a whole. Quantifying agonistic structure makes it possible to construct an interpretive model that corresponds more closely to the total structure of meaning in Hardy's work.

The organization of characters in *Mayor* does not invite readers to sympathize with communitarian protagonists. Nor does it merely invert the egalitarian ethos, sliding under the moral radar to seduce readers into identifying with impulses of personal power. Becky Sharp ends up rich, contented, and unrepentant. Henchard's efforts at dominance end only in humiliation, disgrace, and despair. Farfrae fulfills his modest ambitions, but his complacency seems only to put readers off, not give them emotional satisfaction. Elizabeth-Jane also achieves contentment, but readers evidently do not consider her fate a main feature of the novel. Lucetta's end is wretched, but her life is ultimately marginal, a matter of little consequence either to readers or to the other characters.

In stepping so far outside the range of ordinary empathic identification, does *Mayor* also step outside the range of psychological effects to which an adaptive function could plausibly be attributed? Possibly. It is possible that *Mayor* is idiosyncratic, an outlier, like a mutation producing maladaptive or adaptively neutral behavior. Another

possibility, though, is that the peculiar agonistic structure of *Mayor* points us toward adaptive function at a level more basic and general than that manifested in morally polarized agonistic structure. The arts, including literature and its oral antecedents, help us make sense of the world, emotionally, subjectively, imaginatively. Agonistic structure in most of the novels in this study suggests just how important our need for social bonding can be. Still, dispositions for derogating dominance and affirming one's place in a social group are not the only important features of human nature. Authors are members of a community, subserving the needs of their readers, but they are also individual human beings. Every novel is an imagined world, and in every novel the author tacitly adopts a point of view, an emotionally modulated stance toward the characters and events in the story. Each individual novel necessarily reflects its author's characteristic ways of engaging the world, responding to its challenges, and giving value to experience. As we have seen, authors exercise a high degree of control over the emotional responses of readers. To become absorbed in an imagined world is to share, for the time being, its author's point of view. Each imagined world is an exercise in making meaning. For readers, each such exercise is an opportunity to see what the world looks like and feels like from a particular point of view. If nothing else, reading novels would be an access of social learning—not just learning about the characters and situations depicted in the story, but learning how things look and feel from a particular point of view. Such learning is intrinsically valuable. It extends our natural, adaptive dispositions for gossip, dialogue, and social observation. It also provides us with a repertory of possible stances toward the circumstances of our own lives—toward sexual desire, jealousy, love, hatred, loneliness, confusion, disappointment. Experiences at this level are universal. They transcend particular situations and give us access to stories from every culture and every period.

Assessing thematic and tonal structure in a novel inevitably leads us back to the world view of the author who creates that structure. To evoke Hardy's total world view, we shall have to register qualities of style and authorial temperament that are not part of the data we gathered for this particular study. Our descriptive terms for those qualities can, though, be closely integrated with the categories on which we gathered data.

The organization of tonal and thematic elements in *Mayor* is unusual, but the elements themselves are common and familiar. They can be located on a continuum with the imaginative qualities in Hardy's other works. Hardy's distinctive qualities include a



sensually rich lyricism scarcely equaled in English outside the poetry of Shakespeare, Milton, and the Romantics. Hardy also has an extraordinarily high capacity for registering emotional pain. In his treatment of *Tess*, his proclivity for negative affect combines with tenderness and strength of mind. The result is a sublime elegy. In much of *Jude*, Hardy's sensitivity to pain degenerates into neurasthenia, pure depressive affect of the sort monstrously personified in Jude's son "Father Time." *Jude* is written from a point of view morbidly fixated on the spectacle of sensitive human matter caught and mangled in destructive circumstance. Nonetheless, Jude's renunciation of life, at the end, has a ghastly magnificence that transcends self-pity. He passes beyond the reach of torment and achieves a final stage of utter indifference. In *Mayor*, Elizabeth-Jane succeeds in achieving a detached but compassionate perspective that does not involve losing all capacity for pleasure and all interest in life. In the final paragraphs of the novel, Hardy's perspective merges almost completely with that of Elizabeth-Jane. He commends her wisdom, and invites the reader to do the same. Few critics have been able to elucidate the kind of psychological work that Hardy accomplishes in *Mayor*, for himself or for them. But emotions can be powerfully active even when they are not fully understood or explained. Hardy's stance in *Mayor* has almost certainly exercised an emotional influence operating apart from critical efforts to explain it. Still, criticism is most satisfying when it both evokes and explains—evokes the feelings we have in reading a novel, and also stands apart from those feelings, analyzes them, and locates them within broader networks of explanation.