Models of Tragedy in the Interpretive History of Mayor

We set up a website for *The Mayor of Casterbridge* separate from the larger website listing about two thousand characters from about two hundred novels. To distinguish the two sites, we referred to the larger website as the “multi-novel website.” Our aim in setting up an individual site for *Mayor* was to collect data on enough characters from a single novel to give a comprehensive analysis of the organization of characters and reader responses in that one novel. We chose *Mayor* in part because it is relatively compact, has only a few major characters, and has characters who are very distinctively marked in motives and personality. We listed six characters from *Mayor*: Henchard (the title character); his wife Susan; his stepdaughter Elizabeth-Jane; his rival Donald Farfrae; Lucetta, 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. Another reason for selecting *Mayor* as a case study is that it has an unusual agonistic and tonal structure. By using the average scores of the multi-novel website as a frame of reference, we hoped to tease out the structural peculiarities of *Mayor* and draw illuminating interpretive inferences from those peculiarities.
Interpretive commentary, and especially the interpretation of tone, is often regarded as a form of study too subjective and impressionistic ever to be brought within the range of quantification and empirical analysis. By giving a quantitative analysis of the tone in a single novel, we aimed to demonstrate that there need be no aspect of literary study inaccessible to empirical study, and further, that quantification could confirm, refine, correct, and develop the insights of traditional interpretive criticism.

We solicited participation in the Mayor study by directly contacting scholars who had published on Hardy and particularly on Mayor or on other Hardy novels. We also advertised the study on the listserv of the Thomas Hardy Association and listservs associated with the study of Victorian literature. All participation was anonymous, but we collected information about respondents’ age, sex, level of education, when and why they read the novel, and whether they had published on Mayor or other works of Hardy. By analyzing this information, we determined that a total of eighty-five individual coders responded to the survey. Fifty-one were males, thirty-four females. The youngest respondent was twenty-three, and only eight respondents were under the age of thirty. All had college degrees. Nine had a bachelor’s degree, twenty-one a master’s, and fifty-five a doctorate. Twenty-five had published on Mayor; another twenty-three had published on some other novel by Hardy; and another ten had published on some other aspect of Hardy’s work. Thus, a total of fifty-eight out of the eighty-five (68%) had published on some aspect of Hardy’s work. Sixty-seven respondents reported having read the novel within the past five years, and thirty-one within the past year. Fifty-five read it either for teaching a class or for “professional purposes.” In sum, almost all the respondents were very familiar with the novel. A number of respondents completed more than one protocol, and a total of 124 protocols were completed.

To assess the level at which respondents agreed in their assessments of the characters, we conducted “alpha reliability estimates.” In most psychological research, alpha values around .70 are considered acceptable, and alphas in the .80 to .90 range are considered good. Values above .90 are normally achieved only by trained professionals. The average alphas across all categories for the Mayor respondents is .84. The lowest alpha values were for a minor character (Newson), who received only five codings. If we exclude Newson’s alpha values, the average alpha values across all categories is .89. In other words, there was a high level of consensus among the respondents on all the substantive categories of analysis. Agonistic role assignments are a different matter. We discuss those at the beginning of the next section.

To orient readers who have not read Mayor or have not read it recently, we shall concisely summarize the plot. The actions and events in 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 twenty-one years old. Embittered at being held back and burdened by family responsibilities, he gets drunk at a country fair and sells his wife and baby daughter. Within the next twenty 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 had 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 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, but 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. In the period of just a few years after Susan’s return, Henchard’s fortunes have declined drastically, and Farfrae’s fortunes have steadily risen. 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. Henchard attempts to kill Farfrae by throwing him out of a hay loft, but relents and breaks down in remorse. Lucetta has become 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. 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.

As this summary should make clear, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is in basic ways an unusual novel. Its protagonist, Michael Henchard, has personality traits and motivational dispositions that are more typical of antagonists than of protagonists. Moreover, Hardy's own perspective on the events seems remote and detached, thus discouraging the reader's emotional involvement in the story. Because of these peculiar features, Mayor constitutes an especially difficult challenge to interpretive criticism, and it is a challenge that previous criticism has been only partially successful in meeting.

Most commentators who seek to interpret the tonal and perspective structure of Mayor use one of three distinct models of tragedy, or, with whatever cost to consistency, some combination of the three: (1) a model of retributive justice, (2) a model of Promethean Romantic heroism, or (3) a model of redemptive change. 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." 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 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." 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." These three models of tragedy have persisted over decades in which seemingly fundamental changes have taken place in the ideological and philosophical orientation of literary studies, and they have retained their basic structural character through numerous metamorphoses in theoretical concepts and vocabularies—old fashioned humanist, New Critical, archetypal, Marxist, Freudian, deconstructive, feminist, and the various hybrid blends of postmodernism. The persistence of these models suggests that in important ways the models function at imaginative levels deeper and more general than the various fashions through which they have retained their basic form. 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.

Despite the archetypal scope of the three models of tragedy, none of the models is sufficiently deep and general to give a thoroughly cogent account of the tonal and perspectival structure of Mayor. The three models overlap in certain ways but conflict in other ways, and the inadequacies of each, as interpretive models, help to explain the persistence of its rivals. The model of retributive justice eliminates the element of chance in Hardy's vision of the world and adopts a stance of vindictive satisfaction incompatible with his tolerant humanity. The model of Prometheus Romantic heroism glamorizes Henchard's character and strikes a note of vainglorious triumphalism incompatible with Hardy's shrewd irony. And the model of redemptive change blurs the essential continuity of Henchard's character and posits a sentimental resolution alien to Hardy's tragic austerity.

At about the time that he was writing The Mayor of Casterbridge, Hardy wrote a note in which he formulated a concept of tragedy that contains none of the distorting impediments of the three models that are typically invoked to account for the generic and tonal structure of the novel. "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."5 This definition covers a broad spectrum of works typically regarded as tragic, and it is fully adequate to the situation of The Mayor of Casterbridge. It involves no commitment to a principle of poetic justice; it does not require us to derive affirmations of an essential human nobility from the struggles of the tragic protagonist; and it does not presuppose a morally uplifting transformation in the moral constitution of the protagonist.

We need not accept any of the main assumptions that have animated the standard tragic models used to interpret Mayor—that the novel must involve passionate involvement with a heroic protagonist, that the protagonist must himself achieve an adequate interpretive perspective on his own experience, that the events of the story must affirm the existence of 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. If we reject these assumptions, 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. Hardy does not himself feel that Henchard's career is a sublime or ennobling spectacle, and he does not invite the reader to feel that. 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 own experience would require powers of detachment and of generalization that are alien to his nature.

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."6 In Mayor, those qualities are most fully exemplified by Elizabeth-Jane, but the qualities are not gender specific. In other Hardy novels, they are exemplified by both male and 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 in his 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 widest views in her mature life, and in that evocation, her perspective intermingles indistinguishably with Hardy's own:

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. And in being forced to class herself among the fortunate she did not cease to wonder at the persistence of the unforeseen, when the one to whom such unbroken tranquillity had been accorded in the adult stage was she whose youth had seemed to teach that happiness was but the occasional episode in a general drama of pain.  

Because she thus also stands apart and above, Elizabeth-Jane is not herself a passional protagonist. So far as the passional drama is concerned, she is only a good minor character. Within the perspectival drama—the struggle to attain an interpretive view adequate to the spectacle of Henchard's life—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.

“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 (including missing values) for assigning characters to roles in Mayor is low (69%, in contrast to 81% for all 206 multiply-coded characters in the multi-novel website), 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. The consensus rating on Henchard, the title character, is fairly high (88%). Fifty-six out of sixty-four respondents identify Henchard as the protagonist. But, compared to the profiles from the website for all the other novels in this study, Henchard's profile in motives and personality is more like that of an antagonist than that of a protagonist. His predominating motives are those of achieving wealth, power, and prestige; his scores on affiliative behavior and affiliative personality traits are low; he does not score high on cultural interests; he is highly unstable emotionally; and he receives high scores on the emotional response factor Dislike. Henchard comes into sharp conflict, in one way and another, with Farfrae and with Newson, and 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.

In the multi-novel website, the one central motive factor that distinguishes protagonists, both male and female, from all other character sets, is a factor we label "Constructive Effort." It consists in two chief elements: affiliative and altruistic social behavior, and creative and culturally acquisitive intellectual interests. Henchard's stepdaughter Elizabeth-Jane displays a high level of Constructive Effort, and her personality also reflects features typically associated with protagonists. (See figures 9.1 and 9.2.)

She scores low in Extraversion and high in Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Emotional Stability. Despite her protagonistic features, our respondents affirm that the success or failure of her hopes and efforts is not a main feature in the outcome of the story, and they identify her as a good minor character, that is, as the friend or associate of a protagonist. That role assignment corresponds to the assessment of her role in most of the critical commentary on the novel. Elizabeth-Jane is clearly not a protagonist, but she nonetheless has a crucially important function in the story. She provides a point of view wider and wiser than that of any of the other characters. Her own success or failure is not central to the outcome of the story, but her perspective on the success or
failure of other characters provides a standard of judgment that is close to Hardy's own. That standard modulates the emotional and tonal quality of the story and helps to guide the reader in gaining a perspective on the meaning of the story.  

With respect to personality, Farfrae 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.

The criteria that enter into mate selection typically differ among males and females in both good and bad character sets. Male protagonists tend to set a high value on Physical Attractiveness, some value on Intrinsic Qualities (intelligence, kindness, and reliability), and little value on Extrinsic Attributes (wealth, power, and status). Female protagonists tend to set the highest value on Intrinsic Attributes, a moderate value on Extrinsic Attributes, and little value on Physical Attractiveness. Male antagonists, curiously, score below average on all criteria for selecting mates. That is, they have no particular preferences. Female antagonists, in contrast, place the highest value on Extrinsic Attributes, slight value on Physical Attractiveness, and almost no value on Intrinsic Attributes. As the unusual structure of motives and personality in Mayor might lead us to anticipate, mate selection in Mayor disrupts these usual patterns. (See figure 9.3.)

Henchard and Farfrae vie for Lucetta, and in pursuing her they both mingle protagonistic and antagonistic features. They are strongly moved by her Physical Attractiveness but give no heed to her Intrinsic Qualities. They both display interest in her Extrinsic Attributes. In selecting Henchard, Lucetta displays the pattern of a typical female antagonist; she is interested only in his wealth, power, and prestige (External Attributes). In selecting Farfrae, in contrast, she is moved by all three criteria, though least by his Intrinsic Qualities. In a standard romantic comedy, the normative or model couple marries at the end of the story. Elizabeth-Jane
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and Faedra marry at the end of this story, but their mate selection pattern is unusual. In selecting Faedra, Elizabeth-Jane gives highest priority to Intrinsic Qualities, but she also places a considerable emphasis on Physical Attractiveness. In selecting Elizabeth-Jane, Faedra, in contrast, gives little heed to Physical Attractiveness. He gives some regard to Intrinsic Qualities, but contrasted with his interest in Lucetta, his interest in Elizabeth-Jane seems, in its romantic aspect, rather tepid.

Our research design does not aim directly at analyzing the complex interactions in point of view among the author, the characters, and the readers, but the elements of our design enable us to get at this perspectival dimension indirectly. The relations among the role assignments, the constitution of character, and the emotional responses of readers give the necessary clues to the peculiar perspectival and tonal structure of this novel, and by assessing that tonal structure we can make reasonable inferences about the specific kind of psychological work this particular novel is designed to accomplish both for the author and for the reader.

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 sympathetic identification with one or more main characters, or at least to activate the reader's sympathetic and appreciative responsiveness to the main characters. That sort of involvement is registered in part through one of the three emotional response factors that emerged from the factor analysis of emotional responses in the multi-novel website, the factor "Interest." The first emotional response factor is Dislike and is constituted by positive loadings on anger, disgust, contempt, and fear of the character, and by negative loadings on admiration and liking. (A factor "loading" indicates the weight given to each of the measurements used to define a factor.) The second emotional response factor is Sorrow and is constituted by positive loadings on sadness and fear for the character. The third emotional response factor is Interest. This factor has moderate positive loadings on admiration and liking, but the main element in Interest is a strong negative loading on indifference. Characters who score low on Interest have typically received very high scores on indifference. That is, our respondents have indicated that they are highly indifferent to the character. A high score on Interest suggests a strong degree of passionate involvement with a character. Factor analysis, by design, identifies statistically independent themes. The factor analysis therefore reveals that the emotional response factor Interest is qualitatively distinct from the evaluatively charged response Dislike, which constitutes a measure of positive or negative emotional valence. Interest is also qualitatively distinct from Sorrow, which constitutes a measure of sympathy or compassion.

In one of the earliest responses to *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, an anonymous critic observed that the novel "does not contain a single character capable of arousing a passing interest in his or her welfare." As the scores on Interest in our study indicate, this critic's observation of the fact is correct. (See figure 9.4.)

The inference the critic draws from that fact is, however, 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. Passionate involvement is indeed a common way in which novels work, but it is not the only possible way, and it is not the way *The Mayor of Casterbridge* works. What Hardy is after...
in this novel is something rather different, and 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 Hardy accomplishes in Mayor is that of gaining a reflective detachment from the story 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.

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. 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 phantasmagoria of passion and folly, tinged with absurdity and futility. The most striking aspect of the emotional response to the novel as a whole is the extremely low level of interest for the main characters. To get a comparative sense of the level of interest, we can line up the interest scores for the forty-eight 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 fifty-four 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 multi-novel website are standardized, the average score for all characters is zero. For the forty-eight most frequently coded characters, the average score on interest is .17. For the six characters in Mayor, the average interest score is -.81. Given the proportions of the normal curve, about 79% of all characters in the multi-novel 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.

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. 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 antagonists, but neither scores in the antagonistic range on dislike. In the scores for the larger data set, root for—a measure of whether respondents want a character to succeed—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. It seems likely that this disruption helps neutralize emotional responsiveness in readers and thus contributes to the low scores on interest.

As narrator of Mayor, Hardy adopts a stance of reflective, stoic detachment. He seeks to gain a calm and distant perspective on the transient ambitions and passions of human life and the peripeties and contingencies of circumstance. Gaining detachment is not the most common kind of psychological work 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.” This was not true, 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.

Conclusions

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 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 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. Those 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 in Tess of the d’Urbervilles, his proclivity for negative affect combines with tenderness and strength of mind. The result is a sublime elegy. In much of Jude the Obscure, 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 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.