

Entrapped by words: Semiotic studies of Thomas Hardy's novels

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Part One

The Mayor and two performatives

By way of introducing this semiotic study of Hardy's novels, I shall analyze two scenes from the beginning of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, which Hardy published in 1886. These two scenes illustrate those pragma-linguistic features of the novels I shall be concerned with in this work. The two scenes are the wife-sale in Chapter I and the oath-taking in Chapter II. However, for purposes of exposition, I shall deal with these scenes in the reverse order, starting with the oath-taking.

After selling his wife and his daughter at the fair at Weydon Priors, and falling asleep in a drunken stupor, Michael Henchard, the hero of the novel, wakes up and regrets his action of the previous day. He at first blames his wife for letting him go through with the auction, but on sobering up he realizes that it 'was of his own making, and he ought to bear it' (*The Mayor*, p. 84¹). Before going out to look for his wife and little daughter, he decides to take an oath, 'a greater oath than he had ever sworn before'.

Arriving at a church, Henchard enters and goes up to the altar. Putting his head, not merely his hand, on the Bible which lay on the communion table, he says aloud:

I, Michael Henchard, on this morning of the sixteenth of September, do take an oath before God here in this solemn place that I will avoid all strong liquors for the space of twenty-one years to come. ... And this I swear upon the book before me; and may I be strook dumb, blind and helpless if I break this my oath. (pp. 84-85)

Let us consider a number of features of this oath, which will illustrate the performative utterance we are concerned with. First, we will consider the setting, or generally, the circumstances in which the utterance is made.