

Materials to Guide Reading

LECTURE SIX

Sorrow-Acre:

Sorrow-Acre takes place in a world different from that of its intended audience, but it is supposed to have lessons for them. The scene of action is in a backwater of Europe - Denmark, in the late eighteenth-century, just before the American and French revolutions were to initiate changes in the nature of authority in the Western world and make some of the values by which the characters in the story live things of the past. The story is written from the modern standpoint, however, and our values, which are just making their way into the world of the story, are represented by the young man, Adam, who has lived in England (unlike Denmark, a major power) and is thinking of going off to America. The outcome of the story seems to endorse the values represented by Adam's uncle, the "Old Lord", but the text allows Adam to be troubled by misgivings as he surrenders to the rightness of the older man's position.

You should understand at least three of the text's references. (1) The allusion to the Book of Genesis (the lord's estate looks like the Garden of Eden "from every tree of which, thou, my Adam, may freely eat") has reference to the fall of mankind; the old lord omits the rest of God's speech, which forbids the first Adam to eat of one fruit - the original "forbidden fruit", the fruit of the tree of knowledge. The forbidden fruit here is the old lord's young wife and the story carries a decided hint that Adam's duty to his heritage will be fulfilled, paradoxically, by becoming the father of the child who will be recognized as the old lord's legitimate heir. (2) The Biblical text cited by the phrase "in the beginning was the word" refers to the belief that God created the world by speaking that is, by issuing edicts; the old lord implies that for executive authority to take back an edict or a decision would be equivalent to God's taking back the word that created the world, that is, to disavow the world and thereby destroy it. (3) Finally, the image of a single figure reaping in a field is a conventional image in the Western tradition for death.

1. The long opening passage describing the land speaks of the value of "continuance, a worldly immortality" and describes how the lives of the lords of manors were focused on their being "the incarnation" or embodiment of that value. Yet we are expected to know that the world spoken of and the value embodied have passed away, were not immortal, after all. Does this make a difference to the way in which we think of the old lord's action?

2. Adam, at the outset of the story, feels (p. 195) that as long as someone "of his blood and name" should be lord of the manor, he himself "would still have a home and would carry weight in the world." How would you paraphrase this feeling? Does it still make sense in the modern world?

3. The old lord has a problem in executive management. How would you describe it? What is at stake for him in the problem, which leads him not to render a decision but to pass responsibility along to a subordinate who must take a fearful risk to resolve it? Why is Adam's uncle unwilling to act upon his beliefs or his sympathies?

4. What are the stakes for the subordinate figure-the woman, Anne-Marie Piil? How do you resolve the contradiction between her allegedly bad character ("they tell as a girl she had a child and did away with it") and her willingness to sacrifice her life for her sons liberty?

5. One way of looking at the old lord's action is to see it as passing the buck - a failure of decisiveness and accountability. At least part of this view is founded on a sense that the risk imposed on Anne-Marie is somehow disproportionate to the risk (if any) that would be incurred by the old lord if he simply instructed the judge to free the boy on grounds of insufficient evidence. Does the old lord incur any risk in transferring responsibility to Anne-Marie? What

answer can be made to a proponent of this view? Adam, of course, takes the view that the old lord is failing himself and his responsibilities by making the wager with Anne-Marie. In part, Adam's view is determined by his opinion of the folk for whom the old lord is responsible. What is this view? Does it suit executive authority?

6. An alternative is to see what the old lord does as an act of empowerment. In this connection, what is the difference between empowerment and delegation of authority in management? How would you describe the old lord's managerial style? The bailiff observes (p. 205.) that if everyone worked as hard as Anne-Marie the manor might show a profit. The old lord replies in such a way as to suggest that "showing a profit" is not the real justification of the manor's existence. Is profit the bottom line for corporations or is their existence to be justified in terms of something else? Is there any managerial lesson to be learned from taking the old lord's view seriously?

7. Does power stand in the way of virtue? asks Adam. No, says his uncle, power is in itself the supreme virtue. What does he mean? Is he right?

8. In dealing with the importance of not taking back his word, the old Lord alludes to the opening verse of *The Gospel according to John*, and says that we do not know anything about the meaning of God's word. "It may," he says, "have been uttered as a whim, in jest." What is the relevance of this remark to the old lord's situation? How would this relevance translate to the responsibilities of management?

9. Do the answers of any of the foregoing questions help to explain why Isaak Dinesen wrote this story for her countrymen during the period of its Nazi occupation?

10. Consider the case of a worker accepting a job with a high risk of danger (to health, to life or limb), because it carries a higher wage than a job with similar duties without such risk. How does the case of this worker compare with that of Anne-Marie, in *Sorrow-Acre*, who willingly undertook a risk because of the benefit that it would yield? How does the Old Lord compare with the companies that offer such jobs or with the stockholders who invest in them? If the old lord was wrong, in your view, and should be debarred from making his offer to Anne-Marie, does it follow that companies are wrong in offering employment at risk, no matter how strong the market-demand for their product, and should some executive authority debar them from making the offer?

Milton Friedman:

1. Friedman's essay concerns fiduciary responsibility - the sort of responsibility incurred when a client delegates the management of one aspect of his or her interests to an agent, who engages to pursue it within the limits prescribed by law and professional ethics. The issue here is management of a business corporation. But the essay seems to have a larger import than merely to argue that the fiduciary agent must not betray the client's trust even when good reasons tempt him or her to do so. It seems to adopt the notion that no good reasons can possibly exist to do the tempting. How does the argument manage to turn in this direction?

2. Is Friedman's essay badly named? After all, it isn't entitled "The Business of Business is Profits"? Isn't this a piece of hypocrisy of the sort he complained about? What is the difference between saying "Profits are Ethical" and "Ethics are Profitable"? Would Friedman subscribe to both sentiments?

3. Friedman's paradox: You have an *ethical* obligation to give "bad" reasons for good actions - namely, nakedly, and unashamedly. Recall that Undershaft's conduct was described in just this way by Lady Britomart, and it was what annoyed her about him. (You may also recall that Undershaft's motto was: "Unashamed"). Is the similarity here real or just a play on words?

4. Undershaft says that he is not one of those people who put their moral and their business into separate, water-tight compartments - the recommendation of Albert Carr, we recall, was to do just that. Does Friedman stand with Carr or with Undershaft here?

5. Friedman's way of dealing with disvalue-let us say, the occurrence of accidents in a particular factory---is to let the general rate of profits determine the "right" number of accidents, which is the number where it would be more expensive in terms of opportunity costs to pay for improved vehicular safety than to pay indemnity to the victim (or the victim's survivors, but Friedman steers clear of raising the implication of fatality). Applying the lesson of his other paper, one might say that it would be a breach of fiduciary responsibility (and therefore it would be *unethical*) to make improvements and lessen physical risk beyond this point. Is the ethical implication correct? (I want to suggest that not taking the issue here seriously would be a mistake, because one way or another you *will* be involved in decisions of this kind.) How valid is this argument? To what extent is it related to "administering the woe of the universe"? If Friedman is right, what sense did it make for Macnamara to invite various stakeholders at Tacoma to speculate about what counts as "acceptable risk" in the case of lead pollution?

6. What's the difference between saying it's ethical to be profitable and it's profitable to be ethical? Would Undershaft approve of Friedman's essay?