

## ELE23, SESSION 2008 (Thatcher, Langenbach, D.H. Lawrence)

### Suggested plan (X. Lachazette)

**Intro:** (a) Introduce the 3 documents (only the *relevant* details): 1988 speech made by PM Thatcher before a religious assembly, in which she shows how her beliefs guide her personal convictions & political choices, esp. her belief in “*personal responsibility*” (70-1); the bleak picture of a working-class residential neighborhood in industrial Lancashire (England) by an American photographer, where hardly any *individuals* can be seen – tho’ Langenbach is more of an architect-cum-consultant in building renovation than a social activist; an excerpt from Lawrence’s famous novel (he himself was born in a coalmining town in Nottinghamshire), in which one of the protagonists (Gerald) relinquishes a Christian outlook for one based on *efficient systems* and capitalist-type production. (b) Hence, one of the main topics of this set of documents = the place of the individual in society (at the heart of it or only peripheral?). Are societies created for the benefit of individuals, or must individuals adapt to whatever the benefit of the majority requires? (c) State the plan (slowly & clearly).

#### 1) Individual v. society: a dire outlook

- a) The 3 docs offer *a somber representation* of the issue at stake here. The photograph speaks volumes: uniformity/sameness, cobblestones as if this were a picture coming straight from the 19<sup>th</sup> c. & the height of the Industrial Rn (Cf. the 19<sup>th</sup>-century “Condition of England” debate in novels like Dickens’s *Hard Times*, Gaskell’s *North and South*, Disraeli’s *Sybil*, etc.), or “mews” = former stables turned into dwellings. In a way, an apt illustration of the dangers associated with Gerald’s new belief in the **power & beauty of repetition** (Cf. idea of “changeless” geographical & temporal repetition *ad infinitum*, lines 47, 53, 60). Hardly any humans visible, only 3 as far as we can see, no kids playing or horsing around, etc. A **dehumanized** context & environment deprived of any natural elements (trees, gardens, etc.) → industrialization as the arch enemy of the individual (2 mutually opposing entities?)
- b) Obviously a lack of empathy for the lowly & downtrodden in the Lawrence excerpt: Gerald sees democratic ideals as irrelevant to modern-day living. A “realistic” (some would say cynical) approach to **the question of authority & power**: there *have to be* masters & servants, dominating wills & mere cogs in the great economic wheel. What matters is what “functions” & is “practical” (6, 23, 34) → a bleak outlook where “**order**” & “**organization**” (28, 33, 34-5, 51) matter more than the happiness of the majority.
- c) Something with which Thatcher obviously agrees in her search for political ways to “shape economic and political life” (4). Cf. her stress on the “basic ties of **the family**” (52-3) as the basic unit on which to work, and the need to elicit “**efforts**” (75) from *all* the members of society (= those who *won’t* should be punished or thwarted in one way or another).

#### 2) Religion as the only hope left?

- a) Gerald’s utilitarianism: no more any belief in divinity, equality, democracy, “live and self-sacrifice” (2-3) – which is only “silliness” (13, 20, internal focalization in these passages) the expression of a “desire for chaos” (16-7, acc. to Gerald, naturally = not necessarily acc. to the narrator or author). In a way, the picture corroborates Gerald’s fear about the potentially horrifying effects of “equality and democracy.” In Gerald’s system all of those defunct concepts are replaced by **a kind of divine machine**, described at the end (underline the religious vocab. in lines 52-62: *eternal, infinite, Deus ex machine, God, Godhead*, etc. + the **central image of the wheel** = perfection of the circle + religious connotations (Buddhism, for instance) + shift in the text towards *mechanical* wheels (11, 12, 56, revolving 57, *spinning* 58 with also a pun on “spinning” since associated with weaving, for instance). This immoderate love for machines was already present in Disraeli’s *Coningsby* (1844) and is also a characteristic of the Futurist movement (1909 – WW2 roughly) = admiration for speed, technology, youth, violence, the car, the airplane and the industrial city, all that represented the technological triumph of humanity over nature).
- b) Ironically, Gerald’s system makes Thatcher’s Christian outlook look like **an oasis in a desert of indifference** to the ill effects of hierarchical orderings & to the plight of the poor & lowly. Analyze 1 or 2 of

the Biblical refs in the excerpt (= 7, 10, or 57), and/or list the issues or people whom the PM states should be addressed or taken care of (66-8). After all, the Christian God is supposed to have created mankind “in his own image” – which is something a “divine machine” could never claim... + one notices that Thatcher’s speech **continually strives to strike a balance** between strong Conservative views (entrepreneurialism, importance of individual responsibility, reduced state intervention = cuts in public spending & social services, in fact) and a more humane or “feeling” approach to social problems. (Study lines 40-51 in particular.) Yet as we know, the “Iron Lady” could prove unfeeling in her dealings with trade unions & strikers (1985 strikes) + this part of her speech avoids **the question of the unemployed**, which she seems to lump with those who would rather *not* work “extremely hard” like the rest of “us” (Cf. interesting lines 72-5). After all, this kind of speech **does sound strange at a time of high unemployment** & when pit closures (for instance) meant the laying off of thousands.

### 3) *The need to beware of all dogmas*

- a) From a symbolical perspective, the photograph could show the result of policies which **target or stigmatize the poor & unemployed (a recurrent Anglo-Saxon / Protestant pattern**, as is visible in Thatcher’s speech). In the picture: people literally stuck in a “dead-end” kind of existence, houses barring the (intellectual & religious) horizon, soullessness, moroseness, humans dwarfed by architecture (one could see *some* beauty in this unchanging pattern, maybe – shouldn’t art matter less than humans?)
- b) The narrator’s intervention in the Lawrence excerpt (28-35, omniscient narrator telling the reader about his character’s limitations) also acts as a warning: what Gerald thinks of as “**harmony**” could be seen as anything but harmonious (dry “order” in fact). More like a systematic, soulless approach to human problems. An interesting **shift in the meaning of the adjective/adverb “inhuman(ly)”** in line 44: here, supposedly a *positively* connoted word since it refers to a non-human way of doing things (= more like a superhuman, or divine, way). But obviously “non-human” & “inhuman” are *not* synonymous!! → Gerald on the verge of putting forward an **authoritarian / totalitarian system**.
- c) The limits of Thatcher’s speech: Her **basic assumptions are sometimes surprising**: (1) Lines 50-1: who says that people’s instincts & convictions are not so “deeply rooted”? What does that tell us about her conception of the masses? (2) What is this about artists & craftsmen’s work glorifying God?? Is that just a pun on “creation”? (Cp. 9 & 20) Or does it mean that artists’ works should *only* be subsidized *if* they do?? (3) All truths are supposed to stem from the Bible (as asserted in the 1st §), but when the Bible is out of touch with today’s realities (“new duties”) new truths should be developed (61-3) → Bible to be read both literally & figuratively??!

**Concl:** (1) Hence a rather gloomy set of documents, in which individual development matters less than the survival of the many (society). Not much to cheer us up here. (2) yet also a kind of warning: all belief systems are flawed, and rely on intellectual constructs / assumptions that can be questioned. For instance, analyze the subversive nature of the Biblical parable which Thatcher alludes to in lines 21-2 (“the woman with the alabaster jar of ointment” = Matthew 26: 7-13 or Mark 14:3-9). Someone else might object that what this proves is that anyone should be allowed to spend their money as they so wish, including on the poor, & even if this does not solve the problem of poverty = the opposite of Mrs. Thatcher’s policy of public-spending cuts.