

Lecture #23

Isaac Dinesen, "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.