



Who or what was on trial in *The Trial of Lady Chatterley's Lover*?

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(The following is an interview with Arthur Seaton, one of the five 'ordinary men and women' who sat on the jury for the trial of Lady Chatterley's Lover. Here, he gives us his perspective on the arguments of both defence and prosecution. Mr. Seaton's dialect and language have been modified for the comfort of our readers.)

Interviewer: Mr. Seaton, as a member of the working class, it appeared that this trial had special relevance to you. Reference was made many times to the lower classes in discussing the possible dangers the book might pose to your character and moral conduct. So, might I first ask, do you consider yourself to be 'ordinary' in the sense of the word used by both defence and prosecution?

Seaton: Depends on what you mean by ordinary. I'd say I'm an average bloke, who works just enough to get the money I need to enjoy myself. I've got mates and I've got family, and I suppose we're ordinary enough people. I try to get on as well as I can, as long as the bosses don't get on my back... What's 'character and moral conduct' got to do with being working-class?

Interviewer: The prosecution argued that you, as a member of the 'lower orders', would be specifically threatened by the book's supposed immorality due to your lack of education and discernment. What do you say to that?

Seaton: Danger? That's just typical. The ones in 'authority' telling us what we can and can't do and who we are and what we're supposed to be. I reckon it's all about control, you know, the government telling you you're 'vulnerable' so that they can find some other way to mess with you -

Interviewer: Calm down, Mr. Seaton. Let's get back to the trial. The prosecution suggested that Lawrence's rampant disregard for marriage and shocking use of four-letter words would 'deprave and corrupt' vulnerable people. Would you agree?

Seaton: No. People aren't as stupid as you make out. I suppose you're referring to people like me when you say 'vulnerable people', right?

Interviewer: Well... both young people and the lower orders were identified as being more easily influenced by such immorality than the rest of society. So, and let's be honest now Mr. Seaton, didn't Lawrence's approval of Lady Chatterley's adultery lessen your respect for the institution of marriage? Did the book's pernicious sensuality stimulate lustful and depraved thoughts in your mind?

Seaton: A book do what? A book's not going to make me do anything, mate. I don't hate marriage, but if a woman's not getting what she needs from her husband, then I reckon I'm well entitled to step in. If you want to call that depraved, go ahead, but I think you need to understand what life's really like...

Interviewer: Alright... you agree then with the defence's argument that the institution of marriage is less important than the actual relationship, that a woman can sleep around as long as her emotional needs are being fulfilled? What of Mr. Hoggart's assertion that Lawrence's

presentation of marriage is actually 'puritanical' in its dedication to marriage's spiritual aspect?¹

Seaton: You're missing the point. It's just a book. Life's more complicated than that. Sometimes marriage works and sometimes it doesn't, and I think life's hard enough without you lot telling us that we're wrong for not thinking something different. And what did you say... 'puritanical'? I don't do religion, mate.

Interviewer: I take it you don't read books, Mr. Seaton? What do you say then to the defence's argument that this book is of educational and ethical value, and that by publishing it, Penguin are acting in the public good?

Seaton: I'd say you're talking to the wrong person. I can't be bothered with books. I work hard all day and when I'm not working I'll drink, I'll fight, I'll go out with women, but above all I'll enjoy myself. I don't need someone else telling me what's good for me – I'll decide for myself.

Interviewer: But isn't great literature a vital part of our culture, a symbol of the health and vitality of our national way of life?

Seaton: 'Culture'? 'Way of life'? You're speaking a different language, mate. I don't know about your culture and to me your 'national way of life' is a load of rubbish. If you're asking me, this 'culture' you're talking about is just something those in authority force on the rest of us to –

Interviewer: Ok, ok. That's quite enough. Thank you, Mr. Seaton...

The trial of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, was, in many ways, a trial of both the nature and purpose of culture in the 20th century. Through the medium of Lawrence's controversial work, both defence and prosecution argued for a specific conception of culture and its relationship to the state of society. In making these arguments both sides consistently made reference to the 'ordinary' and to the 'public good', making the fundamental assumption that art, as part of culture, is capable of having a formative effect on the minds of its readers, and that both sides therefore have a responsibility in regulating and defining what constitutes 'good' culture for the benefit of wider society.

In imagining what Arthur Seaton might think about these debates about culture and the role it plays in 'ordinary' lives, I'm trying to highlight the disjunction between the idea of culture presented in the trial and the way 'culture' operates in *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning*. In the context of Sillitoe's 'authentic' working-class novel, it is hard to imagine Seaton reading Lawrence's book, and still harder to imagine him being 'depraved and corrupted' by it. Indeed, culture as suggested in the trial seems to have little relevance to Seaton's world, built as it is around the binary of work and leisure, and characterised as it is by belligerence in the face of authority rather than a concern with the spiritual health of society. Instead, it arguably fits Clarke's conception of working-class culture as being rooted in the experience of work and the 'cultural identifications and collective solidarities' that result from the 'necessities and degradations of waged labour'.² In Clarke's argument, culture is important as a way by which the working-class adapt to the hardships that arise out of their direct relation to the means of production in an industrial society. The 'common meanings' that develop serve almost as a coping mechanism, a way of making a difficult and thankless life valuable. As such, culture in an 'ordinary' sense stands in marked contrast to the arguments about culture in the trial, which characterise it as an external rather than organic force that is capable of influencing behaviour and defining a national rather than local

¹ C.H.Rolph, ed., *The Trial of Lady Chatterley's Lover* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p.100.

² John Clarke, 'Capital and culture: the post war working class revisited' in *Working Class Culture*, eds. J. Clarke, C. Critcher and R. Johnson, (London: Hutchinson, 1979), p.185.

identity. The way Sillitoe sets up Seaton's working-class anti-authoritarianism as based in the factory and an opposing hedonism appears to validate Clarke's idea of working-class culture in relation to this novel.

In this respect, it is important to recognise the way in which the debates of the trial rely on the characterisation of 'ordinary' or working-class people as vulnerable, morally suspect and even infantile. In Williams' testimony for instance, Hutchinson questions whether it is 'right' for 'the kind of people' that attend Williams' W.E.A. classes to be allowed to discuss the book.³ Such language presents the working-class as almost childlike. It implies that they need to be protected, and it is significant that both defence and prosecution share this attitude. The contrast to Sillitoe's representation is sharp, as in Seaton there is a vitality, intelligence and emotional discernment which reveals the representations of the trial to be inflected with prejudice. I have tried to suggest this contrast in the tone of the interview, and it is my argument that 'culture' is the concept around which these prejudices coalesce.

That is not to say that Sillitoe's approach to the working-class is the 'correct' one, as in the end it cannot be representative or reliable enough to be evidence of the quality of 'ordinariness' that the working-class supposedly possess. What it does suggest though is that 'culture' as presented in the trial is a fundamentally unstable concept, undermined by the opposing arguments in the court room as well as by what might be seen as the 'reality' of working-class experience. 'Culture' as a concept is made to mean something by both defence and prosecution, leading to the question: what ideological motivations lie behind each case? As Hewison has argued, 'culture has become dauntingly associated with authority...it is the field in which the struggle for authority takes place'.⁴ This suggests that the debate over the purpose of culture in the trial actually constitute a struggle for cultural, and therefore political, authority. As such, an analysis of the attitudes underpinning their arguments reveals how each side conceives society, and how culture as a concept is manipulated in the interests of propagating each sides' purported authority.

The prosecution argued that a society's culture has a responsibility for that society's moral standards. By arguing that Lawrence's book should be banned on the basis that it undermined the institution of marriage and the kind of accepted attitudes towards sex, class and gender that were the 'correct' values of a civilised society, Griffiths-Jones was implicitly claiming that 'good' culture was a force to shape and control society.⁵ By seeking to deny the right of specifically lower-class people to read the book, the prosecution attempted to mould society in its own image, setting itself up as the arbiter of normative values and attitudes. This conception of 'culture' as serving to inculcate moral standards and good character is based on assumptions that reveal an arguably sinister belief in the ruling class' place in modern society. These assumptions privilege the upper-class male as being the natural figure of authority, and are summed up aptly by the much quoted question, 'is it a book that you would even wish your wife or your servants to read?'.⁶ The prosecution attempts to manipulate the term 'culture' in order to inscribe the subjugation of women and the lower-classes into the cultural apparatus. It is interesting that in the trial, it is almost always Lady Chatterley's adultery that is portrayed as immoral by the prosecution, while the adultery of the equally 'sinful' Mellors is barely mentioned. Rolph draws attention to this when he comments, 'Lady Chatterley was indeed on trial'.⁷ Similarly, Griffith-Jones' repeated references to the low price of the book, argued by the publishers to allow even the poorest to enjoy the same quality of 'culture' as everyone else, work to suggest that Penguin's crime was to 'make it

³ Rolph, p.135.

⁴ R. Hewison, *Culture and Consensus*, (London: Methuen, 1995), p.16.

⁵ A. Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p.50.

⁶ Rolph, p.17.

⁷ Rolph, p.63.

available in a mass market paperback rather than an exclusive and expensive edition'.⁸ As such, in attempting to ban Lawrence's text and so place it outside the officially sanctioned 'culture', the prosecution attempt to manipulate the term so that it is loaded with prejudice. Interesting in relation to this is the argument that culture should be used to combat the 'lack of standards, lack of restraint, lack of discipline – mental, moral discipline' in society.⁹ Combined with the suggested moral superiority of the upper-class male, this suggestion that culture should inculcate good, accepted character into the morally deficient carries insidious parallels with the discourses of imperialism. As such, the prosecution's arguments are informed by the belief in the necessity of a ruling elite, and the failure of their manipulation of 'culture' goes some way to showing how outdated these attitudes were.

Contrastingly, the defence believed that the book had a kind of redemptive potential, and that by disseminating the book to the masses society would be reformed by its educational and instructive power. Implicit in this argument is the belief that 'good' culture has the universal capability to improve human life and to enrich the moral and spiritual capacity of those who read it. This humanist conception of culture, strongly influenced by the critical tradition of F.R. Leavis, undermines the idea of 'high' culture which is evident in the arguments of the prosecution, arguing instead for culture as the right of all.¹⁰

However, despite these intentions, the arguments advanced by the defence still serve to set them up as the possessors of cultural authority, who have the right to define what 'culture' is. This authority is established through the literary expertise that is asserted by the defence and validated by the trial's outcome. As Matthews has argued, 'the proceedings explored the very function of criticism and the role of the critic', and it is significant that the defence use the cultural resource of Lawrence's text to establish the dominance of their own critical mode.¹¹ The consistency and vigour with which the defence witnesses analyse the book within the Leavisite, humanist critical tradition, characterised by terms such as 'truth', 'importance' and 'value', works to set up that tradition as the 'correct' way of reading the book.¹² Such an approach works to preclude any alternative reading of the text, and the defence's success is dependent upon the extent to which they can convince the 'ordinary' jury of the authority of their judgements.¹³ As a result, the ability to read texts 'correctly' becomes a condition for being considered 'cultured'. As Sinfield has recognized, this works to reproduce social divisions in line with new criteria, replacing rather than destroying existing hierarchies.¹⁴

There are also wider political implications to Leavis' criticism. Anderson has argued that Leavis' 'moral and aesthetic criticism...is the major creative tradition' of the New Left, and the leftist subtext of the defence's language leads to questions as to the political significance of the emphasis placed on culture as a universal right.¹⁵ Johnson has argued that the emphasis that the left places on the 'moment of culture' in the 1950's represents 'an attempt to vindicate critical social thought...in circumstances where even the "people" seemed content'.¹⁶ This suggests that the defence implicitly utilises 'culture' as a means by which to validate its progressivism in a climate of post-war equality and affluence. Hoggart also explicitly sets 'good' culture against a debasing, capitalist mass-culture in his testimony,

⁸ Hewison, p.118.

⁹ Rolph, p.211.

¹⁰ Sean Matthews, 'The Trial of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*' in *New D.H. Lawrence*, ed. H. Booth, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p.179.

¹¹ Matthews, p.172.

¹² Rolph, p.61.

¹³ Sinfield, p.290.

¹⁴ Sinfield, p.55.

¹⁵ P. Anderson and R. Blackburn, *Towards Socialism*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), p.283.

¹⁶ Richard Johnson, 'Three Problematics' in *Working Class Culture*, eds. J. Clarke, C. Critcher and R. Johnson, (London: Hutchinson, 1979), p.214.

implying that the left-intelligentsia have responsibility for regulating culture and protecting people from the negative by-products of affluence.¹⁷ From this, then, we can say that the manipulation of 'culture' by the defence and the successful confirmation of their cultural authority works to reaffirm the political authority of the New Left and the ideological basis of its socialism.

Ultimately, I would argue that the trial acted as a forum for two competing discourses, each trying to situate *Lady Chatterley's Lover* within their individual perspective on what 'culture's' role is in modern society. Considering the importance to which they ascribe the high cultural form of Lawrence's text in relation to the conception of culture that operates within Sillitoe's novel, this appropriation is clearly an active manipulation of what culture 'means', leading us to question what motivations underlie such manipulation. To answer the question, then, I would argue that culture, as a term filled with competing meanings, responsibilities and implications, is what is on trial. The irony is that the defence and prosecution, both representing in different senses an 'elite', needed the 'ordinary' jury to validate their idea of culture over the other. The jury was asked to decide which vision of 'culture' was more valid, and in choosing the defence's version, synthesis was achieved between the quality of 'ordinariness' and the cultural-political ideology of the left-intelligentsia. And would Arthur Seaton really have voted to acquit the book? I'm inclined to think so, if only because the prosecution are synonymous with the state he despises.

¹⁷ Rolph, p.103.

Bibliography

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