Mary Elizabeth Lease Speech (1890)

**Background:** The daughter of Irish immigrants who settled in Pennsylvania, Mary Elizabeth Lease was born in 1850. Her father and older brother were both killed when they served in the Union Army during the U.S. Civil War, and her widowed mother struggled to care for her. In 1870, Mary moved to Kansas to teach at a Catholic mission school, later married a druggist, and enjoyed a middle-class lifestyle for the first time in her life. Her family was plunged into poverty in the financial panic of 1873, and they moved to Texas and then to Kansas to start over. Mary became involved in social reform movements such as prohibition, woman suffrage, the labor movement, and the Populist Party. In the 1890s she campaigned all over the country for the Populist Party’s cause and candidates. Violating accepted decorum for women of the day, she became a nationally known fiery stump speaker, and a favorite target of those who believed a woman’s place was in the home. In June of 1896 alone, she delivered speeches in 17 different cities in Minnesota. She drew much criticism because of her forthright fearlessness on the public stage, but the vilification seemed to increase her strength. Emporia editor William Allen White, who disapproved of her political views, wrote “she could recite the multiplication table and set a crowd hooting and harrahing at her will.”

**Wall Street Owns the Country; A Speech by Mary Elizabeth Lease (circa 1890)**

This is a nation of inconsistencies. The Puritans fleeing from oppression became oppressors. We fought England for our liberty and put chains on four million of blacks. We wiped out slavery and our tariff laws and national banks began a system of white wage slavery worse than the first. Wall Street owns the country. It is no longer a government of the people, by the people, and for the people, but a government of Wall Street, by Wall Street, and for Wall Street. The great common people of this country are slaves, and monopoly is the master. The West and South are bound and prostrate before the manufacturing East. Money rules, and our Vice-President is a London banker. Our laws are the output of a system which clothes rascals in robes and honesty in rags. The [political] parties lie to us and the political speakers mislead us. We were told two years ago to go to work and raise a big crop, that was all we needed. We went to work and plowed and planted; the rains fell, the sun shone, nature smiled, and we raised the big crop that they told us to; and what came of it? Eight-cent corn, ten-cent oats, two-cent beef and no price at all for butter and eggs—that’s what came of it. The politicians said we suffered from overproduction. Overproduction, when 10,000 little children, so statistics tell us, starve to death every year in the United States, and over 100,000 shopgirls in New York are forced to sell their virtue for the bread their niggardly wages deny them... We want money, land and transportation. We want the abolition of the National Banks, and we want the power to make loans direct from the government. We want the foreclosure system wiped out... We will stand by our homes and stay by our fireside by force if necessary, and we will not pay our debts to the loan-shark companies until the government pays its debts to us. The people are at bay; let the bloodhounds of money who dogged us thus far beware.
REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What are the main complaints of Mary Elizabeth Lease?
2. Why do you think she attracted so much attention and criticism?
3. In what ways are constitutional principles and essential virtues demonstrated? In what aspects of the events are they decidedly absent?