

# **Hans Brinker; or, The Silver Skates**

## **Short Guide**

### **Hans Brinker; or, The Silver Skates by Mary Mapes Dodge**

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## Overview

Hans Brinker; or, The Silver Skates is in some respects a dated novel; the world it describes has long since disappeared. But young adults still must face the moral and ethical problems its characters encounter. For example, Hans Brinker must constantly choose between his own inclinations and the morally responsible act. Should he spend a gift of money on steel skates or on food for his family? Should he keep the purse he has found, which contains a sizable sum, or return it to the rightful owner? Should he attack those who humiliate him and his family? Should he help a rival in the race for the silver skates or take advantage of his opponent's equipment failure to win? His sister Gretel must grapple with mixed emotions about a demented father who abuses her mother and with feelings of anger from the taunts of well-to-do girls.

Moreover, those who are rich must ask themselves how to deal with the poor and less fortunate. Dodge disapproves of those who humiliate or condescend to those who happen to be poor and shows that such insensitive people are sowing the seeds of their own misfortune. On the other hand, those who treat people fairly find their lives emotionally enriched.

In presenting these ethical questions, Dodge depicts young adult characters of an earlier period who exhibit all the varieties of personality that characterize modern youth. Some are leaders, some followers, some naive, some sophisticated, some athletic, some awkward.

Dodge avoids explicit aspects of sex and violence, but she describes young people who fall in love, face dangers, feel hunger, and fear death, with only a reliance on their wits and moral sense to guide them. The long-gone world of nineteenth-century Holland challenges its youth in modern ways.

## About the Author

Mary Mapes Dodge was born on January 26, 1830, in New York City, the second of six children of James Mapes and Sophia Furman Mapes, descendants of a long line of New York patricians of Dutch and English ancestry. Although the family was well connected, Dodge knew genteel poverty in her early years because her father, an intellectually curious scientist, lacked a steady income. Like many women of her time and social class, she was educated at home.

In 1848 her father moved the family to a farm south of Newark, New Jersey, both to cut living expenses and to conduct an experimental farm, where he showed how artificial fertilizers could revive worn-out farm land. His major financial backer was William Dodge III, a New York lawyer, whom Mary married in 1851. The couple settled into a socially active life in New York City and had two sons by 1855. Then disaster struck.

William disappeared and was found drowned in October 1858, an apparent suicide brought on by a series of personal and financial crises. His widow returned to her family home, which now belonged to her, and tried to pull her life together.

Encouraged by her father to read and write, Dodge began to write for and edit the *Working Farmer*, a magazine he founded to publicize his agricultural theories. As she gained confidence in her writing, Dodge published articles in a variety of other periodicals, including *Harper's Monthly* and the *Comhill Magazine*. Simultaneously, through family and professional connections, she became friendly with several literary people who were to wield great influence as editors in the late nineteenth century, including Richard Watson Gilder and Horace Scudder. She gained her first success as an author of books with *Irvington Stories* (1864). Her publisher, James O'Kane, contracted with her to provide a manuscript annually.

This obligation led to *Hans Brinker*. In writing it she drew upon the knowledge of Holland that she gained through reading John Lothrop Motley's recently published *Rise of the Dutch Republic* (1856) and *History of the United Netherlands* (1861-1868) and through her friendship with a Newark family from Amsterdam, the Scharffs. O'Kane had reservations about publishing the manuscript but issued it late in 1865 for fear of losing his promising author. Initially the public's response was muted. But reviews were favorable and sales picked up steadily with over 300,000 copies reportedly sold in the first year. Only Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* enjoyed comparable American sales at the time. In the century and a quarter since, *Hans Brinker* has continued to be available in many editions in English and in other languages.

The death of her father in early 1866 and the need to support her two sons in college led Dodge to seek more regular income, and in late 1868 she became associate editor of a weekly magazine, *Hearth and Home*, that was nominally edited by Harriet Beecher Stowe and Donald G. Mitchell. She continued at this post successfully until early 1873, when she became founding editor of *St.*



Nicholas, a job she would hold until her death thirty-two years later.

As editor of *St. Nicholas*, initially published by Scribner's and later by The Century Company, Dodge created a magazine for children and young adults that dominated the field for half a century, until it folded during the Great Depression. Building on her belief that the primary purpose of writing for young people was to entertain and inform, not to preach or indoctrinate, Dodge sought out the works of writers like herself— Louisa May Alcott, Rudyard Kipling, Mark Twain, Frank Stockton, Sarah Orne Jewett, Joel Chandler Harris, Frances Hodgson Burnett, Carolyn Wells, and Helen Hunt Jackson—and illustrators such as Thomas Nast, Reginald Birch, Howard Pyle, N. C. Wyeth, and Oliver Herford, all of whom sought to delight young readers. Among the memorable works published in *St.*

*Nicholas* were Alcott's *Eight Cousins*, Burnett's *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, Jackson's *Ramona*, Kipling's *Jungle Book* and *Just So Stories*, and Twain's *Tom Sawyer Abroad*. In addition, factual articles informed readers about scientific and technological developments, foreign cultures, and how-to projects.

Dodge regularly wrote "Jack-in-thePulpit" columns to young readers, although her writing of fiction and poetry, much of it published under pen names, slacked off because of the stress of editing and dealing with a growing number of quality submissions. Her last novel, *Donald and Dorothy*, was published in 1883, but revisions and collections of her work appeared throughout her lifetime.

When Dodge died on August 21, 1905, in *Onteora Park*, New York, she was an acknowledged leader in the field of literature for young people. Eulogized then and since by magazines and newspapers across the United States, her place as a prominent author and editor of work for young people is assured.

## Setting

Dodge sets her story in Broek, a village on the outskirts of Amsterdam, in the 1830s, just before the Industrial Revolution has had great impact. In the novel, Holland is a country where wind still drives the ships and powers the machinery that pumps water, saws wood, and grinds grain. It is a country where dikes and historic ruins and buildings, all with their own stories, remind people of a past spent fighting the sea and foreign invaders. Most people still derive their livelihood from farming, fishing, trades, or crafts. Railroad construction is just beginning, and most travel is by foot, boat, or coach. The major events of the story occur in December, when commercial activity slows because the canals have frozen and the crops have been harvested. The nation pauses to celebrate a series of secular and religious holidays, including the feast of St. Nicholas, the model for the modern Santa Claus.

Although the Dutch form of government is a monarchy, Dodge describes Holland sympathetically as democratic and lacking vast class differences. There are rich and poor people, but they share a common culture and feel a sense of responsibility for their mutual wellbeing.



## Social Sensitivity

Dodge is most sensitive to the pressures financial insecurity and poverty place on parents and children. While she does not encourage excessive materialism, she recognizes that adequate housing, food, and clothing can make life more rewarding and less frightening. The Brinker family, in spite of the taunts of some middle-class characters, is hardworking, loving, and proud. Dodge praises those of means Hans Brinker; or. The Silver Skates who help the Brinkers, but she emphasizes that charitable acts must be performed with a sense of shared humanity and respect for the recipients.

She also implies that many of the poor, as exemplified by the Brinkers, are victims of accidents beyond their control, that their poverty is material, not spiritual. Dodge uses the skating race to show how the poor, if given an equal chance, can surpass the rich. In this contest, Hans and Gretel are more than equal to the efforts of their richer peers, their very hardships toughening them mentally and physically to excel when endurance counts.

## Literary Qualities

Hans Brinker is of uneven literary quality. Dodge paints vivid pictures of what it was like to be poor or well-to-do in nineteenth-century Holland. The synopses of Dutch history and culture remain interesting because Dodge involves the characters in them and because she does not include too much information. But the desire to be informative leads Dodge to switch point of view frequently, disrupting the novel's structure. In the middle section, Hans and the Brinker family disappear for a long spell as Peter van Holp and his comrades take over the action. While Dodge often writes informal or colloquial dialogue that incorporates information and gives a flavor of the Dutch language and speech patterns, she sometimes does so awkwardly. For example, to introduce the famous "Hero of Haarlem" tale about the boy who stuck his finger in the dike, two English students who read it in school suddenly appear in the narrative and then disappear just as quickly. But these structural problems do not detract from the rich descriptions of the visit of St. Nicholas, the skating parties and races on frozen canals, and the colorful variety of Dutch women and men.

Moreover, the central story of the Brinker family rings true to anyone who has struggled with economic, physical, or emotional catastrophe. The conflicts these ordinary people face are real and the fortitude with which they meet them is believable.





## Themes and Characters

Hans and Gretel Brinker are the two main characters. They attend the same school as middle-class children, but they do not lead easy lives. Throughout the story, many schoolmates refer to them as "rag pickers" or "peasants."

Moreover, their daily lives involve unremitting poverty, with only their own efforts and occasional charity providing relief. An injury that their father, Raff Brinker, sustained while defending the dikes against a rising sea a decade earlier has rendered him a mindless invalid.

No pension or workman's compensation eases his family's plight. To make matters worse, a small fortune Raff had saved disappeared at the time of injury.

His wife has struggled ever since to support her husband and their two children.

The poverty-stricken Brinker family is not Dodge's only concern. She devotes much of the novel to the adventures of the middle-class children who attend school with Gretel and Hans. After introducing the Brinkers and the other characters, she follows a group of boys who, led by Peter van Holp, skate fifty miles from Amsterdam to The Hague and back. Because one member of the party is a visiting British relative, the boys tour a variety of historic sites and museums as they skate through cities and countryside. This journey lets Dodge introduce a great deal of interesting historical information. In addition, as the boys are a spirited lot, they have a series of adventures involving thieves, ice boats, and lost wallets. In their stopovers they enjoy a variety of food and stay in quarters ranging from country inns to a city mansion, all of which Dodge describes engagingly.

The interlude also creates suspense because Peter van Holp has promised Hans to send a famous surgeon, Dr.

Boekman, to operate on Raff Brinker, whose condition has worsened to the extent that he almost burns his wife alive by forcing her against a stove. Only Gretel's intervention prevents a disaster. When Dr. Boekman appears at the Brinker cottage, Dodge introduces other plot elements that reveal connections between the doctor's long-lost son and the events that led to Raff's injury.

In addition, Hans's conduct impresses Dr. Boekman, who takes him on as an assistant. The novel ends with the Brinker family's financial and emotional fortunes restored.

Almost lost in the events surrounding Raff Brinker's surgery is the race for the silver skates. Even though it was written over a century ago, Hans Brinker promotes equal athletic opportunity for girls and boys. Dodge provides separate races for each sex with the winner of each receiving a pair of silver skates.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Hans Brinker contains much historical information about Holland. Do you think this information detracts from or adds to the story of the Brinker family?
2. Dodge was a widow raising two sons and supporting other members of her family at the time she wrote this novel.

How does this personal experience affect the subject and tone of the book?

3. Stereotypical images often affect how we value other people and ourselves. Does Dodge use certain stereotypes of the hero and heroine and villain in this book? Do these stereotypes still have power today?
4. Several plot lines are introduced in the opening chapters of the book. What are they and how does Dodge relate them to each other?
5. Although Dodge did not know Dutch, she knew Dutch immigrants and used them as sources. How does this contact influence the English she uses, especially the dialogue?
6. As young adults, Gretel and Hans are changing in their perceptions of the world and themselves. What indications does Dodge give that both are taking on more mature views of themselves and others?
7. Wealth is dealt with ambiguously in this novel. Lack of money means starvation and death, but possession of it leads to temptation. How does Dodge resolve this problem?
8. Cliques of teenagers are important in this novel, especially because Gretel and Hans are not part of them. What dangers of such social groups does Dodge point out?
9. Like many nineteenth-century novelists—Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, Victor Hugo—Dodge looks at society through the eyes of the poor.

How does this point of view allow her to criticize her readers, most of whom are middle class?

10. About halfway through the novel, Dodge rather awkwardly inserts the story "The Hero of Haarlem." Why does she insert this story?
11. What purpose does the visiting English character Benjamin Dobbs play?
12. As the boys tour Holland, they visit several historical spots and Dodge recounts the significance of each. What aspects of Dutch history and culture does Dodge admire?
13. Dodge was much interested in scientific and technological developments of her time. How does this interest reveal itself in the novel? Are there matters about which she seems vague?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Dodge gained great attention as the editor of St. Nicholas magazine from 1873 to 1905. Find a bound volume or look at an issue from this period on microfilm and determine how authors then portrayed young adults. What similarities to and differences from today's portrayals do you note?
2. Dodge, who had not visited Holland when she wrote the novel, drew heavily on the work of John Lothrop Motley for historical background. Find one of Motley's books and see what parts she used to write *Hans Brinker*. Does Dodge give clues to other sources from which she drew?
3. Many Dutch painters are mentioned as the group of boys led by Peter van Holp skate from Amsterdam to The Hague. Prepare a list from the novel and see how many works by them you can find in books on Dutch art. Then prepare a report on them.
4. It is common today to make film or play versions of novels. Develop a film or playscript based on *Hans Brinker*, paying special attention to how these media affect your pattern of story telling.
5. Nineteenth-century authors and readers liked to have novels with wellconstructed plots that were neatly tied together at the conclusion. Does this preference create problems in *Hans Brinker*? Do you think the resolutions of the plots are a bit too neat or implausible? How might you revise the novel to make it more attractive to twentiethcentury readers?
6. Writers often use patterns of imagery consistently to create particular meanings. Do you find any such patterns in *Hans Brinker*?

## For Further Reference

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In *Writers for Children*, edited by Jane M. Bingham. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988. Christy provides a critical overview of Dodge's novels, short stories, and poetry, arguing that her literary accomplishments are less significant than her editorial ones.

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Erisman, Fred. "St. Nicholas." In *Children's Periodicals of the United States*, edited by R. Gordon Kelly.

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Griswold, Jerome. "Hans Brinker.

*Sunny World, Angry Waters*." *Children's Literature* 12 (1984): 47-60.

Griswold argues that the characters' self-control in the face of crisis is a central theme of the novel.

Kirkpatrick, D. L., ed. *Twentieth Century Children's Writers*. 2d ed. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983. The article on Hans Brinker finds the novel to be a conventional nineteenth-century work for children in terms of values and structure.

Rosta, Paul. "The Magazine that Taught Faulkner, Fitzgerald, and Millay How to Write." *American Heritage* 37 (December 1985): 40-47. Rosta tells about contributors to the St. Nicholas League who became well-known writers. Designed for writers aged eighteen and younger, the league was the most successful of many efforts by Dodge and her successors to involve readers in the magazine.

Wright, Catherine Morris. *Lady of the Silver Skates*. Jamestown, RI: Clingstone Press, 1979. This is the only published biography of Dodge written with full access to her papers. Although difficult to read, it is the only available source for many of the details of her personal and professional life.

## Related Titles

Dodge did not write a sequel to *Hans Brinker*, but her later novel *Land of Pluck* deals with the same country. The reader seeking comparable works is best advised to read novels by Dodge's contemporaries Louisa May Alcott, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, Noah Brooks, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Mark Twain, all of whom wrote for young adult audiences.

These and other writers are approachable through individual titles, but anyone seeking a direct encounter with Dodge or the writers she encouraged should examine issues of *St. Nicholas* published during her editorship.



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