

Isak Dinesen: The Life of a Storyteller Study Guide

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Plot Summary

Isak Dinesen, who was born on April 17, 1885 in Denmark, became a world renowned literary great before she died on September 7, 1962, also in Denmark. Isak Dinesen is actually one of her pennames, having been born Karen Christenze Dinesen. Of her many stories, the most well known today is *Out of Africa*. She considered herself a storyteller rather than a writer of novels. Although her stories varied in length, most can be considered within the range of a short story.

She lived in Africa for several years, where she fell in love with Denys Finch Hatton. She used this experience as the basis for *Out of Africa*. The Kenyan coffee plantation failed, after which she returned to Denmark. World War Two broke out, and during the German occupation of Denmark, Dinesen helped thousands of Jews escape to Sweden.

During her literary career, she produced several volumes of stories that became popular in the United States, France and Italy. She also published many of her short stories in the US magazine industry. Although well accepted elsewhere, the Danish literary world gave her work negative criticism while she lived. She was later accepted as a highly influential writer in Danish literature, and part of the delay had to do with Dinesen's preference to write her stories first in English. She was also fluent in French and had conversational knowledge of several European languages.

She had been nominated for the Nobel Prize in literature several times but never won. In her late life, she visited New York City and instantly became a celebrity there. Due to her failing health, she was known as an extremely thin woman who seemed to be a living relic of the Romantic period in literature. People flocked to her performances in which she would tell her stories verbatim as they had been published. She could do this because all of her stories were worked out in her imagination before she wrote them out on her old typewriter. In later life she had to dictate the new stories to her secretary.

Isak Dinesen lived her life as she saw fit while ignoring the conventional expectations of her time. She was in this way an early feminist, although the primary struggle was to be recognized to be as worthy as a man. She embraced hunting as a favorite activity in Africa, a sport that no other colonial women attempted. She also ran the coffee plantation and accepted the native Kenyans as equals in humanity, not inferiors as was the common racist attitude of the day.

Dinesen worked on her literary projects up to a few days before her death and left an extensive catalog of literary accomplishments. Among her unfinished works was a serious novel that would have had over a hundred characters, and some of her works have been published posthumously. Despite having contracted syphilis from her first and only husband at a young age and having many other health problems, she lived well into her seventies.



Book One Tanne, Chapters 1-4: Either/Or; The Captain; A Family Romance; Alkmene

Book One Tanne, Chapters 1-4: Either/Or; The Captain; A Family Romance; Alkmene Summary and Analysis

Summary

Isak Dinesen was born on April 17, 1885 in Denmark. Her given name was Karen Christenze Dinesen, and her nickname was Tanne. Isak Dinesen is one of her pennames. She is also known as Karen von Blixen-Finecke, or simply Karen Blixen. Her mother came from a family of self-made millionaires, while her father came from a family of country people related to the Danish aristocracy. Dinesen was attracted to her father's family because they seemed more down-to-earth than the stilted people in her mother's family. Dinesen's most famous literary work was entitled *Out of Africa*, published in 1937. She was also noted for many other literary works, most of them in the Romantic literary style and set in the nineteenth century or earlier.

The biography starts with her great-grandfather on her mother's side, Andreas Nicolaj Hansen, and how he built the family fortune during the Napoleonic Wars through shipping. Dinesen's father, Wilhelm Dinesen, was a man who fought in wars, went on hunting trips, lived with Native Americans for a period and led a life style full of promiscuous sex. Wilhelm married Ingeborg Westenholz in 1881. He killed himself at the age of fifty after learning he had contracted a debilitating disease, possibly syphilis.

Isak Dinesen had a younger sister, Ellen, and an older sister, Inger. The three tended to dress alike and do everything together, being that they were only one or two years apart. Isak resented having to play down her literary skills to not compete with her younger sister, who had published a book previously that did not do well. She gravitated to her father and enjoyed their outdoor adventures together until his suicide when Isak was ten years old. Forty years later, Isak wrote a novel about her feelings during the period, entitled *Alkmene*.

Analysis

Isak Dinesen's childhood experiences influenced her later literary works. A central theme had to do with the differences between the wealthy upper middle class and the old aristocratic families. Monarchies were giving way to various forms of democracies shortly before Dinesen was born. Her mother's family represented the wealthy middle class, and her father personified the adventure-seeking aristocrats. Dinesen's father's



family was looked down upon by her mother's family as being uneducated and lacking ambition. However, Dinesen rejected her mother's family in favor of her father's because they were more fun to be with and did not force her to suppress her literary talents.

This biography took the long-range approach by opening with the life of Dinesen's great-grandfather. This man had been known for his cruelty, a characteristic that seemed to have worked into Dinesen's maternal relationships. While not physically abusive, Dinesen's mother pushed her around emotionally by discouraging any competition with her sisters. This, along with her father's suicide, impacted the author enough that she wrote a story about her experiences and feelings over the first ten years of her life. The story, entitled *Alkmene*, is summarized in Chapter 4. The ending is tragic in that the main character becomes a recluse miser. Since this is not how Isak Denisen led her later life, the ending can be considered an alternative reality that could have happened, and perhaps the author worked hard at not letting this happen to her.



Book One Tanne, Chapters 5-8: Three Sisters; The Road to Katholm; Aunt Bess; Art and Life

Book One Tanne, Chapters 5-8: Three Sisters; The Road to Katholm; Aunt Bess; Art and Life Summary and Analysis

Summary

During her childhood, Dinesen spent most of her time with her two sisters, Ellen and Inger. They got along well enough, and as with most siblings, there were squabbles. However, no damaging sibling rivalry developed. The sisters remained agreeable into adulthood, but Ellen fell ill and died at an early age. From then on the sisters drifted apart. The biographer observed that Isak Dinesen appeared to be the thinking sister in the photographs from childhood, while the other two seemed dim and dull by comparison.

In 1898 the Dinesen house burned down, and the family moved abroad while it was being rebuilt. In 1900 Isak Dinesen determined to spend time at Katholm, the home of her paternal family. She remembered this trek as a single visit, but the records show that she visited several times over a period of years. She became interested in two people, Georg Brandes and Fredrick Nietzsche, during this time, which disturbed everyone in her maternal family because the philosophies proposed by these authors and lecturers ran against the conservative grain of the family. Additionally, Dinesen became interested in the feminist movement of the time, which involved not so much gaining political power but achieving equality among men as worthy human beings. This worth had to do with sexual relations primarily, a rebellion against the attitude that men could be promiscuous before marriage but not women. Both sexes, maintained the feminists, should be celibate before marriage and monogamous afterward.

Conflict developed between Dinesen and her aunt Bess. This conflict involved Bess' desire for Dinesen to settle down and get married, as was expected of women for many generations. Dinesen would have nothing to do with such a plan that would have forced her to live her life through a husband. Instead she pushed ahead with her writing and drawing. To appease her desire for formal training at the Copenhagen Royal Academy, Bess and the rest of the maternal family allowed Dinesen to take private lessons in drawing. However, by January of 1904, Dinesen had begun classes at the Academy. There she learned that men were given priority over women in that men had the best instructors and were groomed for careers in the arts. The women were treated as if just biding their time until marriage.



Analysis

Isak Dinesen's growth into a writer was not an easy path for her to take. The pressures of the time nearly dictated that, although they were allowed to express themselves, women were still expected to marry young, have children and raise families in the traditional ways. Women were not supposed to take themselves seriously and actually build careers for themselves. This was a form of condescension in the male-dominated society similar to passive aggression. Women were allowed to explore knowledge and ideas, but if they got out of line, they would be in some non-violent manner punished. For Dinesen, this took the form of her aunt Bess' continual attempts to steer her in the direction that Bess felt was correct.

The tactic did not work on Dinesen. Instead she faced up to her maternal family and defied their desires at every turn. She studied Friedrich Nietzsche's writings and philosophies, which is a confirmed fact. She probably studied Georg Brandes too, but this has to be inferred from her writings and letters. Whether Dinesen studied these men because the ideas and philosophies made sense to her or whether she did so to irritate her maternal family is up for speculation. The truth might have been a combination of the two motivations. In any case, Dinesen rebelled at a time when youthful resistance against tradition was not popular. She may have had a sense of the world changing at the turn of the nineteenth century into the twentieth century took place. History now supports that view of the world.

Dinesen's early influences and her experiences as she churned through her teen years brought together her talents in poetry, prose and drawing. She learned English during this time and is known to be a master at the language from the viewpoint of accuracy and lyrical/romantic styles. Her native language was Danish, and she is also known as an influential writer in Denmark. She became fluent in French and conversational in other European languages during this time, all of which added up to the perfect background for producing a remarkable writer at the beginning of the twentieth century. Her personal conflicts became the grist from which she created her stories, which implies that she had a strong need to write as a means to understanding her conflicts.



Book One Tanne Chapters 9-14: Countess Daisy; First Tales; Love, Humble and Audacious; Rue; La Valse Mauve; Noble Prospects

Book One Tanne Chapters 9-14: Countess Daisy; First Tales; Love, Humble and Audacious; Rue; La Valse Mauve; Noble Prospects Summary and Analysis

Summary

At about the age of twenty-one in 1906, Dinesen began keeping a diary. She started out simply recording the mundane things that happened around her, but once she met Daisy Frijs, her diary entries became more interesting. Daisy was from a rich royal family and had a disregard for taking risks. She never seemed to consider the consequences of her actions, and Dinesen found this irresistible because the behavior reminded her of her father.

Dinesen grew up during a time when storytelling was a cherished skill in families, similar to playing the piano. Families and friends entertained themselves rather than depending on television, and so Dinesen's first tales were little plays that she and other family members would act out. By 1907 she had applied herself to several serious efforts at writing stories, one of which was published. The publisher recognized her talent, although at the time it was still undeveloped. Dinesen continued to write under the penname Osceola.

From 1907 to 1913 when she left for Africa, Dinesen went through a period of modest literary production. She studied art in Paris and struggled with emotions that jerked from deep depression to extreme happiness. She fell in love with Hans Blixen, but he did not have any feelings for her. One acquaintance, a young man who later became an influential art critic in Denmark, accused her of preferring the mundane pleasures of life over further developing her writing talent.

In 1912, Dinesen accepted a proposal of marriage from Hans Blixen's twin brother, Bror. They made plans to move to Africa and start a farm.

Analysis

As Dinesen grew from an adolescent girl into a young woman, she lost the clear direction that she once had. This was likely due to moving away from her family, which



meant that she no longer had anybody to rebel against, such as aunt Bess. Life became too easy with no battles to fight.

She also might have had a bout with bipolar syndrome, formerly known as manic-depression. Dinesen reported that her mood swings were extreme, which is a sign of bipolar syndrome. This could also have been due to her lack of direction and focus after having been rejected by Hans Blixen, but not in any way that would have brought closure. He simply ignored her as if she did not exist. This had to have been a crushing blow to her ego because she had become accustomed to men lavishing their attentions on her. A conflict must have developed that, had Hans fallen in love and married her, Dinesen would have been doing exactly as aunt Bess desired.

Another internal conflict probably involved her dual attention to art and literature. One or the other had to eventually become her primary focus. She might have thought that literature invited too much criticism, perhaps at a subconscious level, or that it was simply too difficult to write stories for the literary world rather than for her family.

These feelings are not abnormal for her age. Many young adults still find it difficult to establish a life direction in their twenties for many different reasons. Undergraduate college students change majors regularly, and young workers tend to drift from job to job. Many people in their twenties are shocked to realize that they are becoming just like their parents.

Dinesen needed something, but she did not know what it was. By the end of this period, she decided that changing locations might do the trick. Dinesen accepted the proposal of marriage from the twin brother of Hans Blixen, Bror, and moved with him to Africa.



Book Two Tania, Chapters 15-20: Sea Change; A Still Country; The Clear Darkness; Safari Life; Lucifer's Child; The Wing of Death

Book Two Tania, Chapters 15-20: Sea Change; A Still Country; The Clear Darkness; Safari Life; Lucifer's Child; The Wing of Death Summary and Analysis

Summary

Dinesen's marriage to Bror Blixen brought with it the title of Baroness, but the other members of the aristocracy who owned land in Africa never fully accepted her. To them Dinesen was always a member of the working middle class, also known as the bourgeoisie, a relatively new social structure that had developed out of the Industrial Age. She also had a rapport with the African natives. The aristocratic land owners considered the natives to be inferior, which was a common attitude for the period. Dinesen thought that this attitude was racist and extremely offensive, and she did not keep her thoughts to herself all the time.

World War One put further strains on the relationships among the aristocratic land owners and Dinesen. She had managed to make a few friends, but they were on the German side of the war, while Dinesen's loyalties were for Denmark. Her younger brother Thomas had enlisted in the Danish army, a commonly known fact among the aristocrats.

Dinesen's marriage to Bror was not a happy one. She tolerated his loudness, boorishness and racism. The only activity that they both enjoyed was going on safari and shooting animals. Dinesen became quite an accomplished hunter, as surviving photographs demonstrate along with her diaries from the period. When not on safari with her, Bror continually cheated on her and contracted syphilis. The disease was then transferred to Dinesen.

Analysis

Isak Dinesen may have been one of the first European writers to condemn the common racism of her day. She could see the intelligence and nobility in the Kenyan tribes that other Europeans refused to acknowledge. The native foreman for the plantation became a very close friend, and perhaps this friendship helped form her egalitarian views. She may have also delighted in making the aristocrats, who had rejected her, as uncomfortable as she could.



Her natural shooting and hunting talents led her into an almost compulsive need to kill animals. Certainly the safari diversion took her out of the uncomfortable and stressful society of the land owners, so the bloodlust may have been more of an escape than anything else. Another possibility was that she wished to advance her feminism by taking on what is traditionally a male sport. Although hunting was apparently something she enjoyed doing, along with being out in the wilds of Africa, she may have wanted to make the aristocrats even more uncomfortable.

The Blixens experienced their worst year on the plantation in 1917 shortly after they returned from a trip to Europe. Heavy rains and a military confiscation of the wagons nearly caused their coffee company to fail. They learned about the death of Hans Blixen in an airplane crash, and the war kept everyone suspicious of everyone else's loyalties. Rumors about spies in their midst circulated. The pressures made Dinesen return to her painting as a way of relaxing and escaping the harsh realities, and it can be speculated that the loss of Hans crushed her spirit. He was the brother that she truly loved, and now she had to put up with Bror without any hope of seeing Hans again.



Book Two Tania, Chapters 21-24: Dramatis Personae; Intermezzo; Thomas; Kamante and Lulu

Book Two Tania, Chapters 21-24: Dramatis Personae; Intermezzo; Thomas; Kamante and Lulu Summary and Analysis

Summary

Dinesen started a love affair with Denys Finch Hatton while still married to Bror. Her attitude about marriage involved a social and legal contract, but since Bror was not faithful to her, she felt no responsibility to be faithful to him. She felt that Denys was her true match on an intellectual level and compatible on an emotional level. Denys provided her the companionship she needed, while Bror raised her financial and social statuses. He knew about the love affair and mostly kept quiet. Occasionally he would embarrass Dinesen by acknowledging in public that Denys was her lover, but at the same time he became good friends with Denys.

In 1918 the Blixens sailed to Europe after harvesting a good coffee crop. They met with the coffee company shareholders, after which Dinesen went on a spending spree in Paris. She had custom clothes made for her by world-famous designers. She became a regular in the Parisian arts community by attending plays and operas. While she was doing this, Bror returned to the coffee plantation and lived a wild playboy lifestyle.

After Dinesen returned to Africa, her younger brother Thomas tried to live there in a cottage on the coffee plantation. He and Dinesen had major differences in philosophical outlooks and would engage in heated arguments regularly. Dinesen thought her younger brother lacked drive and ambition. Thomas thought Dinesen's success was unearned, although he greatly admired her writing. He eventually left the plantation, after which Dinesen and Bror separated.

In 1923 Dinesen's health failed in ways that mystified the doctors. The doctors speculated that the disease might be malaria, but this could have also been the result of syphilis. Yet another cause could have been the series of misfortunes that Dinesen had suffered. The coffee plantation failed during a long drought. She lost her favorite dog, and several of her closer acquaintances died. She could not get along with Thomas, yet she missed him terribly when he went away. Bror's mismanagement of money increased her misery, and she had to sell all her designer clothes.

Analysis



Dinesen's love affair with Denys became a major part of her story, *Out of Africa*. Due to the popularity of that story and the subsequent movie, Dinesen became known as a great romantic personality of the early twentieth century. She had a loveless marriage, and for many of her admirers, this justified her affair. Others could point to the terrible behavior of Bror and his passing syphilis to Dinesen as enough justification. From the perspective of today, Dinesen had found her soul mate in Denys, and so the romantic attraction lives on.

Considering her marriage like those of the eighteenth century, Dinesen easily accepted the unfaithfulness of her husband. What she could not accept was his carelessness with money. She had married him primarily to gain financial status, along with the baroness title. After the separation, her life began falling apart. She discovered that she could not get along with her younger brother, whom she had idealized while he served in the war. Deaths and losses kept piling up while the coffee plantation failed and investors clamored for their money. No matter what she tried, it failed to make things better. She could not borrow money to buy the plantation from the investors and ended up selling everything she could to pay the bills. Her life seemed to be a failure, and she was soon to reach the age of forty.

Many people can relate to this life story because early success often leads to losing everything. On top of this, the forces that brought Dinesen down were beyond her control: the weather and her husband. This is why the biography has been compared to a novel. Dinesen seemed to be living a fictional life, yet it was very real to her. She suffered financial ruin and failing health, and she wrote about her feelings in letters to her family. Some of these letters hinted that she was considering suicide. Whether this was true or from her tendency to dramatize is not clear.



Book Two Tania, Chapters 25-28: A Love of Parallels; Nature and the Ideal; Holding Out; A Release from Self

Book Two Tania, Chapters 25-28: A Love of Parallels; Nature and the Ideal; Holding Out; A Release from Self Summary and Analysis

Summary

The relationship between Dinesen and Denys was perfect in that Denys, a confirmed bachelor, came and went as he pleased but fulfilled Dinesen's desires for romance and understanding better than anyone else. For a period, Dinesen thought she was pregnant with his child. She wrote to Denys about this, and he reacted less than enthusiastically. This split the two apart until Dinesen miscarried, likely due to the treatments she was taking for syphilis.

With the divorce from Bror finalized, Dinesen tried to run the coffee plantation on her own. By her fortieth year on earth, she fell into deep depressions followed by irrational hopeful periods. Dinesen returned to her home in Denmark, but this worsened her condition because she regressed into the old conflicts she had experienced while growing up. On the bright side, she, with the help of her family, reestablished her literary career. She then returned to Africa to try making the coffee plantation work again.

The letters that Dinesen wrote during this period outlined the plight that she had experienced in life. She was expected to be a woman, as defined during the period. This definition restricted women to living their lives through their husbands and children. Trying to compete with men was considered unwomanly and even, from some extreme points of view, homosexual. After her divorce, Dinesen was attempting to do exactly the opposite, which was to run the coffee plantation on her own and thereby compete with men as an equal.

Analysis

The biographer drew many parallels between Dinesen's life at middle age and her stories that were published during this time. Individual characters might have been based on real people or groups of people who could be identified by their general attitudes. This is not uncommon for writers of fiction, but the parallels were especially notable in Dinesen's case. She considered herself a storyteller more than a novelist, and in fact most of her stories were not written to novel lengths. Nevertheless, their characters and themes did rise to the level of great literature.



Dinesen's actual life was interesting enough to be a long novel. She loved deeply and suffered the results. Denys may have been her soul mate, but he never considered marrying her and raising a family. The very suggestion that this might come about pushed him away, and when the possibility dissolved, he came back. Dinesen naturally became despondent from not having lived a fulfilling life as a woman, yet she was conflicted that this sort of life was not to her liking. She never wanted to be like the other women in her family, yet she could not become the woman she had envisioned as a child. Her mood swings at middle age reflected this unresolved conflict. It was a conflict that was impossible to resolve in the early twentieth century and defies resolution to this day.



Book Two Tania, Chapters 29-32: Lion Hunt; Visitors to the Farm; Spirits of the Air; Closing the Parentheses

Book Two Tania, Chapters 29-32: Lion Hunt; Visitors to the Farm; Spirits of the Air; Closing the Parentheses Summary and Analysis

Summary

While Denys adventured in Africa, Dinesen did her routines, which included going on safari and spending much time with old friends. Denys showed up now and then with his tales of adventure. Dinesen listened to them as part of his audience and enjoyed his presence without much comment. When he showed her wildlife movies, she did tell him that they were pale representations of real animals in the wild.

Dinesen and Denys came upon two lions on New Years Day. Denys shot both of them, but this was retold in Dinesen's book, *Out of Africa*, as a love scene in which she shot the second lion. Other events during this period become scenes in her work of fiction as well. Dinesen considered this time as the high point in her life.

In 1928, Denys became busy with several lucrative ventures as a safari guide. His visits with Dinesen became sporadic and brief, which made her feel abandoned. She got over the feelings and became very happy with the situation. In 1929, Denys took her to England to visit his family. She returned to the coffee plantation in 1930.

From all indications, Dinesen was about to lose the plantation. She ignored the obvious signs and kept on as if nothing was wrong. Meanwhile, Denys became interested in flying airplanes. He returned to the plantation with a new plane called a Gypsy Moth, in which he and Dinesen took many flights.

By December of 1930, Dinesen had to auction off the plantation, the house and most of its contents. The buyer of the plantation let her stay in the house indefinitely, which she did while continuing to run the plantation. In April of 1931, she prepared to leave forever. In May, after she and Denys had a serious falling out and broke off their romance, Denys crashed in his plane and died. Dinesen and many others mourned his death. After putting all her affairs in order, Dinesen left Africa in July.

Analysis

Isak Dinesen's life was not typical for women of the time. She defied the acceptable roles and lived the way she saw fit. This included having a lover, Denys, who was usually gone. When he did visit and stay for any length of time, they had an intense

romance that made up for the long absences. Dinesen also had the ability to fill her time with activities that interested her while Denys was off on safari or otherwise occupied.

The relationship had its rocky times, as most do. The final breakup was, by most accounts, very passionate and final. Tragedy followed with Denys' death, and this set up the rest of Dinesen's life. She had loved deeply, suffered tremendously and would need to live as best she could with the memories.

The loss of the plantation seemed so bleak that Dinesen could not face it. However, she did and survived, even though she had written a suicide note. The thoughts were something with which she struggled but on which she never took action, indicating a very strong character. In a way, Denys' sudden death in an airplane crash freed Dinesen from the constant on-again, off-again romance.



Book Three Isak Dinesen, Chapters 33-36: Amor Fati; Seven Gothic Tales; In a Dark Wood; Out of Africa

Book Three Isak Dinesen, Chapters 33-36: Amor Fati; Seven Gothic Tales; In a Dark Wood; Out of Africa Summary and Analysis

Summary

Dinesen's departure from Africa was a painful experience in more than one way. She of course had the associated psychological trauma, but she also suffered from advanced syphilis. This type of syphilis did not affect her mind but was localized in her spinal cord. Her digestive system was impacted the most, and so she became very thin. Her brother Thomas helped her through this time and was rewarded by Dinesen letting him read two of her stories that were to become famous. He realized that his sister had finally found her true calling.

Her return to Denmark was not at all easy. She could not adjust to the cold winter and had lapses of her hold on reality. Her family tried to reclaim her, but she resisted at every turn and became "bad-tempered, selfish, hypersensitive to intrusion during this time" (p. 287).

She began to write her most famous stories and became known as having a modern voice but characters from an earlier century. Conflicts tended toward an old aristocracy meeting and dealing with a changing world. She did not so much write the stories as transcribe them after having turned them around in her mind until they were done.

Her themes involved what was termed decadence, a complex combination of heroism, perversion, courage, wit and the rejection of conventional morality. Her characters did not live for others but for themselves and their internal desires to do and be something else beyond the ordinary. This blurred the line between good and evil, which made her literature more challenging than stories crafted for a general audience. A common metaphor for this is approaching the abyss, looking down into it, considering taking a leap into it, and then turning away. An accompanying idea in Dinesen's work was that acknowledging the abyss and confronting it were among the most courageous acts a human could do.

When Dinesen turned fifty in the spring of 1935, she suffered the uncertainty of what to write next and the feelings associated with menopause. Thomas suggested that she start on her idea to write about Africa, which led to the composition of *Out of Africa*. This book was a hit in several countries.

Analysis

If suffering makes for a good storyteller, Dinesen entered her mature literary period well armed on both the physical and psychological sides of suffering. She was an author out of her time yet in her time, aware of Freudian psychology and the blooming of the Industrial Age. However, the present held little interest for her. She explored what it meant to be in the age of aristocrats (1700s - 1800s), often referred to as Gothic, from the primary viewpoint of aristocrats. She disliked the rise of the middle classes and the accompanying materialism. She was in the classic sense of the term a Romantic.

Part of the reason her stories were well received had to do with her treatment of desire, especially sexual desires, that were considered perverse in her time and some still so today, such as rape and infanticide. Another major draw was that Dinesen's own character was mysterious. If she had not purposefully created this persona, she certainly did not discourage its development. She may have also been responding subconsciously to her fans' and interviewers' expectations by becoming an enigmatic celebrity. Modern psychology would point to her puritanical youth and a rebellion from it, which seems to hold true considering the knowable facts about her life before this period.

Dinesen was a controversial celebrity as well. She attracted vicious and unfair criticisms along with the positive. She took the viciousness to heart and gained a reputation as being one of the most pure-hearted immoralists. She did not believe that morality in its commonly understood form existed, yet she wished no harm to befall anyone.



Book Three Isak Dinesen, Chapters 37-40: Winter's Tales; Life in a Cage; Heretics; Death of a Centaur

Book Three Isak Dinesen, Chapters 37-40: Winter's Tales; Life in a Cage; Heretics; Death of a Centaur Summary and Analysis

Summary

During World War Two, Dinesen stayed at her family's house in Denmark. Her mother had died in 1939, and in 1940 Dinesen visited Berlin on assignment as a journalist. She did not pick up on the implications of Hitler's Germany as an investigative reporter might have. Rather, she took an aloof point of view, merely describing what she was shown by an official guide.

She worked on a book titled Winter's Tales during the first two years of the war, during which Germany occupied Denmark. The collection of stories reflected her longing for something she once had, which could have been Denys, Africa or freedom from occupation and a world at war.

When the Danish resistance organized and helped transport thousands of Jews out of the country to Sweden, Dinesen helped out. She had Jews in her kitchen and Nazis in her garden during the evacuation that had to be done carefully and in stages. Everyone in the resistance was risking being executed as traitors. Once the evacuation was completed, 7,200 Jews made it to Sweden, and 475 were captured and deported to Germany.

When the Germans discovered that hardly any Jews were left in Denmark, they came down hard on the country. A great deal of violence was done to the Danes, and they retaliated in kind. As all this was going on, Dinesen wrote a novel that was published in the US. Then after the war, she became involved with a literary movement of young Danish authors and poets.

She entered the magazine market in the United States. Her life became difficult because she did not agree with the way the world was moving after the war and expressed contempt for people not having honor, meaning the courage to take risks with their lives and their souls.

Analysis

As Dinesen aged, she became more mysterious and challenging. Her literary works had become well known, and from this fame, many people sought her out. These were not

long-lost relatives with their palms upturned for a handout. Dinesen was always struggling with money. Her visitors were young authors, influential critics and poets.

She almost emigrated from Denmark several times due to the heavy taxation after the war and because she had always felt that the critics in her homeland did not understand her literature. The novel she wrote was just for fun, a diversion from the hardships of the war, and was written under a pen name. Rather than take it as the pure entertainment it was intended to be, the Danish critics tore into her lack of literary depth and misunderstanding of the Danish culture. She was, in short, picked on by her own people.

Other critics tried to read too much into the novel. This also irritated Dinesen, and she fought against this take on her work. She resented that the novel might be placed at the same level as her other books. Before she understood the selection process, Dinesen fought against the novel becoming a Book of the Month Club title. Despite these crises and the fact that her health was deteriorating from syphilis and age, Dinesen managed to be an intriguing and charming host to her many visitors.



Book Three Isak Dinesen, Chapters 41-46: Folie a Deux; Goddess and Barfly; The Immortal Story; The Pact Is Broken; Betrayals; Should Not My Mind Keep the Knots?

Book Three Isak Dinesen, Chapters 41-46: Folie a Deux; Goddess and Barfly; The Immortal Story; The Pact Is Broken; Betrayals; Should Not My Mind Keep the Knots? Summary and Analysis

Summary

Dinesen became involved with a young poet named Thorkild Bjornvig. She made him her special project and dominated his life. This led to problems involving psychological forces that neither understood, and Bjornvig suffered a mild form of nervous breakdown. After four years, Bjornvig left Dinesen so that he could live his own life. She had frightened him off to some extent with her talk about owning his soul and having made a deal with the devil, but mostly he could not put up with her mood swings, manipulations and criticisms that seemed intended only to put him in his place.

As Dinesen aged into her sixties during the 1950s, she obtained radio slots in which she talked about the lost aristocracy and described the differences in society, culture and senses of morality between that time and the modern era. At the same time she became addicted to amphetamines, which was before the stimulants became known as dangerous controlled substances. Dinesen gained a reputation for running off at the mouth, a common behavior for those on amphetamines. People around her interpreted the behavior as a manifestation of genius, although Dinesen was repetitive and not engaged with her audience.

Even as her health was failing, Dinesen wrote stories throughout the 1950s. She based them on her feelings toward Bjornvig, which was love without sex. Not exactly platonic, the relationship had to do with mutual flights in the imagination that had all the elements of erotic love making but with none of the mechanics. During his stay in Germany, Bjornvig started an affair with a married woman whom Dinesen knew. She learned of the affair later on after Bjornvig had basically dumped her. She arranged to have a highly confrontational meeting with him.

Over the ensuing years, Dinesen tried to reestablish the relationship without much success. By 1955 her health had declined, and she underwent pain management



surgery of the spine. This nearly killed her. However, she survived, had another operation for stomach ulcers, and turned into a woman in her seventies who was extremely thin and pale. She continued writing by giving dictation and enjoyed as much as possible being a living relic.

Analysis

The relationship between Bjornvig and Dinesen started out well but deteriorated over time. Dinesen truly believed that she had given her soul to the devil, and in return she had been given the storytelling talent. Her stated goal to Bjornvig was to capture his soul as well. Bjornvig likely brushed this off as sheer fantasy, but when Dinesen got herself inside his head, he realized that she was neither joking nor exaggerating. This type of psychological manipulation is better understood today, but it is still a mystery exactly how one person can dominate another to this extent, and even over long distances. When Bjornvig had his mild breakdown, he was in London. Dinesen was undergoing surgery in Denmark.

Dinesen's radio career propelled her into mass popularity. She was seen as a living tribute to the past as well as an accomplished author. Young people flocked to visit her, but they also had to put up with her caustic side. This endeared her even more to her following. She successfully convinced Bjornvig to study in Germany, an environment he hated. However, she urged him to work through his feelings and gain the experience of suffering. Dinesen believed that all great artists needed to suffer in order to become honest with their work.

Love without sex is generally considered platonic, but sex is also primarily in the mind and imagination. The odd relationship that Dinesen had with Bjornvig carried with it all the emotional risks of love with physical sex. Dinesen was hurt when Bjornvig rejected her, but this was a familiar suffering to her. What set her off was that the cad had been cheating on her for a long time, even under her own roof. She reacted as expected with hot anger, accusations and then stony silence.

Old age did not happen gracefully for Dinesen. Her health problems compounded and left her a slight eighty-five pound woman in her seventh decade on earth. She nevertheless continued to impress people as "a symbol, as one who had 'been through death—a passage outside the range of imagination, but within the range of experience'" (p. 430). In this way she accomplished a goal that she had worked toward her entire life. Another way to look at this is that Dinesen never let her struggles with aging and health triumph over her spirit. She put the suffering to good use for creating herself.



Book Four Pellegrina, Chapters 47-52: Baksheesh; Echoes;

Book Four Pellegrina, Chapters 47-52: Baksheesh; Echoes; Summary and Analysis

Summary

After her surgeries, Dinesen went to Rome on a vacation. Her strength and vitality returned, and the European literary community embraced her. She then went to Denmark. That experience weakened her and brought back old worries. Dinesen later arranged to have a biography written because she did not feel at all comfortable doing a memoir.

Dinesen and her brother Thomas never got along well, but in her later years the mutual resentments grew into financial struggles. Dinesen wanted to buy out Thomas for the family property called Rungstedlund, but she did not want to meet Thomas' asking price. Her feeling was that she did all the work to keep the property while Thomas skated through life on the family money. A third party finally bought out Thomas and put the family property into a foundation. This preserved the property while allowing Dinesen to live there. She donated all her royalties due after her death to the preservation of the property as a public bird sanctuary.

In her final years of life, Dinesen was nominated repeatedly for the Nobel Prize in literature. She never won it. She traveled often and continued to write stories. Her last was entitled *Tempests*, one of the few originally written in Danish and, as with most of her stories after her health failed, was dictated. This last story was remarkable in that it encapsulated Dinesen's life struggles into a single tale.

While seventy-three years old in 1958, Dinesen visited New York City on an all-expenses paid deal with the Ford Foundation's Fund for the Advancement of Knowledge. She was offered and accepted many speaking engagements and left a strong impression on everybody who went to see her. Dinesen quickly gained celebrity status. She spent time with the likes of Marilyn Monroe, Truman Capote, e. e. cummings, John Steinbeck and a host of other famous artists, performers and publishers.

After New York, Dinesen returned to Denmark. She worked steadily while her health continued to deteriorate. She could not eat very much due to a form of anorexia that she made worse with the use of amphetamines. She died on September 7, 1962 from emaciation.

Analysis



Isak Dinesen's death was not dramatic, unexpected or tragic. She jammed more life into a month than most people experience in a year, but part of this was from the continuing use of amphetamines to keep her energy up. For all the suffering that she experienced, her final years were full of praise for her literary works and socializing with many of the great people of the period.

Not an easy person with whom to live, her secretary Clara Svendsen put up with Dinesen's outbreaks of unfair judgments and nasty personal attacks. Nevertheless, Dinesen depended upon Svendsen's support for taking dictation of ongoing literary works and physical aid. Being so dependent likely irritated Dinesen until she finally let loose with all her pent up frustrations, and Svendsen just happened to be the most accessible person to target. While Dinesen's public persona was that of a pleasant ancient literary master, her personal life was full of fears, conflicts and, of course, physical pain from her illnesses. She did not die all of a sudden but faded away, leaving her literary works to mark her passage through this world.



Characters

Isak Dinesen

Isak Dinesen (April 17, 1885 - September 7, 1962) was the subject of this biography. She was also known as Karen Blixen, and Isak Dinesen was one of her pen names and the most well known. Dinesen grew up in Denmark on a property called Rungstedlund and had parents with very different personalities and goals. Her father Wilhelm was an adventurer who died at a fairly young age. Her mother was a homemaker and very traditional. Dinesen took after her father.

Of her many literary works, the best known is *Out of Africa*, a story that was made into a popular movie and was released in 1985. It is a piece of fiction based on Dinesen's experiences while running a coffee plantation in Kenya, a country on the African continent. The biography recounted her actual experiences while there and expounded on her love relationship with Denys Finch Hatton.

After losing the plantation because it could not make enough money, Dinesen moved back to Denmark where she concentrated on expanding her catalog of literary works. She became popular in the United States, France and Italy but not so much in Denmark. Part of this was from writing her stories in English first and later translating to Danish, but for many of the works, the Danish translation did not come to pass. Danish literary critics also did not accept her work as worthy literature, even though she was nominated for the Nobel Prize in literature several times.

Dinesen spent World War One in Africa and World War Two in German-occupied Denmark. She directly helped thousands of Jews escape to Sweden, thus saving their lives. During World War One, she supported the Danish side, and her younger brother Thomas served in the Danish army.

In her later years, Dinesen suffered with major health problems. She had problems with keeping her weight up, partly due to the illnesses and partly due to a habitual use of amphetamines. She nevertheless managed to live into her seventies until dying in 1962. She left behind a quite impressive legacy in literature that is recognized the world over today, a unique and interesting life story and finances in order, which had not been so most of her life. Dinesen worked on her storytelling up until the time of her death.

Denys Finch Hatton

Denys Finch Hatton was Isak Dinesen's lover while she was in Africa. Their romance was intense but not in the usual way. Denys was a confirmed bachelor with absolutely no interest in marriage. He even balked at fully committing his life to Dinesen and often fought with her about this. He would stay for a while, be gone for a while, and repeat this pattern throughout.



With perhaps a desire to bring the relationship to another level, Denys invited Dinesen to visit his home in England. Rather than solidifying anything, the visit resulted in a new rift developing in the relationship. However, this did lead to experiences in Africa about which Dinesen wrote in her famous story, *Out of Africa*.

The tragic end to Denys' life happened while he was flying an airplane, a Gypsy Moth. He had taken Dinesen for several rides in the plane, which she enjoyed very much. On a day after it seemed they had broken up for good, Denys flew solo. He crashed shortly after takeoff. Dinesen took this very hard for several reasons, among them that they had exchanged angry words that had not been reconciled. Their relationship might have improved, but then it was too late. She felt so terrible about this that she could not function for weeks, and others ran the coffee plantation during this time.

Wilhelm Dinesen

Wilhelm Dinesen was Isak Dinesen's father. He was an adventurer, came from an aristocratic family and was active in politics. Drawn to the still somewhat wild North American continent, he spent time living with Native Americans. When he learned that he had contracted syphilis, Wilhelm hung himself. Isak Dinesen, then known as Karen, was only ten years old.

Wilhelm impressed Karen the most during her early years. He often took her on little adventures around the family property. His love of adventure transferred to her, as did his aristocratic background. Throughout Karen's life, she longed for the return of the aristocratic times when the socio-economic classes were strictly demarcated. This longing was reflected in her storytelling.

Wilhelm's suicide may have had an effect on Karen in that she tended to glorify his memory and emulate his life. When she entered her adolescence, she became very rebellious against her mother and the rest of her family on her mother's side. This eased a bit once she married and moved to Africa, but there was always tension. When she returned to Denmark, the tension would often cause her to lash out at others.

Ingeborg Westenholz

Ingeborg Wetenholz was Isak Dinesen's mother. She came from a wealthy bourgeoisie family, meaning that the wealth had been earned through business activities rather than inherited along royal bloodlines. Dinesen did not like this side of the family. She preferred the aristocrats on her father's side.

Despite the animosity between them, Ingeborg always had her daughter's well-being in mind. She encouraged Dinesen to study in Copenhagen, France and Italy. However, the idea was to mold Dinesen into a marriageable young woman. Instead, Dinesen married a baron and moved to Africa, which was not at all what her mother wanted. Ingeborg wanted Dinesen to raise a family and live her life through her husband and children. Dinesen would have none of that.



This conflict continued throughout until Ingeborg's death in 1939. Dinesen found the situation intolerable and sought out refuge in different places within Denmark. This later became a strong desire to travel. Ingeborg meanwhile tolerated her daughter's behavior because that was what mothers were supposed to do.

Aunt Bess

Aunt Bess was Ingeborg's sister. She had a better handle on Dinesen and could talk rationally about what Ingeborg wanted for her. However, Dinesen was too smart to be manipulated by an aunt, even one of whom she was fond. This led to letter exchanges that were actually debates. Dinesen defended her position and argued for the full rights of women in a man's world. Aunt Bess argued for the traditional roles of women in a man's world. Both agreed that it was a man's world, but their approaches to it were directly opposed.

Thomas Dinesen

Thomas Dinesen was Isak Dinesen's younger brother. She and Thomas never got along well. They had different ideas about how to live life, politics, economics and just about everything else. For a period of time after serving in World War One, Thomas stayed with Isak on the coffee plantation in Kenya. He had to leave for various reasons, but an important one was his continual discordance with his older sister.

Unlike Isak, Thomas married and raised a family. Isak liked to make cruel fun of his situation and nurtured resentment toward him for living off the family money. When she wanted to buy out his share of the family property, Thomas refused because the offer was too low. He later sold his share to a third party who offered what he wanted.

Bror Blixen

Bror Blixen was Dinesen's one and only husband. He was a crude man with carnal appetites. In Africa he often visited prostitutes, and through this activity he contracted syphilis. He passed on the disease to his wife.

Once divorced from Dinesen, Blixen's life became less satisfying than before. He worked with safaris for a time, traveled, tried other business ventures, but nothing really panned out. Toward the end of his life he returned to a small family farm, an environment he hated and had tried to escape. There he died.

Clara Svendsen

Clara Svendsen was Dinesen's secretary during the later part of the storyteller's life. Clara was well versed in several languages, worked also as a translator and did not have much ambition past this. She was happy taking dictation from Dinesen, preparing



manuscripts and helping Dinesen to get around the various cities they visited. Clara wrote and published a memoir about her time with Isak Dinesen.

Thorkild Bjornvig

Thorkild Bjornvig had an odd relationship with Dinesen in her later years. He was much younger than she and aspired to be a serious poet. Dinesen found the young man to be attractive and nurtured a mentoring relationship spiced with non-physical sensuality. She became highly influential over Bjornvig, and eventually he became afraid of losing himself. He rejected her, but she would not let him go. They met a few times later on until the relationship had entirely dissolved.

Native Kenyans

Dinesen embraced the native Kenyans, which was unheard of during her time in Africa because racism was the norm. She helped whenever she could and wanted to return to build hospitals for the tribes. While in Africa, the natives honored Dinesen often and considered her to be a fellow tribe member.

Literary Critics

Isak Dinesen craved the praise of literary critics. She received plenty of this from critics in the United States, France and Italy. The critics in her native Denmark were not so willing. They in fact were not accepting of her stories and denigrated her abilities, which hurt Dinesen very much.



Objects/Places

Denmark

Rungstedlund was Dinesen's family property. She grew up there and returned after her time in Africa. She worked hard to keep the property in the family.

Copenhagen

Copenhagen is the capital city of Denmark and where Dinesen began her advanced studies. This set her on a course into authoring great literature.

Paris

Dinesen continued her studies in Paris, where she learned French and a deep appreciation of the arts. She returned to Paris often throughout her life.

Kenya

Kenya is the country where Dinesen's coffee plantation was located. Of all the places she lived, Kenya was her favorite. This was the setting for her story *Out of Africa*.

United States

Dinesen received great praise and acceptance in the United States. Her publishers were located there, and she visited in late life. She met many great artists and performers during this time.

Gypsy Moth

The Gypsy Moth was a model of airplane. Denys bought one and flew it all over Kenya with Dinesen as his delighted passenger. On a solo flight, Denys crashed the Gypsy Moth and died.

African Wildlife

Dinesen enjoyed going on safari to hunt the African wildlife. She was a good shot and had the hunter's lust for the kill. Two lions appeared in her story, *Out of Africa*, in an enhanced scene based on reality.



Typewriter

Dinesen always composed on an old typewriter that she never replaced. After her strength failed and she could no longer type, she dictated her stories.

Stories

Dinesen wrote mostly stories, some longer than others. Her books were compilations that sometimes shared characters and thematic ideas.

Rungstedlund

Rungstedlund was Dinesen's family property. She grew up there and returned after her time in Africa. She worked hard to keep the property in the family.

Themes

Storytelling versus Novel Writing

Isak Dinesen was a storyteller, not a novelist. She could write novels and had one published under a pen name, but she did not take the form seriously. Her great literature always had the form of stories of limited length. They could be considered the short story form or novella if longer and more intricate. In her later years, she took on a very ambitious novel with more than one hundred characters but did not finish it before she died.

She began creating her stories while still in childhood and adolescence. Many of them were told over and over verbally, which became a refining process. She also kept them in her mind and revised them in the imagination before ever attempting to write them out and publish.

Because her stories were so much a part of her, she could recite them verbatim when performing for audiences. Few authors have had this capability or closeness to their work, and she impressed her audiences accordingly. Additionally, when she became too weak physically to work her typewriter, she dictated her new stories to her secretary, who then prepared them as manuscripts. This ability required that she have the story entirely worked out in her imagination before dictating it.

Great Literature versus Commercial Literature

Commercial literature is intended to entertain first and perhaps inform as well. The difference between great literature and commercial literature is enlightenment. Great literature causes the reader to think deeply about something or many things. Emotional connections are made to ideas, observations, plot elements and characters. Great literature has the ability to change lives, whereas commercial literature usually does not.

Isak Dinesen wrote mostly great literature, and for this she is fondly remembered. One of the tragic parts of her life involved the literature critics in Denmark, her home country. She wanted very much to be accepted by them, but this did not work out. This may have been a strong reason why she preferred to write in English rather than her native language.

When she wrote a novel, she purposefully kept it light and commercial. Not wanting to be associated with this lowbrow literature, she used a pen name. However, her writing style was so unique that her loyal readers picked up on the true author of the book. She was mortified, yet this illustrated how a great writer cannot escape greatness simply by writing a commercial novel. Dinesen never attempted poetry, or if she had, none of it survived. Her sense of great literature did enable her to recognize good and great poets of her time and throughout history. Conversely, she could also tell when a poet did not have the right talents and skills, and she had a habit of letting the aspiring poet know it.



To be fair, she also let promising poets know that they could be great—if they followed her guidance, that is.

Full Living

The storyteller lived her life fully from the beginning to the end. She could not wait to get away from her middle class roots to find adventure and love in the big open world. Dinesen wanted to live as if in a different period when the social classes were not so fluid. The aristocracy ran things in her desired world, and she got a good taste of this in Africa. At first shunned by the English, German and Swedish aristocratic land holders, she finally earned their acceptance. This was largely due to her marriage to a baron, but she also had to prove her worthiness.

While in Africa, Dinesen did something that was unique among the aristocrats—she befriended the natives. In turn, the natives accepted her into their cultures. This was entirely unheard of for the time, being that racism was the norm. The natives were supposed to be something less than human and thereby subjects to be exploited, not befriended. Dinesen could only go so far as to think of the natives as her children, which would be considered highly condescending today, yet she lobbied for their rights and wanted to help as much as she could.

Although losing the coffee plantation in Kenya came as a severe blow to Dinesen, along with the death of her lover Denys, she did not completely retreat from life. Her return to Denmark was very hard on her emotionally, and she did go through periods of despair. Nevertheless, her strong desire to live fully as much as she could given the circumstances led her to travels and further writing projects. World War Two was a ghastly experience for her, but she still managed to help save the lives of thousands of Jews in Denmark. She had terrible financial difficulties and still was able to keep the family property away from the auctioneer's block. Not only did Dinesen not let misfortunes keep her down, they seemed to spark a fearless rebellion against the world. Usually she won, given enough time.

Home as an Anchor and Burden

Denmark was an anchor for Dinesen. She always returned there after tragedy or travel. Her actions in Africa during World War One and in Denmark during World War Two acknowledged her love and patriotism for her native land. She greatly appreciated the natural beauty of the northern world and would take excursions into it regularly. Her kindness and generosity shown toward her people were offered without question. The downside was that returning to Denmark generally put her into an emotional tailspin.

It has been famously written by Tom Wolfe that one cannot return home after having experienced the world. Isak Dinesen knew about this phenomenon very personally. Family pressures tried to tie her down into what was considered a normal woman's life. Her literary works were regularly panned by the Danish critics. In her later years, she

was considered by her fellow Danes as being too lofty to be one of them. In many ways, she was.

Dinesen never had children, although she did marry once. Through this marriage, she contracted the syphilis that would follow her throughout the rest of her days and contribute to her death. The disease put an end to her physical sex life, so she had to experience erotica through the imagination. She was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in literature several times. Her books of stories sold strongly, and she became a celebrity known and loved especially in the United States, but also in France and Italy. Isak Dinesen was not the typical Dane. She had indeed reached a lofty height that others could barely comprehend, and thereby she was resented by her fellow Danes.

On the bright side, she also received a great deal of support from her family and friends when she needed it the most. This likely kept her coming back to Denmark because the resentments were superficial and born of ignorance. She also might have craved the suffering to improve her storytelling.



Style

Perspective

The biographer approached Isak Dinesen in an objective manner, exposing both the good and bad sides of the storyteller. Dinesen could have been the nicest person in the room or an outrageous harpy. She was energetic in her old age but was also taking amphetamines to keep up the pace. At times highly vulnerable, she could also shame a group of German soldiers to not search her house during the Nazi occupation.

Obviously a big fan of Dinesen, the biographer indulged in her own summary and analysis of Dinesen's major works. The saving grace was that the biographer also tied these literary reviews to situations in Dinesen's life, whether full scenes, individual characters, plot elements or thematic ideas.

Having full access to all of the family's papers, letters and other records pertinent to Dinesen's life also improved the perspective tremendously. Between full access and interviews with people who had known Dinesen, the biographer presented a complete and reliable record of her life. Certainly an amount of speculation needed to be done for determining Dinesen's most private thoughts, and the biographer revealed this clearly in footnotes.

Tone

Neither a breathless admiration piece nor a caustic attack on character, the biographer's tone kept to a detached level that was close to journalism. Lengthy quotes were used in order that Dinesen's own voice could be heard, albeit from a fairly distant past. The quotes taken from Dinesen's letters were the most genuine, since while writing she was probably not considering that the letters would be published.

A good deal of Dinesen's life could have been analyzed from the perspective of psychology. She played around with people's minds quite a bit starting in childhood, and this could have been pointed to as a sign of various tendencies. The biographer did not attempt to do this, leaving such analysis to the reader. Dinesen's use of amphetamines was not connected with her tendency to fall into lengthy monologues, even to the point of alienating the people listening to her. The behavior was described without much comment.

The overall honesty of the biography gave it a better chance of being taken as a definitive work. This is tied to the almost journalistic tone, but the honesty stands alone even had the biographer done more praising than what was presented. Isak Dinesen was acknowledged in her own time as a great writer; she knew it, and she exploited what she could from her celebrity. In return, she gave the world good stories to read, and if desired, to tell. The biographer accomplished a similar task by giving the world a credible and well rounded story of her life.



Structure

The structure of the biography was overall chronological from the childhood to the death of Dinesen. The work was broken into four books that covered the childhood, the time in Africa, the highly productive literary period and her celebrity in later life. Dinesen herself would have broken her life into five sections, which the biography mentions.

In all, fifty-two chapters presented the life of Isak Dinesen. These chapters often jumped forward and backward in time but within the confines of the overall period. This gave the biography a bit of storytelling feel, which was very appropriate for the subject.

A table of contents and index was provided, along with footnotes arranged near the references within the text and at the bottom of the page. This is the traditional structure of a scholarly work. More modern structures tend to have notes pages at the end of the book in order to smoothen the reading flow. The biographer may have chosen to do the traditional structure to match the era in which Dinesen lived, a subliminal trick to enhance the reader's experience.



Quotes

"[Wilhelm] Dinesen felt a deep affinity with the Indians: their code of honor, their elegance and bravery, their knowledge of animals and the wild."

Chapter 2, *The Captain*, p. 15

"Mingling incestuously in Tanne's [Dinesen's] copybooks with the well-outlined and liberal-minded essays were dramatic writings in quite a different vein."

Chapter 5, *Three Sisters*, p. 44

"When Tanne began to frequent the society of the noble Frijs sisters, to dine with them in town, to go to their balls, to spend weekends at Frijsenborg, she suffered keenly from a sense of her social disadvantage and perhaps acted—put on a special show of brilliance—to distract from it."

Chapter 9, *Countess Daisy*, p. 79

"Here the world was as flat as a pie crust, rounded at the edges, with the hills rising in irregular shaped scallops around the rim."

Chapter 15, *Sea Change*, p. 127

"Africa, despite everything that wounded her and wore her down, had given her a glimpse of 'life itself.' She could no longer imagine a future apart from it."

Chapter 20, *The Wing of Death*, p. 164

"And for many years she would continue to blame her unhappiness on the family's influence and, alternately, to plead abjectly for their understanding."

Chapter 24, *Kamante and Lulu*, p. 204

"Game photography was 'a pleasant, platonic affair,' at the end of which the parties 'blow one another a kiss and part like civilized beings.' It was not a matter of life or death, and therefore it held no interest for her."

Chapter 29, *Lion Hunt*, p. 247

"Her increasing thinness and nervousness gave her a somewhat frightening aspect to the very young; one settler, then a child, thought she was a witch."

Chapter 31, *Spirits of the Air*, p. 269

"What began as a collection of dinner-party anecdotes, of 'short, quite truthful'



autobiographical sketches, of travel writing, of perceptive but romantic amateur anthropology, became Out of Africa."
Chapter 35, In a Dark Wood, p. 311

"Isak Dinesen's work during the long and intense relationship with Bjornvig was naturally much influenced by it and by him, and a dozen private jokes and intimate details are commemorated in her later tales."
Chapter 43, "The Immortal Story", pp. 399-400

"The aristocratic world had always held out this promise to Karen Blixen; this was its real charm for her, something many of her friends, who didn't understand her 'idiotic snobbery,' could not see."
Chapter 48, Echoes, p. 449

"Her doctors now discovered that to make up the deficit between the energy she had and that which she needed she had been taking amphetamines."
Chapter 50, Isak Dinesen in America, p. 470

Topics for Discussion

What significance does her story *Out of Africa* have to Isak Dinesen?

How did Dinesen's father influence her?

Characterize the relationship between Isak Dinesen and her aunt Bess.

Explain why Dinesen was so popular when she visited New York City.

Why was Denys important to Dinesen?

Describe the relationship Dinesen had with the native Kenyans.

What did Isak Dinesen think about her younger brother Thomas?

How did World War One and World War Two impact Dinesen?