The Ring Study Guide

The Ring by Karen Blixen

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Contents

Introduction

The short story "The Ring" by Isak Dinesen (whose real name was Karen Blixen) can be seen both as typical of its author's literary art and as different from her most characteristic mode of expression. Its eighteenth-century Danish setting places it within the deliberate archaism of Dinesen's storytelling, and its concern with fundamentals such as identity, sexuality, and violence echo such concerns in her other tales. On the other hand, "The Ring" has a simplicity not found in some of Dinesen's other works. In its concise style, it resembles a folktale or an episode from a medieval saga. "The Ring," which appears in the 1958 collection called *Anecdotes of Destiny,* adheres to the classical styles of storytelling, the Aristotelian unities of character, setting, and temporal span, and explores the way in which violence both breaks and reforges character.

Although dismissed by some of her contemporaries as an archaist who manipulated devices of eighteenth-century storytelling in a manner irrelevant to the modern condition, Dinesen has since come to be valued as an incisive commentator on modernity. While "The Ring" deals with a group of people, rural Danes of a past century, quite alien to the American reader of the 1990s, the tale addresses a universal human condition: Like Lovisa, the young bride, readers can find themselves caught up in a world which they did not make but with which they must come to terms.

Author Biography

Like Oswald Spengler, Thomas Mann, Sigrid Undset, and Hermann Hesse, Isak Dinesen (1885-1962), whose real name was Karen Blixen, was born in the nineteenth century and to a great extent remained true to its Romantic ideals though she lived well into the twentieth century. They participated fully, if critically, in the great artistic, social, philosophical, and political phenomenon known as modernity. To mention Dinesen, a daughter of Danish nobility whose roots were traceable all the way back to the middle ages, in company with Spengler, Mann, Undset, and Hesse is to point out that her modernity, like theirs, was one of dissent which aimed at compensating for the modern flatness of life through the revival of an antique ethos. Like Spengler, whose *Decline of the West* (1919) colored the era, Dinesen saw European civilization as descended primarily from a Gothic, or what Spengler called a Faustian, vision of life: A sense of distance as something to be conquered, an urge toward exploration both of inner and outer space, a willingness to confront violence and to accept the tragic. Like Mann in *Doctor Faustus* (1944), Undset in *Kristin Lavransdatter* (1921-23), and Hesse in *Narcissus and Goldmund* (1940), Dinesen in her literary art often traveled back to a medieval or baroque setting, resurrected Gothic themes and motifs, and indeed exploited a lowering saga-like atmosphere for everything that it was worth.

Dinesen's life itself was like a saga or romance. There was her birthplace, Rungsted, in North Zea-land, which in a radio-talk she described as "one of the oldest houses—perhaps the oldest house—between Elsinore and Copenhagen," a country-seat of minor Danish nobility where time might well have stopped in the eighteenth century. Critics who complain that Dinesen's settings are falsely archaic fail to contend with the Gothic quality of Rungsted, to which many of her imaginary locales strongly correspond. The rural farmstead supplied a stock setting in traditional Danish storytelling as well, as in Steen Steensen Blicher's famous *Diary of a Parish Clerk* (1841).

Dinesen's saga was filled with both adventure and disappointment. Her father, to whom she was very close, committed suicide when she was ten. Dinesen entered the Royal Academie of Fine Arts in Copenhagen in 1903 to study painting but left a few years later to begin writing. She published her first stories in a Danish periodical in 1907, using the pen name Osceola. Dinesen fell in love with her second cousin, Hans von Blixen-Fienecke, who refused to marry her; she later married his twin brother, Bror. Dinesen and Blixen managed a six thousand acre coffee plantation in Kenya, East Africa. Together they socialized with British aristocrats, many of whom inspired characters in Dinesen's later stories. Soon after marrying, however, Dinesen contracted syphilis from her unfaithful husband, and the disease affected her for the rest of her life.

Dinesen eventually became sole manager of the plantation, and she was divorced from Blixen in 1925. In 1918 she had met Denys Finch Hatton, a British pilot with whom she had an affair until his death in 1931. The financial condition of the plantation deteriorated until Dinesen finally sold it, also in 1931. She returned to Denmark, where she began her writing career in earnest.

Dinesen published her earliest tales before World War One but fell silent as an author during the Kenya hiatus. In 1934 she published *Seven Gothic Tales,* a work which appeared in Danish but which, surprisingly, she composed in English, a second language, and then translated into her native Danish. The *Gothic Tales* were followed by *Winter's Tales* (1942), *Last Tales* (1957), and *Anecdotes of Destiny* (1958), all consisting of independent short stories and novellas unified by recurrent themes and the pervasive Dinesen atmosphere. Dinesen wrote two memoirs, *Out of Africa* (1937) and *Shadows on the Grass* (1960, English translation 1961). She also wrote a novel, *Ehrengard* (1963), and many essays on a wide variety of topics. At first slighted by critics, she gained a reputation as one of Denmark's greatest living authors by the time of her death in 1962. Competent in English and concerned with universal human conditions, Dinesen also attracted an international following.

Plot Summary

Dinesen, writing in the 1950s, sets the action of "The Ring" in rural Denmark "on a summer morning one hundred and fifty years ago," which would correspond approximately to the year 1800. Sigismund and Lovisa, two newlyweds (twenty- four and nineteen years of age) whose love, after much tribulation, has prevailed over the reluctance of the bride's family, are out walking to observe the pasturage of Sigismund's farm and to inspect the Cotswold rams by which the farmer hopes to "improve his Danish stock." Dinesen's narrator divulges Lovisa's reminiscences of their struggle against her parents' wishes (she is of higher station in life than he, and her family is wealthier than his) and her present sense of having been liberated into "freedom" by her marriage. Lovisa delights in the "rustic atmosphere" of the locale and experiences joy in the notion that she has no secret from her husband.

At the sheepfold, sheepmaster Mathias tells Sigismund that two of his English lambs are dead and two more sick. While two helpers go off to fetch the sick lambs for examination, Sigismund and Mathias converse about the sheep thief who has been plaguing the district. The thief drags off his prey "like a wolf" and three nights earlier killed a man and injured the man's son in order to escape capture after having been caught by them red-handed. Lovisa wants to know more and gets Mathi-as to tell the story in full for her benefit. Details of a bloody fight in a sheep house, during which the thief broke his arm, excite her: "She felt a pleasant thrill running down her spine." Mathias says that the man should be hanged; Sigismund says "poor devil." Lovisa wonders that her husband could pity such a violent and lawless man.

Sigismund sends Lovisa home, and she leaves her hat with him to carry back for her; she walks slowly, daydreaming and delighting in the landscape. She fondly imagines that soon Sigismund will return after her and decides to play a trick to show her husband how much she means to him. She hides in a glade that she had previously discovered so that Sigismund, not seeing her on the path, will wonder for awhile where she has taken herself. The glade is the main setting of the tale and the stage of its central incident.

In order to enter the glade, Lovisa must push aside stubborn underbrush and thickly entwined low branches of trees. At the center a clearing opens with room for three or four people, so shielded by the tangle surrounding it that it is perfectly isolated from the rest of the world; a green realm, a fine and private place. Entry proves difficult, and when she wins it, she finds herself face-to-face with a ragged, bloody stranger, "about her own age," who is none other than the much-rumored sheep thief. They stare at each other. The narrator states that the confrontation immediately changed Lovisa from the innocent that she had been up until the moment into something else. But the change is not instantaneous; it is acted out in careful, ritual steps.

The thief, crouching, lets his right arm dangle between his legs, the hand grasping a bloody knife, which he points upward at Lovisa's throat by bending his wrist; the corners of his mouth nervously twitch. He puts the knife into its sheath. Lovisa nervously

removes her wedding ring, offering it to the thief, as though to bargain for her life. She drops the ring on the ground before him, but he kicks it away into the brush. She also drops her handkerchief, and it is this that the thief picks up. He wraps his knife in the handkerchief and leaves. Lovisa has been spared. She leaves the glade.

Now, however, when she meets Sigismund on the trail, Lovisa can only stutter that she is missing her ring; she harbors a secret, and the whole world appears changed. Walking in front of Sigismund on the homeward path, she suddenly sees herself as destined to "poverty, persecution, total loneliness." Sigismund kisses her hand, telling her not to worry about the ring, but the kiss feels cold. He asks if she has any idea where she was when she lost it. She has, she says, no idea at all.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

As the story begins, we meet the two central characters, a young Danish squire named Sigismund and his new wife, Lovisa. The couple, who have been married only one week, are out for a walk on their land.

Sigismund and Lovisa's courtship was not an easy one. Lovisa's parents are from a higher social class than Sigismund's are, and they initially disapproved of their relationship. As a result, for ten years, the couple met secretly. Lovisa's parents eventually relented and the couple married.

The newlyweds are very happy and are particularly relieved that they can now be seen together in public without fear of evoking their parents' anger. They seem to take pleasure in everyday things: carriage rides, sharing meals and their dogs and sheep.

Lovisa seems to be particularly happy with her new life. Even though their lifestyle is far simpler than what she is accustomed to, she assures her husband that she is quite content. Her biggest joy is the fact that for the first time in her life, she is not keeping any secrets.

Sigismund and Lovisa walk toward the field where Sigismund's sheep are kept. Sigismund had studied sheep breeding abroad and his herd is a particular source of pride. Lovisa is both proud of, and amused by, her husband.

Arriving at the sheepfold, they are greeted by Mathias, the shipmaster who informs them that one of the English sheep Sigismund had brought with him when he returned from England had died and two others were sick. This news troubles Sigismund and so he and Mathias engage in an intense conversation.

As the men talk, Lovisa begins to think of other things. Soon, however, their conversation catches her attention and she learns that a sheep thief is most likely the culprit. The thief's actions are described as being like those of a wolf; he sneaks into the sheepfold and disappears with his prey, leaving no trace in his wake. She also learns that this thief recently killed a man on a nearby estate and badly injured his son. The thief's arm was broken in the process.

Before long, the sick lambs are brought for Sigismund and Mathias to examine. Lovisa appears to be distressed at the lambs' discomfort and so Sigismund suggests that she begin walking home and tells her he will soon catch up.

Lovisa is hurt by Sigismund's dismissal of her, feeling he cares more about his sheep than about her. She asks him to bring her hat with him when he returns because she wants to feel the warmth of the sun on her face as she walks.

As Lovisa walks along the path toward home, she begins to enjoy the feeling of being alone. As she walks, she notices a concealed glade, and decides to play a trick on her husband by hiding from him there. As Lovisa negotiates her way into the glade, she amuses herself with thoughts of her husband searching for her.

Lovisa's amusement abruptly ends when she enters the glade and comes face to face with the sheep thief. Without taking her eyes from the man that stands before her, Lovisa surveys the glade and observes that it appears as though this man has been living there for some time.

The man points the knife he is holding directly to Lovisa's throat. Then, slowly, he returns the knife to the sheath by his belt.

In an effort to spare her life, Lovisa removes her wedding ring and offers it to the man. In the process, however, she drops both the ring and the handkerchief she was holding. The ring lands on the ground near the man's foot and he quickly kicks it into the brush. Then, he picks up the handkerchief, draws his knife, wraps the knife in the fabric and returns it to its sheath. When he finishes, he leaves the glade, sparing Lovisa's life.

Shaken, Lovisa exits the glade and begins to walk toward home. Sigismund sees her and catches up, and is full of talk about his lambs. Noticing Lovisa's silence, he stops and asks what is bothering her.

Lovisa responds that she has lost her wedding ring. As she tells her husband this, she realizes that her life is destined to be full of "poverty, persecution and total loneliness." Sigismund assumes Lovisa is troubled by the loss of her ring and promises to find her another.

As they continue to walk home, Sigismund asks his wife is she remembers where she last had her ring. Lovisa replies that she has no idea.

Analysis

Isak Dinesen's short story, "The Ring' was written in the 1950's. Because the author tells us that the story takes place 150 years prior, we can assume that the story of Sigismund and Lovisa takes place somewhere near 1800.

Sigismund and Lovisa appear to be blissfully happy, particularly in light of the rough start their relationship endured. When we first meet Lovisa, she appears to be rather immature and content with her life as a sheep farmer's wife. Although she is five years younger than her husband is Lovisa feels that she is far more mature, remarking, "What a baby he is! I am a hundred years older than he." By all indications, however, it is Lovisa who is less mature than her husband is.

The author speaks of Lovisa's love of the everyday things: shared meals, their dogs and their home. When they meet Mathias the shipmaster who tells them of the sheep thief that has been victimizing local farmers, Lovisa is reminded of the childhood tale "Little

Red Riding Hood." As the two men discuss the unfortunate series of events that has befallen the sheep, Lovisa quickly grows disinterested and begins to think of other things. She cannot understand why her husband is so preoccupied with his sheep, saying all the attention he is giving them is "silly."

Ironically, it is Lovisa's childlike desire to play a trick on her new husband that causes her to make the transformation from a young, innocent girl to a woman well aware of the realities that await her. Lovisa's entry into the glade is described as difficult, not unlike her courtship with Sigismund. For ten years, the couple met secretly, because their parents disapproved of the relationship. When they finally received consent to marry, Lovisa was elated not to have to hide their relationship any longer and she vows never to keep a secret from her husband.

When Lovisa encounters the thief in the glade, he is crouched low, holding a knife between his legs. The imagery here suggests that Lovisa might be raped, an event that thankfully does not happen. Nonetheless, it is a stark contrast to the young girl who is described by the author as not far removed from her girlhood days of playing with dolls.

Lovisa is able to escape harm by offering the man her beloved wedding ring, which he does not accept. He does pick up her handkerchief, which she accidentally dropped, before vanishing from the glade. As Lovisa exits the glade, she is stricken with the realization that most of the remaining days of her marriage will not be as happy as this first week. This is reinforced by her husband's preoccupation with his sick sheep and lack of understanding that the ring Lovisa has lost is in fact her wedding ring.

It is also at this moment that Lovisa breaks her own vow never to keep secrets from her husband; rather than telling him of her encounter with the thief, she chooses instead to deny knowing what has happened to her ring.

Characters

Lise

See Lovisa

Lovisa

Lovisa, who is called Lise by her husband, is the main character in Dinesen's story. She is nineteen years old and has been blissfully married for only a week to Sigismund, whom she has planned to marry for ten years. She is from a family of greater rank and wealth than Sigismund's, and her parents originally objected to him. Lovisa is girlish in many respects: she was still playing with dolls until fairly recently; the story of the thief reminds her of a fairy-tale character, "Red Ridinghood's wolf"; she has "never in her life been exposed to danger"; and she plays a game of hide-and-seek on Sigismund to make him grieve her absence. Yet Lovisa considers herself much more mature than her twenty-four-year-old husband. She delights in the freedom of having no secrets from him. Though she wants "to obey him in everything," she is still willing to disagree with him, as when she objects to Sigismund's feeling that the thief should be pitied, agreeing instead with Mathias that he should be killed. Her accidental encounter with the thief arouses her empathy, and her gesture of offering him her wedding ring, which he spurns, makes her feel that she has thus wedded herself to "poverty, persecution, total loneliness." Her freedom disappears in the knowledge of the secret encounter she now keeps from her husband.

Mathias

Mathias, an older man, is the sheep master on Sigismund's farm. At the beginning of the story he tells Sigismund about the death of one of his Eng-lish-bred lambs and the illness of two others. Eventually he also describes the sheep thief's activities, saying he would like to kill the thief for what he has done.

Sigismund

Sigismund is a twenty-four-year-old sheep farmer who has been married to his nineteen-year-old bride and childhood sweetheart for one week. He is determined to protect Lovisa from misfortune, promising himself that "from now there should be no stone in his bride's path, nor should any shadow fall across it." A modern farmer, Sigismund has traveled outside of Denmark to learn the latest methods of sheep breeding and has had sheep imported from England to improve his flock. He is so happy in his newly married life that he cannot join his wife and Mathias in condemning the thief but rather pities the man. On the other hand, he is preoccupied with his sheep at the expense of his wife: when Lovisa is distressed by the sick lambs, he advises her

to go home—she is "turned away by an impatient husband to whom his sheep meant more than his wife." When near the end of the story Lovisa admits she has lost her ring, he asks, "What ring?"

Thief

The thief never speaks, and much of what is known of him is learned from the story of Mathias, the sheep master. Repeatedly likened to a wolf, the thief has been stealing sheep from local farmers for several weeks and recently killed a farmer who had caught him in the act. The thief is hiding in a grove on the farm of Sigismund and Lovisa and is covered with blood and surrounded by sheep bones when Lovisa unexpectedly enters the grove. He says nothing to her but points a bloody knife at her throat, his hand dangling between his legs. He refuses the wedding ring Lovisa offers him, choosing instead to wrap his knife in a handkerchief which she dropped. Once the knife is put back into its sheath, the thief disappears. The thief represents an intrusion of disturbing and deadly violence into the flat and pacific landscape of the Danish countryside as well as into the innocent, paradise-like world of Lovisa.

Themes

Identity

In the first paragraph of the story, Dinesen explains that the events happened one hundred and fifty years ago in the Danish countryside. The two young people at the center of the story are Sigismund, aged twenty-four, and Lovisa, aged nineteen, newlyweds who have been married only a week. In Dinesen's aesthetic—indeed in her view of the world—such facts are important because much of human identity comes from *milieu,* the particular place and time in which an individual finds himself. Sigismund, the story says, is a "squire," a propertied gentleman-farmer; that is his role. Lovisa's role is the gentleman-farmer's loving wife. It is a case not so much of individual but of traditional, even geographic, identity. The two young people have not yet transcended their milieu to become fully individual; rather, they still bear the impress of the countryside where they were born and of the roles which circumstances have bestowed on them. Interestingly, Lovisa thinks that Sigismund's intentness on being a scientific sheep-farmer is boyish, a pose, but she does not see her own affectations or understand her own immaturity. Identity is something into which one grows.

More than this, however, identity—*healthy identity*—combines unique individual traits derived from experience with a deeply internalized relation to institutions and norms, like business and marriage, or moral and legal standards accepted by the majority of one's community. Identity, in Dinesen's understanding, consists of a balancing act that requires careful and fully conscious maintenance by every person. The relation of the individual to society, and to norms, is often conflicting, in that the individual must sacrifice much of his own will to the peace of the community, or to specific other persons within the community, just as a man and a woman concede much to each other in marriage.

Duty and responsibility

As Dinesen saw it, individuals enter a world which none have made, which exists prior to their birth, and which makes certain nonnegotiable demands. Some of these demands are simply physiological: birth endows a person with the characteristics of one sex or another and with all of the organic limitations inherent in being a mortal creature. Tradition, too, imposes and coerces, with the norms and standards which constitute the prevailing moral consensus of a people. Arising from centuries of human existence, morality guards against behaviors that disrupt communal order and generate misery. Sigismund has a duty to succeed at sheep farming so he can keep his wife from poverty; he must devote himself to his role even if doing so entails paying less sentimental attention to his wife than she, for her part, might demand. The wedding ring binds them not only to each other but to centuries of custom and to the wisdom that custom contains.

The Meaning of Life

Before her encounter with the thief, Lovisa thinks she knows the meaning of life: it is to be loved by her husband and to love him in return. The encounter leaves her in grave doubt, and giving away her wedding ring in an attempt to barter for her life puts her in a new and unsettling relation with marriage, the one social institution on which she has founded her new life.

Consciousness

Consciousness, for Dinesen, is an external awareness of oneself and one's condition. Lovisa's passage from naive satisfaction with her life to anxious dissatisfaction with it is a passage from unconsciousness to consciousness, mediated by an encounter with violence. Sigismund, by contrast, remains absorbed in the pragmatics of squiredom. Lovisa claims to Sigismund that she has "no idea" what became of her ring, but she knows she is lying. At the same time, she grasps her life in a new and startling way, as though she were an observer looking at herself with cold objectivity. The thief, animal-like in his wild appearance and silence, evokes the danger of unconscious or animal urges, such as those associated with sexuality.

Sex

Dinesen tells the reader that Lovisa was quite recently still playing with dolls, a childish activity indicating a pre-sexual existence. Also like a child, Lovisa plots to draw her husband into a game of hide-and-seek. They have been married a week, but the reader does not know whether the newlyweds have consummated their union. Sigismund is too preoccupied with his farm during the course of the story to give his wife much of his attention, in contrast with Lovisa's musings on wedded bliss. Her entry into the glade has been taken by some as a metaphor for sexual penetration, and her encounter with the thief contains a variety of sexually suggestive elements, such as the unsheathing and resheathing of the bloody knife and the criminal's taking her handkerchief (a hymeneal symbol). Sigismund's plan to improve his stock through the importation of English stud-animals also has a sexual aspect.

Violence and cruelty

The farmers introduce the theme of violence in their discussion of the sheep-thief, and Lovisa encounters the source of that violence in the glade. In Dinesen's view, violence and cruelty are part of human nature, but however disagreeable in themselves, they also denote the presence of vitality, of something like the "will-to-power," as the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche termed it. Violence and cruelty therefore represent the energy that fuels creative endeavor, that awakens consciousness. The question for vital human beings is how to channel their vitality, their will-to-power, creatively rather than

destructively. In Dinesen's Nietzschean view of things, art is the sublimation of violence, and every instance of beauty (as in Lovisa's glade) contains something violent.

Style

Style

Isak Dinesen faced the accusation throughout her career that she used an archaic style irrelevant to the social reality of the modern world. While less baroque and internally complicated than some of her other stories, "The Ring" nevertheless illustrates what critics mean when they accuse Dinesen of archaism. Here, Dinesen travels beyond the baroque, back to the style of medieval folktale and saga. For example, there is a moment, in *The Prose Edda,* one of the great mythological poems of the Scandinavian middle ages, when the god Thor fights the World Serpent. Thor will slay the Serpent, the poet says, and then stagger back nine paces—not a few paces, not eight, not ten, but precisely nine paces—and then die from the Serpent's poison. The ritualistic exactitude is reported matter-of-factly. Dinesen's style, in "The Ring," derives from the laconic, the ritualistic, precision of medieval narrative.

Dinesen narrates Lovisa's encounter with the thief in her glade step by step, with saga-like matter-of-factness and precision. When Lovisa finds the thief he stands precisely "two steps off" from her; their silent transaction requires exactly "four minutes"; and when she offers her wedding ring that the thief should take it and depart, "her young form had the grave authoritativeness of a priestess conjuring down some monstrous being by a sacred sign." Again, the thief's movements when he picks up Lovisa's handkerchief from where she has accidentally dropped it get a precise description. Dinesen calls the encounter a "pantomime," and in endowing each movement with visual precision so that the reader can imagine it perfectly, Dinesen also charges every gesture with significance.

Setting

Like the English countryside in the poetry of William Wordsworth or the novels of George Eliot, the Danish countryside tends to achieve the status of a character in the works of Isak Dinesen and of other Danish writers. But the Danish countryside is flat-ter, altogether less variegated, sparer, and at times bleak. It is settled in the form of farmsteads and associated small villages. Throughout the nineteenth century the rural areas of Denmark retained their isolated character; they were not in continuity with cities like Copenhagen or Aalborg, but they were in continuity with their own massive traditions. It is into such a milieu that Dinesen places Lovisa and Sigismund, on a summery day around the year 1800. On Sigismund's sheep farm, footpaths lead through the gently rolling furze, and there are, here and there, stands of trees.

One such stand, or glade, serves as the principal setting of the tale. Lovisa's secret glade differs from the surrounding countryside. It consists of a thick tangle of underbrush and tree branches, which she must force apart in order to gain entry to the inner "alcove," as she calls it. The glade has the character of an inner sanctum, shut off

from the rest of the world, an asylum of pure privacy—now violated, however, by the presence of the thief. The cinders of his fire, strewn about with gnawed bones from his rude feast, give the scene a primitive character.

Stream of consciousness

Although the story begins as a classic third-person narrative, the episode of Lovisa's encounter with the thief exhibits elements of stream-of-consciousness narration: during this event Dinesen lets the reader see, without interruption and with little comment, through Lovisa's perception. The shift in narrative technique emphasizes the paradoxical awakening of consciousness.

Realism

Despite the archaism and the distance of the setting, Dinesen charges "The Ring" with elements of her characteristic realism. This realism chiefly concerns the encounter with the thief, whose physical state Dinesen carefully describes. On the other hand, the thief's vanishing is so abrupt that it acquires a magical quality, which challenges the episode's concreteness, giving it a dreamlike quality.

Paradox

If one of the principal themes of "The Ring" is consciousness, one of the ways in which Dinesen conveys this theme is through the construction of a paradox. In Dinesen's vision, consciousness itself is paradoxical. The paradox consists of the fact that Lovisa's happiness turns out to be a delusion. Delusion is a state from which one would want to be delivered, if one knew about it, and yet the very deliverance from it, into objective knowledge, entails the dissolution of happiness. And happiness, seen from the perspective of the anxiety of doubt that comes with consciousness, can seem a refuge. Having come into consciousness—having, that is, understood something of the truth about her condition—Lovisa finds that she cannot speak the truth to her husband, as when she ironically says that she has no idea where her wedding ring disappeared. Earlier, Lovisa expressed the thought that she was "a hundred years older than" Sigismund, but by the end of the story that delusion gives way to the truth that she is only now wiser than he. She thus understands the import of his words, when he argues that the loss of the ring means nothing, because both of them "are the same" as on their wedding day. He remains the same; she has become something different.

Structure

The structure of "The Ring" reflects the changing relationship between Lovisa and Sigismund. In the beginning, husband and wife are walking together, then they separate, leaving Lovisa on the trail home by herself. Next the story ushers Lovisa into the glade to confront the thief, who at last vanishes, whereupon Lovisa finds herself

back on the path with Sigismund, walking this time not beside him but in front of him, with her back to him, so that their unity is heavily qualified.

Symbolism

The symbol of the wedding ring dominates the story, a purely conventional symbol upon which the meaning of the events depends. A wedding ring is the token of unity of a married couple, signifying their decision to make themselves one in the sight of God. Facing the thief, Lovisa's wedding ring becomes for her an amulet that has the power to chase away an apparition, and in removing the ring, although she does not think of herself as bartering for her life, she does devalue the symbol of her marriage. The reader cannot be sure whether the ring becomes, at that instant, merely a knickknack, quite replaceable, or whether the act of trying to give it to the thief in exchange for his departure possesses richer significance for Lovisa. The story does link the ring to a marriage which has been transformed, in her eyes, negatively, and the removing of the ring to Lovisa's "marriage" to a crueller understanding of life and fate—a philosophical marriage which becomes the transcendental context for the naive marriage to Sigismund. Another symbol is the thief's bloody knife, commonly endowed with phallic characteristics in the manner of a Freudian interpretation. But the knife can also symbolize violence in general, in addition to sexual violence. Commentators have identified the glade both as a sexual symbol and as a symbol of consciousness; it can be seen as the interior of Lovisa's mind.

Historical Context

Militarily, economically, and artistically, Den-mark was a much more influential nation in the nineteenth century that it would be in the twentieth. This fact is significant for an understanding of Isak Dinesen (1885-1962), whose life straddles both centuries. When the nineteenth century began, Den-mark controlled an empire: Iceland, Greenland, the Faeroe Islands, and the Danish Virgin Islands were all territories of the Danish crown, and so was the region of Slesvig-Holstein, a corner of the European continent which would, in the war of 1864, fall under the control of Prussia. Not only did Denmark begin the nineteenth century both as a power and with an empire, but in the middle of that century it suffered a humiliating defeat. One effect of the loss was to disabuse the Danes of further geopolitical ambitions and provoke them to seek status by cultural means. For a small country, Denmark could already, by mid-century, claim a good share of Europe's literary and artistic achievement, not least in the work of well-known and respected writers like Hans Christian Andersen, Adam Oehlenschlager, Meir Goldschmidt, Jens-Peter Jacobsen, Soren Kierkegaard, and Georg Brandes. Even the redoubtable Henrik Ibsen, though a Norwegian, wrote in Danish and could be considered part of Danish literature. As for Brandes, he was, in the last third of the nineteenth century, the most influential literary critic in Europe, a herald and explicator of the burgeoning, self-conscious movement of artistic modernity. In painting, Edvard Munch broke ground as an exponent of the expressionist school.

Dinesen came of age exactly at the turn of the century, an era of sophistication. She enrolled as a student in *Det Kongelige Akademi,* the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, in Copenhagen, aiming at making a career as a painter. It did not work out that way, but in Copenhagen Dinesen was exposed to the leading currents of contemporary thought and art. Under the influence of Brandes, for example, she made herself familiar with the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, the radical German thinker popularized by Brandes in a widely disseminated book called *Aristocratic Radicalism,* whose title in many ways describes Dinesen's own outlook. Nietzsche argued that all the inherited "values" of European civilization were exhausted of their relevancy and that a new breed of men was required to create new values to replace the dead ones. In Nietzsche's view, life was entirely "immanent," that is, life was what people might make of it, and if their aims were heroic, then life itself would be heroic; but if their aims were those of shopkeepers and bureaucrats, the bourgeoisie, then life would be a paltry affair of routine and habit. In the absence of God, urged Nietzsche, the locus of all genuine values was art; under Nietzsche's dispensation, the justification of life lay in beauty, not in worship.

Just as the war with Prussia in 1864 chastened Denmark, so too did the World War of 1914 to 1918 chasten all of Europe. The traditionalists who thought that tradition itself formed a bulwark against catastrophe and the radicals who thought that the unleashing of the will would lead to a utopia of supermen—all found that humanity was a fragile thing that could collapse out of control if not supervised with the utmost vigilance. Although Denmark had kept out of the war, Dinesen herself, in Kenya at the time, was in it, for her farm lay in the skirmishing ground between British and German forces in East Africa. Dinesen returned to a Europe devastated by war, intoxicated by the "Roaring

Twenties," headed for financial collapse in a worldwide depression (1929), and plunging into an era of fascism and nationalism. In the heady atmosphere of the 1920s, the leading lights in art and literature were self-proclaimed modernists, either experimentalists like James Joyce in England or social realists like Tom Kristensen in Denmark. Although a modernist in her outlook (she remained a Nietzschean, even after the war), Dinesen belonged to a group of Scandinavian writers who were severe critics of modernism, advocates of a type of Gothic or preindustrial ethos.

Two writers are important in this regard: Knut Hamsun and Sigrid Undset, both Norwegians. Hamsun's novels celebrate the world of the Norwe-gian coastal village, a world of fishermen and small farmers; Undset's look back to the medieval period, when Christianity was newly consolidated in Scan-dinavia and the fishing and farming communities described in Dinesen's tales had found their basic form. In her Gothicism, Undset is particularly close to Dinesen, and her trilogy *Kristin Lavransdatter* (1920-22) explores on an epic scale the same issues that are central for Dinesen. But Dinesen's earliest significant work, the *Seven Gothic Tales,* appeared only in 1937, much later than Undset's work; *Anecdotes of Destiny* belongs to the mid-1950s. Meanwhile, the heritage of English literature exerted some influence on Dinesen, who spoke the language well enough to write the *Seven Gothic Tales* in English. Shakespeare meant a great deal to her, and so did Edgar Allan Poe, an earlier critic of modern life and another expert teller of the short story.

The Europe of the height of Dinesen's career (1937-1957) saw even more tumult than the Europe of her youth. A second world war did not spare Denmark but engulfed it; the Nazis' professed admiration for Nietzsche and his concept of the "superman" tainted the Brandesian notion of aristocratic radicalism so dear to Dinesen. Unsullied by twentieth-century developments, however, and at last coming into his own as an important thinker was Kierkegaard, a Christian psychologist and aesthetician who became increasingly visible as a factor in Dinesen's outlook. For Kierkegaard, human life consisted of profoundly consequential choices, each one of them an "either-or" which admitted no compromise and demanded action. Before Nietzsche, before Freud, Kierkegaard had conducted a brilliant and disturbing analysis of human motives, and Dinesen was not the only one during the Second World War and after to turn to him in qualified preference to the now-suspect Nietzsche.

Dinesen's last decade (1952-1962) belonged to the Cold War and to the increasing possibility of nuclear destruction. The impulses of the would-be superman were now more dangerous than ever, but were the circumstances of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century landed gentry more relevant to the modern condition than they had been before or only less relevant than ever? It was still an assertion of aristocratic radicalism to pay no attention to the critics, to depend on the discernment of sensitive readers, and to forge ahead according to one's own lights. In her last years, the facts of the contemporary world, of milieu, diminished in importance for Dinesen. She exerted her own influence rather than taking her cues from the present.

Critical Overview

By the time "The Ring" appeared in *Anecdotes of Destiny,* the critical judgment on Dinesen had long since fully registered, and whatever controversy her stubborn art had earlier generated had become the mere expert background to her work. Critics who wrote about her did so mostly from a stance of approval, and those who disapproved—the ascendant Marxist school, for example—tended to ignore her. Judith Thurman in *Isak Dinesen: The Life of a Storyteller* (1982) summarizes the initial critical reaction in Denmark to Dinesen's fiction this way: "Many readers were offended by Karen Blixen's frank nostalgia for the *ancien regime* and by her flight from the grim realities of Danish life. There was also some resentment over the fact that she had written originally in English and had had her first success in America."

After the Second World War, Danish writers began to reassess their earlier commitments to social realism. A generation grew up whose work implicitly acknowledged the influence of Dinesen: both Martin A. Hansen and H. C. Branner looked to earlier centuries than the twentieth for settings which might foreground the essentials of the human condition, and both were, like Dinesen, critics of modernity. Appreciative accounts of Dinesen and her work began to appear by respected critics like Aage Hendriksen.

Critical response to *Anecdotes of Destiny* is perhaps best summed up by Thomas R. Wissen, who writes in *Isak Dinesen's Aesthetics* (1973) that this final volume amounted to a denouement in that it "contains stories . . . which do not contribute significantly to the illustration of points she has made previously." Nevertheless, says Wissen, "the tales will not disappoint . . . they conform to a fully realized aesthetic." And yet critics have responded with interest to individual tales in the *Anecdotes.* Bruce Bassoff recognizes "The Ring" as an instance of Dinesen's assertion that human beings respond to a native urge towards transcendence. Writing in 1990 in *Studies in Short Fiction,* Bassoff states that Lovisa "muses over her happiness" only to discover, through her encounter with the thief, that "life is both more and less than imagined promises." More than that, in Bassoff's reading, Lovisa's encounter leaves her with the sobering conviction that "she is no longer free," as she had earlier imagined herself. Robert Langbaum offers an interpretation in *The Gayety of Vision: A Study of Isak Dinesen's Art* (1964) that suggests for the tale an underlying vampire-aesthetic: "The sexual symbolism [in the encounter] suggests that there has been a union between [Lovisa and the thief], that he has taken her spiritual, as well as her physical, virginity." Yet Langbaum also claims that only in the loss of the ring is Lovisa's "marriage to [Sigismund] fully consummated."

Janet Handler Burstein, writing in *Texas Studies in Language and Literature* (1978), avails herself of the contemporary critical idea of "otherness" to bring out what, for her, is the significance of "The Ring." According to Burstein, it was Dinesen's conviction that individual identity included "otherness" essentially; that which is not one's self, which is different, as poverty is to wealth or cruelty to kindness, nevertheless forms a basic and non-negating part of every individual person. Thus "although [Lovisa] is happily married

to the man she loves," she nevertheless discovers, in her encounter with the thief, an opposite to her world which, in effect, completes that world. Lovisa's consciousness, says Burstein, "is changed [and] henceforth, at the very heart of her secure and familiar world, [she] will know the 'other' whose alien eyes have met her own." Burstein's reading reveals an emergent trend in writing about Dinesen: feminist criticism. Yet while Dinesen was, to put it in terms of gender politics, a great *female* artist, she was not herself of any "progressive" persuasion and still less any kind of feminist.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Bertonneau is a Temporary Assistant Professor of English and the humanities at Central Michigan University and Senior Policy Analyst at the Macki-nac Center for Public Policy. In the following essay, he maintains that Dinesen's story "The Ring" is an example of art describing tragedy.

Isak Dinesen, who owed much philosophically to the German philosopher and poet Friedrich Nie-tzsche, would certainly have agreed with Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols* (1888) that "whatever does not kill me makes me stronger." For this precept is simply a concise statement of the meaning of tragedy—that wisdom stems from pain and sorrow—and Dinesen's art always displayed an orientation towards the tragic. Just as Nietzsche's vision of tragedy can help readers to understand Dinesen's art, however, so can instances of Dinesen's art help readers to understand the basic structures—the human anthropological essence—of tragedy. To the extent that tragedy reflects life, it also reflects consciousness, the human perception and interpretation of life. And, as both Nietzsche and Dinesen powerfully reveal, violence has a relation, possibly generative, to consciousness. Thus if the cruelty at the heart of a Greek play like Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* fascinates us, it is because the shock acted out on stage mirrors the shocks that have promoted each one of us from unconsciousness to consciousness. With this in mind, consider the case of the young bride, Lovisa, in Dinesen's brief but rich story "The Ring."

In the opening paragraphs of "The Ring," Dinesen stresses the youth and inexperience of the newlywed couple Sigismund and Lovisa: He is twenty-four and she is nineteen; they have been married only a week, and Lovisa in particular remains rapt in a girl's fantasy about the bliss of wedded life. "They were wonderfully happy," and after overcoming the resistance of Lovisa's parents to their union, "their distant paradise had descended to earth and had proved, surprisingly, to be filled with the things of everyday life." Dinesen's simple syntax, representative of Lovisa's as-yet rather simple thinking, tells us much. The "and" which links the idea of paradise with the idea of everyday things really ought to be a "but"; paradise and everyday things are normally incompatible. To the extent that one lives in the real world of the everyday, one does not live in paradise. And paradise, for its part, implies the irrelevance of everyday things. Indeed, everyday things predominate in Sigismund and Lovisa's life together, especially Sigismund's preoccupations in his role as a gentleman-farmer of quality sheep. Sigismund's intentness on bettering his flock in fact distracts him from the marriage itself, as when he sends Lovisa home from the sheepfold. Even so, Lovisa feels that she "move[s] and breathe[s] in perfect freedom because she could never have any secret from her husband."

To emphasize her innocence, Dinesen dresses Lovisa up in "a white muslin frock and a large Italian straw hat," making her the image of girlishness:

It was not a long time since she had played with dolls; as now she dressed her own hair, looked over her linen press and arranged her flowers she again lived through an

enchanting and cherished experience: one was doing everything gravely and solicitously, and all the time one knew one was playing.

Thus attired, she walks with Sigismund to inspect the flocks, but arriving at the sheepfold, where sheepmaster Mathias is waiting, they are greeted with ominous news: one of the English-bred lambs is dead and two lambs are sick. As two assistants go to fetch the sick lambs, Sigismund and Mathias converse about a sheep thief who has been on the prowl in the district. "Three nights ago the shepherd and his son on an estate ten miles away had caught him in the act. The thief had killed the man and knocked the boy senseless." There had been a long fight, and the thief's arm was broken. Lovisa, listening to the story, feels "a pleasant little thrill running down her spine." This thrill seems to be connected, moreover, with the blush that had twice colored her face a few moments before when she was thinking her own thoughts as Sigismund and Mathias talked. What makes a young bride blush? Thoughts of the bed chamber seem probable. In that case, Lovisa's erotic musings have dovetailed with her contemplation of violence in Mathias's narrative about the thief and his bloody fight. Somehow the thrill of the two phenomena is related.

The glade within the grove where Lovisa seeks—all at once—solitude and adventure on her way home from the sheepfold, and where she will encounter the sheep thief, will serve as the scene in which the themes of violence and consciousness come together in Dinesen's story. There Lovisa will be jolted out of her childishness into a consciousness of life that deserves the name "tragic." To enter the inner sanctum, it is necessary for Lovisa "gently [to force] her way into the shrubbery," "to divide the foliage and make a door to her sylvan closet." In the center of the glade Lovisa has previously discovered "a narrow space like a small alcove with hangings of thick green and golden brocade, big enough to hold two or three people in it." The imagery is undeniably sexual. Dinesen writes that "a little way into the grove, the soil became moist," and the locale is qualified by its emphatic "secretness." The glade within the grove also boasts the features of a fairy-tale wilderness, radically separate from the everyday world, but it is best characterized as a scene of heightened consciousness and self-awareness. Of course, as Lovisa enters it, to hide from her husband and provoke him into worrying about her that he might appreciate her the more, she finds an unexpected danger whose presence changes her playful attitude radically.

The thief himself suddenly "stood up erect, two steps off." His appearance is alarming: "His face was bruised and scratched, his hands and wrists stained with dark filth. He was dressed in rags, barefooted, with tatters wound round his naked ankles." Dinesen has arranged an interesting and undoubtedly meaningful symbolic sequence beginning with the whiteness of Lovisa's dress; continuing with her blushes (presumably red) and with Mathias's mention of the thief's bloody fight in the sheephouse of the nearby estate; and culminating in the actual bloodiness of the thief himself. With his right hand, the thief "clasped the hilt of a knife." From the lack of awareness and girlish indifference betokened by the white dress, Dinesen has led us to the bloody criminal, blade in hand. The blade, threatening Lovisa from between the thief's legs, suggests the dreadful possibility of rape. The sexuality and the violence of these images are quite entangled, but the point is that together, whatever the formula of their mixture, they stimulate

Lovisa into a new intensity of awareness. The last thing that one can say of that awareness is that it is girlish. Says Dinesen, "She beheld the man before her as she would have beheld a forest ghost: the apparition itself, not the sequels of it, changes the world to the human who faces it."

For one thing, the thief has altered the arboreal inner sanctum from Lovisa's place of private asylum into his own thief's den, from an alcove into a covert. As the thief stares at her in complete silence (he never speaks), Lovisa intuits that "he was wondering, trying to know" what her intentions might be towards him and what his, practically speaking, might be towards her. The situation exhibits a type of primitive symmetry, and Lovisa thinks that she can "see herself with the eyes of the wild animal at bay in his dark hiding-place: her silently approaching white figure, which might mean death." Now this might really be empathy. Dinesen's words do not preclude such an inference. But it is also projection, for, despite Lovisa's naivete, the thief "might mean death" to her in a very real sense. After all, he is wounded, but he is armed. At some level, she knows this, and even though the narrative imputes to her a "fearless . . . nature" and reports her as thinking that she is *not* bartering for her life, her pantomimed offer to buy-off danger amounts to the same thing. Lovisa draws off her wedding ring to offer it to the thief. The thief spurns the ring, but he does pick up her handkerchief, which she has inadvertently dropped. He wraps it around the blade and resheathes the knife. Injured, uncertain what Lovisa's presence means, the thief vanishes. Lovisa has the impression of having commanded him to do so. But this, readers need to remind themselves, is an *Anecdote of Destiny,* and Fate must be conceded its role in the affair.

Back on the path, she sees Sigismund, but the way "was so narrow that he kept half behind her and did not touch her. He began to explain to her what had been the matter with the lambs. She walked a step before him and thought: All is over."

Earlier, Lovisa imagined herself to be "a hundred years older" than Sigismund, a conceit which at the time was false. Now she is a step ahead of him, with her back to him, and he is following her from behind. In the tragic sense, Lovisa now could repeat her earlier conceit and it would be true. Sigismund notices Lovisa's distraction and inquires what is the matter. She reports having lost her ring. Sigismund's response indicates why his consciousness is no longer adequate from Lovisa's transformed point of view: "What ring?" In all probability, Sigismund is still preoccupied with problems of animal farming. Lovisa now understands that losing the ring marked a new marriage, not that of a girl to her childhood lover, but of a woman, a newly conscious woman, "to poverty, persecution, total loneliness. To the sorrows and the sinfulness of this earth." The shock against the senses has opened her eyes to all this, but the invoice should not be interpreted as negative. It is, properly speaking, tragic, and it includes a type of moral development.

When Lovisa heard the story of the thief from Mathias, she agreed with him that the thief, if caught, should be killed. (Mathias had made a brutal pantomime of throttling the criminal with his bare hands.) To Sigismund's casually pitying sentiment that the thief was a "poor fellow," Lovisa objected. Now, however, Dinesen credits her with a sense of "persecution and total loneliness," which sounds remarkably like a truly empathetic

understanding of the thief's plight. Lovisa may still believe that the thief deserves to die, but a part of her now, at least in part, understands the thief's situation. Standing in judgment can include *identification* at some level. As despondent as the insight leaves her, then, the important thing is that it increases her awareness of the world, of the human inner dimension. The insight does not kill her. No, indeed, it makes her stronger, for an increase in consciousness, in Dinesen's world, is an increase of strength.

Source: Thomas Bertonneau, Overview of "The Ring," for *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 1999.

Critical Essay #2

Bassoff is Professor of English at the University of Colorado. In the following excerpt, he contends that Lovisa's (here called Lise) encounter with the thief—and the "real world"—results in a dramatic change in her character.

Structuring ["The Diver"] are plot elements that we find also in "The Ring" and "Babette's Feast": a desire for transcendence (represented by the motifs of birds and angels); a fall (or its refusal) caused by the "real world" in which "dreams are tested"; and either new knowledge or resignation, true art or its simulacrum. In "The Ring" Lise, a young, wealthy newlywed wife, muses over her happiness. Unlike the Softa, who wants to transcend everyday life through converse with an angel, Lise feels like the angel herself: the "distant paradise" she shares with her husband has "descended to earth" and is "filled with the things of everyday life." If the artist, as we are told in "The Diver," seeks secrets from the depths, our domestic angel finds freedom in the fact that she has *no* secret from her husband, whom she wants to obey in everything. Though she does everything "gravely and solicitously," she knows that she is playing. Like the fish in "The Diver," who are "upheld and supported on all sides," Lise lacks gravity. Unlike the veiled dancer in "The Diver," who understands how the world works, she has no interest in the real world. From time to time, however, a blush—a version of the "burning" decried by the fish in "The Diver"—unveils her innermost being. When this diffusion of blood occurs in the *outside* world, where it betokens the need and mortality she has ignored, she is humanized.

A thief, hungry and desperate, has killed and taken a sheep and killed a man who tried to stop him. When the sheepmaster compares the thief to a wolf, Lise remembers pleasurably the wolf in "Little Red Ridinghood," but she criticizes her husband for sympathizing with the thief. Like those in power in "The Diver," she fears "revolutionary" ideas. As she walks back to the house, she surveys a landscape that for her is full of promise. Still playing at life, she decides to hide from her husband to make him feel "what a void" life would be without her. Hiding in a "narrow space like a small alcove" that she finds in the woods, she discovers, however, someone very foreign to her make-believe world: the beleaguered thief. During a silent exchange of looks, she sees herself with his eyes and discovers that life is both more and less than imagined promises.

The thief makes a gesture that is both threatening and sexual: "He moved his right arm till it hung down straight before him between his legs. Without lifting the hand he bent the wrist and slowly raised the point of the knife till it pointed at her throat." While she offers him her wedding ring—in the hope he will disappear and allow her to pretend that he never was—he takes her handkerchief and wraps it round his knife, which he fits into its sheath. Then he closes his eyes and frees her.

She is no longer free, however, as she was when she had no secret and wanted only to obey her doting husband. She loses her wedding ring, which the thief discards in the woods, but finds in its loss an emblem of life's limits: "With this lost ring she had wedded herself to something. To what? To poverty, persecution, total loneliness. To the sorrows

and the sinfulness of this earth." While "The Diver" goes beyond the Softa's fall to his subsequent but premature equilibrium, "The Ring" ends with the heroine's fall—into material scarcity, sexuality, and death.

Source: Bruce Bassoff, "Babette Can Cook: Life and Art in Three Stories by Isak Dinesen," in *Studies in Short Fiction,* Vol. 27, No. 3, Summer, 1990, pp. 385-89.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Burstein suggests that the conflict between self-identity and social stereotype is experienced by many of the female characters in Dinesen's works. She then explores Lovisa's (here called Lise) struggle with her selfhood in "The Ring."

Because the work of Isak Dinesen reflects her patrician inclinations, her skeptical view of "emancipated" women, and her high regard for the symbolic—rather than the sociological or psychological—value of art, her stories often appear fairly remote from contemporary concerns; in a world animated largely by individual striving for equality and self-realization, Dinesen seems to speak, conservatively, for values that many of us have learned to distrust. And yet, Dinesen's work is deeply rooted in her abiding preoccupation with a problem that is alive in our own time. Experienced as a disjunction between identity and role, or between self-image and social stereotype, this problem has been formulated by Simone de Beauvoir [in *The Second Sex*, 1952] as a conflict between selfhood and "otherness." In her analysis of the social, psychological, and political implications of "otherness" for women, de Beauvoir has shown that the role of "other" deprives one of autonomy, of a sense of self based upon norms that are appropriately female, and ultimately of a valid personal and generic identity. Quite simply, to be cast as the "other" is, for de Beauvoir, to lose one's sense of oneself as a subject and to accept a peripheral, passive role as object in a busy world dominated largely by men. But for Dinesen, "otherness," despite its dubious implications for individual autonomy, is a vital fragment of human identity that must be acknowledged and accepted before selfhood can be achieved.

Dinesen's preoccupation with the idea of "otherness" appears in virtually all her published work; as a major theme, a source of metaphor, and a seed of dramatic situation, therefore, this idea bears looking at from a strictly literary point of view. But from another perspective, one might explore this idea in her work simply for its own sake, to consider possibilities that may be obscured by the tendency to conceive the roles of subject and object, self and "other," as mutually exclusive. If one has learned, in other words, to reject the role of "other" as threatening to the integrity of the self, Dinesen may reveal self and "other" as two states of being that can co-exist in fruitful tension. Like all the great antinomies which bracket human existence, self and "other" may be seen, in the words of one of her characters, as "two locked caskets, each of which contains the key to the other." And to achieve a sense of the relationship between them may be, as it is for the characters in Dinesen's work, to widen the range of one's own experience and to understand that experience more fully.

For Dinesen's characters, the need to conceive oneself as the "other" and also the quest to experience and understand life more fully are determined partly by the nature of her fictional "world." Whether she writes of twentieth-century Africa or nineteenth-century Europe, Dinesen's "world" is essentially realistic in one important respect: it never wholly yields to the individual will or conforms to the needs of men and women who live within it. Like our own world, it may allow individuals the brief illusion that they shape events according to their own desires, or the momentary pleasure of finding

themselves in tune with a larger, cosmic harmony, but it is always, simply, itself: resistant, or at best indifferent, to the human desire for mastery. When locusts descend on a beloved coffee plantation, or a ledge of ice breaks under the weight of two young lovers, Dinesen's "world" seems to express its resistance to the individual will, and it is partly this resistance that illuminates the limits of individual autonomy and reveals the self as "other." In short, for Dinesen, the "other" in oneself seems called into being in response to experiential encounter with a will that is not one's own.

Experience alone, however, is not sufficient to the task of human understanding, for Dinesen's stories also demand that characters learn to appreciate the logic which governs the resistance of the world and limits the autonomy of the self. Thus, unlike our own world which is often opaque, bewildering, absurd, Dinesen's fictional "world" is always transparently symbolic: entirely coherent, wholly expressive, thoroughly meaningful. If, as [Donald Hannah] has observed [in *Isak Dinesen and Karen Blixen*, 1971], her characters "change colour vividly . . . grow rigid with rage or terror . . . shake with laughter . . . tremble with anger, fear or grief . . . [and] blush—in all hues of red," they do so partly because they are fulfilling their function as symbols; the self of each is entirely devoted to the task of symbolic revelation, of showing that meaning inheres in every gesture, word, wish, and response of every individual. Many of the tales also manifest a structural concern with the showing forth of meaning; the fine network of separate stories interpolated within single works can invariably be seen, in retrospect, as a deliberate design in which all the stories play small but mutually relevant parts. Images too, particularly images of masks, mosaics, and marionettes which abound in the tales, reflect Dinesen's apparently fundamental belief that the world and all within it are symbolic in their design; as one character puts it, "Life is a mosaic of the Lord's that he keeps filling in bit by bit," a vast and intricate design whose meaning becomes clear only when the pattern is complete and one's own role in the pattern is recognizable.

This conception of the world as mosaic has, of course, both religious and philosophical implications. Its human implications, however, are worth noting, for they account for the distinct emphasis on the importance of seeing oneself as both subject and object that seems so pervasive in Dinesen's work. Theoretically, if life is a mosaic, then the identity of individual tiles is never submerged; the color, shape, size, and texture of separate pieces will always remain distinct within the whole, for a mosaic is not an ill-defined blur of color, but, to use Dinesen's phrase, "a homogeneous up-heaping of heterogeneous atoms"—a harmonious construct, if you will, whose ingredients retain their separate identities. But the identity of every tile, however remarkable in itself, is also part of a larger identity, for each tile participates with its near and distant neighbors in a larger image. And it is the need to perceive the self in both of these roles, as a subjective, autonomous individual and as an objective part of the whole, that seems to motivate many of Dinesen's characters.

For most characters in the stories, awareness of oneself as both self and "other" depends partly upon one's sensitivity to the symbolic meaning of experience, and partly upon one's openness and vulnerability to forces outside the self. And because these two human faculties are rarely balanced in individual characters, the stories allow one to

recognize the differing virtues of both symbols and experience in the quest for selfhood and "otherness...."

Beyond the metaphor of young love, . . . Dinesen fully exploits the imagery of sexuality to suggest the more mature awareness that individuals belong not only to themselves and to each other, but also to a vast design that embraces God and the whole human community. In at least two fairly late stories, this highly abstract notion, as difficult to realize as it is easy to articulate, is embodied in the experiences of two women: Lady Flora Gordon, the gigantic, red-haired heroine of "The Cardinal's Third Tale," and Lise, a young woman, recently married, in "The Ring." In part, Dinesen may have chosen female characters for central roles in both stories because of their vulnerability to sexual violation, for in both works the fact of human community shatters the illusion of self-sufficiency that Dinesen appears to associate with sexual innocence.

In both stories, sexual imagery is unusually emphatic and richly expressive of Dinesen's thematic concern. The white dress of the young wife suggests that, despite her marital status, her essential innocence is still intact; she may preside over the pleasures of her new domain, like a child with a new dollhouse, but in all important respects she is still virgin—her being as yet untouched, as the bright circle of her existence is still unruptured, by experience of the world. In the wedding band that she offers to the fugitive whose hiding place she stumbles upon, one sees a symbol not only of the sexual contract that binds wife to husband in mutual fidelity, but also of the secure but rigid self-enclosure in which this young woman exists. And in the fugitive's disinterest in the ring one sees the contempt of one who knows experience for the facile symbol of domestic security....

It is important to note that even in these two stories, where the intactness of the self is shattered to allow for growth and where this experience is identified, both thematically and imagistically, with the violation of female innocence, Dinesen appears to insist that these women remain active subjects whose own initiative partly shapes their destinies. Lady Flora must offer the gift of her devotion to God before she can be shown the truth of her implication in humanity. And the young woman in "The Ring" must desire to break free of her domestic encirclement before she can encounter the "other" who reveals herself.

Indeed, "The Ring," which Dinesen set at the end of her last collection of stories, probably offers the most complete illustration of her belief that "otherness" is an essential fragment of identity and does not negate, but rather enhances, the self. Lise, the young woman in this story, discovers the reality of her single self just moments before she is made aware of the "other" both within and beyond her. Although she is happily married to the man she loves, she discovers, like the sailor boy, the "sweetness" of her initiative when her husband, preoccupied with difficulties at the sheepfold, impatiently suggests that she walk home without him: "just walk ahead slowly," he tells her, "and I shall catch up with you." But as she walks, savoring the taste of her first moments alone, she imagines "it would be sweeter still . . . to steal into the grove and to be gone, to have vanished from the surface of the earth from him when, tired of the

sheep and longing for her company, he should turn the bend of the road to catch up with her."

On impulse, then, and at her own initiative, like Lady Flora, she finds the grove of shrubbery that she has thought of earlier as "the very heart of her new home," and walks toward it, her white dress shining in the sun and her straw hat dangling its blue ribbons in the grass. As she enters the shadowy grove, she discovers the man who has intruded himself into her existence, a fugitive whose

face was bruised and scratched, his hands and wrists stained with dark filth. He was dressed in rags, barefooted, with tatters wound round his naked ankles. His arms hung down to his sides, his right hand clasped the hilt of a knife.

Although the physical images of the two characters fully articulate the contrast between self and "other" that Dinesen appears to emphasize, the last sentences of the paragraph bind the two images together, relating them in fruitful tension without fusing or unifying or reconciling them: "He was about her own age. The man and the woman looked at each other."

In this moment of silent looking, as so often in similar moments in Dinesen's work, Lise's perception of both herself and the world is changed; although nothing happens, the narrator observes that "the apparition itself, not the sequels of it, changes the world to the human who faces it." Henceforth, at the very heart of her secure and familiar world, Lise will know the "other" whose alien eyes have met her own. And in those eyes, she will also discover an image of the "other" in herself:

After a while she realized that he was observing her just as she was observing him. He was no longer just run to earth and crouching for a spring, but he was wondering, trying to know. At that she seemed to see herself with the eyes of the wild animal at bay in his dark hiding place: her silently approaching white figure which might mean death.

Although she has earlier believed that it is impossible to feel "pity" for such a man, when he releases her and she returns to her husband she keeps the secret of his hiding place. Having recognized the vulnerable "self" in him and the threatening "other" in herself, she has broken the sterile circle of her existence and discovered compassion.

In Lise, then, who dares to risk discovery of both selfhood and otherness, one might see a paradigm of the quest that absorbs so many characters in Dinesen's short stories. One might question the appropriateness of this quest in our own time, for it assumes a confidence in the logic of the world that has been deeply eroded by contemporary experience; if the mosaic of life is actually a heap of rubble, then the search for a meaningful cosmic design and for one's own contributory role in that design is clearly absurd. But other elements of Dinesen's quest remain viable and compelling to the contemporary imagination, for they suggest that the fully achieved self is not negated but enhanced by forces that seem to oppose it, and that by sustaining the tension between selfhood and "otherness" one may transform a sterile opposition into a creative opportunity.

Source: Janet Handler Burstein, "Two Locked Caskets: Selfhood and 'Otherness' in the Work of Isak Dinesen," in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language,* Vol. 20, No. 4, Winter, 1978, pp. 615-32.

Critical Essay #4

In the following excerpt, Langbaum assesses the theme of the human condition as found in Dinesen's "The Ring," particularly as it relates to the character of Lovisa. He also studies the sexual symbolism of the story.

The few brief notes sounded in "The Ring" make an interesting epilogue to the volume [*Anecdotes of Destiny*].... epilogue reminds us of the contrary theme that has been dealt with for the most part negatively in *Anecdotes*—the theme of the richly ambiguous human way. Like Eve when she meets Satan, the newly married, inhumanly innocent wife encounters a young thief and murderer. To buy him off, she offers him her wedding ring, which he spurns so that it falls to the ground and he kicks it away. He picks up, instead, the handkerchief she has also let fall, wraps it around the blade of his knife and puts the knife back in its sheath before disappearing. The sexual symbolism suggests that there has been a union between them, that he has taken her spiritual, as her husband took her physical, virginity. When, lying to her husband, she tells him she has lost her wedding ring, she realizes that she has now married two men—that "with this lost ring she had wedded herself to . . . poverty, persecution, total loneliness. To the sorrows and the sinfulness of this earth." Only now, we are to understand, when she has this secret from her husband, is her marriage to him fully consummated....

In ending *Anecdotes* on a tragic note, Isak Dinesen shows the artist's instinct for a complex symmetry. Looking back from a vision that transcends tragedy, she says what she has implied throughout, that tragedy is our distinctively human glory. But she praises tragedy from a point of view that . . . makes it a part of comedy....

Source: Robert Langbaum, "The Redemption of Ariel: *Anecdotes of Destiny* and *Ehrengard,*" in *The Gayety of Vision: A Study of Isak Dinesen's Art,* Random House, 1965, pp. 245-86.

Topics for Further Study

Dinesen sets "The Ring" in a particular locale, rural Denmark, at a particular historical moment, the early nineteenth century. This setting is preindustrial, manorial (if not feudal) in its social arrangements, and highly custom-bound. In other words, it is hard to imagine a more parochial environment. Discuss why the story is universal in its implications despite its parochial setting.

Analyze and discuss the imagery of the episode in the glade where Lovisa encounters the thief.

Pay close attention to Dinesen's diction and to the way she describes the state of consciousness of her point-of-view character, Lovisa.

Much has been written about the sexual implications of "The Ring." What clues in the story might tell us something about the erotic side of Lovisa and Sigismund's marriage? Do critics overemphasize or underemphasize the sexual element in the story? Explain why you think so.

What Do I Read Next?

"Bjergtagen," or, in English, "Bewitched," by Meir Goldschmidt, a nineteenth-century Danish storyteller, makes use of the ancient folk-motif of the mortal woman seduced by a supernatural lover, a troll. Dinesen's story "The Ring" makes oblique reference to the motif and perhaps also to Goldschmidt's story, which is available in a number of translations in anthologies of Danish literature.

"On Mottoes of My Life," by Dinesen, in *Daguerreotypes and Other Essays* (1979), a book of essays, is a concise summation of her world view.

"The Dreamers," by Dinesen, in *Seven Gothic Tales* (1934), is a much longer narrative exploring the theme of "tragic wisdom" of the generative relation of loss and betrayal to consciousness.

A Severe Mercy, by Sheldon Vanauken (1977), tells of the deep love the author shared with his wife, Jean Palmer Davis (nicknamed "Davy"), of how the "Shining Barrier" of their love was breached one day when Davy was threatened by a stranger in an urban park, and of how, in the Christian faith embraced by both, love is stronger than death.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

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□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

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