The Sailor-Boy's Tale Study Guide

The Sailor-Boy's Tale by Karen Blixen

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Introduction

Isak Dinesen's "The Sailor-Boy's Tale," was first published in 1942 in *Winter's Tales,* her second collection of short stories.

In this story, Simon, a young sailor boy, rescues a falcon, which has gotten tangled in the ropes of the main mast of a ship. Two years later, Simon, now seventeen and working on a different boat, goes ashore at a port town on the northern coast of Norway. There he meets Nora, a girl of thirteen or fourteen, who promises to give him a kiss if he comes back the next day. The next night, however, he accidentally kills Ivan, a Russian sailor whom he has befriended. He runs to Nora, who gives him the promised kiss. He is eventually taken in by Sunniva, an old woman, who helps him to evade capture for the murder by pretending that he is her son. She then explains to him that she herself was the falcon he rescued (as she sometimes changes into a bird) and that she is now rescuing him in return.

This story contains several stylistic elements typical of Dinesen's fiction. It is narrated in the style of a fairy tale and includes the supernatural element of the old woman, presumably a witch, who is able to change herself into a falcon. It is also a coming-of-age story, in which the sailor boy, through the rites of passage enacted by the act of murdering a man and the kissing of a girl, is transformed into a man. Destiny is another theme central to the story, as Simon seems to have been destined to meet the falcon/old woman just when he is in need of her help; his passage into manhood is also marked by his ability to accept his destiny. The theme of storytelling is indicated both by the title of the story and by the ending line, which assures the reader that Simon lived "to tell the story."

Author Biography

The Danish writer Isak Dinesen was born Christentze Dinesen on April 17, 1885, in Rungsted, Denmark. Throughout her life, she was also known as Karen Christentze (or Christence) Dinesen, Karen Christentze Dinesen Blixen, Baroness Blixen-Finecke, Osceola, Pierre Andrezel, Tania B., Karen Blixen, and Tania Blixen, as well as Isak Dinesen, the name by which she is best known to English-language readers. Dinesen suffered tragedy early in life—at the age of ten—when her father, an army officer, hung himself. Dinesen received an education through private tutoring as a child, later studying English at Oxford University (1904) and painting at the Royal Academies in Copenhagen, Paris, and Rome (1910). Dinesen eventually dropped out of the academy and began writing.

A failed love affair with her cousin, Hans Blixen-Finecke, left her deeply depressed, and in 1914 she married Hans' twin brother, Baron Bror Blixen-Finecke, with whom she moved to British East Africa (in what is now Nairobi, Kenya) to become joint owners and managers of a coffee plantation. Her letters home from Africa were compiled and published posthumously in 1981 as *Letters from Africa.* In 1921, she divorced, remaining sole manager of the plantation. In the years following her divorce, she had a love affair with the English hunter and pilot Denys Finch-Hatton. Because of the failure of the coffee plantation business, Dinesen moved back to Denmark in 1931—the same year in which Finch-Hatton died in a plane crash. An account of her experiences in Africa was published in the form of a memoir under the title *Out of Africa* in 1937.

Once back in Rungstedlund, Denmark, Dinesen began to write, publishing her first collection of stories, *Seven Gothic Tales,* in 1933. This was to be the first of five of her books selected for the Book-of-the-Month Club. Her second collection of stories, *Winter's Tales,* was published in 1942. Dinesen eventually gained worldwide notoriety as a writer and was nominated several times for the Nobel Prize. Plagued throughout most of her life by syphilis, which she had contracted from her husband, Dinesen died in 1962 at the age of 77. The 1985 film, *Out of Africa*—which was based on her life and writings—won seven Academy Awards.

Plot Summary

"The Sailor-Boy's Tale" opens with the sailor boy, Simon, aboard a ship, the *Charlotte,* observing a falcon whose foot has gotten caught in the mesh atop the main mast. Simon climbs the mast to untangle the falcon's foot. When the bird scratches his hand, drawing blood, he hits it over the head and tucks it into his shirt. After her climbs down from the mast, Simon lets the bird go, and it flies off.

Two years later, Simon is working aboard the *Hebe,* which is docked at Bodo on the coast of Norway. Wandering around ashore, Simon comes upon a girl of thirteen or fourteen, whose name is Nora, standing at a fence. He asks whom she is waiting for, and she replies that she is waiting for the man she is going to marry. Simon offers Nora the orange he has purchased in exchange for a kiss; but just as she is about to kiss him she is called away by her father. She tells Simon she will kiss him if he comes back the next day. The following day, Simon goes ashore with a group of Russian sailors from another ship. He goes for a drink with them and is set upon by Ivan, who drunkenly expresses great affection for the young man. Simon leaves to find Nora but gets lost and comes upon Ivan instead. Ivan embraces him with great fervor, and Simon, repulsed by the man and wishing to get away to find Nora, pulls out a knife and stabs him. Ivan falls to the ground, dead, and Simon runs off to meet Nora.

He confesses to Nora that he has killed a man, and she assures him that she does not hate him for it. But she explains that she cannot help to hide him because her father is a parson and would not allow it. She kisses Simon, and he runs off in hopes of evading capture for the murder of Ivan. He enters a dance hall. An old woman enters the dance hall, demanding to see her son. Although Simon does not know her, she seems familiar to him, and he obediently leaves with her. The old woman, whose name is Sunniva, takes Simon to her home where she disguises him as a boy native to the region. When the Russian sailors enter in search of the man who murdered Ivan, Sunniva claims that Simon is her son, and they leave. Sunniva then explains to Simon that she herself was the falcon he rescued years ago; she sometimes changes into a falcon and had been on her way to visit relatives. She explains that, as he once saved her life, she is now saving his life. She arranges for him to get back to his ship without being caught for the murder of Ivan. Before Simon leaves, Sunniva smacks him across the face, explaining that, just as he had hit the falcon over the head while saving it, she is in turn hitting him back. Simon returns safely to his ship and lives "to tell the story."

Characters

Ivan

Ivan is a Russian sailor from the boat *Anna.* He is described as "a giant, as big as a bear." Ivan is one of the crewmembers from the *Anna* who bring Simon from his boat to shore and then invite him for a drink with them. Ivan takes an instant liking to Simon and, in a state of drunkenness, "fell upon the boy with a bear-like affection, pawed him, smiled and laughed into his face, made him a present of a gold watch-chain, and kissed him on both cheeks." Later, when Simon is wandering around in the unfamiliar town in search of the girl Nora, he comes upon Ivan, who drunkenly and forcefully embraces the young man, "like a bear that carries off a sheep." Eager to escape the man's embrace, Simon pulls out a knife and stabs him. Ivan falls to the ground, groaning "'Poor Ivan, poor Ivan.'" Simon runs off before the Russian sailors find their mate dead. It is the murder of Ivan that causes Simon to take refuge with the old woman, Sunniva, who saves him from being accused of the murder. The character of Ivan is repeatedly referred to as resembling a "bear," in keeping with the use of animal imagery to describe humans throughout the story. There is some implication that Ivan's excessive love and affection for the young man whom he has just met carries sexual innuendo. Simon's disgust with Ivan's embrace is described in terms that suggest a disgust with the physical intimacy Ivan imposes on him: "The odious sensation of male bodily warmth and the bulk of a man close to him made the lean boy mad."

Nora

Nora is the girl Simon encounters while wandering around on shore. She is described as "a little girl in a blue frock ... thirteen or fourteen years old, as slim as an eel, but with a round, clear, freckled face, and a pair of long plaits." When Simon asks what she is waiting for, she tells him that she is waiting for"'the man I am going to marry, of course.'" She agrees to give Simon a kiss in exchange for the orange he has bought, but she is called home at that moment and promises to give him a kiss if he comes back the next day. Simon does not see her again until the next night after he has killed Ivan. Nora assures him that she does not hate him for his deed and proceeds to kiss him: she

clasped her arms round his neck. She pressed her young body to his, and kissed him tenderly. He felt her face, cool as the moonlight, upon his own, and when she released him, his head swam, and he did not know if the kiss had lasted a second or an hour.

Nora then promises him, "'I will never marry anybody, as long as I live.'" Although Simon does not see her again for the rest of the story, her kiss functions symbolically as a rite of passage, an initiation into manhood. Although the story ends with Simon back on his ship and continuing with his travels, there is some implication that Nora may come back into his life, through the same workings of destiny that brought him back in contact with the falcon/old woman. Nora's promise that she will never marry anyone as long as she

lives and her portentous parting statement—"Do not forget Nora"'—suggest that perhaps she, like the old woman, has a greater knowledge of Simon's "destiny" than he does.

Simon

Simon is the protagonist of the story, the "sailor boy" of the story's title. As the story opens, he is observing a falcon, which has gotten caught in the ropes of the ship on which he is working. He climbs up to free the bird's foot and then tucks it into his shirt before climbing down again. He then lets the falcon free, and it flies off. Two years later, when he is seventeen, he is on a ship that docks on the northern coast of Norway, and he goes ashore. There he meets a girl who promises to kiss him if he returns the next day. The following night, he comes back to shore, accompanied by a group of Russian sailors from another ship. One of the sailors, Ivan, takes an immediate and excessive liking to Simon; as Simon is wandering around looking for the girl, he comes upon Ivan, who captures him in a bear hug. Disgusted by Ivan's affections and eager to find the girl, Simon stabs Ivan, killing him. Simon then runs off to find the girl, who kisses him. Attempting to evade capture for the murder of Ivan, Simon meets an old woman, Sunniva, who takes him to her home. Sunniva saves him from being captured and accused of murdering Ivan by pretending that Simon is her son. She then tells Simon that she is the falcon whose life he had saved long ago and that she is now saving his life in return. She helps Simon to return to his ship without being captured or accused of Ivan's murder. With Sunniva's help, Simon "lived to tell the story."

Sunniva

Sunniva is the old woman who ultimately saves Simon from being caught for the murder of Ivan. She is described as "a short, broad old woman, in the clothes of the Lapps." She enters the dance hall into which Simon has wandered after killing Ivan and kissing Nora, demanding, "'Where is my son?"' Although he does not know her or her intentions, Simon leaves with her, feeling that "he had met her before." Sunniva takes him to her home, and when the Russian sailors come looking for the boy who murdered Ivan, she tells them Simon is her son, and they leave. She then explains to Simon that she is the falcon he once rescued from being caught in the ropes of a ship. She explains that although she is an old woman, she sometimes transforms into a falcon. Just as he has saved her life, she is now saving his life. She then sends him back to his ship, allowing him to escape punishment for the murder of Ivan.

Themes

Coming-of-Age

This is a "coming-of-age" story, in the sense that Simon's experiences function as a rite of passage, from boyhood to manhood. Simon's development, over the course of the story, begins when he is a "small" boy, rescuing the falcon from the mast. Two years later, at seventeen, he has significantly matured, physically: "Simon had been small for his age all his life, but this last winter he had grown, and had become strong of limb." Yet, at this point, Simon is still a boy. However, the acts of killing a man (Ivan) and kissing a girl (Nora) function as rites of passage, ushering him into full manhood. After he leaves Nora, Simon enters a house where a group of people are dancing. It is at this point that he experiences a shift in his consciousness, from that of a boy to that of a man:

These five minutes during which he stood by the wall of the dancing-room, in the midst of the gay, sweating dancers, were of great significance to the boy. He himself felt it, as if during this time he grew up, and became like other people.... He was Simon, a man like the men round him.

Destiny

This story is centrally concerned with the theme of destiny. A key element of Simon's passage from boyhood to manhood is marked by his ability to accept his destiny: to face life as it is presented to him, to accept himself for who he is, and, most of all, to accept the inevitability of death. As he stands amidst the dance party, his awareness of himself as a man is accompanied by his acceptance of his destiny:

He did not entreat his destiny, nor complain. Here he was, he had killed a man, and had kissed a girl. He did not demand any more from life, nor did life now demand more from him. He was Simon, a man like the men round him, and going to die, as all men are going to die.

The supernatural elements of the story also carry a theme of destiny or fate. Simon seems to have been destined to meet Sunniva, the old woman/falcon, just when he needs her most because his life is in danger.

Good Deeds

If there is a moral to this story, it is that good deeds will be rewarded in the end. When Simon, as a boy, spontaneously decides to save the falcon whose feet have gotten caught in the ropes of the ship's mast, it is perhaps his first act of selflessness. Up to this point, Simon has taken the perspective of every-man-for-himself; he can neither expect help from others, nor be expected to give help to others: "Through his own

experience of life he had come to the conviction that in this world everyone must look after himself, and expect no help from others." But it is his capacity to identify with the bird, as one who, like himself, has drifted far from home that inspires him to save it: "a fellow-feeling rose in him, a sense of common tragedy." In addition to being his first act of charity, Simon's decision to free the bird represents his developing maturity, as it is done of his own volition, on his own initiative: "he felt that he had been ordered up by nobody, but that this was his own venture, and this gave him a proud, steadying sensation." This first act of selfless charity on the part of the boy is rewarded in the end, when the falcon, now in the form of an old woman, aids him in evading capture for the murder of Ivan. The supernatural element of Simon's encounter with Sunniva implies that it was his destiny to meet her again just when he needed her to save his life. Thus, his good deed in selflessly saving the falcon is rewarded when the falcon/Sunniva in turns saves him.

Style

The Fairy Tale

This story is written in the form of a fairy tale or fable. The supernatural element is the most salient feature that renders it a fairy tale; Sunniva, the old woman who can change herself into a falcon is some type of witch, a common character in fairy tales. The plot structure is also in the style of a fairy tale. Italo Calvino, who is best known for his collection, *Italian Folktales* (1956), has pointed out the element of "hard logic" and repetition by which many folktales, or fairy tales, are structured. In this story, Simon saves the falcon by untangling its feet from the mast ropes upon which it struggles; it scratches his hand and draws blood. He then hits the falcon over the head to subdue it while he climbs down from the mast. When Simon meets Sunniva, the falcon who is now in the form of an old woman, she returns the favor with a logical precision that renders her actions absurd. As Simon saved the life of the falcon/Sunniva, so Sunniva saves his life by protecting him from capture for the murder of Ivan. As Simon's hand was cut by the falcon's talon, so Sunniva cuts her own hand with his knife. Finally, as Simon hit the falcon over the head, so Sunniva smacks his face in reciprocation. As he is saying goodbye to her, she tells him,'"We do not forget....And you, you knocked me on the head there, high up in the mast. I shall give you a blow back.' With that she smacked him on the ear as hard as she could."

Imagery: Animals

Dinesen's story makes use of animal imagery in descriptions of the characters. The most prominent animal imagery is that of birds. Bird imagery is central to Sunniva in her old woman form. Sunniva's voice is described as "high" and "shrill ... like a bird's." Her eyes, like that of a bird, are yellow. When the Russian sailors come to her home in search of the murdering of Ivan, "She was so furious that she danced where she stood, and jerked her head like an angry bird of prey." When she touches Simon, her gesture is described as using "two brown, claw-like fingers." Sunniva herself refers to Simon as '"my little bird,"' thus implying the association between Simon and the falcon, which is made in the beginning of the story. Others in the story are also referred to using bird imagery; when Simon and Sunniva leave the dance room, they see "a flock of people" crowding the street.

Animal imagery is used to describe several other characters. Ivan, the Russian sailor, is described as "a giant, as big as a bear," and his aggressive affection toward Simon takes the form of "pawing" him. When Simon later meets Ivan on the street and is reluctantly embraced by him, the bear imagery is coupled with an image of Simon as, by contrast, a sheep; Ivan "crushed the boy to him, like a bear that carries off a sheep"; his hug is described as, "the hot embrace of a hairy animal." Nora is described as "slim as an eel," and Sunniva at one point is described as "still as a mouse."

Historical Context

Denmark

Dinesen returned from Africa to Denmark in 1931. A significant historical circumstance during her lifetime was the occupation of Denmark by Nazi Germany during World War II. Although Denmark maintained an official policy of neutrality at the outbreak of World War II in 1939, the government capitulated to German occupation in 1940. After a show of organized resistance by the people of Denmark against Nazi occupation, the Germans took over control of the nation's government and much of its military forces. The resistance movement was organized as the Danish Freedom Council in 1943, and in 1945, the Germans surrendered to defeat by the Allies.

Kenya

Dinesen lived in the region that is now Kenya from 1914-1931 as the owner and manager of a coffee plantation. The history of this region during the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries is characterized by European colonization and exploitation of members of the tribes native to the area, such as the Massai and the Kikuyu. Britain, Germany, and France all had a hand in colonizing the area. The Imperial British East Africa Company had a dominating hand in these efforts beginning in the 1880s. In 1894, the British government declared the area the East Africa Protectorate. In the 1890s, British military forces were employed to quell resistance to European rule by African tribes. A railway, built between 1895 and 1903 was a key factor in encouraging European settlement and cultivation of the East Africa Protectorate in the early 1900s. During this time, members of the native African tribes were restricted to reservations and forced into labor on European plantations. In 1920, the region was renamed the Kenya Colony. Throughout the 1920s, Africans, such as members of the Kikuyu tribe, organized to press for their rights. In the 1940s, a small number of Africans were allowed to sit on the Legislative Council. Large-scale protest, organized by members of the Mau Mau tribe and referred to as the Mau Mau Rebellion, was waged between 1952 and 1960. In 1960, a conference in London led to an African majority on the legislative council for the first time. In 1963, The Republic of Kenya was created under a new constitution, which allowed for self-rule and national independence.

Kierkegaard

Critics have noted that Dinesen's writing shows the strong influence of the nineteenth century Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855). Kierkegaard was a religious philosopher considered to be the father of existentialism, based on his criticism of rationalism, particularly the philosopher Hegel. A large inherited fortune gave him the freedom to devote his life to writing philosophical works. His first major work, *Either/Or,* was published in 1843. Later in life, Kierkegaard came to believe that he had been

appointed by God to criticize the Christian church. His work was not given serious critical attention until the 1870s, and his importance to philosophy did not become widely recognized until the years between World War I and World War II.

Scheherazade

Before many of Dinesen's stories were published, she narrated them orally to her lover, the British hunter and pilot Denys Finch-Hatton during his intermittent visits to her plantation in Africa. Because of this, she likened herself to the fictional character Scheherazade, narrator of the ancient collection of stories known as *A Thousand and One Nights,* or *The Arabian Nights.* The story of Scheherazade is that she was to be married to a king who hated women and killed all of his wives. To delay her execution, Scheherazade began to tell the king one story a night, being careful to end her storytelling each night before the story was finished to keep him in suspense until the following night. After delaying the execution for many nights, the king is finally won over by her and abandons his plans to kill her. The collection of tales, which result from this frame narrative, first appeared in the ninth century and has been published in many versions over the past thousand years. Tales that have become staples to Western folklore include that of Ali Baba, Aladdin, and Sinbad the Sailor.

Critical Overview

Dinesen's "The Sailor-Boy's Tale" first appeared in *Winter's Tales,* her second collection of short stories, in 1942. The book title is based on the title of the Shakespeare play *A Winter's Tale.* Along with *Seven Gothic Tales* (1934), her first collection of stories, and *Out of Africa* (1937), the autobiographical account of her life in Kenya, it is considered one of her masterpieces. Judith Thurman, in *Isak Dinesen: The Life of a Storyteller,* notes that *Winter's Tales* is

the most Danish of [Dinesen's] books, the most somber and introspective, the most luminous, and her own favorite. The tales are filled with a poetic feeling ... for the Danish landscape, its particular stillness and light; for the tempos and speech of rural Danish life and its mythology.

Winter's Tales secured Dinesen's international reputation as an important writer; Robert Langbaum, in *The Gayety of Vision,* observes,

it became clear after 1942, in the English-speaking and Scandinavian countries, that Isak Dinesen's books were not mere sensations of a season—that they were here to stay for a while, though one could not yet say for how long.

The stories comprising *Winter's Tales* were written in the midst of Nazi Germany's occupation of Denmark during World War II. Because of this, Dinesen could not get her book published in her own country and delivered it to the British Embassy in Stockholm to be published in the United States. Dinesen had intended for "The Sailor-Boy's Tale" to be the first story in the volume, but the publisher rearranged the order of the stories, and it was published as the second. Only after the war ended and Denmark was liberated from German rule did Dinesen learn of the popularity the book had gained among American servicemen.

Response to *Seven Gothic Tales,* Dinesen's first book of stories, was mixed. Olga Anastasia Pelensky, editor of *Isak Dinesen: Critical Views* (a collection of essays on the work and life of Dinesen), has summed up early critical responses to this work as follows:

When Isak Dinesen ... first published *Seven Gothic Tales* in 1934, her tales were reviewed as opaque, with some critics suspiciously observing that nothing would likely be found beneath that opaqueness. Others recognized a master artisan at work behind the complex tales.

Yet, despite such mixed reviews, Pelensky explains, Dinesen's "wide readership prevailed against critical flurry, gaining her an international reputation."

A "ground-breaking study" of Dinesen's work, *The Gayety of Vision* (1964), by Robert Langbaum, "opened up the academic world in North America to an interest in the fiction of ... Dinesen," according to Gurli A. Woods in *Isak Dinesen and Narrativity.* By the

1960s, Dinesen was internationally celebrated as among the greatest fiction writers. She was nominated for a Nobel Prize several times; Ernest Hemingway, upon receiving the 1954 Nobel Prize, commented that it should have been given to Dinesen instead. Nonetheless, by 1970, less than a decade after her death, Pelensky points out, Dinesen's works had gone out of print in America. According to Pelensky, a "new wave of critical interest" in Dinesen's work was in part inspired by an international symposium on her works, held at the University of Minnesota in 1985. Another conference, entitled "Isak Dinesen: A Reassessment of Her Work for the 1990s," was held at Carlton University in 1990.

Recent critical responses to Dinesen's work have taken one or more of three primary perspectives: that of colonialism, feminism, or/and post-structuralism. Dinesen became a darling of feminist literary critics, who have sought to reclaim her as a writer concerned with the place of women in society. Woods notes, "a number of women scholars in the 1970s and '80s turned their attention to Isak Dinesen from a feminist point of view." Pelensky explains, "Arguing in the feminist tradition, recent critics have sought to establish Isak Dinesen as a woman worthy of feminist claims, not a traitor to the tradition." Prominent feminist critical response to Dinesen includes *The Witch and the Goddess in the Stories of Isak Dinesen: A Feminist Reading* (1988) by Sara Stambaugh, *Isak Dinesen and the Engendering of Narrative* (1990) by Susan Hardy Aiken, and *Diana's Revenge,* by Marianne Juhl and Bo Hakon Jorgensen. Stambaugh notes, "Dinesen's central concern was the situation of women, particularly the restrictions they faced in the past and, in spite of steps forward, continue to face in the twentieth century."

Recent critics of Dinesen's fictional and autobiographical writings, based on her fifteen years spent as owner and manager of a coffee plantation in Kenya, have pointed to the colonialist attitude embedded in the white woman's perspective on Africa. Pelensky notes,

Critics such as Jan Mohamed and Ngugi wa Thiong'o have opened the charge on *Out of Africa* as a work born in the colonial experience, pressing away from the admiring view of *Out of Africa* as modern pastoral, shifting the focus to the problematic text of colonialism it is.

Dinesen critics, drawing from literary theories of postmodernism and post-structuralism, emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. Woods notes,

literary theorists began to discover that Dinesen's sophisticated narrative technique lends itself to a closer examination, and that it was rewarding to analyze her texts from the points of view of recent literary theory.

In recent years, Dinesen became most popularly known in the English-speaking world with the 1985 release of the film *Out of Africa,* based on her book and other memoirs. The movie, starring Meryl Streep as Dinesen and Robert Redford as Denys Finch-Hatton, was critically acclaimed and garnered a number of Academy Awards.

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Brent has a Ph.D. in American Culture, specializing in cinema studies, from the University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer and teaches courses in American cinema at the University of Michigan. In the following essay, Brent discusses Dinesen's story in terms of rites of passage.

Isak Dinesen's "The Sailor-Boy's Tale" is a com-ing-of-age story, told in the style of a fairy tale, in which a young man, Simon, must go through a rite of passage to make the transition from boyhood to manhood. This rite of passage involves the psychological themes of Eros (love) and of relationships with mother figures and father figures.

Simon's transition into manhood is marked by a symbolic transition from homosocial to heterosexual encounters. The term "homosocial" refers to a situation in which members of the same sex are primarily inclined to socialize with one another, whether or not their sexual identity is heterosexual. As Simon is a sailor, he comes from a strongly homosocial environment, as there are no women in the ships' crews. Even when they go ashore for recreation, the sailors in the story seem to be primarily interested in interacting with one another rather than seeking out the company of women. When Simon wanders into a house in which a large room is being used as a dance hall, he encounters a strong example of the sailors' "homosocial" tendencies. He observes, "There were some women in the room, but many of the men danced with each other." He also notes that the crowd then clears the center of the room to watch "two sailors, who were showing a dance from their own country." This scene epitomizes the homosocial environment of the sailors in which Simon has spent his boyhood. This is not to say that the sailors do not engage in sexual contact with women. It is made clear that the sailors go ashore in part to go "wenching"— seeking out prostitutes. But their interest in exchanging money for sexual encounters with women is contrasted to Simon's romantic interest in Nora:

These people will be believing that I am going in to town, wenching.' And then he felt, with some pride, that they were right, although at the same time they were infinitely wrong, and knew nothing about anything.

But the homosocial borders on elements of the homosexual when, earlier in the story, Simon captures the attention of Ivan, a large, burly Russian sailor. When Simon joins the Russian sailors for a drink, Ivan's affection for him is overbearing and carries sexual undertones: "He got drunk at once, and then fell upon the boy with a bear-like affection, pawed him, smiled and laughed into his face, made him a present of a gold watch-chain, and kissed him on both cheeks." When Simon later gets lost on his way to find the girl, Nora, he runs right into Ivan. Again, Ivan's demonstrations of affection toward Simon are overbearing, and suggest the talk of a lover to the object of his affections, despite Simon's attempt to resist him:

The Russian folded his arms round him and held him. "Good! Good!" he cried in high glee, "I have found you, my little chicken. I have looked for you everywhere, and poor

Ivan has wept because he lost his friend." "Let me go, Ivan," cried Simon. "Oho," said Ivan, "I shall go with you and get you what you want. My heart and my money are all yours, all yours." Ivan held him so that it hurt, and patted him with his other hand. "I feel it, I feel it," he said. "Now trust to me, my little friend. Nothing shall part you and me.

The animal presence of Ivan's body is especially odious to Simon, implying that he is repulsed by the sexual implications of the large man's affections: "Suddenly he crushed the boy to him, like a bear carries off a sheep. The odious sensation of male bodily warmth and the bulk of a man close to him made the lean boy mad." Simon's anger toward Ivan is in part motivated by his romantic expectations of the promised kiss from Nora. The homosocial affection of Ivan, with its erotic implications, becomes odious to Simon. This feeling is in contrast to the heterosexual affection he hopes to win from Nora. "He thought of Nora waiting, like a slender ship in the dim air, and of himself, here, in the hot embrace of a hairy animal." It is this desire for Nora that motivates Simon to stab Ivan to escape from his embrace. It is thus the heterosexual impulse that motivates him to rebuke the homosocial company of a fellow sailor.

The murder of Ivan takes on further symbolic implications, especially in the context of the story's elements of a fairy tale. Sigmund Freud theorized that the *symbolic* murder of the father by the son is an important step in the process of the development of male children. Freud pointed to examples from literature to support this theory, particularly noting the Greek tragedy in which Oedipus unknowingly murders his own father. Because "The Sailor-Boy's Tale" is written in the form of a fairy tale, it invites interpretation at a symbolic level. The death of Ivan thus connotes Simon's symbolic murder of the father as a key event in his rite of passage from boyhood to manhood. Other figures of male authority in the story also threaten to impede Simon's passage into manhood. Having found their compatriot, Ivan, murdered, the Russian sailors attempt to seek out and punish his murderer. It is these men whom Simon must successfully evade to "live to tell the story." Furthermore, Nora's father represents a figure of male authority who poses a threat to Simon's progress. When he asks Nora if she can hide him, she explains that she cannot because her father is a parson, and "'he would be sure to hand you over to them, if he knew that you had killed a man."

Having symbolically murdered the father figure, the next event in Simon's rite of passage is the kiss from Nora. It is this kiss that completes his transformation from boyhood to manhood. Again, in the fairy tale mode, the kiss seems almost magical, as if the transition to manhood were a mystical event, or a good spell she has cast upon him. Nora

clasped her arms round his neck. She pressed her young body to his, and kissed him tenderly. He felt her face, cool as the moonlight, upon his own, and when she released him, his head swam, and he did not know if the kiss had lasted a second or an hour.

Nora imbues the kiss with a cosmic significance, declaring with a certainty beyond her years, "I promise you that I will never marry anybody, as long as I live.'" Nora's statement here is odd; she does not promise that she will marry Simon, rather she says she will"'never marry anybody.'" The future of Nora is left entirely uncertain by the end of

the story. The reader may, perhaps, speculate that just as the falcon reentered Simon's life as Sunniva, the old woman, so perhaps Nora will reenter his life in another form, at another juncture. If Sunniva has mystical powers, such as the ability to transform herself into a falcon, perhaps Nora, too, has such mystical powers. Her parting words to Simon — "'Do not forget Nora"' —sound almost like an omen.

After kissing Nora, Simon runs off in hopes of evading capture for the murder of Ivan. When he wanders into the dance hall, he becomes aware of his transformation from boyhood to manhood. That fact that "he had killed a man, and had kissed a girl" marks this transition:

These five minutes during which he stood by the wall of the dancing-room, in the midst of the gay, sweating dancers, were of great significance to the boy. He himself felt it, as if during this time he grew up, and became like other people. He did not entreat his destiny, nor complain. Here he was, he had killed a man, and had kissed a girl. He did not demand any more from life, nor did life now demand more from him. He was Simon, a man like the men round him, and going to die, as all men are going to die.

It seems that his overpowering a father figure, in the form of Ivan, and his encounter with the feminine principle, in the form of Nora, have enacted Simon's transition to manhood. His encounter with Sunniva, the old woman who helps him to escape punishment for murdering Ivan, represents another encounter with the feminine. Whereas other men in the story function to impede Simon, the women function as his allies. Sunniva, in recognition of Simon's affinity for women, rewards him with a spell that will endear him to women:"'So you are a boy,' she said, 'who will kill a man rather than be late to meet your sweetheart? We hold together, the females of this earth. I shall mark your forehead now, so that the girls will know of that, when they look at you, and they will like you for it.'" Yet, this does not mean that Simon renounces his homosocial occupation of sailor. Sunniva assures him that he will not "need to" stick his knife in another man, for, she explains,"'from now you will sail the sea like a faithful seaman.'" Simon's rite of passage, whereby he murders a man and kisses a girl, does not alienate him from his fellow man, but better equips him for the company of both men (as a fellow sailor) and women.

Source: Liz Brent, Critical Essay on "The Sailor-Boy's Tale," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Riser has a master's degree in English literature and teaches high school English. In the following essay, she explores the fairy tale form and the initiation theme of Dinesen's story.

The word "tale" in the title of Isak Dinesen's short story "The Sailor-Boy's Tale" lends insight into the nature of the story. This is not to be a realistic true-life account; rather, it is to be a story in the sense of a fairy tale or a parable. In the tradition of her countryman Hans Christian Andersen, the writer of well-known children's tales, Dinesen uses the form of the fairy tale for the stories in her collection *Winter's Tales,* of which "The Sailor-Boy's Tale" is one. However, Dinesen subverts the traditional form to make this a story most children, as well as adults, might find disconcerting. Moreover, the word "boy" in the title of the story indicates that the subject of the story is to be an innocent character, suggesting again that perhaps this is a children's tale. However, though the story starts out as the tale of a boy, it ends with the boy having been initiated into manhood, with some unusual and not-so-innocent events happening in the meantime. Thus, Dinesen's "The Sailor-Boy's Tale" is a subverted fairy tale that shows a boy's transformation into manhood—and confronts some rather adult questions along the way.

Lionel Trilling suggests that the word "tale" indicates that the story is going to contain the "marvelous" or the supernatural, which rational adults generally do not accept but are willing to put aside for the sake of being entertained or instructed. Trilling states, "the element of the marvelous in literature has important moral implications: it suggests that life is not to be understood in terms only for our daily practical knowledge of it, that it is also a mystery evoking our wonder no less than our fortitude." Certainly, this is true in "The Sailor-Boy's Tale." The transformation of the bird into the old woman can only be described as marvelous or supernatural. This is something we might see happen in a children's tale—we expect children to somehow be more receptive to such ideas. Though, as Trilling points out, stories meant for adults often contain the supernatural as well, and we simply set aside our disbelief for the sake of the story. This begs the question of "why?" Why are adults willing to accept things in stories that we know could not happen in real life? As Trilling points out, we want the stories to work their magic on us. We want to believe them so that we can be affected by them and learn from them. Therefore, we "suspend our disbelief" for the sake of the story.

Another part of the story that makes it more of a parable and less of a realistic story is the extensive use of symbolism. There are only a few objects in the story with color: the yellow eyes of the falcon—and of Sunniva, of course; the orange that Simon gives to Nora; Nora's blue dress and eyes; the blue handkerchief. These few bright spots in an otherwise gray story point to objects of great importance. The yellow of the falcon's eyes leads us quickly to conclude that we have met the falcon again in the person of Sunniva. The complementary colors of the orange fruit and Nora's blue dress and eyes indicate the potential intimacy between Simon and Nora. Simon buys the "small blue

handkerchief," which is "the same colour as her eyes," but he does not give it to her—this might represent their failure to form a meaningful relationship.

Pointing out additional symbolism in the story, the critic Antonine M. L. Marquart Scholtz reads the story as a series of Jungian symbols (after Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung, 1875-1961). She focuses on the symbols of city, tree, and sea, which are all symbols of motherhood. Scholtz sees "The Sailor-Boy's Tale" as a story about the birth of art and reads the end of the story as Simon's "birth" as an artist. Indeed, at the end it says that he "lived to *tell the story"* (Sholtz's emphasis)—thus, he lived to be a sort of artist. Scholtz views Sunniva as a mother symbol who "delivers" Simon's creative power through "the blending of their blood." Though Scholtz's Jungian analysis of the story is tenable, the story can also be read as a story of initiation into manhood.

Through her extensive use of symbolism, Isak Dinesen successfully avoided the restrictions that realism placed on many of her contemporaries. Dinesen insisted that she was a "storyteller" and not an "author," which might sound like a pointless distinction, but in fact she was alluding to an integral aspect of her writing. Dinesen wished to confront existential questions in her writing and found that modern literary techniques, which depicted social and psychological reality, were not adequate for her own expression. Just as Dinesen shares a literary kinship with her countryman Hans Christian Andersen, she also shares the philosophical outlook of another Dane, Soren Kirkegaard, who was the first writer to call himself an "existentialist." Existentialism emphasizes individual existence—subjectivity—in contrast to an absolute morality in which the individual has little choice. According to Kirkegaard, a person must find his vocation and must live a completely committed life, which often requires that a person defy society's norms.

The story "The Sailor-Boy's Tale" deals with the existential question of "what is our place in the world?" At the beginning, the boy has the view that "in this world everyone must look after himself." However, he begins to identify with the falcon struggling in the ship's lines. He frees the falcon despite the ridicule that he knows might follow from his fellow shipmates; as Kirkegaard would say, he defies his society's norms in pursuit of something he knows from within himself to be right. Seeing himself in another creature is the beginning of his transformation, his initiation into manhood. He realizes that in the world, everyone does rely on others in some way.

For the two years following this experience, Simon grows physically, and in the story's next scene he takes the lightness in the air as "a sign of unwonted good-will in the Universe, a favour." He feels that his growth is due to "a new benevolence in the world." Simon is willing to take this "favor" but feels now that he is on his own again: "he asked for no more. The rest he felt to be his own affair." Again, he has returned to the philosophy he had at the beginning of the story, the philosophy nobody should expect help from others. He has regressed, and it takes a drastic turn of events to put him back on track towards his initiation.

On shore one day, Simon meets a girl, Nora, who agrees to give him a kiss if he returns the next evening. So, the next night, he hails a ride to shore with some Russian sailors.

One of these sailors, a jolly but obtrusive drunk named Ivan, gets in the way of his seeing Nora. In response, Simon stabs Ivan under the arm, killing him.

The murder of Ivan is a disturbing scene. Why does Simon kill Ivan? It seems like an extreme response. Is Ivan trying to take Simon as his lover? Certainly there is language to suggest this: Ivan clasps Simon

like a bear that carries off a sheep. The odious sensation of male bodily warmth and the bulk of a man close to him made the lean boy mad. He thought of Nora waiting, like a slender ship in the dim air, and of himself, here, in the hot embrace of a hairy animal.

Janet Handler Burstein posits that after meeting Nora, Simon realizes that he desires women and abhors the embrace of another man. Even at that, we have seen Ivan to be a friendly, if overbearing, companion, and it seems unnecessary to kill him. Dinesen does not address in any way the morality of Simon's action. It is perhaps more useful to see Ivan as a symbol; he is an obstacle to Simon's realization of his transformation into manhood, which Simon believes will happen with a woman's kiss.

After Simon kills Ivan and therefore is able to see Nora and get his kiss, he feels like he "grew up, and became like other people.... he had killed a man, and had kissed a girl." Here it appears that it is not only the kiss but also the killing of a man that Simon sees as prerequisites for manhood. He maintains here his original view of the world that nobody helps anybody, that one is responsible for one's own destiny. If something gets in one's way, it is to be eliminated. Like the day before on the boat, he still does not expect anything: "He did not entreat his destiny, nor complain.... He was Simon, a man like the men around him, and going to die, as all men are going to die." He thinks of himself as a "man" now, not as a boy. Here, he is mimicking society's expectations of a man, rather than following his own individual truth of which he saw a glimmer two years before when he freed the falcon from the ship's lines. This evening, he feels that he has been transformed into manhood through his two "adult" actions.

However, this assuredness is soon to end. Sunniva, who has familiar yellow eyes—the eyes of the falcon Simon saved at the beginning of the story—comes to hide him from Ivan's friends. Suddenly, Simon is no longer a "man." Sunniva calls him "my boy," and she transforms him by combing his hair in the Lapp fashion so that he will not be recognized. Through Sunniva, Simon achieves his real transformation. She hands him a hot black drink and says, "You have drunk with Sunniva now ... you have drunk down a little wisdom, so that in the future all your thoughts shall not fall like raindrops into the salt sea." The "wisdom" that he drinks with her is the knowledge that he is not alone in the world, that everyone does not simply look out for himself but rather relies on others. There is a common thread that runs through all creatures, which is what he sensed at the beginning when he helped the falcon. Before Sunniva tells him that she was the falcon, he feels "as if he were swaying high up in the air, with but a small hold"—just as she must have felt before he freed her from the boat's rigging. The fact that creatures share this "common tragedy" is why she tells him not to kill again. The "moral" of the story is that we must honor that commonality in all creatures.

Thus, it is through the falcon/Sunniva that Simon is initiated, not through the kiss of a woman or the killing of a man. Simon's transformation is accomplished through his recognition of the "common tragedy" and through his taking action to help another creature, even at the risk of ridicule. Sunniva reminds him of this by rescuing him from an equally perilous situation, completing his initiation. Dinesen's tale may not be as morally satisfying as some children's tales, but it successfully addresses the existential question of humans' place in the cosmos.

Source: Emily Smith Riser, Critical Essay on "The Sailor-Boy's Tale," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Trilling examines the themes of "the marvelous" and initiation in "The Sailor-Boy's Tale" and other well-known stories.

Isak Dinesen always called her stories "tales." The use of this word served notice that she intended to tell a story of a particular kind. What is a tale? Perhaps it is best defined as a narrative which counts upon a certain simplicity of acceptance from the reader or hearer, an acquiescence in the possibility of strange and unlikely events, especially marvelous ones.

In cultures which have not developed a high degree of rational thought, the marvelous is taken for granted as virtually the essence of the literary experience. This is true also of children, who have always been supposed to have a natural affinity with marvels and an appetite for them. Even the modern theory, which has established itself in some quarters, that children ought not to be told fairy tales but only stories about "real life," has not been able to overcome this supposition. It has merely replaced fairy godmothers and pumpkin-coaches with infant locomotives that think, feel, and talk, and perform heroic deeds.

We cannot suppose that the child, or the adult whose culture sets less store by rational thought than ours does, accepts the marvelous in exactly the same way that he accepts the actual occurrences of daily life. Were he to do so, he would take no pleasure in the stories in which the marvelous has a part. He merely accepts it more immediately and naively than a mature person reared in a culture in which rational thought is highly valued. And even such a person by no means rejects the marvelous. He has his own way of accepting it, for although he does not "believe" it, yet with no great effort he is able to make what Coleridge, in his famous phrase, called "a willing suspension of disbelief." For the purposes of literature, this does quite well enough. If anyone were to interrupt our reading of a story about ghosts, or walking corpses, or monsters from outer space in order to ask whether we believed in their actual existence, we should unhesitatingly reply that we did not, that such creatures were impossible. Yet it is likely that we should be giving this answer in circumstances which indicated just the opposite—our pulse rate would probably have gone up, our palms would be damp, and we would be experiencing some uneasiness about being alone in the house at night. We would have been interested, even absorbed, in the impossible story, to the point of resenting the interruption. We permit ourselves, that is, to respond to the unlikely beings in such a story *as* if we believed in them. The fact that we do not really believe in them but have only suspended our disbelief does not prevent their having their effect upon us.

In a culture like ours, which gives so much weight to rationality, the marvelous has a rather special place in the reading experience. In general, our literature is committed to fact and to the representation of reality. We tend to praise a literary work in the degree that we think it communicates the truth of actuality. But for that very reason, the marvelous, when it does appear, has a special value for the modern reader. Coleridge

suggested what this value might be when, in connection with his great poem of the marvelous, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,* he quoted the seventeenth-century Bishop Burnet, who said that a belief in demons—he stipulated a *judicious* belief—preserved the mind from "mean thoughts," from small and merely mundane views of life. It is often said that modern science, so far from being what science used to be called, "organized common sense," has developed only through its willingness to defy common sense and the evidence of the senses—that it is based upon an acceptance, if not of the marvelous, then at least of the unlikely, and upon conceptions which do not apply to the occurrences of daily life and which require a suspension of disbelief. Certainly for the modern reader, the element of the marvelous in literature has important moral implications: it suggests that life is not to be understood in terms only for our daily practical knowledge of it, that it is also a mystery evoking our wonder no less than our fortitude.

"The Sailor-boy's Tale" has in common with several other stories ...—"Di Grasso," "The-Secret Sharer," "My Kinsman, Major Molineux"— the theme of initiation, of a young man's moving forward into a new stage of growth. The attraction of this theme for writers as diverse as Babel, Conrad, Hawthorne, and Isak Dinesen indicates something of the universality of its appeal. We first encounter it in the folktales we read in early childhood, which tell about the youngest son of the woodcutter or the miller, who is thought to be a fool by his family but who sets out alone to make his fortune, and succeeds, showing himself to be no mere undeveloped boy but a man. As the youth goes on his journey, he encounters circumstances that try his capacities: not uncommonly he is tested for his kindness of heart. Because he is willing to milk the cow that hasn't been milked for seven long years, or because he is courteous to the old crone whom no one will regard, some unexpected and unpredictable good befalls him. The cow and the old woman are not what they seem, they turn out to have some helpful secret to impart or some magical assistance to offer. So in "The Sailor-boy's Tale," the peregrine hawk that young Simon frees from the rigging is a Lapland witch—the people of Lapland have always been known as the most accomplished of witches and wizards —who, when Simon is in danger, repays in kind the help he had given her.

This is the kind of marvelous event we are all familiar with from the tales of our childhood, and much of the charm of Isak Dinesen's story lies in its use of the matter of a children's tale in a story not meant for children. But all the stories of initiation included ... [here], not Isak Dinesen's alone, contain an element of the marvelous. Di Grasso's leap is beyond the powers of ordinary mortals; it is virtually the action of a divine being, and it appears to have a magical effect upon those who witness it. The young captain in "The Secret Sharer" is endangered but also aided by his double, who is essentially the *Doppelgänger* of folktale, the supernatural duplication of himself that it was once thought a man might encounter, and the experience of young Robin in "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" is compounded of supernatural episodes, or so at least they seem to the young hero. Inevitably we are led to wonder if the experience of initiation is not one we naturally incline to connect with happenings of a marvelous kind. And, indeed, is it not felt to be exactly a marvel by the young person who experiences it—does he not know that, in passing from boyhood to manhood, he has been *transformed?*

Source: Lionel Trilling, "The Sailor-Boy's Tale," in *Isak Dinesen: Critical Views,* edited by Olga Anastasia Pelensky, Ohio University Press, 1993, pp. 51-53.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay excerpt, Landy analyzes "The Sailor-Boy's Tale," in the context of its similarity to Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," especially its "exploration of isolation and community."

One of Dinesen's most anthologized tales in *Winter's Tales* is "The Sailor-Boy's Tale," a tale that orchestrates many of Dinesen's dominant concerns. It is a tale too that is most reminiscent of a work which exercised a great influence on Dinesen's writing, Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner." Her friend, Denys Finch-Hatton, introduced her to it, and one can see echoes of it in other Dinesen tales. There are many reasons why the Coleridge poem should have appealed to Dinesen. It is a poem which stresses the role of the narrator, particularly the hypnotic effect he has over his auditors, and which stresses the cathartic effect on the storyteller and auditor. Dinesen's tale explores the idea of the violation of nature and its consequences, and the unity "Of all things both great and small." The exploration of isolation and community pervades Dinesen's tale much as it does the "Rime." The Coleridgean concern for reconciliation among human beings, and between human beings and nature is also Dinesen's. Finally, Coleridge's poem with its use of archetypal situations and characters, its emphasis on the supernatural, has its counterpart in Dinesen's tale. Dinesen's tale is a particularly good example of the characteristics of the storyteller as described by Benjamin: one finds the magical properties of the fairy tale, the kinship with nature, the familiar as opposed to the unique, the presence of the maternal image, the concern with death, a simplicity of narration, and the presence of words of counsel.

"The Sailor-Boy's Tale" should, according to Dinesen, have opened *Winter's Tales,* for it contains many of the thematic elements of the other tales in the volume. The action takes place aboard ship and on land. The first significant action on the sea journey is between the young sailor boy and a falcon which has been trapped on the ship's mast. But, unlike the Mariner who kills the Albatross, the sailor boy frees his bird. He acknowledges his kinship with the falcon: "He thought: 'That bird is like me.'" In freeing her, however, the boy is injured by her. In exchange, he angrily hits her on the head. They are reunited and reconciled when he finds her later, metamorphosed into a wise old Lapp woman who saves him from some Russian sailors seeking revenge for the death of a comrade killed by the sailor boy on his way to meet his sweetheart. The woman reveals her former identity to him: "That day you climbed up by the shrouds of the topgallant-mast to help her [the falcon] out, in a stiff wind, and with a high sea. That falcon was me." Moreover, she tells him that she is saving him because he is "a boy ... who will kill a man rather than be late to meet your sweetheart. We hold together, the females of this earth."

Dinesen makes the explicit equation between the female bird, the young girl, and the old Lapp woman. The unity between human beings and nature and males and females is essential to the tale. The old Lapp woman is symbolic of a matriarchal power belonging to women, a power which men often violate as they violate other creatures in nature. This community to which the sailor boy now belongs is contrasted to the group

of men aboard the ship who mock his actions in saving the bird and also to the Russian sailors who would obstruct him his quest for the young girl. Thus Dinesen stresses the dependence of the community on nature and the importance of being true to one's desires in spite of threatening obstacles. The ritualistic elements in the tale—the falcon, the exchange of objects, the metamorphoses, the roles of the boy, the girl, and the old woman—like the ritualistic elements in the "Rime of the Ancient Mariner"—move the reader beyond the idiosyncratic aspects of character and situation to basic and typical aspects of human life. The wisdom of the storyteller can be seen in her ability to give the events their representative and universal nature. She also reveals that actions are neither arbitrary or incomprehensible. As narrator, Dinesen derives her authority from making the basic identifications and connections which gives these parables their power. This is not a mystical knowledge. Dinesen's authority is evident in the way she presents her words of counsel. She induces general truths from events and the observations feel right. The reader does not experience her statements as moralizing or as simplistic proverbs.

In describing the tale of Kitosch, the unfortunate servant in *Out of Africa,* Dinesen gives another good example of the narrative authority which permits her to provide moral comment. She says in "Kitosch's story":

By this strong sense in him of what is right and decorous, the figure of Kitosch, with his firm will to die, although now removed from us by many years, stands out with a beauty of its own. In it is embodied the fugitiveness of the wild things who are, in the hour of need, conscious of need, conscious of refuge somewhere in existence: who go when they like: of whom we can never get hold.

In this passage, one can find too a similar motif as in Dinesen's later tales, the reverence for the wild things like the falcon in "The Sailor-Boy's Tale," and one can read her open admiration for those free spirits who will not allow themselves to be dominated and brutalized by others or who will not dominate and brutalize others.

This passage comes after a moving description of the flogging and maltreatment of Kitosch by an insensitive white settler. Kitosch's offense was that he disobeyed his master's orders by riding a mare when he was merely to walk it. After flogging Kitosch, the settler tied him up in his store, and there Kitosch died, not from his wounds but, as Dinesen claims, because he wanted to die. She uses this event to describe and to reproach the irresponsibility of the white settler. Even more significantly, she uses it to describe the heroic, decorous, and dignified way the African transcends the brutality of the white settler. Kitosch dies like an aristocrat. One finds throughout her work this emphasis on an aristocracy deriving not from the privilege of class but from self-respect and fearlessness in the face of adversity. Another word Dinesen substitutes for aristocracy is pride, and of pride she says:

People who have no pride are not aware of any idea of God in the making of them, and sometimes they make you doubt that there has ever been much of an idea, or else it has been lost, and who shall find it again? They have got to accept as successes what

others warrant to be so, and to take their happiness, and even their own selves, at the quotation of the day. They tremble with reason, before their fate.

Not interested in worldly definitions of success, Dinesen sees as more important the feeling of dignity and the necessity of action to negate despair. A passage like the above is not merely an appendage to her work but an integral part of the narration. Because of her capacity to make events simple, powerful, and typical, she has earned the right to her counsel.

Source: Marcia Landy, "Anecdote as Destiny: Isak Dinesen and the Storyteller," in *Massachusetts Review,* Vol. XIX, No. 2, Summer 1978, pp. 401^04.

Adaptations

The audiotape *Out of Africa* features Wanda Caddon reading from Dinesen's memoirs. It was recorded by Books on Tape in 1983.

The audiotape *An Isak Dinesen Feast* features excerpts from Dinesen's memoirs and several of her stories read by the author. It was recorded by Audio Partners in 1985.

The audiotape *Isak Dinesen Herself Telling Two Stories* features the stories "The King's Letter," and "The Wine of the Tetrach." It was released by Audio Partners in 1988.

The audiotape *Isak Dinesen* features biographical information on Dinesen, written and read by Judith Thurman. It was recorded by Recorded Books in 1997.

Sunniva, who is some kind of witch or sorceress, serves as the supernatural element in this otherwise realist tale. It is her character that most clearly renders the story in the category of a fairy tale.

Topics for Further Study

Many of Dinesen's stories contain elements of Gothic literature, particularly elements of the supernatural. Dinesen's stories are also frequently written in a style resembling a fairy tale. What elements of a story make it Gothic? What elements of a story make it a fairy tale? Can you write a short story either in the Gothic style or in the style of a fairy tale—or both?

Contemporary critics have faulted Dinesen for her romanticized, Eurocentric depictions of Africa and African people. Learn more about the history of Kenya, where Dinesen owned and managed a coffee plantation for over fifteen years, in the twentieth century. What were the conditions under which the African people were forced to accommodate the European presence in Africa?

See a film adapted from Dinesen's writings. This could include *The Immortal Story* (1969); *Out of Africa* (1985); or*Babette's Feast* (1987). In what ways are the central themes and stylistic elements of Dinesen's writing adapted to the visual medium of film?

Dinesen's writing is often said to have been influenced by the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard. Who was Kierkegaard and what was his contribution to modern philosophy? What are some of the central tenets of his philosophy?

Compare and Contrast

Early Twentieth Century: From 1894-1960, the region of Africa in which Dinesen lived for over fifteen years is a protectorate of the United Kingdom called the East Africa Protectorate.

Late Twentieth Century: In 1960, the East Africa Protectorate achieves self-rule and national independence and is renamed the Republic of Kenya.

World War II: Dinesen's native country of Denmark is occupied by German forces (1940-1945).

Post-World War II: Upon the German defeat by the Allies in 1945, Denmark regains self-rule.

Early Twentieth Century: The vast coffee plantations of the East Africa Protectorate, like those owned and managed by Dinesen, are owned by Europeans who force the Africans onto reservations and exploit their labor.

Late Twentieth Century: Land used for coffee plantations is gradually ceded to African people, as a result of pressures to further the rights of African people in their native regions.

Early Twentieth Century: The phenomenon of book clubs, begun in the nineteenth century, leads to the formation of the popular Book-of-the-Month Club in the United States in 1926. A total of five of Dinesen's books are included in Book-of-the-Month Club lists.

Late Twentieth Century: Beginning in the 1950s, the availability of cheap paperback editions of many books results in a decline in popularity of book clubs.

What Do I Read Next?

Winter's Tales (1941) is Isak Dinesen's second collection of short stories. It includes "The Sailor-Boy's Tale."

Seven Gothic Tales (1934) is Dinesen's first collection of short stories. It includes "The Deluge at Norderney"; "The Old Chevalier"; "The Monkey"; "The Roads Round Pisa"; "The Supper at Elsinore"; "The Dreamers"; and "The Poet."

Out of Africa (1952) is Dinesen's nonfiction memoir of her years spent managing a coffee plantation in Kenya between 1914 and 1931.

Isak Dinesen/Karen Blixen: The Work and the Life (1988) by Aage Henriksen is a biography of Dinesen, which includes critical essays on her work. It has an introduction by Poul Houe and is translated by William Mishler.

Isak Dinesen: The Life of a Storyteller (1982) by Judith Thurman is a biography of Dinesen.

Written by Herself, Volume II: Women's Memoirs from Britain, Africa, Asia, and the United States (1996) is both edited and has an introduction by Jill Ker Conway. Memoirs of famous female authors from around the world, including an excerpt from Dinesen's memoirs, are in this collection.

Longing for Darkness: Kamante 's Tale from Out of Africa, with Original Photographs and Quotations from Isak Dinesen (1975), collected by Peter Beard, includes excerpts from Dinesen's memoirs on Kenya and the Kenyan people and is accompanied by photographs taken during her years in Kenya, 1914-1931.

Further Study

Dinesen, Isak, *Letters from Africa,* edited by Frans Lasson, translated by Anne Born, University of Chicago Press, 1981. Dinesen's collection of personal letters to family and friends during her years in Kenya, from 1914-1931, sheds light on the perspective provided in her published memoirs.

Huzley, Elspeth, *The Flame Trees of Thika: Memories of an African Childhood,* 1959, reprint, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987.

This is an autobiographical account of life in Africa by an English author who grew up in Kenya. It provides a different perspective on Kenya from that of Dinesen.

Phillips, Robert, ed., *Nightshade: 20th Century Ghost Stories,* Carroll & Graf, 1999.

This is an anthology of ghost stories by such authors as Henry James, Franz Kafka, Gabriel García Márquez, and others. It includes "The Supper at Elsinore" by Dinesen.

Reynolds, Margaret, ed., *The Penguin Book of Lesbian Short*

Stories, Viking, 1994.

This anthology is made up of short stories with lesbian themes, including "The Blank Page" by Dinesen.

Rosenthal, Lucy, ed., *The World Treasury of Love Stories,*Oxford University Press, 1995.

This work is an anthology of short stories on the theme of love, from an international selection of authors, including "The Immortal Story" by Dinesen.

Trzebinski, Errol, *Silence Will Speak: A Study of the Life of Denys Finch-Hatton and His Relationship with Karen Blixen,* University of Chicago Press, 1985.

This is a biography of the man who was Dinesen's lover while she lived in Africa, hunter and pilot Denys Finch-Hatton, who died in a plane crash in 1931.

Williams, A. Susan, ed., *The Lifted Veil: The Book of Fantastic Literature by Women, 1800-World War II,* Carroll & Graf, 1992.

The title of this selection is drawn from George Eliot' s novella, "The Lifted Veil," which is included in the anthology. It also includes "The Supper at Elsinore" by Isak Dinesen.

Yolen, Jane, ed., *Alphabestiary: Animal Poems from A to Z,* illustrated by Allen Eitzen, Wordsong/Boyds Mill Press, 1995.

This collection of poems about animals, arranged in alphabetical order by animal, is aimed at the young reader. It includes poems by Dinesen, as well as Theodore Roethke, William Blake, and others.

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Pelensky, Olga Anastasia, ed., *Isak Dinesen: Critical Views,* Ohio University Press, 1993, pp. xiii, xiv, xv, xvi.

Scholtz, Antonine M. L. Marquart, "Africa and Creative Fantasy: Archetypes in Three of Isak Dinesen's Tales," in *Isak Dinesen: Critical Views,* edited by Olga Anastasia Pelensky, Ohio University Press, 1993. pp. 283-294.

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Woods, Gurli A., ed., *Isak Dinesen and Narrativity: Reassessments for the 1990s,* Carlton University Press, 1994, p. xi.

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Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

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Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

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.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

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

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

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

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

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.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535