Sorrow-Acre Study Guide

Sorrow-Acre by Karen Blixen

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

First published in Danish as part of the collection *Winter's Tales,* "Sorrow-Acre" is the most frequently anthologized of Dinesen's short stories. Written upon her return to Denmark after more than a decade in Africa, and during the darkest days of World War II, the collection's title has a double meaning, referring to both the cold, northern climate in which Dinesen found herself and to the war raging all around her. As Thomas Whissen writes, "[D]enied a sword, she took up the only weapon she had-her pen-and wrote *Winter's Tales.* Huddled behind blackout curtains in that draughty old house on the sound, cut off from the world, aware that she was being watched (German soldiers camped in her backyard), she began writing tales again, the first in nearly a decade."

However, it would be a mistake to read the collection, or "Sorrow-Acre," as nothing more than the effect of these causes. Dinesen was one of the more gifted writers of an abundantly gifted era, and all of her gifts are on display in this collection. Donald Hannah gives one obvious example drawn from "Sorrow-Acre" when he observes that Dinesen's "life-long interest in painting is ... reflected by the way in which her imagination in the tales frequently operates in visual terms. She writes like a painter. The striking description of the countryside in the opening paragraphs of 'Sorrow-Acre' is but one example of this." Throughout "Sorrow Acre," *Winter's Tales,* and indeed, throughout her entire life's work, she demonstrates the power of her clear-sighted imagination and formal elegance to impressive, often stunning effect.

Author Biography

Isak Dinesen was born Karen Christentze Dinesen at the estate ofRungstedlund, near Rungsted, fifteen miles north of Copenhagen, Denmark, on April 17, 1885. Though she is best known today for her writings about Kenya-works like *Out of Africa* and *Shadows on the Grass*-she in fact spent most of her life at Rungstedlund. She was raised there, returned there after her years in Kenya, and lived there until her death; it is at Rungstedlund that she wrote *Winter's Tales,* the collection in which "Sorrow-Acre" appeared.

Dinesen's parents were from two very different walks of life. Her mother's family, the Westenholzes, were quite wealthy, urbane, liberal, and bourgeois. Judith Thunnan, in *Isak Dinesen, the Life of a Storyteller,* writes that the Westenholzes "were also. . . passionate feminists and nonconformists, converts to the Unitarian Church. . . . Their energies went into practical or abstract projects, and mostly to their own moral excellence." Her father's family, the Dinesens, were cut from a different cloth. Although they were also wealthy, her father's family was from the country; they carried no title, but nonetheless had aristocratic, rather than bourgeois sensibilities. In Thurman's words, "the men tended to be virile and opinionated, the women elegant and pretty." Isak navigated through life guided by the magnetism of these two opposite poles, poles Thurman identifies as "Dinesen W estenholz, freedom/taboo, aristocrat/bourgeois," and finally, "either/or. "

Dinesen's life as a writer can be conveniently broken up into three periods. During the first period, as Karen Drnesen, she filled her time With the social life her station in life afforded her-with parties, receptions, balls-but also with writing. During these early years, she succeeded in getting three of her stories published in Danish literary reviews"The Hermits," "The Ploughman," and "The de Cats Family" -but she did not yet think of herself as a writer. The first period came to an abrupt end in 1914 when she moved to Kenya and married her Swedish cousin, Baron Bror von Blixen-Finecke, who had purchased a large coffee farm near Nairobi with her family's money. The seventeen-year period which followed, recounted in the memoirs *Out of Africa* and *Shadows on the Grass,* was brought to a close when the farm eventually ran into so much debt that she was forced to sell it and leave. The marriage with Blixen had failed also, he being chronically unfaithful to his wife. In 1931 Dinesen, now forty-Six, returned to Rungstedlund where she began to write in earnest, publishing the story collections and memoirs for which she is known. The remainder of her life was spent with her international reputation growing greater, while her physical well-being declined. Dinesen died at Rungstedlund in 1962 of emaciation, the result of her long, unendingly painful fight with the syphilis she had acquired from Blixen early in their marriage

Plot Summary

At his mother's urgent request, a young man named Adam has returned from England to his ancestral home in Denmark at the height of the short Danish summer. He meets his uncle in a beautiful garden on the estate. After an amiable discussion comparing the tasks confronted by the gods of Rome to those of the earlier Norse gods, Adam notes that his uncle seems distracted. His uncle admits that his thoughts are elsewhere and tells Adam the story of Goske Pill.

One week before Adam's arrival, his uncle says, someone burned down his barn at Rodmosegaard. A few days later, the keeper at Rodmose and a wheelwright came to the house with Goske Piil, a widow's son, in tow. They swore that Goske was the person who had set the barn on fire. Both men disliked Goske. The keeper suspected him of having poached on the grounds of Rodmose, while the wheelwright suspected Goske of having relations with his own young wife. The boy swore to his innocence, but he was unable to convince Adam's uncle in conversation with the two men that he was truly innocent. Adam's uncle had Goske locked up, meaning to send him to the Judge of the district with a letter. The judge, he explained, is an idiot and would have done whatever he thought the uncle wanted him to do: send the boy to prison, put him in the army as a bad character, or even free him.

During a ride through his fields, Adam's uncle met Anne-Marie Piil, Goske's mother. She protested her son's iunocence, saying that her son had indeed been in Rodmose at the time of the barn-fire, but only to visit someone. Still uncertain of what to do with Goske, Adam's uncle had an idea: he told Anne-Marie that if she could mow the rye field in which they stood in a single day. between sunrise and sunset, he would drop the case and free Goske. If not, "he must go, and it is not likely [she] will ever see him again." The task to which AnneMarie agreed was huge: "a day's work to three men, or three days' work to one man," but Anne Marie agreed gladly, "kiss[ing] his boot in gratitude. "

At sunrise, as Adam and his uncle discussed Norse and Olympian mythology, Anne-Marie begins to mow the field. A little later in the morning the narrative focus shifts to Adam's uncle's new wife. Sophie-Magdalena, a seventeen-year-old girl who had been raised at court. Although she is not, as the narrator observes, ideally suited for the role she is to fill as the uncle's wife ("there was probably not in the whole country a creature more exquisitely and innocently drilled to the stately measure of a palace"), she quickly learns to adapt to country life, enjoying the sensual reality of nature in a greater intimacy than life at court allowed. In terms of action, Sophie-Magdalena's scene is quite short. She wakes up, takes her nightdress off and observes her naked form in a mirror, kills a flea on her leg, and dresses.

In the afternoon, after a ride around the bounds of the estate with Sophie- Magdalena, Adam returns to the garden, joining his uncle who continues to watch Anna-Marie' s progress across the field. Now, for the first time, Adam begins to understand that Anne-Marie will almost certainly die, whether she succeeds or fails, and begs his uncle to change his mind. But Adam's uncle remains resolute, insisting that his word cannot be

broken, and that Anna-Marie is at peace with their agreement. They quarrel, and Adam threatens to leave forever, but shortly thereafter has a change of heart.

As sunset nears, it appears that Anne-Marie

may finish the acre and succeed in freeing her son. The whole village gathers around her to watch as she makes her way, ever more slowly, down the last row. The village bailiff has even brought AnneMarie's son to the field to watch. After she cuts the last handful of com, the uncle tells her that she has succeeded, that her son is free. She does not seem to hear, so he tells her son to repeat what he has said. Goske tells her. She reaches up, touches his tearstained cheek, and falls into his arms, dead.

"In the place where the woman had died the old lord later on had a stone set up, with a sickle engraved in it. The peasants on the land then named the rye field 'Sorrow-Acre.' By this name it was known a long time after the story of the woman and her son had itself been forgotten. "

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

This short story begins with a description of the Danish countryside that subtly makes the distinctions between the generations of gentry who have owned the land and the poor who have worked it for them. There is detail in the description of the thatched huts that clearly speaks of the impoverished village in contrast to the mansion and its fine furnishings that indicate no expense was spared in creating a comfortable and pleasurable environment for its inhabitants.

Among its inhabitants were the women who bore the sons that carried on the family name and inherited all that was left by those who came before. The lady of the manor might appear to be – in all her finery – mere window dressing, but the legitimacy she passed to her offspring was the very heart of her family's existence. One of the story's main themes is this very concern. The current lord of the manor lost his wife and then two of his children in infancy. He had arranged a marriage for his surviving child, a son, that would have rehabilitated the family's prestige, but the son had died before it could be accomplished. This news has brought home Adam, the lord's nephew, next in line to inherit the family fortune. This is unlikely to happen, however, because the old lord has taken his son's intended wife as his own bride. She may yet give him sons to whom he can leave his estate.

Adam is up at dawn on his first day back, surveying the land where he grew up, remembering those who had died and the choice he had made to leave home, to travel extensively, and to represent Denmark in the Court of King George. He is unaffected by his uncle's marriage, which will disinherit him largely. He enjoys knowing that his personal success in life depends on his own abilities. He has stretched his mind to embrace new ideas about the rights and freedoms of every man and of justice. He wants to learn more and plans to travel to America. Nonetheless, he was nostalgic for home after receiving news of his cousin's death and asked his uncle if he might visit. He realizes that this will always be home to him and it gives him some weight in the world, even though he might never return to it. At the same time, if he were to stay, he fears the responsibilities would stifle his imagination, energy and emotion.

In his reverie, Adam comes across his uncle and as they walk together, Adam praises the landscape and refers to it as a Garden of Eden. His uncle takes this as a personal compliment. Likewise, the uncle is pleased that Adam is still so fond of his native soil. Adam responds with verses of Danish poetry and a discourse on the virtues of the gods in Nordic mythology who surpass in moral greatness the gods of Greece and Rome, who were capricious and treacherous. He calls the gods of their Danish forefathers divine because of their righteous, trustworthy and benevolent qualities. At this, Adam's uncle responds that it was much easier for them. He goes on to say that these gods were not omnipotent, that they could safely give themselves over to temperance and kindness because there were darker forces that worked the suffering and disasters of

the world. He further asserts that true sovereigns have no need to practice chivalry, which implies that have equals as rivals.

Adam remarks to his uncle that he seems distracted, and his uncle agrees. He tells him there is a matter of life and death going on in a nearby rye field. He tells Adam that a week earlier, someone burned his barn down. Several days later, he was presented with a boy, Goske Piil, a widow's son, whom he was told had been seen at the barn near nightfall. While Uncle knew his accusers had other reasons to finger him, he had the boy locked up and intended to turn the matter over to a judge. The judge, in turn, would do whatever the uncle wished – prison, soldiering or set free. However, Goske's mother, Anne-Marie, described as also of questionable character, came to him and attested to her son's innocence. He proposed that if she cut an entire field of rye in one day, he would drop the case against her son. She kissed his riding boot in gratitude for the favor. Uncle acknowledges that this is her only child, her only support in old age, and that she may hold him as dear as her own life. He estimated the field to be a day's work for three men. He tells Adam that the boy was his son's only playmate and that he does not know if Anne-Marie can accomplish the task before her. He proposes to stay all day and watch the scene, but asks Adam for the book, a tragedy, he has in his pocket so that he may read all the while. His servants come bearing his morning chocolate and breakfast on silver trays.

Inside the mansion, the mistress of three months, Sophie Magdalena, 17, wakes and dresses for the day. At one point, she looks grave and thoughtful, but actually does not think at all. Raised in the courts, she never questioned the strange series of events that led her to marry the almost-60-year-old father of her fiancé. She was not disappointed because she had thought her youthful suitor to be infantile, but she is only vaguely aware that she is not as happy as she ought to be. Her maid comes in with her clothing and accessories for the day and she gets ready to go riding with Adam.

During their ride, Adam positions himself between Sophie and the rye field so she will not see what is going on or question him about it. Adam has felt unsettled all day because of the tragic and cruel tale his uncle has told him. He hears the sad contest like a drum beat calling him to respond. While he thinks of the woman, he cannot get the image of his uncle out of his mind. He thinks of how he has looked to the man, since the death of his father, as a second father. He reflects on the fact that his uncle has been the law in this part of the country for longer than Adam has been alive. He thinks that perhaps when uncle traveled through Europe with his sick son as his sole companion, he had set himself apart and become insusceptible to the ideas and feelings of other human beings. Now, in "senile willfulness," he seemed determined to take the life of someone simpler and weaker than himself and feared no retribution. Adam thinks on powers different and more formidable than the "short-lived might of a despot." He felt a foreboding of disaster, but could not warn this man he loved.

Adam is torn, but sits with his uncle, who begins a discussion ostensibly about the book he has borrowed from Adam, but also about his own position and the events unfolding before them. Uncle tells Adam that his new age has made a god in its own image, an emotional god, and that he is writing a tragedy to it. While Adam does not want to

debate with his uncle, he also dreads the silence in which he will have to listen to Anne-Marie's sickle. In the course of their conversation, the uncle includes himself among those "who stand in lieu of the gods and have emancipated ourselves from the tyranny of necessity…" Adam finds himself, for the first time, feeling estranged from his uncle.

He is further undone when they go to the field to measure Anne-Marie's progress. Adam shouts at his uncle in French that he should not force the old woman to continue, that he is killing her. His uncle responds that he is not forcing her to do anything. To which, Adam counters, if she quits it will cost her only child. His uncle only seems confused that someone would challenge him, and maintains that he gave Anne-Marie his word. Adam's argument that a life is worth more than a word is ignored. Uncle quotes scripture and his family's history in support of his authority while Adam tries to explain the value of a person willing to lay down her life for another. Uncle dismisses him as too young to understand the way things are. When Adam tells him that Anne-Marie's death will be on his head, his uncle merely responds that he has weathered much before and asks in what fashion this could harm him. Adam tells him it is unlikely that any woman would ever sacrifice her life for either of them.

Adam says he cannot stay another night under his roof. As he stands, avoiding his uncle's eyes, Adam sees the landscape in a new light. His gaze falls on "black stacks of peat (that) stood gravely…" His uncle tells him he will wish him well and asks where he will go. To America, Adam says. Then his mind wonders over all the emotions of the day, especially the sense of belonging he awoke with, and he tells his uncle he will stay. A long, loud roll of thunder breaks. His uncle thanks him and says that he need not stay, that he will tell him tomorrow how things turn out. Adams says he will return to see for himself, but he does not. Instead, he accompanies his young aunt on the harpsichord, all the while thinking that he and Anne-Marie were in the same hands of destiny that would end each.

Uncle stays and has his valet change his clothes in the open pavilion where he eats his supper and drinks a bottle of wine. At sunset, he goes to the field and watches as Anne-Marie finishes the field. He tells her that her son is free and she has done a good day's work that will long be remembered. Her son, beside her, repeats this message. She looks up, touches her son's face and falls dead. In the place where she died, the old lord later set a stone engraved with a sickle. The peasants on the land called the rye field "Sorrow-Acre," by which it was known a long time after the woman had been forgotten.

Analysis

"Sorrow-Acre" is one of Isak Dinesen's finest short stories and a reflection of all she was as a person and a writer. Although a member of Danish aristocracy, herself, Dinesen was foremost a champion of human rights for the less fortunate. In this short story, she manages to use her knowledge of both worlds to flog the landed gentry for their treatment of others without their means. This particular short story was written during the Nazi occupation of her homeland and quite aptly describes how she feels about

that, particularly in the line describing the power of the man in charge as the "short-lived might of a despot."

She draws the differences between the classes with the finest details about the homes they live in, the clothes they wear, the way they work, how they eat, the things they think about, the way they behave. Yet, Dinesen leaves the reader pitying the rich and envying the poor. While the old lord lives in the lap of luxury, he shares his home with a wife, who has married him only because it improves her position in life. She hopes to bear him a son, only to fulfill her part of the bargain. This arrangement is in stark contrast to Anne-Marie, who is willing to lay down her life to ensure the safety of the son she loves.

Into this fray, arrives the protagonist, Adam, who is somewhat confused about his place in this family. While he feels some pride in his ancestry, he is a modern who has enjoyed years of exploring the world, stretching his mind and trying out his talents. He plans to do more of the same and tells himself he is unconcerned about what goes on now at the homestead, as long as it remains in the family.

Yet, very early on in his first conversation with his uncle, Adam is troubled by the differences between them. Uncle objects to his discourse on the virtues of Nordic gods, saying it was easier for them to be benevolent because they were not omnipotent, and those who find a need to practice chivalry have equals as rivals. Thus, he asserts his sovereignty while Adam preaches a kinder, gentler authority figure.

The Garden of Eden reference is also symbolic of uncle's god-like stature in the Danish countryside. It is also a metaphor for the good and evil that goes on there, and the reference is made by Adam, who shares his name with the first man. His uncle's response to the compliment is biblical. He speaks God's words to Adam, saying, "From every tree of which… thou, my Adam, mayest freely eat."

Adam tactfully changes the subject, and learns about the bargain his uncle has struck with Anne-Marie regarding her son Goske Piil, who has been accused of burning down one of his uncle's barns. His uncle assures him that the law will do anything he tells them to in this matter. It turns out that Piil was his son's only companion. Uncle is not sure of his guilt and has reason to doubt his accusers, but he has offered Anne-Marie the chance to redeem her son by the near-impossible feat of cutting a field of rye in a day. The cutting of rye has nothing to do with the alleged crime; the uncle simply sets this task in front of her because he can.

While this tragedy unfolds in the field before him, Adam's uncle is unmoved – literally and figuratively. He is served his meals by servants carrying silver trays to the garden where he sits. His valet changes his clothes twice, and he reads a tragedy. Adam, for his part, wrestles with conflicting emotions about his love for his uncle who has become a symbol of tyranny and oppression in the world, but goes through the motions of an ordinary day. He rides with his aunt, protects her from a view of the field and later accompanies her on harpsichord as Piil's fate is decided. He thinks to warn his uncle, and perhaps that is his duty, but he recoils for fear that the man he thinks of as a second father will think less of him.

Indeed, uncle manipulates Adam's sensibilities in a veiled exchange about the gods. He realizes that if Adam were in his place, he would choose mercy and forgiveness, traits uncle shuns in favor of power and control. Therefore, he tells Adam, tactfully, that "his age" has made an emotional god in its image and that is why Adam sees Anne-Marie's struggle as a tragedy.

When the men go to the fields to survey the scene, Adam cannot hold back any longer. He switches to French so as not to embarrass his uncle in front of his employees, who are certainly not schooled in foreign languages, and he tells him that he is killing Anne-Marie. Uncle takes no responsibility, saying it is her choice to cut the field or lose her son. He defends the challenge he set before her as giving her his word and even goes so far as to quote the Bible to validate the importance of his word. He cannot or will not hear Adam's argument that a human life is worth more than words. Adam threatens to leave and never come back. Uncle is unaffected. Adam attempts to shame his uncle by telling him that Anne-Marie loves her son more than either of them is likely to be loved by a woman. It is true, but uncle remains steadfast in his position.

At this point, Adam disowns the matter, telling himself that destiny will deal with Anne-Marie, as it will with him. He thinks, but he does not act. When Anne-Marie completes her task, the old lord releases her son to her and tells her that her work will long be remembered. It is. Anne-Marie dies in that moment, and the old lord keeps his word, erecting a stone in her memory. The field is named Sorrow-Acre by the others who work it, and it is known by that name long after Anne-Marie has been forgotten.

Characters

Adam

Adam, the first character described in the story is also the story's protagonist, or main character. The narrator's initial description of him is external: "he was dark, a strong and sturdy figure with fine eyes and hands; he limped a little on one leg," but it soon becomes clear that Adam is also keenly intelligent and well-traveled. Not only is he familiar with Roman and Danish mythology, but he is well-read in philosophy: from Aristotle's *Poetics,* which provides the structural background to his discussion of tragedy, to then-modem philosophical tracts, most notably Thomas Paine's (1737-1809) "The Rights of Man" (1791). He has "traveled and lived out of Denmark, in Rome and Paris," and is appointed to the Court of King George, the same King George from whom the American colonies won their independence in the Revolutionary War.

Anne-Marie Piil

It is Anne-Marie Pill who works herself to death in "Sorrow-Acre," and for whom the acre is subsequently named. Although she says nothing during the course of the story (with the exception of her reported conversation with Adam's uncle), her wordless presence in the story is meant to be an overwhelming demonstration of what Dinesen terms "an effort too sweet for words": "to me for the one you loved."

Goske Piil

Goske, Anne-Mane's son, is the catalyst for the story's action. Accused of setting a barn on fire, he was to be sent to the magistrate for trial; but Adam's uncle, meeting the boy's mother, AnneMarie, by chance, agrees to free Goske if she can reap a large field in a day's time. Like Anne-Marie, Goske says little during the story, but he is present at the end of the day, and it is in his arms that Ins mother dies.

Sophie-Magdalena

Like Adam's uncle, Sophie-Magdalena's full name is never given, and her character remains somewhat incomplete as well. Originally the intended bride of Adam's young, sickly cousin, Sophie-Magdalena marries the bridegroom-to-be's father soon after his son's death. Being from a good family, Sophie-Magdalena will, it is hoped, restore Adam's uncle to good graces with the King. Sophie's appearance on the stage of "Sorrow-Acre" is brief; but her nubile, sensuous awakening in her bed-chamber nonetheless provides a striking contrast to the cool, dispassionate intellectualism of the conversation taking place outside between Adam and his uncle.

Uncle

The uncle is both Adam's foil and his future. Adam's uncle is the head of the family estate, the younger man's father having died some time ago. The uncle had wished to leave the estate and his name to a son, but his only son died before the beginning of the story's action, and before he was able to marry and provide Adam's uncle with a grandson. In order to pass his name on, Adam's uncle marries his son's intended bride, Sophie-Magdalena, shortly before the start of the story's action.

Themes

Custom and Tradition

From the opening paragraphs, in which the narrator reminds the reader that "a human race had lived on this land for a thousand years" to the closing sentence, in which the reader is told that the place was known as "Sorrow-Acre a long time after the story of the woman and her son had itself been forgotten," Dinesen keeps the power of custom and tradition in the forefront of her narrative. In this fictional world, custom and tradition work hand in hand, reinforcing each other-things are done in a certain way, a customary way, because there is a tradition of doing them that way; the tradition exists because of the adherence to custom. This is, in some sense, the crux of the story, for when Adam returns from England, awakened to the ideas of freedom and equality then sweeping America, France, and England, he finds it difficult to accept the feudal state that still exists in his ancestral home. Interestingly, however, it is only when Adam is confronted with the reality of Anne-Marie's suffering that he becomes upset; this demonstrates the degree to which he has remained a product of his culture.

Duty and Responsibility

Hand in hand with custom and tradition runs the theme of duty and responsibility. In one of the crucial passages in the story, Adam and his uncle articulate their very different visions of what it means to give one's word, and, by extension, the meaning of words themselves. In an allusion to the opening passage of the Gospel of John ("In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God"), the uncle says, "you have learned in school. . . that in the beginning was the word. It may have been pronounced in caprice, as a whim, the Scripture tells us nothing about it. It is still the principle of our world, its law of gravitation. My own humble word has been the principle of the land on which we stand, for an age of man. My father's word was the same, before my day." The uncle's argument maintains that the word, once given, is irrevocable; it creates a responsibility for both the giver and receiver, so that neither the uncle nor Anna-Marie can be freed from the might of the word.

Adam, on the other hand, sees the word in more Joycean terms ("in the virgin womb of the imagination the Word was made flesh"), arguing that his uncle is wrong, that the word "is imagination, daring and passion," sentiments more in keeping with the present day than with the "thousand year old" precedents the uncle is fond of quoting Nonetheless, despite the appeal of the sentiments Adam voices to contemporary readers, one must think carefully about the implications of the uncle's undoubtedly correct assertion that, while he and Adam-and by extension, modem readers-"do not, perhaps, quite understand one another," he is "in good understanding" with "[his] own people."

Religion

Though religion does not playas prominent a place in this story as one might expect it to, Christian and pagan gods are a recurrent theme. As the narrator explains early on in describing the country house, the class of people from which Adam comes is less concerned with the hereafter than with the here: "The country house did not gaze upward, like the church, nor down to the ground like the huts; It had a wider earthly horizon than they. For these people, as Adam and his uncle demonstrate, God may be useful, but the gods of old are more useful, at least as a starting point for a discussion of absolute power, its workings, and its pitfalls. While Adam believes that the Norse gods were morally greater than the Greco-Roman gods because they possessed the sublime human virtues of righteousness, trustworthiness, benevolence and chivalrousness, his uncle argues that virtue came more easily to these gods because their power was not absolute. "'And does power,' Adam again asked, 'stand in the way of virtue?'"_ "'Nay,' said his uncle gravely, 'Nay, power is in itself the supreme virtue.'"

Style

Point of View and Narration

"Sorrow-Acre" is told from a consistent third person, or "he said/she said," point of view, and from a strikingly even narrative distance. The narrator is partially omniscient; that is, she can tell the reader what Adam and Sophie-Magdalena are thinking when the alternative would be unwieldy. (Imagine, for example, how awkward It would appear If Sophie-Magdalena had to say everything she thinks aloud to herself or someone else). But generally the narrator prefers to present narrative commentary ("the low, undulating Danish landscape was silent'"; "a young man walked'") and report speech. At the same time, this narrator clearly has a personality distinct from the personalities of the story's characters, and seems to view the characters with occasional irony and complete detachment. The narrative voice, not to be confused with the personal voice of the author, is similar to the voice Dinesen utilizes in some of her longer works; compare, for example, the first-person voice and tone in the opening lines of *Out of Africa* to the narrative tone at the outset of "Sorrow-Acre.'"

Setting

The story is set in an almost feudal Demark in the late eighteenth century, but the England of George Ill-a nation on the cusp of modernity-is a powerful, albeit offstage, force. Adam, the story's protagonist, tries to bridge the impossible gulf between these two but must eventually choose either to flee to America, or to be a Dane in Denmark.

Structure

Although "Sorrow-Acre" can be read as a story, it works better when read as an allegory. As is often the case in the heavily stylized, nuanced allegorical form, the action takes place during a single day, from sunrise to sunset. During that interval, two characters, one young, the other old, engage in a genteel battle between feudalism and modernity, which in turn can be read as a commentary on the far-from-genteel battle between the democratic Allied forces and the quasi-feudal Axis forces fighting for control of Europe during the early years of World War II, when Dinesen's *Winter's Tales* collection was written and published. (One of the advantages of allegory over many other fictional forms is that one can talk about controversial things in oblique language, which makes allegory more difficult to censor and perhaps even safer than thinly disguised narrative).

Fairy Tale

"Sorrow-Acre" exhibits many characteristics of a fairy tale or fable. The story is set in a timeless agrarian place where nobles, the gentry, and the yeoman peasantry interact

along clearly drawn class lines. There is a palatial estate upon which the action takes place, specifically the undertaking of a challenge which, if met, will mean the difference between life and death. There is an inflexible tyrant in the uncle, a beautiful young woman longing for more from life than she is experiencing, a traveler from afar (Adam) to challenge the tyrant's prerogative, and an earnest old peasant woman who accepts a challenge which seems beyond her ability to fulfill.

Historical Context

Eighteenth-Century Europe

The first, most obvious point of inquiry is the late eighteenth-century during which the story's action takes place. The story's physical setting is Denmark, but in light of Adam's preoccupation with the intellectual currents sweeping England, France, and the newly independent United States, it is clearly important to consider what is happening in these places as well. Although changes during this period are many, the most significant are that the French Revolution and the American War of Independence have ushered in a new age of individual rights. The once clear divisions between the landed nobility and the landless peasantry now became increasingly complicated. One complicating factor is the emergence of a "middle" class-a consequence of the fledgling Industrial Revolution. Another is the contradiction between "the divine right of kings" and the "inalienable rights of men." It is important, however, to keep in mind that these new, liberal ideas are not embraced by the landed aristocracy in England, France, or anywhere else; they are a threat to the very idea of traditional aristocratic rights. In Denmark, to this point, the eighteenth century has seen a gradual, but nonetheless substantial, erosion in the rights of the peasantry. But as England's needs for grain outstrip its ability to supply its needs, it turns to Denmark (among others) to fill the gap. In turn, the rise in the prices for grain and other agricultural commodities ushers in a period of increasing economic advantage for the farm worker that lasts until the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1809. So the period during which "Sorrow-Acre" is set is not one of stasis, but instead, an historic moment in which the pattern of centuries is dramatically revised.

Twentieth-Century Kenya

Less obvious, but no less essential to understanding Dinesen's point of view, is an understanding of Kenya in the early twentieth century. It is in Kenya that Dinesen learns to be her own person and-more importantly-to begin to empathize with people who do not share her fortunate station in life. It is also here that she gathers the material which is to become *Out of Africa,* the collection of stories for which she is best known today. Like the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, the record of Kenya's twentieth century is greatly influenced by the colonial power which ruled it-in Kenya's case, Britain. Early twentieth-century British policy in Kenya centered around the Uganda railway: first building it, then making it profitable. The building done, Britain encouraged settlement and farming of the Kenyan highlands in the hope that transporting the agricultural produce of this largely uninhabited, good land would be sufficiently lucrative to support the line. It is in these highlands that Dinesen settled and about them that she writes in the beginning of *Out of Africa:* "I had a farm in Africa, at the foot of the Ngong Hills." In an ironic parallel to Europe's gradual democratization from the late eighteenth century onward, white hegemony, or control, in Kenya is questioned with increasing frequency and insistence during the years of Dinesen's tenure there. For many, this questioning culminates in

1938 with the publication of Iomo Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya,* a book whose effect on Kenyan politics of this period is similar to the effect of Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man* on the politics of the English-speaking world of the late eighteenth century Revolutionary era

Denmark and World War II

Knowing something about what Denmark was like during the late 1930s and early 1940s is also quite important One cannot pass over these years without making reference to the reality of World War II and the conflict between freedom-loving nations and nations bent upon conquest of other people and their lands. If the motion of the prior 150 years has been toward greater individual freedom, Hitler's invasion-and Denmark's acquiescence signaled the elimination of individual freedoms and the advent of totalitarianism. The physical contest between nations is therefore of less concern to Dinesen at this point than is the threat of totalitarianism-which seeks to control the minds of others that she sees in Hitler's National Socialism. *Winter's Tales,* the collection containing" Sorrow-Acre," can perhaps be best understood, therefore, in the context of the fairly successful passive-resistance movement in Denmark.

Critical Overview

Critical reaction to *Winter's Tales* must be seen through two lenses: present and past. Although she is now considered a major twentieth-century writer, Dinesen was, for a time, essentially forgotten. The revival of interest in her as a writer can be attributed in large part to Sydney Pollack's film version of *Out of Africa.* As a result, one cannot speak of a single critical reaction, but must instead consider two reactions: those of her contemporaries and those of the post-revival critics. Interestingly, each group seems to have seized upon very different facets of her writing as most worthy of comment. For the most part, earlier critics were more interested in her stylistic accomplishments, for example, Orville Prescott, writing in the *New York Times,* called her style "elaborately artificial, formal, suave, and beautiful," while William Sansom wrote in the *Saturday Review* that she "gives us tales of blood and doom and honor in the old grand manner." Later critics seem more interested in understanding the significance of her stories' content.

However, there are some points at which all critics seem to agree. Although they understandably see many different things in *Winter's Tales,* they are unanimous in their praise for the literary accomplishment the stories demonstrate. David Richter pointed out in the *Journal of Narrative Technique* that "Sorrow-Acre" "invokes many of the persistent themes that haunt Dinesen's work: the contrast between the cruel beauty of the *ancien regime* and the more prosaic humanitarian ethos of modem democracy that will inevitably displace it; the inextricable connections between men and the land they live on; the arcane routes by which men seek and find their destiny; the perverse and terrible costs which love extracts."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Kippen is an educator and specialist on British colonial literature and twentieth-century South African fiction.. In the following essay, he discusses "Sorrow-Acre" as an allegory.

Like fable, allegory describes one thing-usually something quite specific-to talk about something else that shares similar features or characteristics. So, for example, Aesop's fable "The Tortoise and the Hare" isn't really "about" a tortoise or a hare; instead, it is about plodding perseverance and mercurial quickness-the tortoise and the hare are merely physical manifestations of these moral attributes. Similarly, Dinesen's "Sorrow-Acre" is neither about a young man named Adam nor about the fate of the widow Piil. These characters are representations of -or standing in for-what turns out to be a complex use of history. Unlike fable, however, allegory rarely presents a clearly discernible moral. While "slow and steady wins the race"

neatly summarizes both the story of the race run by the tortoise and underscores the (moral) value of perseverance, it is difficult to draw a single, clear moral from Dinesen's story. This difficulty is due both to the complexity of the ideas the characters manifest and to the greater length and larger cast of allegory in general and Dinesen's story in particular. However, while one may not be able to reduce the meanings of "Sorrow-Acre" to a single phrase, it is nonetheless clear that the story has as its focal point Adam's question at daybreak, and the landscape's answer at dusk.

Returning to Denmark after an extended stay abroad, Adam finds his homeland deeply familiar, but his absence gives him new vision, enabling him to stand outside this familiarity. He sees his homeland, and his hereditary place in it, as natural, but not inevitable. He sees the windmill, the church, the manor-all of these give evidence of a process by which the land and the people who live on it have worked upon and shaped one another, in much the same manner as sea and seashore exist in simultaneous opposition and partnership, each defining itself against, but also through, the other. As the omniscient narrator observes, "a human race had lived on this land for a thousand years, had been formed by its soil and weather, and had marked it With its thoughts, so that now no one could tell where. . . the one ceased and the other began."

However, though Adam returns as "nominal" heir to his manor and estate, his stay in England coincides with the powerful emergence of a set of ideas that throw into question doctrines arguing that the rights of kings and lords over their subjects represent the will of God, and are therefore the divine intention: "[H]e had come in touch with the great new ideas of the age: of nature of the right and freedom of man, of Justice and beauty. The universe, through them, had become infinitely wider to him." Thomas Paine's "The Rights of Man" (1791), the French Revolution (1789), and the American Revolutionary War had in common a theme most forcibly articulated in the second paragraph of the American colonies' Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life,

liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their Just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any form of government becomes destructive to these ends, It is the right of the people to alter or to abolish It, and to institute new government, laying Its foundation on such principles and organizing Its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.

Perhaps it is the dissonance between this strident call of the future-a call for rulers to be accountable to the ruled-and the feudal, thousand year past through which Adam finds himself walking that morning, that makes Adam speak to the land "as to a person, as to the mother of his race."

He asks: "Is it only my body that you want. . . while you reject my imagination, energy and emotions? If the world might be brought to acknowledge that the virtue of our name does not belong to the past only, will it give you no satisfaction?"

His question, asked "half in jest," receives no answer that morning, but it holds within it the conflict at the heart of Dinesen' s story between the uncertainty of feudal authority, and the verdant, certain fructiveness of democracy. As Susan Hardy Aiken observes, "Sorrow-Acre" "constitutes a fundamental interrogation of patrilineal primacy both cultural and textual, not only on the literal level of its narrative 'events,' but also on the symbolic level, where it functions as an oblique, mythopoeic parable about its own origins and its 'illicit' position in the lineage of male texts."

It would be wrong, of course, to argue that this conflict between feudalism and democracy, between the powers of paternity and maternity is the *only* important theme in "Sorrow-Acre." Although most of her other thematic concerns are ultimately subordinate to this one, as noted earlier, Dinesen's story has a number of other well-developed thematic threads, as well as some important parallels to other texts. A useful discussion of these relationships could easily be the subject of several essays and is therefore beyond the scope of the present study, but the most important parallels-to the Bible and to Shakespeare's *Hamlet-should* not be passed over without mention.

Dinesen is not light-handed when she wishes to have her reader note an allusion to another text. While another author might be content to name his protagonist "Adam" and, having done so, expect his reader to look for simple symmetry between the contours of his text and the Old Testament, Dinesen creates an elaborate parable-in-parallel between the Bible and her text. She invokes an "old Adam," in the person of the Uncle, who personifies commandments brought into question (or up to date) by the arrival of the "new Adam," in youth like Christ; she sets their meeting in a garden "which is as fresh as the Garden of Eden, newly created," and she thereby invites her readers to link the relationship of the divine right of kings and the Rights of Man. Similarly, when she wishes to invoke *Hamlet* Dinesen is not content to create a young Danish protagonist who has been called back to his ancestral home-now under the reign of "his father's brother"-by the death of a relative and the incestuous marriage of his uncle. As if this might not yet be clear, she peppers the rest of her text with unveiled references to the play: "a Rosenkrantz. . . at Rosenholm"; "He remembered the old servants who had

taught him; some of them were now in their graves"; "the stage of this world." While exploration of these parallels is not possible here, it is certainly worth noting that the unquestioned authority of paternity is the central focus of each of them: God, the Father of man; Hamlet, his father's avenger.

Dinesen engages with authority, but particularly paternal authority, at a number of levels, some abstract, seemingly far-removed from the story's action, others quite concrete. At Adam's first meeting with his uncle, for example, they enter into an obscure, lengthy discussion whose primary subject is a comparison between the Norse gods and the gods of Greece and Rome. As Adam's uncle explains, the primary distinction between these gods (at least for Dinesen's purposes) comes down to this: the Norse gods were not omnipotent; the Greco-Roman gods were. One is tempted to understand this discussion as a framework for the rest of the story, to create an equation between Adam and the Norse gods' impotence, on one hand, and his Uncle and the Greco-Roman gods' omnipotence on the other. This line of thought would seem to be borne out by the quick shift in their discussion from this highly abstract terrain to the fate of the widow Piil, and it is reasonable to assume that-at least on the surface of the allegory-Dinesen' s intention is to be understood in just this manner.

Near the end of the day, Adam again joins his uncle, who has spent the morning and afternoon steadfastly watching the widow's progress. Adam, who until this point seems to have understood that day's events in an academic, or philosophical framework, is now close enough to the widow to see her as a suffering individual; he is finally moved to beg his uncle to break his word and release the widow from their agreement. His uncle refuses, saying "my own humble word has been the principle of the land on which we stand, for an age of man. My father's word was the same, before my day." Adam responds: "you are mistaken. . . . The word is creative, it is imagination, daring and passion. By it the world was made." But Adam is unable to move his uncle, who says "you are young. .. I am old-fashioned, I have been quoting to you texts a thousand years old. We do not, perhaps, quite under stand one another." In the American edition, he then says "But with my own people I am, I believe, in good understanding." The uncle seems to end the discussion here, saying in essence: "I'in not going to argue any more. I'in going to do what I wish." But this is not Dinesen's final word.

According to Olga Anastasia Pelensky (author of *Isak Dinesen: The Life and Imagination of a Seducer,* 1991), the following passage was added when Dinesen rewrote the story in Danish, then added to the British edition, but was never incorporated into the American edition. After "we do not, perhaps, quite understand each other," Dinesen later added:

"But If, to your ears, my orthodoxy does now sound antiquated, remember that within a hundred years both nune and your own speech will sound antiquated to the generations then discoursing upon word and life. Have patience, let me explain myself to you. "Believe me, I have the public welfare as much at heart as you yourself. But should we, in our concern, for *Ie bien commun,* gaze only at those human beings who happen to be about us today, and look neither before or after? When we consider the matter rightly we will find the past generations to be in majority Well," he interrupted himself, as Adam

made a gesture of Impatience, "let them rest as they deserve to. But the coming generations, you will agree, must ever be in majority And when we speak of the welfare of the many we must needs let them have the last word King Pharaoli, I have been told, made a hundred thousands of his subjects slave for him and suffer great hardships, in order to build him a pyramid. He might at the same cost, have distributed bread and wine amongst his people, have fed and clothed them, and have been blessed by them Still even so things would have been With them, today, what they are now, they would all be dead and gone. And a hundred generations have, since the days of King Pharaoh, lifted their eyes to the pyramids With pride and joy, and acclaimed them their own. A great deed, my nephew,-be it even brought forth with tears, even with blood,-Is a fund of resource, a treasure for the coming generations to live on, It is, within hard times and the hour of need, bread to the people
"But the true insight into these matters," the old lord went on, "you will never find, and can never reasonably expect to find, With the common people, to whom the chief concern in life is their daily bread, and who are living, mentally as well as physically, from hand to mouth Nay, my nephew, It is our affair and our responsibility, we, who have inherited from the past and who know that we are to live on, in name and blood, through the coming centuries. These humble peasants, whose life is one With the life of the earth, and of whom you have spoken With so much fervency, what good are we to them but this that they may trust you to look after *Ie b,en commun,* not at the moment only, but in the future? And see you now, my good nephew, you and I may find it a little difficult to see eye to eye."

Then follows the line, "but with my own people I am, I believe, in good understanding."

Why, one wonders, did Dinesen add this passage? It complicates the uncle's position with regard to Ane-Marie Piil, suggesting that she is not only the author of her fate, but that there exists a grander order of things in which it is more important to *Ie bien commune* ("the common good") that there someday be a place called "Sorrow-Acre" than that justice be done today. What does the story gain by this addition?

In order to answer this question-which is another formulation of Adam's question ("Is it only my body that you want. . . while you reject my imagination, energy and emotions?")-one must recall both the function of allegory and the historical moment during which Dinesen composed "Sorrow-Acre." As I observed at the beginning of this essay, allegory describes one thing to talk about something else that shares similar features or characteristics. To this point, I have discussed the correspondence between Adam and one nexus of ideasPaine's "Rights of Man, " the Norse gods, etc., and the correspondence between his uncle and an opposite nexus-feudalism, Greco-Roman gods, etc. But Dinesen's allegory works on another level as well: as a critique of Hitler's paternalistic, feudal National Socialism.

Unable to attack National Socialism directly (Denmark was invaded in 1940, two years before *Winter's Tales* was published), Dinesen was forced to choose a more oblique line of approach, one that revisits the past to illuminate the present. While the uncle is not a clearly-recognizable Hitler figure, this fact is essential to Dinesen's critique, for it shifts the reader's focus away from the uncle's person toward the customs and traditions that

make him do what he does. For Dinesen, the interesting question is not "why Hitler," but why do otherwise good people do bad things, or in Adam's case, fail to stop others from doing them? Dinesen's answer, it would seem, is that good people do, or allow, bad things because they remain susceptible to the powerful allure of custom and tradition.

Adam has a chance to escape the tradition of arbitrary punishment masquerading as justice by leaving Denmark for America, but in order to do so, he would have to sacrifice not only ills ancestral home but also a conceptual framework that, at the most profound level, makes sense to h1m. All day long, as Anne-Marie makes her slow passage back and forth across the Rye field, the landscape silently Walts for him to decide between the freedom of the unknown and the security of the morally repugnant known, and to declare his decision. Finally, he says to his uncle "If you wish it I shall not go. I shall stay here." A wordless peal of thunder immediately reverberates through the hills: "the landscape [has] spoken." What does the thunder say? That It is not the world deciding for the individual, but the individual who must decide for himself whether his virtue is to be found in ills "imagination, energy and emotions" or in the possession of a thousand-year-old name with the power to rule.

Source: David Kippen, "What the Thunder Said," In *Short Stones for Students,* Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #2

A professor of English at City College of New York-Queen's College, Richter is the author of Fable's End: Completeness and Closure in Rhetorical Fiction *and* Ten Short Novels. *In the following essay, he discusses what he calls the "covert plot" of "Sorrow-Acre, " stating that Dinesen encrypted the secret meaning into her story in a gesture of cultural elitism*

Perhaps none of Isak Dinesen's novellas has been more ad1nired, and certainly none has been more widely anthologized, than "Sorrow-Acre,". originally published with her *Winter's Tales* in 1942. This lyrically tragic tale, set in Denmark in the 1770s, invokes many of the persistent themes that haunt Dinesen's work: the contrast between the cruel beauty of the *ancien regime* and the more prosaic humanitarian ethos of modem democracy that will inevitably displace it; the inextricable connections between men and the land they live on; the arcane routes by which men seek and find their destiny; the perverse and terrible costs which love exacts. These themes have been sensitively and eloquently elucidated in the published criticism on Dinesen, particularly the studies by Langbaum, Joha1lllesson and Ha1llall; what these critics, and others, seem to me to have misunderstood about Dinesen's "Sorrow-Acre" is not her themes but her plot. Or her plots, rather. For it is my basic thesis that "Sorrow-Acre" is informed by two interlocking plots, one overt and obvious, which no reader can conceivably miss, the other merely hinted at through foreshadowing allusions which previous commentators have misread or read but in part. The brief essay that follows will concern itself with the covert plot of "Sorrow-Acre," its relation to the more visible plot, and why Dinesen may have adopted the apparently risky strategy she chose of structuring a story around a plot so enciphered thatit might easily remalll a mystery.

The open or visible plot of "Sorrow-Acre" which to my mind is the subordinate one of the two-has its source in a Jutland folk-tale collected by Ohrt and retold by Paulla Cour in 1931; Ha1llall has found the latter, more literary version to have been Dinesen's most direct inspiration. The story, as it appears in "Sorrow-Acre," concerns a widow, Anne-Mane, whose only son Goske has been accused of setting fire to a bam belonging to the "old lord" on whose landed estate they work. Anne-Marie pleads with the old lord to save her son, and the old lord offers her a bargain: if she will mow in one day a rye-field that would be work for three men, he will let her son go; if she fails, the boy will be sent away to be judged and she will never see him again. On the day set for the ordeal, Anne-Marie begins mowing the field, quickly at first, then ever more slowly as her strength ebbs and as the heat of the day takes its toll. In the presence of a crowd of peasants gathered to commiserate with and encourage her, and in the presence of the son for whom she made the bargain, Anne-Marie finishes the field just at sunset, only to collapse, dead from exhaustion.

While this story occasionally occupies the foreground of Dinesen's narrative, particularly at the denouement, for the most part it forms the backdrop against which a very different figure is traced. This takes the shape of a debate between the old lord and his young nephew, Adam, whom most commentators correctly take to be the focal

character of the story. On the day set for the mowing, Adam has just returned to his ancestral estate from England, where he has absorbed the liberal and humanitarian values current there in intellectual circles, and which we today would associate with Jefferson or Rousseau. As he walks to the mansion at the centre of his uncle's feudal estate, Adam experiences a recrudescence of intense love for the soil of his forefathers, which he senses wishes to claim him, body and soul; these feelings are qualified, however, by his awareness of how alien his values have become to the hierarchical structures of autocracy physically implanted in the topography of the manor. As Adam stands listening, in the morning, to the old lord's exposition of the bargain he has made with Anne-Marie, he says nothing to challenge his uncle's decree, but as the day wears on the drama being played out in the rye-field weighs ever heavier upon his conscience, and he is driven to remonstrate with his uncle: "'In the name of God . . . , force not this woman to continue"' The old man answers Adam calmly and reasonably from within his aristocratic and feudal values: that Anne-Marie chose to accept the ordeal as freely as he chose to offer it; that his word, once given, is to him as sacred as that Word out of which the world was created; that hIs decree, if cruel as those of the Greek gods, at least allows the woman the beauty of a tragic destiny to which gods themselves cannot aspire; finally, to the prediction of Nemesis foreseen by Adam, the old lord responds with a shrugging "Amen," accepting whatever fate history will bring to him and his class. The old lord is immovable, his fortress of reasons impregnable, and Adam is finally driven to declare that, rather than stay in a land where such brutality must be, he will leave Denmark and go, not to England, where the feudal structures are incompletely eradicated, but to America, in whose fields and forests his more modern Ideas reign supreme.

But this is not where Dinesen leaves the matter. In a long passage of interior monologue written with an intensity that marks it as the emotional climax of the story, Adam reverses his decision and decides to stay on his uncle's estate. The passage begins with the old lord's bitter benediction upon Adam's choice to go to America: "'Take service, there,. . . with the power which will give you an easier bargain than this: That with your own life you may buy the life of your son."' This refers, most obviously, to the bargain the old man had concluded with AnneMarie, but it also alludes to the uncle's private sorrow-the death of his only son, who was to inherit the manor. Though the old man has married himself the bride intended for his dead son, and may, Adam thinks, have children by her, Adam sees as he had not before the old man's suffering, and his ever-present dread of 'the obliteration of his being" through the failure of his direct line. And as Adam contemplates his uncle with pity and forgiveness, he recognizes that beneath his liberal values was a stronger, universal vision, which determines him not to leave but to stay. To make this vision comprehensible it must be quoted at some length:

He saw the ways of life, he thought, as a twined and tangled design, complicated and mazy; It was not given him or any mortal to command or control it. Life and death, happiness and woe, the past and the present, were interlaced within the pattern Yet to the initiated It might be read as easily as our ciphers-which to the savage must seem confused and incomprehensible-will be read by the schoolboy And out of the contrasting elements concord arose All that lived must suffer; the old man, whom he had Judged hardly, had suffered, as he had watched his son die, and had dreaded the obliteration of

his being. He himself would come to know ache, tears and remorse, and, even through these, the fullness of life So might now, to the woman in the rye-field, her ordeal be a triumphant procession. For to die for the one you loved was an effort too sweet for words
As now he thought of It, he knew that all his life he had sought the unity of things. Where other young people, in their pleasures or their amours, had searched for contrast and variety, he himself had yearned only to comprehend in full the oneness of the world If things had come differently to him, If his young Cousin had not died, and the events that followed his death had not brought him to Denmark, his search for understanding and harmony might have taken him to America. . . . Now they have been disclosed to him today, in the place where he had played as a child. As the song is one with the voice that sings it, as the road is one with the goal, as lovers are made one in their embrace, so is man one with his destiny, and he shall love it as himself

As Adam decides to stay, he feels the hour "consecrated. . . to a surrender to fate and to the will of life," and as he speaks of his altered plans to his uncle a roll of Jovian thunder signals the fateful choice. But Adam is not afraid: he thinks, in his present *amor fati,* that 'he had given himself over to the mightier powers of the world. Now what must come must come."

But Just what is It that 'must come"? What is the fate that Adam has accepted with such gravity? This is what I have called the covert plot of "Sor row-Acre," for it is not so much told to us as it is enciphered by Dinesen in the loose and stray details surrounding the visible story. One common view is that expressed by Robert Langbaum: "It is the destiny of Anne-Mane and the old lord to die, and it is the destiny of Adam to inherit the lord's estate and marry his young wife." Another view is that of Johannesson, who speculates that Adam will cuckold his uncle; the latter, we are told, "is a comic figure because. . . he will have a son produced for him by his wife and Adam." Now while there is evidence to support elements of both these views, neither is very congruent with the tone Dinesen uses to describe Adam's acceptance of his fate, or Adam's reflection, a little later on, that "Anne-Marie and he were both in the hands of destiny, and destiny would, by different ways, bring each to the designated end." The sombre tone of Adam's vision, and his foresight of a link with Anne-Mane's tragic destiny, suggest a very different fate for Adam than the inheritance of a valuable estate or a sexual romp with his uncle's beautiful young bride. Contemplating either destiny would require little in the way of *amor fati.* I believe, however, that when Dinesen's hints are read as a whole, the story in which one infers Adam will play the role of protagonist would be more like that of Tristan and Isolde than like Chaucer's "Merchant's Tale." There will indeed be a love-affair between Adam and his youthful aunt, a love-affair that will culminate in the birth of a child; but Adam's fate will be to die, at the hands or his uncle or his minions, sacrificing himself to save the woman and their son.

The common ground of all three interpretations is the future connection between Adam and his uncle's seventeen-year-old bride, and indeed this is the element of Dinesen's covert plot that is most difficult to miss. Our inferences are primarily cued by the lengthy digression Dinesen makes from the visible story to portray this girl, who plays no explicit part either in Anne-Marie's tragedy or in Adam's fateful decision. Dinesen's language is

somewhat coy here, but the portrait clearly enough indicates her sexual frustration. We are told, somewhat ambiguously, that "she was given an old husband who treated her with punctilious respect because she was to bear him a son. Such was the compact. . . . Her husband, she found, was doing his best to fulfill his part of it, and she herself was loyal by nature and strictly brought up," Such mild hints that the old lord may be impotent are validated by the bride's dreadful "consciousness or an absence" in her life, her longings for "the being who should have been there" in her embrace, "and who had not come." This absence is quite clearly sexual, for it is when examining her nude and lovely body in the looking-glass that she most intensely feels "a *horror vaccui* like a physical pain. That Adam will be the one to fill this vacuum, to complete her inchoate longings, is first hinted at when the bride tears herself from her unpleasant meditation by thinking instead about "her new nephew arrived from England," with whom she plans to "ride out on the land." The activities of Adam and his aunt on the day the narrative is set are chaste enough, of course, but their thoughts about each other, their ride together, and their collaboration in a musical duet as the curtain is drawn upon them symbolize even as they presage the love-affair we can foresee.

That his will be an illicit affair, rather than a more staid romance that will wait upon the death of Adam's uncle, is largely implicit in the sexual urgency of the bride's physical frustration, taken together with the absence of any suggestion that the old lord is soon to die. But there are other hints as well. The young bride's middle name, for one thing, is Magdelena, traditionally identified with the fallen woman of the seventh chapter of the Gospel according to Lnke. For another, there is the prophecy made to Adam back in England: "When at Ranelagh an old gypsy woman looked at his hand and told him that a son of his was to sit in the seat of his fathers. "

If we take the prophecy seriously, and in the literal way such foreshadowing is generally to be taken in tragedies and folk-tales, it suggests that, while a son of his will possess the manor, Adam himself will *not* be its inheritor. Thus one must reject the Langbaum interpretation, and accept the Johannesson, as far as it goes. But Johannesson's notion that the covert plot of "Sorrow-Acre" is a cuckold comedy is unsatisfactory for quite a number of reasons.

The first and perhaps most unanswerable reason is that already mentioned: that the tone of "Sorrow-Acre" is tragic, not merely in the section devoted to the destiny of Anne-Marie but in that devoted to Adam and his fateful decision to remain on his uncle's manor. Here Adam foresees that "he himself would come to know ache, tears and remorse," which is far from suggesting that his love affair will be a bedroom farce devoid of serious consequences. Second, Johannesson's formulation is structurally off kilter, for his view takes the old lord to be the protagonist of this comedy, whereas it is clear from the narrative point of view that it must be Adam that is the protagonist of the novella's covert plot. Finally, there are a great many subtle hints within the text that death, rather than birth or love, is the focus of Adam's fate.

First off, there is Adam's name, recalling the Biblical Adam, our once innocent forefather who was betrayed by woman into death. Second, there is Adam's sense, on his first approach to the manor house, that he has been invited there by the dead ("Dead people

came towards him and smiled upon him. . . "). Next, there is the tragedy by Johannes Ewald which Adam brings with him and leaves with his uncle. It is not named in the text, but the conversation it kindles suggests that it must be the 1775 verse drama of *Baldurs Dod,* which centers upon a young god who dies, driven by his passion for a mortal woman. Fourth, there is the sinister aspect to the young bride's sexual fantasies, which imply that loving her would be a most dangerous thing:

A sudden, keen itching under her knee took her out of her reveries, and awoke in her the hunting instincts of her breed. She wetted a finger on her tongue, slowly brought It down and quickly slapped It to the spot She felt the diminutive, sharp body of the 1Osect against the Silky skin, pressed the thumb to It, and triumphantly lifted up the small prisoner between her fingertips. She stood quite still, as If meditating upon the fact that a flea was the only creature risking its life for her smoothness and sweet blood

Fifth, there is the recurrent pair of lines from Gluck's *Alceste,* repeated three times within the novella: "Mourir pour ce qu'on aime, C'est un trop doux effort." These lines about dying for the one you love are not only translated within Adam's interior monologue, they are alluded to as the curtain is discreetly drawn upon him and his aunt, for It is Alceste's arIa which the two are playing and singing together. They apply, obviously, to Anne-Marie, who sacrifices herself for her son, but in his interior monologue Adam apparently applies them to his own case. Finally, there is Adam's sense, already alluded to, that his fate and that of Anne-Marie are somehow linked, that they are "both in the hands of destiny" which will bring each of them to "the designated end"; in the context this makes even more ominous Dinesen's guarded statement, "Later on he remembered what he had thought that evening. "

Arching over all these details, and marshalling them into perspective, is the reader's desire to make the fullest possible sense of Dinesen's story, to take this "twined and tangled design" and find in it a "pattern," to unify this work of literature and participate in its harmonies in the same way that Adam wants to decipher the hidden unity and harmony of life. It is this aesthetic sense that has dictated Adam's decision to stay, just as it is the old lord's aesthetic sense that has made him stage-manage the tragedy of which Anne-Marie is the protagonist. And I suspect that Dinesen trusted the aesthetic sense of her readers to complete, to stage-manage in their own minds, the tragedy linked to the visible one of which Adam is the protagonist. And, if we have been following her implications correctly, a single denouement, the completion of Anne Marie's sacrifice and death, will serve as the catharsis for both. Anne-Marie, as a peasant-woman, is the heroine of a tragic folk-tale; Adam, as befits his higher birth and station, will be the hero, not of a folk-tale or a fabliau, but of a variant of the tragic myth of Tristan.

It is in fact a misapplication of Dinesen' s aes thetics that led Johannesson and Hannah to posit a cuckold-comedy as the covert plot of "Sorrow Acre." Their argument is based upon the old lord's view that, just as the omnipotent Greek gods could not be tragic, so too the aristocrats of Denmark "who stand in lieu of the gods" should "leave to our vassals their monopoly of tragedy." But it is only the old lord himself who, in his omnipotence and amorality, like the Greek gods, is beyond the reach of the tragic. His

nephew is no Zeus; he is more like the Norse gods of Asgaard who, the old lord tells us, "had, at all times, by their sides those darker powers which they named the Jotuns, and who worked the suffering, the disasters, the ruin of our world"; and like the Norse gods, like the Baldur of Ewald's drama, Adam in his limitations possess es the capacity for tragedy. The old lord quite explicitly identifies Adam with Baldur: the new age, winch Adam represents "has made to itself a god in its own image, an emotional god. And now you are already writing a tragedy on your god." To put it another way, the old lord, from his Olympian perspective, may indeed view himself as a COmiC figure, a dece1ved Vulcan whose Venus has strayed

But from Adam's perspective-and given the point of view it is his angle that we share-his destiny to love the young bride, to father her son, and to die sacrificing himself for them is indeed a tragic fate, which his uncle characterizes as the highest human privilege.

I have tried to show how the demands of tone, of parallel structure, of point of view, and of details and verbal allusions all collaborate to convey the covert trag1c plot of "Sorrow-Acre" But if we can agree that Dinesen has succeeded in organizing her story in such away, then we must also paradoxically admit that she has failed. She has failed, at least, to convey her covert story to five sensitive readers whose studies I have cited, and therefore, one suspects, to most of those who have perused her novella. To the initiated, Adam says in his interior monologue, the pattern of life, that complicated and mazy design, "might be read as easily as our ciphers-which to the savage must seem confused and incomprehensible-will be read by the schoolboy." And yet Dinesen has so enciphered the primary plot of her story that few of her readers are likely to make it out. For those who succeed, the pleasures of tacit collusion with the author are intense and refined indeed; for those who fail-and here is Dinesen's insurance policy-most will have not sense of what they have missed.

The fact is that Isak Dinesen was an elitist in more ways than one. The reception of *Seven Gothic Tales* had suffered ill Denmark, critic Tom Kristensen remarked, from the common readers' reaction to "their too aristocratic tone, verging on snobbery." Though Kristensen felt that the *Winter's Tales* had more "humanity" than the earlier book, it is clear that her defense of the *ancien regime,* her contempt for democratic vistas, are by no means absent from the later collection, which includes "Sorrow-Acre." And as an elitist, Dinesen was very unlikely to have been averse to reserving some of her work's secret pleasures for a select group of kindred souls capable of following her indirections and allusions. Like Joyce's *Finnegans Wake,* whose meaning is encrypted in thousands of puns in dozens of living and dead languages, like Nabokov's "The Vane Sisters," whose hidden denouement is encoded in the initial letters of the last paragraph's words, and like Dinesen's own "The Roads Round P1sa," whose ending requires the reader to decipher an obscure symbolic passage in Dante, "Sorrow-Acre" 1S a story that is also part puzzle, a reflection of its author's intellectual snobbery and a challenge, moral as well as intellectual, to the reader's own.

Source: David H. Richter, "Covert Plot in Isak Dinesen's 'Sorrow-Acre'," in *The Journal of Narrative Technique,* Vol. 15, No 1, Winter, 1985, pp 82-90.

Critical Essay #3

Johannesson has written distinguished studies of Dinesen and the novels of August Strindberg. In the following excerpt, he discusses "Sorrow-Acre" as a story that expresses Dinesen' s elitist views and aristocratic sympathies.

The most dramatic illustration of the aristocratic philosophy of life is found in "Sorrow-Acre." This story, winch is set in Denmark, seeks, in Milton's words, to Justify the ways of God to man. It seeks to answer several related questions: Why is life so dear? Why 1S life so p1tiless? Is there not a God who can temper the laws of necessity with mercy?

The central incident concerns a crime. AnneMarie, a peasant woman, has a son who is accused and probably guilty of having set fire to a bam, and for this crime he is to be punished. When AnneMarie pleads for her son the lord of the estate makes a stipulation: if she can mow a field of corn in one day, her son will be set free. Normally this 1S a task for three men. Anne-Mane succeeds, however, and the son is set free, but she dies from exhaustion.

This incident, and particularly the role which the lord plays in it, is very shocking to Ins nephew, the young hero of the tale. Adam has been living in England and has been imbued W1th a number of the new liberal ideas: ideas about nature, justice, and the rights and freedoms of man; he even has some notions of going to the United States. To him the uncle, who has always been an embodiment of "law and order, the wisdom of life and kind guardianship," now appears as "a symbol of the tyranny and oppression of the world." At one point he tells the uncle to stop "this terrible thing," and he decides to leave the estate and go to the United States. Before evening, however, he has changed his mind. The reasons for this change are to be sought, I think, in his three conversations with the uncle, and in certain events which put the figure of the uncle in a new light These conversations are central to the story. They concern the nature of comedy and tragedy. Adam has been reading a tragedy by the Danish poet Johannes Ewald (1743-81), entitled *Balder's Death* (1775), and at his suggestion the uncle also reads it during the course of the day.

During the first conversation Adam suggests "that we have not till now understood how much our Nordic mythology in moral greatness surpasses that of Greece and Rome." Adam feels that the gods of Greece and Rome were "mean, capricious and treacherous," while "the fair gods of Asgaard did possess the sublime human virtues; they were righteous, trustworthy, benevolent and even, within a barbaric age, chivalrous." The uncle disagrees with this statement: it was easier, he insists, for the Nordic gods to be virtuous because they were not as powerful as the gods of classical antiquity. The Nordic gods, he says, had at all times "by their side those darker powers which they named the Johns, and who worked the suffering, the disasters, the ruin of our world." The omnipotent Greek and Roman gods had "no such facilitation. With their omnipotence they take over the woe of the universe." Jove is superior to Odin because he "avowed Ins sovereignty, and accepted the world which he ruled"

The second conversation occurs after the uncle has read *Balder's Death.* This conversation concerns the nature of comedy and tragedy. Adam suggests that tragedy is, "in the scheme of life, a noble, a divine phenomenon." The uncle agrees that tragedy is a noble phenomenon, "but of the earth only, and never divine." "Tragedy," he says, "is the privilege of man, his highest privilege." As such It "should remain the right of human beings, subject, in their conditions or in their own nature, to the dire law of necessity. To them It is salvation and beatification." The gods, on the other hand, are not subject to necessity. As a result they can have no knowledge of the tragic: "When they are brought face to face with it they will, according to my experience, have the good taste and decorum to keep still, and not interfere."

"The true art of the gods is the comic," the uncle insists. "In the comic the gods see their own being reflected as in a mirror, and while the tragic poet is bound by strict laws, they will allow the comic artist a freedom as unlimited as their own." The comic artist may even mock at the gods.

On earth the aristocrats stand in lieu of the gods and have likewise emancipated themselves "from the tyranny of necessity. " For this reason they must also "accept the comic With grace." And no master will "make a jest of his servants' necessity, or force the comic upon them." The aristocrat will not fear the comic: "Indeed," says the uncle, "the very same fatality, which, in striking the burgher or peasant, will become tragedy, with the aristocrat is exalted to the comic. By the grace and wit of our acceptance hereof our aristocracy is known."

The third conversation occurs after Adam has told the uncle to stop the terrible tragedy that is being enacted on the cornfield. The uncle answers that he is not at all forcing the old woman to go on. Adam's animadversions that the woman's death will come upon the uncle's head leave the uncle unperturbed. He says he has given Anne-Marie his word, and in his world the word is still the principle, the law of gravitation. Adam speaks for imagination, daring, and passion as greater powers of the word than those of any restricting or controlling law, but the uncle answers that it is impossible for him to stop Anne-Marie now without making light of her exploits, which would be making her into a comic figure. Adam's statement that he might go to the United States the uncle answers as follows: "Take service, there, with the power which will give you an easier bargain than this: That with your own life you may buy the life of your son."

The conversations between Adam and his uncle are evidently designed to illustrate the differences between two worlds: the world of the eighteenth century and the world of the post revolutionary and romantic nineteenth century; between the feudal and aristocratic eighteenth century and the sentimental and humanitarian nineteenth century. The uncle represents a firm and well-defined order based on law, form, style, and continuity, and within this order his word is law. He has unlimited freedom within this order, but it is a freedom of the same kind as that possessed by the composer of a fugue or a symphony: it is circumscribed by certain rules. The uncle cannot break his word, and he must accept responsibility for the world he rules. Thus he is an aristocratic figure.

Adam, the rebel, cannot accept at first the inhumanity of the uncle's forcing Anne-Marie to sacrifice her life for her son. At last he does so, however. Two things make him change his mind. He realizes that his uncle, too, is a tragic figure who has suffered as other human beings must suffer. The uncle has suffered because he has lost his only son. Thus the whole world that he represents is in danger of perishing, because it is based on the principle of continuance. Adam also comes to realize that the uncle is a comic figure, a representative here on earth of the comic-amoral divinities. He is a comic figure because, as a gypsy had prophesied, he will have a son produced for him by his wife and Adam. This is clearly indicated in the story. At the very outset it is suggested by the author that the real power in this aristocratic world is held by the women, because they alone can attest to the legitimacy of the sons who are to inherit the estates. When we are introduced to the wife of the uncle, she is standing naked in front of the mirror, admiring herself, while thoughts of a sexual nature flit through her mind: she thinks of the bulls and the stallions; she is conscious of an absence of some kind, and when a flea bites her she thinks it silly that only a flea should have the courage to risk its life "for her smoothness and sweet blood." In the afternoon she and Adam ride together in the field. Finally, It is said about Anne-Marie that to save her son is a sweet effort. This line also occurs in a popular tune, the words of which flit through the minds of both Adam and the wife: *"C'est un trap doux effort."* The sweet effort referred to in this connection, although obviously of another nature, is to the same end as that of Anne-Marie: to save a son.

Thus Adam is able to accept the feudal-aristocratic world, and his acceptance is based on a kind of religious experience: he realizes that all which lives must suffer, and that, consequently, there are no easy bargains in life. Adam realizes the unity of all things and accepts the world as it is. He also realizes that suffering brings greatness. By letting her play her role the uncle has conferred immortality on Anne-Marie: the field is forever after known as "Sorrow-Acre." Adam learns to accept tragedy-not as a misfortune-but as a human privilege, because it confers on us ordinary human beings a greatness which is demed the gods and the aristocrats, denied those who are liberated from necessity. . . .

Source: Ene O. Johannesson, in his *The World of Isak Dinesen,* University of Washington Press, 1961, pp. 99-104

Topics for Further Study

What is the significance of the sickle engraved on the stone marker at the end of "Sorrow Acre"? Does the sickle have a symbolic function?

Evaluate the arguments Adam's uncle gives in favor of making the widow Piil finish the entire field. Are they persuasive? Would your opinion be different if she had lived?

Adam decides not to go to America. How would the reader's impression of the uncle be affected If Adam had made good on his threat and left?

The reader learns that Sophie-Magdalena is unhappy, then she disappears from the story. Why? Is her story complete?

What is the purpose of the many allusions to the Bible in "Sorrow-Acre"?

How does the material Dinesen added to the uncle's speech change your understanding of the story? (See the essay by David Kippen.)

Compare and Contrast

1940s: Breaking its promise of non-aggression, Germany invades and occupies Denmark in 1940. Although active resistance is futile, a powerful passive-resistance movement soon emerges. The Nazis occupy Denmark throughout World War II. Denmark is liberated at the war's end and Joins the alliance of We stem nations called NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) four years later.

1990s: Denmark is considered one of the world's nations most open to free expression and personal autonomy.

1940s: Dinesen enjoys a generally positive critical reaction to her writings, including *Winter's Tales,* becoming increasingly confident in herself as a public intellectual and in the issues surrounding women's intellectual advancement.

1990s: After the popular and critical success of Sydney Pollack's film version of *Out of Africa* (1985), Dinesen's literature enjoys a revival among a new generation of readers; today it is widely read and the source of much critical interpretation.

What Do I Read Next?

Judith Thurman's *Isak Dinesen: The Life of a Storyteller* (1982) is the most comprehensive biography of Dinesen's life in print. Thurman writes ill a clear, straightforward, readable style, and her work is accepted by most as the definitive biography of Dinesen.

Winter's Tales (1942) is the collection in which "Sorrow-Acre" first appeared. The other stories ill the book, according to critic Marcia Landy, "are structured around dominant Shakespearian motifs-the relationship between art and nature, loss and recovery, and the pastoral elegiac vision as a vehicle for exploring these motifs. "

Out of Africa is Dinesen's best-known work.

Loosely adapted and mixed with parts of *Shadows in the Grass,* it was made into a movie by Sydney Pollack in 1982. Both novel and film chronicle an Africa of dangerous, arduous beauty.

In terms of economy and insight, Guy de Maupassant is considered by many to be a short story writer without equal. Like the stories in Dinesen's *Winter's Tales* his *Day and Night Stories* deal with moral issues. They are short, concise, and-like Dinesen's-offer a clear-sighted vision of Everyman confronting the challenges of circumstances for which he is not entirely prepared.

Further Study

Green, Howard. "Isak Dinesen," in *The Hudson Review,* Vol XVII, No 4, Winter, 1964-65, pp. 517-30

Examines "Sorrow-Acre" as an example of a "divine art" that brings the reader "face to face with the extraordinary, the Unique, the inexplicab1e, the unpredictable".

"Isak Dinesen," in *Short Story Criticism,* Volume 7, edited by Thomas Votteler, Gale, 1991, pp. 159-210.

Reprinted Criticism on Dinesen's short stories. Included is Criticism by Mark Van Doren, Eric O. Johannesson, Donald Hannah, and several other scholars.

"Isak Dinesen," in *Discovering Authors Modules,* CD-Rom, Gale, 1995.

Includes personal information, a bibliography, and reprinted criticism on Dinesen's works.

Bibliography

Aiken, Susan Hardy. "Dinesen's 'Sorrow-Acre '. Tracing the Woman's Line," *in Isak Dinesen Critical Views,* edited by Olga Anastasia Pe1ensky, Ohio University Press, 1993, pp.174-98.

Hannah, Donald. *"Isak Dinesen" and Karen Blixen. The Mask and the Reality,* Putnam & Co., 1971, p. 12. Pelensky, Olga Anastasia *Isak Dinesen The Life and Imagination of a Seducer,* Ohio University Press, 1991, pp. 178-79. Thurman, Judith *Isak Dinesen The Life of a Storyteller,* St Martin's Press, 1982, pp 6,8.

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Short Stories for Students*.

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

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

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