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Definition: **Dinesen, Isak** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Danish writer. She described her life on a Kenyan coffee plantation in *Out of Africa* (1937). Her collections of short stories include *Seven Gothic Tales* (1934), *Winter's Tales* (1942) and *Shadows on the Grass* (1960).



Image from: [Coffee beans in Geography of the World](#)

Summary Article: **Dinesen Isak (1885-1962)**
from *Encyclopedia of Creativity*

Author Wrote Out of Africa, Seven Gothic Tales, Winter's Tales, Last Tales, Shadows on the Grass, Ehrengard, Anecdotes of Destiny, The Angelic Avengers, Carnival, Letters from Africa: 1914-1931, On Modern Marriage and Other Observations

ISAK DINESEN was a Danish writer who married Baron Bror von Blixen, moved to Africa and established a coffee farm in Kenya from 1914 to 1931. Her experiences with the African people enabled her to write Out of Africa, required reading for U.S. Peace Corps members working in Africa. It was the loss of her coffee farm that led to her writing when she returned to Denmark. She wrote in English; her first book, Seven Gothic Tales, became an immediate success in the United States. She worked in the genre of the tale and in nonfiction narrative. Internationally admired by other authors and poets, she was a literary force both in the United States and in Denmark. When Ernest Hemingway accepted the Nobel Prize for literature, he cited Isak Dinesen as a writer who also deserved it.



Isak Dinesen. (Copyright Rungstedlund Foundation.)

Background

Isak Dinesen, Karen von Blixen, was born in Denmark on April 17, 1885, as Karen Christentze Dinesen (Tanne). Her parents were Wilhelm Dinesen (1845– 1895) and Ingeborg Westerholz (1856–1939). There were four other Dinesen children: Inger (Ea), born in 1883; Ellen (Elle), born in 1886; Thomas, born in 1892; and Anders, born in 1894.

In Denmark, Dinesen and her sisters were privately educated, which meant that they were expected to marry and were not prepared to earn a living. Later they attended the Ecole Benet, where Dinesen showed a talent for drawing. Dinesen's family history formulates a basis for her creativity and the subsequent relationships in her life. Karen Dinesen was the second-born child. The firstborn daughter, Inger, was smothered by the Westerholz females, and the father, Wilhelm, had been excluded.

Overwhelmed by this enormous female presence, Wilhelm promised himself that the next child would be his. Karen Dinesen was the only one of the five siblings who became extremely close to her father. Wilhelm told her stories of his life. He had gone to America as a young man; it was a romantic pilgrimage from Quebec to Chicago to the wilderness around Oshkosh, Wisconsin, where he bought a cabin and renamed it Frydenlund. He lived there alone for months, during which time he hunted and he baked his own bread. He loved the Indians and saw them as romantic figures, powerful and wise.

Dinesen spoke of her father's total acceptance of and love for her as a small child. She adored him and did not want to share her intimacy with him with anyone. She took pride in being her father's girl, not "theirs," her term for the Westerholz women. Wilhelm confided in her, treated her like an adult, and shared confidences with her, especially when he was troubled. That is why she was devastated at the age of 10 when her father committed suicide in 1895.

In Wilhelm's suicide note to his wife, Ingeborg, he wrote that the two other girls would fend for themselves, "but my heart aches for little Tanne." He did not mention his two sons, Thomas (age 3) and Anders (age 1). Karen (Tanne) Dinesen felt an enormous guilt that somehow she was powerless to dissuade Wilhelm from his ultimate fate: He hanged himself from the rafters of his apartment. Thomas believed that his father had been suffering from syphilis. Ironically, when he shared this revelation with Karen Dinesen, years later, she herself was suffering from syphilis. "My father's destiny," she said, "has, curiously enough, to a great extent, been repeated in my own."

Dinesen grieved for her father, even into adolescence. She thought "constantly" about her father and felt his absence from her life as an intolerable tragedy. At the age of 15, in the following letter, she makes a passionate plea to him:

My dear and beloved friend, my wise and gentle brother: If you had been on earth still, I should have come to you and you would have taught me to love and to approach thine [sic] light, but you are gone away to high worlds, I know not where you dwell, spirit that I love. But do not leave me alone, if your spirit dwells still sometimes on earth, where you loved and suffered, let it dwell within me, who love you. And give me only once a token that you live and are the same, and that my spirit could reach thine, and if you give it me, I shall follow your footsteps and be your disciple, today and always. Perhaps I shall be it in all cases, but you know, my brother, how hard it is to be alone, be with me, and give me your bless [sic] dear beloved brother, my master, and teacher, my dearest friend.

It is significant that this letter was written in English, a foreign language to Dinesen, but a foreign language can provide distance and thus protect one's emotions. It can also ensure privacy.

This letter is also a remarkable example of Dinesen's romantic ideation of her father. She literally attempts to merge her identity with Wilhelm, to become him in order to possess his characteristics. His wisdom, his power shall be hers. She will not feel so vulnerable; she will not be alone. Her choice of words to address Wilhelm reveals her feelings toward him: "dear beloved brother, my master and teacher, dearest friend, wise and gentle brother." Theirs was a relationship that transcended father and daughter in an intimate and interdependent way, for Dinesen becomes both *personas*.

That sense of union extended into her later life. When her marriage and her farm were both foundering, she wrote to her mother: If I can make something of myself again, and can look at life calmly and clearly one day—then it is Father who has done it for me. It is his blood and his mind that will bring me through it. Often I get the feeling that he is beside me, helping me, many times by saying: "Don't give a damn

about it."

Dinesen's idealization of her father and her subsequent romantic idealization of him pervaded her life. It was the first link to a series of romantic idealizations and losses that also led to her creativity as a writer.

The second significant male in Dinesen's life was Bror von Blixen (1886–1946). Though he became Dinesen's husband, it was his twin brother, Hans, with whom she fell madly in love at age 24. Hans, who raced horses and airplanes, rejected her, and Bror was not interested in her either until he realized that she was passionately in love with Hans. Then he assiduously courted her. Hans's rejection was very difficult for Dinesen. Her maxim was that the final word as to what one is worth lies with the opposite sex. So it was Bror whom Dinesen accepted as her husband after his third proposal.

Her family fought the engagement; her friends questioned her integrity in marrying the twin of the man whom she really loved. All of this made her more tenacious in her decision to marry Bror, to leave Denmark, and to begin their coffee farm in 1914. It was Bror von Blixen who taught her how to shoot. He took her on safari with him, and she loved it—even the skinning of the lion down to his "elegant bones." It was von Blixen who gave her syphilis, a fact long hidden in her earlier biographies. Dinesen returned to Denmark for medical treatment in 1915, and by 1916 the disease was under control and she was noninfectious. Von Blixen never hid the fact that he slept with native women, and syphilis was almost epidemic among the Masai women.

In Africa it was Bror, not Hans, who became a romantic legend, immortalized as Robert Wilson in Hemingway's "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," and worshiped for his enormous courage and spirit by Beryl Markham in *West with the Night*. He became the standard by which hunters were measured. Dinesen loved this aspect of von Blixen, and she loved being the "Baroness."

Though Dinesen tolerated von Blixen's affairs and entertained a few of her own, she did not want the divorce. Von Blixen left the house in 1919 and divorced her in 1922. It was in 1918 that Dinesen met Denys Finch-Hatton. Finch-Hatton, too, was a superb hunter who frequently went on safari with von Blixen (von Blixen would laughingly introduce Finch-Hatton as "my friend and my wife's lover"). A year after the divorce, Finch-Hatton moved his things to the farm.

Denys Finch-Hatton (1887–1931) was the great romance of Dinesen's life. Adored by everyone at Eton, enormously successful at Oxford, worshiped in Africa, his charm, wit, and intellect were tremendously admired. Like Wilhelm and like Bror, Finch-Hatton came and went frequently; he, too, was restless. In 8 years of living on the same farm, he and Dinesen actually spent only 2 years and 2 months together. The constant separation heightened their passion: a blatant definition of romantic love. They never dealt with reality, and Dinesen catered to his every wish. He enriched her life with music and poetry; he gave her a new perspective of Africa from his small plane. Good food, fine wines, stimulating conversation—these were the things they shared.



Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen) at 30 years of age taken outside of Karen House in Kenya. (Copyright Rungstedlund Foundation.)

Midway in their relationship, Dinesen (age 41) thought she was pregnant. She cabled Finch-Hatton, using the code name Daniel for the child. Finch-Hatton replied, "Strongly urge you to cancel Daniel's visit." A second cable read, "Do as you like about Daniel as I should welcome him if I could offer partnership but this is impossible." Given her age and medical history, Dinesen probably had a miscarriage: Daniel was never born. This was a reality she could not ignore. Nor was the loss of her farm in 1931. Never economically viable, the coffee farm finally folded. Again, Finch-Hatton refused to help her. There was no offer of marriage, no arrangement for her economic security. She returned to Denmark, to her mother's house at Rungstedlund. The couple later quarreled, and he took back his ring. It was Beryl Markham whom Finch-Hatton invited to accompany him to Voi, his final and fatal flight in his gypsy moth. At first she accepted, then refused because her flight instructor, Tom Black, had a "bad feeling" about her going. It was a fatal crash that claimed Finch-Hatton's life in 1931.

Ironically, it was only in Finch-Hatton's death that Dinesen finally possessed him. She picked his gravesite which they had once chosen, and presided at his funeral; she acted as the significant woman in his life, changing the stories of their last moments together. But this romantic ideation was not enough. Dinesen attempted suicide, slashing her wrists in a friend's house before she left Africa. She also left a suicide note, which has since vanished from the von Blixen archives. Though she lost a lot of blood, her attempt served as a catharsis from her excruciating pain. It is not insignificant that Dinesen attempted to replicate her father's demise. Wilhelm was the idealized male model whom Dinesen repeatedly sought. Her choices of von Blixen and Finch-Hatton reflected her narcissistic needs. She projected onto these men what she felt she wanted, needed, to be complete. What she desired from both men was an intimacy, a commitment that even her father had not given her. Had she transcended her narcissistic needs, she might have observed that neither of the two men possessed nor desired a capacity for intimacy or commitment. They had much in common: their physical prowess as hunters, their courage, their independence from convention, their need for adventure and solitude, and their reluctance for commitment in relationships.

The two men were blatant in their words and actions. Dinesen saw and responded to what she wished to see. Von Blixen was uncultivated and rough beside Finch-Hatton, but she fought the divorce because she felt vulnerable, abandoned. With Finch-Hatton, the scenario was repeated. Things went well until she needed him. The possession, the control that she desperately sought, always evaded her—until later in Denmark where she met Thorkild Bjørnvig. Dinesen returned to Denmark to live with her mother at Rungstedlund and began writing *Seven Gothic Tales*. Published in 1934, it was a huge success both in the United States and in England. In 1938 *Out of Africa*, an account of her life on her coffee farm in Kenya and her experiences with the native Africans, marked Isak Dinesen as a modern classical writer. She explained why she chose Isak Dinesen as her pen name. Dinesen was her family name and a connection with her father, Wilhelm. Isak means "laughter" in Hebrew, and like the biblical Sarah, who miraculously bore Isaac past her prime, Dinesen now bore her literary creations past her own prime. She had found laughter, she said, and she continued writing: *Winter's Tales* was published in 1942 and *The Angelic Avengers* followed in 1946.

In 1949, Thorkild Bjørnvig, a young Danish poet, entered Dinesen's life when she was 64 years old, living in Denmark, and experiencing "a period of great starkness in her life." The more a "productive dimension" eluded her in her own writing, the more she considered turning Bjørnvig into a poet.

"Imperfect and incomplete alone, together they would be a unity." Once more Dinesen was engaged in romantic ideation, searching for the male to bring her to perfection. They formed a pact, a mystical union, a vow of eternal love. Bjørnvig would justify her efforts by becoming a firstclass poet by bringing glory to them both.

Dinesen began by trying to make Bjørnvig "a man of the world"—like her father, Wilhelm, or Finch-Hatton. This relationship lasted for 4 years (until 1953). Though Bjørnvig had a wife and son, Dinesen repeatedly claimed him: he lived in her house for months at a time. She dominated him, played God with his life, caressed and bullied him simultaneously, and spoke of leaving Rungstedlund (her family estate) to him if he would live with her. When Bjørnvig fell in love with a young woman, Dinesen felt betrayed, both as a woman and as his "god." When the affair ended, Bjørnvig returned to his wife and attempted to break the pact with Dinesen. The following is an excerpt from the pact:

You shall belong to no one and to nothing, to no party, to no majority, to no minority, to no society except in that it serves me at my altar. You shall not belong to your parents, nor to your wife nor children, nor to your brothers and sisters, nor to them who speak your language, nor those who speak any other—and best of all to thine own self. You shall belong only to me in this world.

Dinesen signed this document and gave it to Thorkild Bjørnvig. It took time. In one of their last meetings, on a walk, they encountered a snake lying in the sun. It did not move as they approached it. How each construed the snake as a symbol defines their relationship. Dinesen saw it as a good omen, something to protect them both from good and evil. Bjørnvig saw it as an indication of Dinesen's satanic power over him. He wrote his final good-bye to her, and she accepted it. But she did not completely relinquish her control over him. She used him in her fiction.

Like most writers, Dinesen exploited her experiences and transformed them into her tales. In "The Dreamers" from *Seven Gothic Tales* she creates Pellegrina Leoni, a great opera diva who allegedly died in a theater fire in Milan 13 years before the story begins. Though she recovered from the burns, Pellegrina lost her voice and would never sing again. She insisted on a burial service, and the world believed her to be buried in a little cemetery in Milan. She had attempted suicide and now felt that Pellegrina was indeed dead. "I will not be one person again ... I will be always many persons from now. Never again will I have my heart and my whole life bound up with one woman, to suffer so much."

Pellegrina admonished her Jewish friend, Marcus, "Be many people." And she does precisely that: She becomes Ollala who inhabits an Italian brothel; she is also Madame Lola, a milliner by day and a revolutionist by night; she is also a religious martyr named Madame Rosalba. Three men fall in love with each female character whom they have met, and when they tell each other their stories, they all define "their woman" as the possessor of a deep, white scar from her left ear to her collarbone who is followed by a very wealthy, elderly Jew. When each man tries to possess her, or force her into a fixed identity, she disappears.

Pellegrina's rejection of self, of identity, evolves from her excruciating pain: the loss of the beautiful voice that defined her. Knowing who she is and who she was, she consciously assumes a myriad of identities. In becoming all of these women, she is none of them. She has traded the myth of Pellegrina for a series of mythic women, none of whom really exists; she is spiritually dead. When Pellegrina is discovered by her three former lovers, she throws herself from a precipice and loses consciousness. When she awakens, she is Pellegrina, the opera diva, and she attempts to finish the aria of *Don*

Giovanni that she was singing the night of the fire. She has returned to herself.

Dinesen admitted that Pellegrina represented herself; that the loss of the diva's voice by fire symbolized the loss of her farm. It is likely that this loss extended to Finch-Hatton, to her broken marriage, and even to Wilhelm. Her loss was inextricably bound to these men to whom she looked for her own identity. The romantic ideation in her life evolved into her fiction. It became a powerful source for her creativity.

Later, Pellegrina Leoni becomes the focal point for Dinesen's relationship with Thorkild Bjørnvig, the young Danish poet. Dinesen admitted that his violent rejection of her possessiveness formed the basis of her story "Echoes" in *Last Tales*. The theme again deals with romantic ideation, with the possession of the qualities of the idealized romantic figure. Pellegrina no longer has a voice, but she has a young pupil, Emanuele, who sings like an angel. Pellegrina wants total control of and adulation from him. When she first hears him sing, she is convinced it is the voice of the young Pellegrina Leoni. She felt her own lungs drawing breath in his body and his tongue in her own mouth ... she made him talk and made his eyes meet hers, and she sensed, as she had often done before, the power of her beauty and her mind over a young male being, her heart cried out in triumph: "I have got my talons in him. He will not escape me." And later, "In three years we two will be one, and you will be my lover, Emanuele." Pellegrina's possession will be complete when she also sexually rules Emanuele. He will become *her* voice, the manifestation of her talent, her creativity, her genius. But Emanuele finally fights for his freedom, his identity. When Pellegrina pricks his finger with a needle, takes three drops of blood on her handkerchief, and sucks them, he believes she is a witch or a vampire and he flees. When she pursues him, he hits her with a large stone, drawing blood from her head. It is only his violent action that enables him to free himself from her possession. Pellegrina needs Emanuele to be whole, to be vital. First, she idealizes him, and then she needs to possess him. There is also an inherent narcissism here, because Pellegrina does not think or care about Emanuele as a person, but as an extension of herself.

Thus the theme of romantic ideation permeates the life as well as the writing of Karen von Blixen, whom the literary world knew as Isak Dinesen. Although the men in her life whom she wished to possess finally eluded her—her father, Wilhelm; her husband, Bror von Blixen; her lover, Denys Finch-Hatton, and the young poet, Thorkild Bjørnvig—she possessed a portion of all of them in her writing as she sought out the idealized male figure as a way to make herself complete. In 1955, Dinesen's spinal nerves were severed in surgery; 6 months later she experienced extensive surgery for a stomach ulcer. As a result she was virtually an invalid and never regained her health, but she continued to write: *Last Tales*, 1957; *Anecdotes of Destiny*, 1958; *Shadows on the Grass*, 1960 (a return to Africa and the native Africans). She was appointed an honorary member of the American Academy and was one of the founders of the Danish Academy. *Letters from Africa (1914–1931)* was published posthumously in 1978. On September 7, 1962, Dinesen died peacefully in her sleep at Rungstedlund; she was 77. She was buried at the foot of Ewald's Hill (named for a poet) on her family estate.

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S.L. Morrison

Notre Dame de Namur University, Belmont, CA, USA

APA



Chicago

Harvard

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