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Dinesen Research Paper

The Expression of Modern Choices in Isak Dinesen's Works

Danish author Karen Blixen, also known as Isak Dinesen, utilizes the characters in her stories as voices for her dreams, fears, and opinions. We see her fears of failure and unworthiness of love through the two sisters in *The Supper at Elsinore*, and their brother serves as the male judgment figure, while all three siblings come to question the courses of their lives and worth. Their personal reflections on their own lives affect how the others see themselves. In *Sorrowacre*, Adam struggles with the question of whether to stay or go, more specifically which direction to choose, and the choice between past and future, as Dinesen had personally experienced so many times before. The captain in *Babette's Feast* approaches destiny as a predetermined matter of fact, rather than something influenced by our personal decisions, and deems our choices as having little importance. Dinesen uses these characters along with their attitudes and experiences to address her personal conceptions of elements in a modern society such as family and childhood, God, and individualism, using these to confront the concept of choices and their constant roles in our lives.

The Supper at Elsinore

In *The Supper at Elsinore*, we are introduced to two sisters from an elite family who are “sleepwalking” through life, so to speak. They are unsure of their purpose and doubtful that they

have a real direction. They have watched their lives go by quickly, without much success or real sources of happiness. For their entire lives, they have been trapped in one way or the other. They are not entirely aware of all this until they speak to their dead brother's ghost near the end of the story.

Fanny and Eliza De Coninck have been convinced that the determination of their self-worth is left up to men to decide, even if they believe that they are destined to be great. "If these sisters could not live without men, it was because they had the firm conviction, which, as an instinct, runs in the blood of seafaring families, that the final word as to what you are really worth lies with the other sex" (237). Even if these individuals may think highly of themselves, she argues, it ultimately does not have as much weight as someone of the opposite sex. This claim that Dinesen makes about worth heavily contributes to how we are to interpret the overall message of the story and also the final scene between the De Coninck sisters and their brother.

The sisters portray a façade of happiness, success, and luxury. The high reputation of their family precedes them when they enter a room, and are highly admired for their beauty and mysteries. But as time goes on, they are conflicted because "they could make people fall in love with them...But who could make them fall in love" (245). Now in their fifties, the sisters were never taken to be wives, and their beauty, wealth, and social status have all faded. As said on page 219,

"The girls would get up, dry their tears, try on their new bonnets before the glass, plan their theatricals and sleighing parties, shock and gladden the hearts of their friends, and have the

whole thing over again. They seemed as unable to keep from one extremity as from the other. In short, they were born melancholiacs, such as make others happy and are themselves helplessly unhappy, creatures of playfulness, charm and salt tears, of fine fun and everlasting loneliness.”

Here we are led to believe that these sisters were destined since the day they were born to be sad, disappointed, and to live lives that do not belong to them. This passage argues that the sisters had little control over what they were to become. However, this seems to complicate the argument that the story later makes about the sisters’ fate. This is where Dinesen’s argument begins to come together in this story regarding the extent of our influence on our lives.

It is clear that the De Coninck family is wealthy and influential, which provides many opportunities for the three siblings. This poses many choices for the sisters and Morten, and Morten elects early on to live a life of adventure and leaves Elsinore in search of this. The sisters choose – or rather do not – choose to remain in Elsinore, living a shallow life of vanity. In doing so, they believe that they are refraining from choosing altogether. Their thought processes are revealed through the narrator:

“That they themselves had had no husbands, children, or lovers did not restrain them from feeling that they had chosen the more romantic and adventurous part. The explanation was that to them only possibilities had any interest; realities carried no weight. They had themselves had all possibilities in hand, and had never given them away in order to make a definite choice and come down to a limited reality” (242).

The sisters conclude that this ignorance will enable them to have it all, rather than selecting a rigid path and therefore cutting off others. We come to see during their conversation with Morten that this outlook has actually led them straight to what they have been avoiding – a life of misery and unfulfillment. They eventually realize that *not* choosing is a choice in itself.

This theme of being confined to a small space or a narrow way of thinking is represented through the several mentions of birds in cages, in relation to the sisters. In the beginning of the story, it is said that “The two young sisters used to keep, in cages, the many birds presented to them by their seafaring admirers” (217). This metaphor of birds in cages presented by Dinesen is interesting because it seems to express irony in the way that the sisters accept these caged animals as gifts, while they themselves also already live a constrained life. These sisters seem to have built themselves their own cages simply by believing that not making definitive choices will keep them free, while these gifts and the admirers that they came from propose an alternative caged life. But while the sisters accept the birds, they do not accept the admirers’ love. This is one example of how the sisters have subconsciously avoided making choices in their lives which later lead to their unhappiness.

Before meeting with the ghost of their dead brother, Morten, the sisters do not fully understand or realize their mistakes. Prior to this, they had the conception that they were living their lives freely, without restraint, when in fact they were doing the opposite. Morten tells of all his adventures, triumphs, and satisfaction as Fanny and Eliza listen in awe. In the end, though, even he admits that his life was not one that would be deemed worthy or commendable.

We find a noticeable contrast between Morten and his sisters. Growing up, Morten was handsome and desired by many women in Elsinore. He had five wives over the course of his life, served in the Napoleonic Wars, and later became a highly respected commander of a ship. After disappearing the morning of one of his weddings, he was rumored to have become a pirate, which all earned him an honorary status. Unfortunately, the last the sisters or anyone else heard of Morten was that he was hung for his pirate crimes. The fact that Dinesen chooses a ghost as the figure that provokes these realizations in the sisters is symbolic. In a way, the sisters are being confronted by their own “ghostliness” and their invisible way of living. They have lost themselves in their hunt for desirability and it has resulted in a life with little substance. They even compare themselves to scarecrows while they are speaking to Morten.

From the perspective of the sisters, it seems that Morten has achieved much and traveled far, and is satisfied with all that he has become. They hold him in very high regards, even though he is no longer alive. However, Morten confesses that he lost everything – including his happiness – and this is evident from his ghostly state. He recounts that although at various points he possessed a tobacco plantation in Cuba, a lovely family, a beautiful ship, and a prestigious reputation, he eventually watched it disappear and was hung in Havana for his pirate crimes. The paths of the sisters and Morten, although quite different along the way, ultimately cross once again in the end. So here we see the confrontation between the siblings, and the debate of who had lived the better life. They each begin to reflect on their choices – or lack thereof – and question whether they had made the right ones.

The conversation between Morten and his sisters takes a turn near the end and with it the tone fades into sorrow once again. Morten acknowledges that their entire lives were devoted to the happiness of others, and the expectation that that might one day reward them. He said: “I thought: we have been amateurs in saying no, little sisters. But God can say no. Good God, how he can say no. We think that he can go on no longer, not even he. But he goes on, and he says no once more” (267). Here Morten cracks the truth, the reality that a higher power dictates our lives despite our own choices. He understands that he and his sisters have not “said no”, meaning they have said yes or even said nothing at all to things they have encountered in life, while God insists on the answer to these questions and choices be “no”. Even though the siblings have not “said no”, God – a higher power – has done this for them and overridden their choices.

But there is yet another passage near the end of *The Supper at Elsinore* that poses a question of worth and purpose of life, if those things are not based on choice-making:

“But who shall ask a woman if she is in love with him?” said Morten. ‘The question to ask about women is this: “What is her price, and will you pay it?” We should not cheat them, but should ask them courteously and pay with a good grace, whether it be cash, love, marriage, or our life of honour which they charge us; or else, if we are poor people and cannot pay, take off our hats to them and leave them for the wealthier man. That has been sound moral Latin with men and women since the world began. As to their loving us – for one thing. Can they love us?” (260)

Within this passage lies an interesting message that contributes to the story's claims. There is an underlying question of determining self-worth throughout this story, as mentioned before. This particular piece of text suggests that one's worth is not solely determined by oneself but also not solely determined by someone else. It encourages that one asks what the other needs and wants – in whatever form that may be – and then evaluates whether they are able to deliver on this request. It explains it in the terms of monetary worth, but it is also a metaphor for other types of wealth that someone might possess that interests another individual. This passage claims that worth is a balancing act and requires contribution from both parties involved.

Throughout *The Supper at Elsinore*, many comparisons are made between the sisters and their brother. Their lives began with the same circumstances, but grew to be quite different as they went on. However, although Morten chose a path that was very much the opposite of the sisters', they all ended up in the same house, both empty and unfulfilled at the end of it all. This is where the element of "the choice" comes into play in this story, as if to claim that your choice in fact does not necessarily have weight on the future, and your fate relies on destiny instead. However, this story also makes claims that lean towards placing partial blame on each individual for their ending circumstances. They each have made choices that led them to where they are now, even if that choice was to allow destiny to run its course.

Sorrowacre

Sorrowacre's underlying conflict is the battle between staying or leaving. A young man named Adam returns to his prior home in Denmark. When he arrives, his uncle informs him that someone recently burned down the barn on his property, and that he is out to seek who

committed the crime. They soon resort to accusing a widow's son, named Goske Piil, despite Goske's claim of innocence. Once he has taken Goske as his prisoner, Adam's uncle makes a deal with Goske's mother, Anne-Marie; If she is able to complete her task of clearing the entire rye field in one day, then Goske will go free. Anne-Marie agrees but many observing people—including Adam – protest that this is a seemingly impossible assignment. Anne-Marie works furiously at her mission, and to everyone's surprise, she completes it just as the sun goes down, only to collapse and die.

Adam returns to his childhood setting and is being confronted by a past that he has attempted to get away from. He longs for other opportunities, something that may be unknown to him, and has an urge to accomplish success. The diction in this paragraph is crucial, and the use of words like “gravely” and “infinitely” trigger cues that the decision that Adam is making will be final, whether for the positive or negative. When the old man asks Adam where he wishes to go, Adam replies that he wishes to travel to America, a code for opportunity and unfamiliarity. The old man evaluates Adam's thinking and analyzes why it is that Adam wishes to leave. Essentially, time passes quickly and the years prove to be tough, especially if one is not conscious of their purpose or goals, and also does not actively pursue them. It is clear in this passage that time is understood to be linear, and two stages of life cannot coexist at one time. One thing must end for another to begin, and this reality is difficult for Adam to comprehend. Perhaps this was an unfortunate realization that Dinesen had to swallow during her lifetime. It becomes a matter of whether to stay and tend to others' needs and happiness while sacrificing one's own, or leaving to pursue a seemingly better and ideal situation for oneself. You may take your experiences with you, but the nostalgia may tag along with them.

After struggling with the option to leave for America or stay with his uncle, Adam surprisingly elects to stay. From this we can draw the conclusion that Adam remains in Denmark because of the fear of the unknown. In the text before he reveals his choice, he reflects on all that he would be leaving behind and what he truly wants. For a moment, his words appear to lean in favor of his departure, but Adam cannot seem to accept cutting himself off from his past or risking what he currently has for circumstances that are unknown. Perhaps Adam wishes rather to postpone or further ponder this choice, and leaves it up to a higher power. We see evidence of this and an interesting comparison to Anne-Marie in this passage: “Anne-Marie and he were both in the hands of destiny, and destiny would, by different ways, bring each to the designated end” (63). Although the “end” means something different to these characters – Anne-Marie’s death and Adam’s surrender to his past life – this text still suggests that the choice is not entirely for us to decide ourselves.

Babette’s Feast

We also see *Babette’s Feast* directly address the concept of the choice through the captain’s speech:

“Mercy and truth have met together. Righteousness and bliss shall kiss one another. Man, in his weakness and shortsightedness... believes he must make choices in this life. He trembles at the risks he takes. We do know fear. But no. Our choice is of no importance. There comes a time when your eyes are opened. And we come to realize... that mercy is infinite. We need only await it with confidence... and receive it with gratitude. Mercy

imposes no conditions. And, lo! Everything we have chosen... has been granted to us. And everything... we rejected... has also been granted. Yes, we even get back what we rejected. For mercy and truth are met together. And righteousness and bliss... shall kiss one another.”

Here the captain takes a bold stance on the matter and essentially leads with the idea that none of choices truly matter, because we will arrive at the same result. If not the same result, then the same fulfillment. He argues that only do we place emphasis on our choices as humans because we assume that it is necessary to do so. The captain approaches this concept calmly, without distress, because he feels he has already come to terms with this reality.

Common themes

There are many common themes that are present in both of these works, as well as other pieces by Isak Dinesen. The most prevalent theme is a longing or nostalgia for another way of life. However, it is not necessarily a way of life that has already been experienced. The characters in these pieces often feel that leaving or moving in a new direction can solve this internal unrest, but this does not seem to be the case. These characters often encounter feelings of confusion and anxiety as to what their purposes are. For the sisters in *The Supper at Elsinore*, they have lived a life centered around projecting an image, which left them feeling empty. They are also not deemed “worthy” so to speak by men, and this grows their insecurities. We see in the character of Adam in *Sorrowacre* a conflict of as to whether staying or leaving will create more happiness for him. However, these characters also question whether the grass really is greener on the other side or rather if they are simply unhappy with their current state. They doubt not only

themselves, but also the trustworthiness of others around them. We observe that God has active yet subtle influence in each of these stories. It can be argued that the uncle in *Sorrowacre* serves a “God-like” figure, and that Morten in *The Supper at Elsinore* has an interesting relationship with this type of influence as well. Another theme largely common in Dinesen’s stories is the notion of “almost”, especially in the case of achieving happiness and satisfaction with life.

A common thread between each of Dinesen’s works is the proposition of a choice somewhere within the core of the plot, usually one with a large weight on the characters’ future. We see the characters face many opportunities and struggle with which path to take. Their conflict comes from the uncomfortable realization that one thing ends when another is chosen. Some characters even strongly avoid the “choice” of their life path, which in itself is a choice and leads to its own set of problems. Sometimes, we are shown both sides of the choice through different characters, and where each of them end up. On several occasions the characters have chosen differently, but have arrived at the same place by some way or another. We repeatedly see the characters contemplating whether they are in control of their choices – and therefore future – or rather if these things are truly left up to a higher power. There is also a common question of how to determine self-worth present in Dinesen’s works. They seem to argue that our choices determine our worth, but they also argue that choices actually have little weight, which complicates the former. Dinesen recognizes this complication and attempts to define self-worth in other ways. However, this anxiety surrounding choices and the production of self-worth mimics that of what people during the transition into modernity also experienced. As we examined through our course work this semester, this was a common “side effect” of becoming

modern because people had previously not had the freedom to choose many aspects of their lives.

After learning the critical details about Karen Blixen's life, I could begin to see how hints of them have wedged themselves into her stories through her characters' voices and experiences. Bits and pieces of Blixen expose themselves as both major and minor parts; An example of this is in Adam's longing for America and opportunity, both of which Blixen also strived for during her lifetime. But although Blixen draws parallels to her own life, her most common focus in her works is the nagging pressure of making choices. All of these underlying claims within her stories combine to form her main argument, which is that we as humans contribute to the course of our lives by making choices that favor what we think we desire but fate ultimately decides where we end up. Our responsibility of choice-making lies in that we, in fact, make them, and that we do this with the best intentions. Only can we be wrong if we fail to make them at all, or destiny disagrees with us.