“Take a Taste”

“Take a Taste”:
Selling Isak Dinesen’s *Seven Gothic Tales* in 1934

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Table of Contents

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Having spent most of my life selling my words on a commercial market, it has not been easy to adapt to the academic world where the reader has to be imagined differently. At the same time, I firmly believe that the academic reader is no different from the reader in the commercial sphere in that both of them read in order to share the thoughts of our own time.

At our first meeting, my main supervisor Professor Heidi Hansson patiently listened to my diffuse explanations of what I wanted to do with *Seven Gothic Tales*. Then, she very neatly handed my garbled account back to me in the form of one brief sentence: "So, you want to show that Karen Blixen is a middlebrow author?" That sentence has been resting on my mantelpiece while I have been writing, and every time I lost my way I took it down, unwrapped and pondered it. It speaks of the ease with which Heidi identifies the essence of an argument, and her comments and readings have been invaluable. I know that I have tried her patience many times, and I am deeply grateful that she has nevertheless continued to support me.

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Introduction

In 1968, the German philosopher Hannah Arendt published a collection of essays entitled *Men in Dark Times*. In her preface, Arendt described her essays as explorations of the uncertain, flickering lights that illuminated the darkness of the first half of the twentieth century with its "political catastrophes, its moral disasters" (vii). One of the illuminating lives and works that Arendt explored in this book was Isak Dinesen's, the Danish author known as Karen Blixen outside the English-speaking world. To Arendt, Dinesen belonged in the company of light-bearers because she had been able to turn the disasters of her life into stories, re-creating herself in the role of a story-teller when she had lost her farm in Kenya and her lover Denys Finch-Hatton. As such, she reminded the world that we have to accept life's tragedies, "be loyal to life" was how Arendt put it, without giving in to despair or self-pity (97). Life is not a fiction that can be bent to the whims of our wills and desires, but by looking back and using our imagination we can create fiction out of life as long as we do not mistake the one for the other. To tell the story of one's life retrospectively is to create order out of chaos and to make peace with life transformed into destiny: "The story reveals the meaning of what otherwise would remain an unbearable sequence of sheer happenings," wrote Arendt (104).

There is no doubt that Arendt considered Isak Dinesen a major author, but her essay is a strikingly ambiguous kind of celebration.[1] In her biography about Arendt, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl framed her own decision to write a biography by referencing Arendt's reservations about the genre and her desire to separate private from public and work from action, in line with her political thoughts (xvii). Young-Bruehl claims that while Arendt did write biographically, as she did in *Men in Dark Times*, she did not write intimately and avoided gossipy realism, heading her own warning in the essay on Isak Dinesen that "our eagerness to see recorded, displayed and discussed in public what were once strictly private affairs is probably less legitimate than our curiosity is ready to admit" (93).

[1] In an essay on story-telling and theory, Lynn R. Wilkinson has discussed Hanna Arendt's use of Dinesen's works to illustrate her own theses on politics, history and philosophy, focusing on the centrality of story-telling to political thought and action.

And yet, the first sentence in Arendt's essay on Dinesen reads

> The Baroness Karen Blixen née Karen Christentze Dinesen – called Tanne by her family and Tania first by her lover and then by her friends – was the Danish woman author of rare distinction who wrote in English out of loyalty to her dead lover's language. (95)

These first lines strike a strangely intimate, gossipy chord, approaching and naming the subject as a family-member, friend and lover and Arendt's introduction of Baroness Blixen, Karen, Tanne, and Tania is markedly different from the introductions of the other historical figures of this volume. In her essays on Walter Benjamin, Hermann Broch, Karl Jaspers and the others, work precedes biography and we never learn what these men were called by family, friends or lovers. Since Arendt was a close friend of all of them there is something very odd about the way she chooses to resist base curiosity in their cases, while giving in to it in Dinesen's case.[2]

One way of explaining Arendt's intimate approach to the topic of "Isak Dinesen," would be to think of it as a consequence of the fact that this essay was originally published as a review in *The New Yorker* of Parmenia Miguel's biography *Titania. The Biography of Isak Dinesen*, in 1968. On the other hand, Arendt is highly critical of what she calls Miguel's "wrong-headed *delicatesse*," especially in the matter which is "by far the most relevant new fact the book contains," revealing that Dinesen's ex-husband had "left her a legacy of illness," but refusing to name the venereal disease and withholding the medical history which "would indeed have been of considerable interest" (99). Simply put, Arendt wanted to know more about the intimate details of Dinesen's private life than Miguel's biography was prepared to offer. Since it was, as Arendt pointed out, commissioned and supervised by the author, the responsibility for holding back ultimately fell on Dinesen who, according to Arendt, made a fool of herself by being led astray by her vanity and need for adoration. By not telling the world about her syphilis, Dinesen refused to add yet another piece to the public

[2] The only people in this volume that Arendt did not know personally were Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Rosa Luxemburg, Pope John XXIII, and Isak Dinesen.

representation of her life as a story about loss and ultimate redemption through the act of story-telling. Parenthetically, Arendt comforted herself with the suggestion that it was perhaps not the wise story-teller Isak Dinesen who made the decision to withhold tragic truth, but rather Baroness Karen Blixen (99).

Arendt's wish to know more about Dinesen than she was ready to share jars strangely both with Arendt's comment on people's inappropriate curiosity, as well as with her observation at very beginning of the essay of the author's own desire to avoid the harsh, unflattering light of the public domain (95). In fact, it seems to jar with the entirety of Arendt's thoughts on politics, society and the relationship between the private and the public spheres. In her introduction to *Men in Dark Times*, Arendt was careful to point out that by "moral disasters" she did not only refer to the monstrosities of wars and systematic extermination. *Men in Dark Times* was a response to what she calls the "light of the public that obscures everything," borrowing this description of the public realm from Martin Heidegger (ix). The obscuring light of the public sphere is the omnipresence and overwhelming power of "mere talk" and "double-talk": "speech which does not disclose what is but sweeps it under the carpet, by exhortations, moral and otherwise, that, under the pretext of upholding old truths, degrade all truth to meaningless triviality" (viii).

Arendt saw the babbling, obfuscating public realm as a consequence of a historical process whereby the ancient distinction between the private and public realms had become obliterated. The private sphere, determined by necessity and need, progressively engulfed and transformed the public sphere, the *polis* of ancient Greece as a space set apart for public action and speech. The rise of what Arendt called "the social" left no room for truly political thinking or acting, or for any kind of thinking. In *The Human Condition* from 1958 Arendt described what she called mass society as a world where we perceive the political community in the image of a family taken care of by a gigantic, nation-wide bureaucratic administration of house-keeping. In this world political science or philosophy had been eclipsed by national or social economy that maps and represents the nation imagined statistically as a collective household. It is in this world that the public realm has become a sphere of babbling and triviality, manipulating and swaying public opinion.

The question that comes to mind when reading Arendt, is why her wish to drag intimate details from Dinesen's life into the harsh public light should not be understood as yet another manifestation of the ills of modern mass society? Would not the disclosure of Dinesen's syphilis and medical history have been an example precisely of what Arendt decries in her introduction: something that "unhidden and unprotected by the privacy of the self, appears in public" (ix)? A real-life tragedy reduced to triviality and entertainment in the light of the public that obscures everything that is true and authentic. It would be easy to answer those questions by simply saying that Arendt displayed a certain degree of hypocrisy and elitism, or at least inconsistency, in her treatment of Dinesen. More interesting, however, are the operations by which Arendt's essay is able to contain and reconcile its own ambivalence. First, by implicitly positing the existence of two kinds of public spheres, one of which is of course Arendt's own writing and the context of *Men in Dark Times*. This is the ideal public sphere, akin to the classical *polis* of ancient Greece where men appeared to tell stories about themselves, others and the world at large in order to reflect on and understand this world. In this sphere, the uncensored biography of Isak Dinesen, Baroness Blixen, Tanne and Tania would not have appeared as triviality and mere talk, but rather as the foundation for Dinesen's fiction: a kind of storytelling that "reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it" (105). Since this is the sphere that Arendt's writing performs, it does not really need to be commented upon or defined. It simply is by virtue of its own praxis. At the same time, it becomes visible when Arendt explicitly outlines its opposite where

> one reads page after page about [Dinesen's] "successes" in later life and how she enjoyed them, magnifying them out of all proportion – that so much intensity, such bold passionateness should be wasted on Book-of-the-Month-Club selections and honorary memberships in prestigious societies, that the early clear-headed insight that sorrow is better than nothing, that "between grief and nothing I will take grief" (Faulkner), should finally be rewarded by the small change of prizes, awards, and honors might be sad in retrospect; the spectacle itself must have been very close to comedy. (104)

This is the public sphere perverted by twentieth century mass society; commercial, shallow, and vulgarly obsessed with the kind of public recognition and honor that can be converted into monetary terms. It is from this sphere that Arendt distances herself and from which she wants to rescue Dinesen in order to salvage the intensity and bold passion of her life and writings from the obfuscating light thrown by the wrong kind of public sphere. The problem here is not only the existence of such a public sphere, but more importantly Dinesen's own willing alignment with it. This is where Arendt's essay performs its second important dissociation by splitting the subject of the essay in two. One is the successful author who valued the commercial benefits of the Book-of-the-Month-Club, and who happily basked in the dark light of the public sphere and received its superficial tributes. The other is the wise story-teller who valued life's sorrows because they could be turned into story-telling. This is a dissociative rescue-operation that runs throughout Arendt's essay, explicitly surfacing in the suggestion that it was vain Baroness Blixen who circumscribed the truth about her own life in order to safe-guard her public success. More importantly, it is present in Arendt's description of Dinesen as someone who never wanted to be a professional author at all "who has his [sic] identity confirmed, inescapably, in public" (96). When she started writing, she did so simply because she had to make a living, and there is, according to Arendt "a sharp line dividing her life from her afterlife as an author" (98). Dinesen became an author because life failed her, or, perhaps, because she failed at living. But while the professional author Dinesen may have succumbed to the lures of public rewards, performing in the "spectacle" of commercial publishing, the intuitive, natural story-teller Dinesen simultaneously triumphed through her ability to recreate life's tragedies aesthetically in her writing. There is then, on the one hand, the empty husk of the public persona Baroness Blixen, mistaken for the real thing by a public sphere unable to discern between the authentic and the superficial. And, on the other, the magnificent writing that organically grew out of Isak Dinesen's inability to live. It is the latter that Arendt cherishes and attempts to extricate from the tragi-comic spectacle of the former's success.

Arendt's essay is an early and beautifully written example of an idea that would characterize much feminist writing on Dinesen in the 1980s and 1990s: that

her writings could productively be read and interpreted as a form of recuperative "self-production," as Susan R. Horton has written in her study of Dinesen's *Out of Africa* (108). And, that her writings represent a remarkable illustration of the generic female artist's experience of "bleeding into print" as Susan Gubar wrote in her by now classical essay on Dinesen's short story "The Blank Page" (296).

Even when the studies have not been intentionally biographical the historical figure of Dinesen has always loomed largely in the interpretations of her works, often throwing, as in Arendt's case, a somewhat problematic shadow having to do with the sheer marketability of her, her works and her life. The success that Arendt lamented has remained a problem, even though it is more often addressed as she addressed it; as a comedy, open to the professional critic's ridicule.

Almost twenty years after the publication of *Men in Dark Times,* Danish literary scholar Hans Hertel published three short pieces in the Danish daily *Information*, entitled "Karen Blixen Superstar." The first sentence reads

> Just to make sure: my admiration for Karen Blixen is almost infinite. It grows every time I read her works, and I wish everybody would come to see her as I do. But, five weeks prior to a certain centennial celebration Blixen-fetishism is about to surpass every kind of parody. (228)
> (Bare for en ordens skyld: min beundring for Karen Blixen er næsten grænseløs, den vokser for hver gang jag genlæser hende, og jeg drømmer om at hun vil gå op for alle. Men fem uger før en vis 100-årsdag er Blixen-fetishismen ved at overgå enhver parodi.)

Published in 1985, Hertel's article dealt with the centennial of Blixen's birthday, celebrated with festivities attended by Danish royalties, conferences and loads of books, radio- and TV-broadcasts, and articles published in glossy magazines around the world. It was not only the centennial Hertel was referencing. It was perhaps even more importantly Sidney Pollack's Hollywood-movie *Out of Africa*, premiering in 1985, which according to Hertel had given Danes living in Kenya the bright idea to get together and raise money to turn the remains of Blixen's African farm into a museum. Two "bonneted ladies," as Hertel called the Kenya-based Danes, were collecting furniture for this venture, and since they could not get hold of the real thing they would probably have to

settle for the props left behind by Universal Pictures, the elegant but fake façade of the movie-industry (228). In the stores khaki-clothes were marketed à la Denys and silk-blouses à la Karen, since everybody was suddenly on a first-name-basis with the aristocracy, observes Hertel. The well-known silver-ware manufacturer Georg Jensen instructed its customers in the art of laying a table in Blixen-style, and advertisements for coffee suggested that its flavor was as smooth as a Kenyan night.

Hertel's pieces are mean and funny, but since he is a literary scholar interested in the mechanisms of the book market he was not only out to score simple points at the expense of gullible people and shallow commercialism. His final point is analytic: the role of books in the commercial sector is to stimulate a chain reaction where what he calls the aura of literature sells movies, clothes, silver-ware and customized trips, and vice versa. In fact, what he is describing is an entire commercial cycle where the movie, coffee and clothes also sell books. People who watch Pollack's movie where Meryl Streep portrayed Blixen, or stroll past the displays at Georg Jensen will perhaps also buy books about and by Blixen to place next to the coffee-cup from Royal Copenhagen as a marker of social status. They may even read them. So, while Hertel could not abstain from suggesting that it would be Baroness *Streep's* books that would sell hundreds of thousands of copies worldwide, he ended his article by advocating a non-puritanical stand vis-à-vis the global Blixen-industry. Under cover of the commercial hubbub an outstanding book would find its way, being "smuggled" is the word used by Hertel, into homes where it would hardly have come by other routes (231).

Hertel's approach to Blixen/Dinesen's ongoing commercial success is analytic, but like Arendt he frames it in terms of parody or comedy, suggesting that there is something slightly ridiculous about the marketability of her works and her public persona. And, like in Arendt's case, the ridicule encompasses the historical figure of Blixen/Dinesen. Hertel brings up the circumstances of Blixen/Dinesen's 70th birthday in 1955 and he quotes the Danish critic Aage Henriksen who in 1984 wrote that the lack of public recognition had made Blixen/Dinesen so sulky that she decided to become ill since only

> if we had been able to bring about the illumination of the whole of Copenhagen, the opening of the Tivoli and the words KAREN BLIXEN

> SUPERSTAR inscribed by fireworks against the nightly skies, would her soul have been at peace. (qtd. in Hertel 229)
>
> (hvis vi havde været i stand til at bringe det i stand at Køpenhavn blev illumineret, Tivoli åbnet og ordene KAREN BLIXEN SUPERSTAR med fyrværkeri indtegnet på nattehimlen, kunde hendes sjæl være faldet til ro.)

Hertel comments that this "wishful dream" almost came true at the centennial. Thus, he not only takes Henriksen's account of Blixen/Dinesen's supposedly narcissistic view of her own importance at face value, but also in fact transforms the words of the former into the dream of the latter. While less conspicuous and vehement than in Arendt, there is a dissociative process going on in Hertel's texts as well whereby the works are separated from the historical figure of the author. There are the outstanding works on the one hand, and the conceited author on the other whose happy-go-lucky participation in the commercial hullabaloo makes her slightly laughable. I do not believe that either Arendt or Hertel consciously set out to ridicule Blixen/Dinesen. Rather, they portray her as someone who was seduced by her own success, blinded by the public light and the fireworks of fawning admiration. Fame-craving, susceptible and almost infantile Blixen/Dinesen can thus be saved along with her work from the public, commercial sphere that never really understood her anyhow.

Yet, it was precisely in the sphere of commercial, popular publishing that Blixen/Dinesen's career as an author once begun. In this study I will argue that it became possible because her first work *Seven Gothic Tales* was published in close cooperation with one of the most commercially aware and inventive agents on the North American book market in 1934, namely the Book-of-the-Month Club. Without its backing of the unknown, middle-aged, European lady Karen Blixen, there probably would have been no Isak Dinesen for Arendt to include in *Men in Dark Times*, and possibly no Karen Blixen Superstar either. The fact that the North American book market and the Book-of-the-Month-Club were crucial to Blixen/Dinesen's success has been duly noted in scattered writings about her over the years. In a public lecture given in 1989, Canadian novelist and Dinesen-scholar Sara Stambaugh pointed out that the US provided her with a prime lucrative market and that American advertising was essential in the process of reaching this market (8). As recently as in November 2013 in an article in *The*

Guardian, novelist Margaret Atwood remarked that it was "New York that had made her famous back in 1934." In a Danish context, Grethe Rostbøll's 2005-study of Blixen/Dinesen's publishing history in the US and in England is, besides an excellent source that I have drawn on in my study, an acknowledgement of the importance of the North American market not only to the existence of Anglophone Isak Dinesen, but also to the world-wide renown of the Danish author Karen Blixen. As for Blixen/Dinesen herself, she recognized the truth of Stambaugh's claim that Isak Dinesen was and is American already in 1937, writing to her American publisher Robert K. Haas

> America took me on when I could not even make the publishers in Europe have a look at my book, and the American reading public received me with such generosity and open-mindedness as I shall never forget. (*Karen Blixen i Danmark Bind 1* 246)

While there may be a tacit recognition within Blixen/Dinesen-research that the North American book-club readers were instrumental in the making of the author, very little scholarly interest has been paid to the question why they received her with such generosity in 1934. This is the more surprising since many academic studies of Blixen/Dinesen's works begin with the suggestion that her writings are difficult to place in relation to the time of publication and literary history in general. In fact, the view of Blixen/Dinesen's stories as problematically anachronistic has almost become an academic tradition in its own right. In an important study published in 1964 Robert Langbaum set out to prove their relevance to modern life by reading them as a part of a modernist literary canon (1). In 2005, Ellen Rees' description of the author as someone who stood "entirely alone in her literary preoccupations" suggests that fifty years of research, and feminist research in particular, has not quite overcome Langbaum's concern that Blixen/Dinesen's works need to be contextualized in order to prove their value (*On the Margins* 13). This concern may at least partially explain why Blixen/Dinesen's writings have been defined both as modernist, post-modernist and late modernist, and also why they have generated such a variety of approaches, ranging from feminist, gothic and queer to theological and

existentialist. Norwegian Blixen-scholar Tone Selboe suggests as much when she writes that

> Despite the fact that many Blixen-readings have a focus on the exotic or anachronistic aspects of Blixen's works *in common*, there is hardly any other author who has been placed under as many *different* labels as Karen Blixen. (12)
>
> (Til tross for at mange Blixen-kommentarer har det til *felles* at de fokuserer på det eksotiske og usamtidige i forfatterskapet, så er det knapt noen annen forfatter som har blitt plassert under så mange *ulike* merkelapper som Karen Blixen.)

While recognizing the importance of academic studies of Blixen/Dinesen as modernist, late modernist, post-modernist, gothic or queer, this study will not attempt to define Blixen/Dinesen in relation to the labels of literary history or theory. Instead, I want to explore the marketability of *Seven Gothic Tales* and try to understand why this collection of short stories written by an unknown, European woman became a commercial and popular success in the US in 1934. I will look at the marketing strategies of the Book-of-the-Month-Club, but also at the ways in which Blixen/Dinesen herself contributed to her success. I will argue that far from being a susceptible victim of the commercial process of marketing and selling literature, Blixen/Dinesen was a fast learner who very consciously set about to make a living out of her writing. Since I do not conceive of the Book-of-the-Month-Club- readers in 1934 merely as gullible victims of clever marketing, I also want to consider *Seven Gothic Tales* as a work that made sense to its readers at that particular time and place, and still today. Unlike Arendt and Hertel, I do not feel the need to rescue Blixen/Dinesen either from herself, or from the readers and admirers who made her career possible in 1934 and who continue to sustain it outside the scholarly world. On the contrary, I find it fascinating that books by and about Blixen/Dinesen continue to find readers almost a century after her first book was published and fifty years after her death.

I am interested in why Blixen/Dinesen and her works were marketable during her life-time and continue to be so, and I will claim that marketability is one way of understanding the specific quality of Blixen/Dinesen works. This study is

founded on the conviction that the material conditions of a particular time and place are inscribed in the literature written at that time and place, and that the work of art always grapples with the reality and experience of the historical moment of its coming into being, not simply reflecting it but responding to and often resisting the course of the world. The time-frame of this study roughly encompasses the first three decades of the twentieth century, an era of exceptional technological, economic and productive growth with concomitant social changes, leading up to the Great Depression during which *Seven Gothic Tales* was published. The effects of globalized transformation of production and consumption were felt in the two places that went into the making of *Seven Gothic Tales*: colonial Kenya where Blixen lived between 1914 and 1931 and where the book was begun, and the US where it was first published. I will argue that the success of *Seven Gothic Tales* in the US depended on the way in which Blixen/Dinesen's experience of colonial Kenya was an experience of commercial modernity that reverberated with the experience of the American readers. Central to this argument is, paradoxically, the ideal of feudalism as an explicit and decisive element in the creation of colonial Kenya. In Blixen/Dinesen's second book, *Out of Africa* (1937), she efficiently used this ideal in her representation of Edenic bliss in a perfectly ordered, hierarchal world, mapping the confirmation of and desire for social stasis inherent in the feudal romance onto the African colonial geography and onto her own biography. What makes colonial Kenya so important in my study, however, is the manner in which the ideal of feudalism as a reflection of a divinely ordained social order became marketable as a commodity at a time of general affluence when social status and identity had in fact become negotiable on a consumer market. The economic structures had created a culture of consumption which fostered the need to create and display your identity and social status on an increasingly competitive labor-market through consumption of the kind of goods, experiences and knowledge that signaled the desired qualities. The consuming self is an individual freed from the restraints of tradition and communal values, making her free choice of whom to be on an increasingly diverse market, endlessly inventing and reinventing her identity. But this self is also a commodity on an increasingly complex and impersonal market where appearance is destiny, an experience which makes

emotional sense of Marshall Berman's observation that "to be fully modern is to be anti-modern," torn between a desire to be free and to be safe (14). What interests me, then, is the way in which this particular interpretation of modernity was realized in colonial Kenya and the US in the 1920s and 30s, and how this experience was given form in a couple of successful and popular literary works of the time, one of them being *Seven Gothic Tales.*

Since Kenya, the US and the twentieth century are entirely absent from *Seven Gothic Tales*, its tales set in European locations in the 1800s, the form and structure of the tales will be crucial in my reading. While *Out of Africa* explicitly set out to market the feudal ideal in the form of achieved reality at a particular time and place – and at the time of its publication only a decade away – *Seven Gothic Tales* interrogates the viability of this ideal. While the marketability of *Out of Africa* rests on its conscious and elegant salvaging of the anti-modern urge at the heart of modernity, the marketability of *Seven Gothic Tales* rests on its uncompromising representation of modernity as the experience of unfulfillable desire. The logic of consumerist economy dictates that there can be no end and no closure since each year, month, week and day brings a new type of car, book, experience, and identity to be bought and emulated onto the market. At the same time, this logic relies on keeping the ideal and the idea of fulfillment and completion alive as achievable reality through the imagery of omnipresent mass advertisement.

I also need to say a few words about my own experience of the marketability of Blixen/Dinesen since I have made a partial living out of her and her works within the academic world but mostly outside of it. Over the years, decades by now, I have read, written about, and published texts on both Isak Dinesen and Karen Blixen, for a number of reasons. In the 1980s Gubar's essay on "'The Blank Page' and Female Creativity" inspired me to read Blixen/Dinesen as partaking in collective "efforts to sanctify the female through symbols of female divinity, myths of female origin, metaphors of female creativity, and rituals of female power" (308). A few years later, inspired by Roland Barthes' structuralist/semiotic study *S/Z*, I subjected "The Monkey" to a painstakingly laborious close reading, a text which eventually and strangely found its way into an anthology into which it did not fit at all – as one reviewer pointed out – since

the anthology was intended to encourage a shift in literary studies and critique away from theory and towards contemporary political contexts. Next, I settled for a thematic treatment of a couple of Blixen/Dinesen-short stories in relation to Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, which was not a very original idea either. Then, post-colonial studies suddenly awakened my interest in *Out of Africa* and *Shadows on the Grass* (1961) and the ways in which a white, female author negotiates and represents identity in a colonial setting. Isak Dinesen, or rather Karen Blixen since I was writing in Swedish, became my favorite point of reference and starting point in a number of texts dealing with other female authors within the same colonial tradition. And, since it is impossible to write about negotiations of identity without submerging oneself into the life where this identity is lived, Blixen's biography became my next focus of interest, which I of course share with so many Blixen- and Dinesen-readers. I have written commercially about herself and her works but also about her silver-ware and sofas in magazines, daily papers, and books, and I have talked about her in public libraries. And while my use of Blixen/Dinesen initially consisted mostly of derivative practices in text-analysis, I have learned something important about Blixen/Dinesen, her life and works, through the years: Blixen/Dinesen sells not only khaki-outfits, postcards and silverware but also thoughts and ideas.

Fifty years after her death and the publication of her last book women mostly and a few stray men, will trudge to the local library to listen to a talk on Blixen. They are the faithful readers of her books and books about her and despite the fact that they have already read everything by and about her there are still new things to be learned and discussed. Was she a racist? But, then, what about the fact that she taught some of the children at the Ngong farm in Kenya in secret since the British did not allow native schools outside the missionary stations? Was she a feminist? But, then, what about her 1953 *Båltale* where she claimed that to be a man is to do, to go out and possess the world and shape it. To be woman is to be, to stay at the hearth and remain loyal to the man and to her own womanhood. How does this view of the sexes as unchanging, diametrically opposed essences fit into the story of her life? She who went out in the world to possess and shape it, and then became a professional author who lived off and supported others by her pen. How does it fit into her tales where appearances can never be trusted?

Where a man may transform into a woman through the simple act of putting on a bonnet, where a woman transforms into a monkey and where women never stay at their hearths but roam the world plotting, planning and acting to change it in accordance with their desires. Was she an old-school conservative who believed in the unchanging essence of blue blood, the absolute rights of the feudal lord and a divinely ordained social order? Well, she did insist on being called baroness by everybody but the close family, even by her faithful, under-paid or not at all paid living-in secretary-cum-maid. But what about the ways in which she cleverly navigated the modern world of mass media and regularly appeared on the radio or on television and arranged to meet Marilyn Monroe on her visit to the US? She turned this meeting into a public photo-opportunity that eternalized the moment when the voluptuous, ultra-feminine, platinum-blonde and the emaciated, black-clad, turbaned, sex-less figure face one another, raising their glasses. And what about all the noble bastards in her tales? The valet successfully disguised as a blue-blooded Cardinal and the shape-shifting or slightly mad Ladies that inhabit her literature. What about her self-declared materialism and love of money? Her mystical beliefs in eternal, transcendent values? The incongruities of Blixen/Dinesen's life and works, within her writings, between what she said and what she did, between what she said and what she wrote, between what she insisted on being in one moment, and how she appeared in the next, continue to fascinate. Although, at the libraries, we do not speak of it as incongruities because that would suggest that we would like her and her literature to be stable entities, always identical to a single, true source of meaning and selfhood, transparent and easy to place in the order of thoughts, traditions and -isms. We speak of it as playfulness, and we recognize the significance of Blixen/Dinesen to our own lives in the way in which both her life and her works map and articulate our own experiences of living at the beginning of the twenty-first century. They confirm our experience of being torn between the freedom of being a self-inventing subject on a market in constant flux on the one hand, and the safety of being confirmed by a world where identities and values are stable and unchanging. But we also recognize Blixen/Dinesen's ability to turn this experience into a commodity on the market, turning herself and her books into consumable artefacts by exploiting our need to feel safe and our desire to reinvent our selves at one and

the same time. We admire her for her shrewdness because, as one library-visitor pointed out, it makes her a role-model for all women within the framework of the consumer society in which we have to make our living, thus recognizing playfulness as grace under duress.

My own experience of Blixen/Dinesen's continuous marketability on a commercial market was an important incentive in the writing of this study. But so was my experience of her continuous marketability within an educational system that while importantly construing itself as non-commercial, in fact behaves very much like a market where theoretical fashions come and go, and money and salaried positions are allocated accordingly. The perception of Blixen/Dinesen within both worlds bears witness to the relevance of her works and her life to our attempts to understand the world in which we live.

My guide throughout this study will be the introduction to *Seven Gothic Tales*, written by Dorothy Canfield Fisher in 1934. Today, Blixen/Dinesen's fame certainly outshines Canfield Fisher's, but at the time the latter's sponsoring of the authorship was crucial and it is probably correct to say that without her, neither Isak Dinesen nor the author Karen Blixen had ever come into existence. In August 1931 46-year old Blixen had left Kenya and moved in with her ageing mother in the house at Rungstedlund where she had grown up. She was deeply depressed and utterly destitute, quarrelling with her mother about money for cigarettes and the right to go out by herself in her mother's old car every now and then. Still, she continued her work with the stories that she had begun in Kenya, and less than a year after her arrival in Denmark she asked her brother Thomas Dinesen to write a letter to Dorothy Canfield Fisher. Canfield Fisher was an old friend of Blixen's aunt Bess Westenholz, and Thomas Dinesen had met the American novelist briefly a few years earlier when picking her up at the airport outside Copenhagen and driving her to his aunt.[3] The letter is signed by Thomas Dinesen but the editors of Blixen/Dinesen's Danish correspondence are probably correct when they refer to it as Blixen's "first personal approach to the person who would be the first to champion her fantastic stories and secure her breakthrough as an author

[3] According to the editors of *Karen Blixen i Danmark*, Canfield Fisher would later recall that Bess Westenholz had become quite upset when she learned of her niece's tactics and her exploitation of an old friendship (*Bind 1* 83).

on the American book market" (første personlige henvendelse til det menneske, der først af alle gik i brechen for hendes fantastiske historier og skaffede hende et litterært gennembrud på det amerikanske bogmarked) (*Karen Blixen i Danmark. Bind 1* 83). In fact, Blixen, using her brother as a mouthpiece, asked Canfield Fisher to read the stories with the American magazine market in mind. In the letter, Thomas Dinesen pointed out that his sister, "Baroness Blixen," was trying to find an English publisher who was willing to publish the stories in a book, but "she wants to try first whether it would be possible to have one or two of them taken by a magazine in America or England," as the letter puts it, helpfully listing a handful of "well known" magazines such as *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Scribner's* or *Harper's* (83). Blixen's first contact with the American publishing industry is interesting because it foreshadows traits that would characterize her later career. While she freely admitted that America had taken her on before anyone else was willing to do so, there would always also be something roundabout and haughty in Blixen/Dinesen's approach to her American benefactors and publishers. The go-between role assigned to her brother in 1932 would later be taken over by her English publishers when Blixen/Dinesen decided that her manuscripts would have to pass through their hands for editing before they got to the Americans. And while keeping her American editors at an arm's length distance she would continue to write with an eye on the American magazine market with its promise of swift rewards.

If Canfield Fisher was at all put off by Baroness Blixen's peculiar combination of old-fashioned reticence and business acumen, she did not show it. She wrote back to Thomas Dinesen in August 1932, and her letter combines praise of the stories with a down-to-earth estimation of their value. She had shown them to a visiting friend who also happened to be a publisher who

> has taken them back to New York with him to show them to his partner. He agrees with me that there is little possibility that any magazine could use them serially, (they are too long, and with too little of what is called "narrative interest" for that, we both think) but the book publication by an American publishing house is apt to be rather more profitable to an author than the British publication. (*Karen Blixen i Danmark. Bind 1* 90)

The friend and publisher was Robert K. Haas at Harrison Smith and Robert Haas, and he wrote directly to Blixen herself, dropping all pretences of corresponding with a protective brother.[4] He did find the stories "remarkable," but reluctantly declined publication "on account of the difficulty of selling any collection of short stories in substantial quantity" (95). In a second letter a month later Haas again expressed his regrets at not being able to publish short stories by an unknown author, adding that he was sure that Baroness Blixen had heard about the present "business conditions" (98). When Canfield Fisher finally wrote directly to Blixen in April 1933 she also blamed business when she accused the American publishers of not getting "up their courage in the face of the depression" (106). Only a few months after Canfield Fisher's letter Haas changed his mind about publishing short stories by an unknown author and he sent Blixen a contract which stipulated that she would not receive the customary advance. While there is nothing in writing to prove it, it is likely that Canfield Fisher in her capacity of Book-of-the-Month-Club-associate had everything to do with his change of mind and that she had promised not only to promote the book in the Club, but also to write an introduction.

Her introduction is a shrewd piece of salesmanship written by someone who knew the potential customers, their desires and fears. It emphatically places the stories of this collection in the "stand in the literary market where they are for sale," brandishing their alluring newness while encouragingly pointing out that they are not the work of genius (vi). It is in this context that Blixen/Dinesen's career begun, and this is also where my study starts, drawing on Janice Radway's and Joan Shelley Rubin's studies of the history and set-up of the Book-of-the-Month-Club in the context of an evolving American consumer culture and the advertising industry of the early twentieth century. Against this background, I will consider the significance of what Blixen/Dinesen's publisher Haas identified as difficulties in the promotion of *Seven Gothic Tales*: her insistence on anonymity and the short story format. On an ever-growing book market the author's public persona became a crucial part of marketing, and I will consider Blixen/Dinesen's initial resistance in relation to the careers of authors Ellen Glasgow and Vicki

[4] Robert Haas served as President of the Book-of-the-Month-Club between 1926 and 1931 before going into publishing.

Baum who were also promoted by the Book-of-the-Month-Club. My discussion of the short story format takes Haas' observation that the American public did not like books made up of collections of short stories as its starting-point, considering it in relation to the neighboring magazine market and Blixen/Dinesen's publishing strategies. The final two sections of part I argue that the spectre of sordid commercialism has haunted the critical and academic perception of Blixen/Dinesen's works and that in order to fit the mold of what Fredric Jameson has termed the ideology of modernism, the author and her works have had to be detached from the commercial, mass culture context, a process beginning in the 1960s and on-going today.

In the second part of this study, I will use Canfield Fisher's description of the characters in *Seven Gothic Tales* as a "race apart" to consider the significance of the feudal and aristocratic theme to Blixen/Dinesen's stories and their reception (vi). Using Tzvetan Todorov's discussion of verisimilitude and the fantastic in a close reading of the first few pages of "The Roads Round Pisa" that opens *Seven Gothic Tales* I will try to show that it is possible to read this story, explicitly set in 1823, as a story about a familiar, hierarchical world in 1934. At the same time, the representation of the aristocratic characters demands a shift in the mode of reading that de-familiarizes the familiar, suggesting that social reality and hierarchy are grounded in an imaginary register that is produced and re-produced in the form of a world view, or an ideology. The notion that there is such a thing as blue-bloodedness may be ridiculous and fantastic but it nevertheless shapes social reality. In the final section of part II, I will argue that Blixen/Dinesen's Kenyan years hold the key to an interpretation of the aristocratic theme that permeates *Seven Gothic Tales*. Not, as it has been suggested, because they enabled her to live out and recreate a European, feudal past in her writings, but because colonial Kenya reinvented the feudal ideal as a marketable commodity in a global consumer society. Read against the colonial background, *Seven Gothic Tales* testifies to the viability of the aristocratic idea and the feudal, hierarchical ethos as image, appearance, and as fiction.

In part III, I will reflect on the form of *Seven Gothic Tales*, the significance of its title but also its two most conspicuous features, namely the wealth of intertextual references and the inset tales. Using a formulation from Canfield

Fisher, I will consider the ways in which what she describes as the "many-colored literary fog" in *Seven Gothic Tales* makes it into a malleable, multi-purpose work of art that could capture a diverse audience (ix). Finally, I want to try to make sense of Canfield Fisher's claim that *Seven Gothic Tales*, despite being a book about a "race apart" viewed through the haze of a "many-colored literary fog" could also be said to be a book about "perfectly real human beings" (x). How did *Seven Gothic Tales* fit into the time and place of its first publication, that is to say, the US in the grips of a deep and catastrophic Depression?

Throughout this study I will refer to the author as Blixen/Dinesen. It is an ugly and clumsy construction, but since I am using biographical material by and about Karen Blixen while writing about the literary works written in English under the name Isak Dinesen, this seems to be the only reasonable way of referring to her. The translations from Danish, Norwegian and Swedish into English are my own throughout.

This Little Book Went to Market

Book-of-the-Month-Club

When Blixen/Dinesen published her first work in 1934, her authorship was launched in close collaboration with the Book-of-the-Month-Club. In 1934, the Club had been around for more than a decade and had amply demonstrated, as Charles Lee observed when he wrote a laudatory study in 1958, that "advertisement could encourage popular culture. Culture could produce profits" (29). To Lee it was obvious that Blixen/Dinesen belonged on the list of "new writers the Club has sponsored (with their publishers of course!)," together with names such as Pearl Buck, Rosamond Lehmann, Elizabeth Bowen, Margaret Mitchell, Vicki Baum, Sigrid Undset, and Mika Waltari, Americans as well as Europeans, works in English as well as translations (118). Lee also quoted Haas who quite frankly stated that "*Seven Gothic Tales* might have done 3000 instead of the 20 000 copies it did in the trade" had it not been for the Book-of-the-Month-Club-selection (207). This success paved the way for a British edition, and speedy translations into Danish and Swedish.[5]

When Lee wrote his study of the Book-of-The-Month-Club's history in 1958, the Club had been in existence for more than a quarter of a century and the story Lee told was one of almost uninterrupted success. By mid-century, the Book-of-the-Month-Club had become an important and even somewhat respected institution on the American book market, and it was no longer selling only books. In the early 1950s, the Club had sought and gained the confidence of institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Metropolitan Opera, establishing joint ventures where reproductions of famous works of art and opera recordings were sold with the recommendations of the two prestigious Mets' and through the commercial channels created and controlled by the Club.

It had not always been thus. That is, the Club had always been a commercially successful enterprise since its inception in April, 1926 when it sent out its first

[5] In a reply to a letter from her Norwegian friend Gustav Mohr, congratulating her on her American success, Blixen/Dinesen wrote in June 1934 that the Club's selection meant that her book would reach "50 000 readers." Since this figure does not correspond to the actual number of Club-members, it is likely that she is referring to the print run commissioned by the Club (*Karen Blixen i Danmark* Bind I 140).

selection of books to 4 750 members, with the exception of a dip in circulation at the beginning of the 1930s. By the end of 1926, the membership-number had increased to 46 539 customers, and 362 585 a decade later (Lee).

The Club had, however, been deeply criticized and contested from the very beginning, and not only by the book-sellers who accused the mail-order club of unfair competition in the market place. Much more virulent and lingering was the critique coming from universities, intellectuals, publishers and authors. They accused the Club of lowering literary standards and, indeed, threatening the very concept of literature itself.

In her study of American corporate publishing in the early twentieth century, Kim Becnel points out that the book-making endeavor had always been considered a gentleman's art. The Club was considered as "a child of advertising" and was seen as openly and unabashedly challenging this tradition and the cultural values it sanctioned and protected (20). In the same vein, Janice Radway, in her massive and personal study of the Club, writes that the book industry was "notable for its continuing ideological, if not economic, dependence on a different model of production organized around the creative activity of a singular, autonomous author understood to be the initiator of the publication process" (*A Feeling for Books* 128).

The Club's founder Harry Scherman certainly did not fit the mold of a gentleman publisher. He started out as a copy-writer in the mail-order department of an advertising agency, and used his combined experience of advertising and mail-order business when he started the Little Leather Library together with Maxwell Sackheim in 1916. The Little Leather Library were reprints of canonical literary works, often abridged and nicely bound in leather, sold through subscription and sent out by mail to the customers. The Leather Library did fairly well, but Scherman soon understood that the classical works were too small a literary base to found a commercially sound enterprise on; their number was, after all, limited. He needed new books, new merchandise, but he also needed to impress on his potential buyers that the untried merchandise held (almost) the same cultural value as that which had been tried and found valuable by the ages. Where value had once been accumulated and established slowly Scherman needed it to be established immediately; pre-reading as it were. The Club bought the

distribution rights from the publishing houses based on manuscripts not-yet-in-print, and, as early as 1930, manufactured its own editions. As Joan Shelley Rubin points out

> The originality of Sherman's contribution was, of course, not the transformation of books or even culture into objects for purchase. Rather, by selling an opportunity to acquire books not yet published, instead of the books themselves, Scherman created a new *kind* of cultural commodity. (103)

But in order to sell what we might call "book/cultural options," Scherman needed to authorize the value of the books he wanted to sell. In order to do so he introduced the Selecting Committee, a crucial marketing device that successfully set the Club apart from competing book-clubs.[6] The Book-of-the-Month-Club was not the only mail-order-based book-club on the American or European markets at the time. Only in the US, there were nine thriving subscription-clubs in 1928, testifying to the educational zeal of the members, but also to the scarcity of book-stores; 32 per cent of the US public were without direct access to any book-store in 1930 (Lee 26). Neither is it correct to claim, as Lee did in 1958, that the Club's special contribution to the merchandising of new books consisted of adapting the mechanisms of a magazine-operation by turning book readers into subscribers. The Book-of-the-Month-Club was one of the first clubs to do so in the US, but in Europe and especially in Germany, the system of membership, subscription and "limited choice" was already in practice by 1926.[7] Rather, it was in the field of establishing cultural value that Scherman and his Club broke new ground when he instituted the "Judges." Originally, there were five of them, and their salaried job was to read all manuscripts being sent in by publishing houses (not by authors directly). They discussed those at a monthly day-long meeting in New York, and selected the handful of books that would be included as Books-of-the-Month. This task soon became impossible, due to the sheer number of manuscripts pouring in.

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[6] "so that [the subscriber] would know he wasn't buying a pig in a poke" as Scherman himself put it (qtd. in Rubin 104).

[7] The "negative option"- construction was and is crucial to any commercial membership-based enterprise. The customer is offered an item – the book or a pair of socks – of-the-month and in order *not* to receive this item, he or she must say "no."

Thus, the judges' final selection was preceded by a first selection made by anonymous "readers" employed by the Book-of-the-Month-Club. Never exactly a secret, this first "in-house" selection was not something the Club chose to make public. In 1927, the judges were presented in a brochure with full-page photographs and their lists of credentials, "a format that made the judges into larger-than-life exemplars of mastery" as Rubin writes (101). Pictures of the judges routinely appeared in ads between 1926 and 1933, thereafter more seldom.

The Selection Committee drew immediate critical fire, both from agents within the commercial book market, such as book-sellers, -publishers and -reviewers, and from the academic world. The former complained that the Club was instituting a sort of literary dictatorship and a standardization of literature that would eventually destroy the readers' ability to pass independent judgments. The latter, however, seemed to be less concerned with the readers' sensibilities. Rather, it was the presupposed autonomy of the aesthetic field at large that was at stake when books were being advertised and sold like any other commodity, and when new books that no one but editors and the Club-judges had read, were passed off as the "important new books." [8]

The book-sellers and the publishers calmed down eventually when the Club was able to prove statistically that their selections tended to boost book-store selling of the chosen titles. On the commercial book market then, the Club was able to present itself as a complement and even an ally rather than the enemy. The academic world however, remained distrustful and openly critical of the Club. The blatantly commercial nature of its operations was not really the issue since Sherman hardly invented the art of selling books through advertising. Also, the Club could not be accused of peddling pulp literature produced in fiction factories, since it always worked together with respectable publishing houses and identifiable authors. Instead, the first real problem was that the Club, through its Selecting Committee, openly set itself up as a competing expert in the field of literature. Secondly, the board of judges approached literature in a way that did not sit well with the academically trained literary elite. Henry Seidel Canby was

[8] 1927-Book-of-the-Month-Club-brochure (qtd. in Rubin 100)

the chairman of the judges, and in an interview he summed up his own approach to the task and the role of great versus good books:

> Because no permanent contribution to world literature has been published in the month of May, is a critic therefore stopped from recommending somebody's good and readable novel? … To conceive of a critic as an arbiter who lowers himself by approving of the plain fare of good books, not great, which most of us largely feed upon if we are to share the thought of our own time, is literary snobbery and devoid of common sense. (qtd. in Lee 118)[9]

Canby however, was not only a Club-judge, but also an English Professor at Yale University. In another interview he made clear that he really did not distinguish between his activities at the university on the one hand, and in the Committee on the other. Wherever he was, and whatever books he was reading, with whatever audience in mind, he defined his own ruling purpose thus: "Whether in college or on the Book-of-the-Month-Club or on *The Review*, [it] has been the passing on of sound values to others" (qtd. in Lee 124).[10]

"Sound values" and "common sense" are keywords in Canby's definition of what makes for good enough but perhaps not great literature. Radway describes him as someone whose literary preferences lay with an older generation of writers, such as Edith Wharton or Willa Cather. Rubin describes him as someone whose view of the world and the role of literature were governed by "genteel idealism" (123). In this respect, Canby had a great deal in common with the second most important judge, Dorothy Canfield Fisher. While the Committee

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[9] That Canby did make a clear distinction between "good" and "great" literature and the role of the Club becomes obvious when we consider his statement on Pearl Buck's 1938-Nobel-prize. He said: "The Swedish Academy's standards are high but evidently they are flexible, otherwise it would be difficult to account for the recent award." As a judge, he was responsible for selecting no less than fifteen works by Pearl Buck as Club-books. He was also responsible for not selecting William Faulkner's works, whose comment on Pearl Buck's Nobel-prize nevertheless echoes that of Canby; "I don't want it. I'd rather be in the company of Sherwood Anderson and Theodore Dreiser than S. Lewis and China-hand Buck" (both Canby and Faulkner qtd. in Becnel 89). Sinclair Lewis was also a steady presence on the Club's selection lists. Faulkner, on the other hand, did not make the selection until after he received his Nobel-prize in 1949. Which, incidentally, he did accept.

[10] Canby was the founder and first editor of the literary magazine *The Saturday Review of Literature*

knew no formal hierarchies but operated according to the principle one person-one vote, Canby and Canfield Fisher were the most widely known among the judges, and it was to those two that journalists and later researchers turned when interested in the opinions and history of the Club's Committee. She, too, was an academic with a PhD in English/French literature from Columbia University but after marriage she settled for a life as a farmer's wife and freelance writing, also of fictional pieces, and eventually novels. During WW I she volunteered as an ambulance driver in Paris and wrote a collection of essays on her experience in war-time Europe. She also wrote on child-rearing, inspired by Maria Montessori whose works she translated and introduced in the US. Radway defines her as a "a female literary sage who could effectively mediate for her readers between the demands of contemporary life and an older, more stable, moral and ethical universe" (179). In a moving introduction to a collection of stories that was published in 1956, Canfield Fisher put forth what could perhaps be labelled her cultural credo, her view of what art could and should be. She writes "that art with its magical intuition brings, and should bring, to the observer an enrichment of human life … of humanity's ceaseless Pilgrim's Progress through the years" (*A Harvest of Stories* 31). This is a somewhat more sage-like echo of Canby's call for "sound values" and "common sense," Through the agency of good, readable books, both Canby and Canfield Fisher in their role as judges wanted to offer the readers a "sentimental education" as Radway puts it (263). That is, both judges embraced a notion of traditional bourgeois "Bildung," understood both in a moral and a cultural sense, and cherished the possibility of transmitting it to the masses through reading. Good reading made for good people, and Rubin points out that

> Canby's and Fisher's dominance as exponents of integrity, morality, and literary standards perpetuated the genteel tradition in a perhaps surprising place: at the heart of an institution inextricably tied to advertising and consumption. (143)

This also meant that formal literary experiments, later labelled modernist by literary history, were not included in the selections during the 1920s, 30s and 40s. T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, Djuna Barnes, Gertrude Stein or Ezra Pound are conspicuously absent. Virginia Woolf, however, is represented by her cheerful

"dog-biography"-novel *Flush* in 1933, and in 1941 the Club ambitiously offered Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. It is probably safe to say that the first judges reasoned in a way similar to that of Radway's informants in the 1980s who declared that some books were simply "much too academic for us" (9). It was, however, not only a matter of form. Out of a 95-title list of "Radical Novels of the Depression Era," compiled in 2004 by Janet Galligani Casey, only one made the Club's selections.[11] The Club chose not to select a number of authors that have come to be regarded as outstanding writers of and on the era; John Dos Passos, Tillie Olsen or Dalton Trumbo. Thus, it is probably also safe to say, as Radway does, that "the judges were much more comfortable with books that attempted to combat despair with sympathy and affiliation," as opposed to political organizing and wrath (279).

So, the judges chose good, enriching books that were neither formally experimental, nor too radical in terms of subject or political views. Good, but not necessarily great, books, "a plain fare" for readers whose main activity was not reading to interpret or analyze, but reading for pleasure. At the same time, the Club-advertisements as well as the judges' definitions of "good literature" suggest that pleasure was not the Club's pre-eminent selling point, but rather usefulness: the promise that 'Bildung' and enrichment would follow from pleasure as an almost accidental by-product. An early Club-ad read:

> Think over the last few years. How often outstanding books appeared, widely discussed and widely recommended, books you were really anxious to read and fully intended to read when you 'got around to it', but which nevertheless you *missed*! Why is it you disappoint yourself so frequently in this way? (qtd. in Rubin 99)

[11] Richard Wright's *Native Son* was selected in 1940, the year it came out. *Black Boy*, by the same author, was also selected in 1945. According to Radway, the judges asked Wright to make alterations in both manuscripts, and he complied, knowing fully well how important a selection could be for sales figures. *Native Son* sold 215 000 copies within three weeks. Radway wryly comments that there were "limits to the kinds of identifications the judges thought their subscribers could tolerate or enjoy" (286). The other author on the "radical list" who made the Club's list was John Steinbeck, not, however, with *The Grapes of Wrath* which was turned down by the judges. According to Lee, Canby still regretted this decision when asked about it more than a decade later (171). Whether his feelings were due to Steinbeck's 1940-Pulitzer Prize or a case of genuine regret over having willingly passed over a good book, we of course cannot know.

The language suggests that "Bildung" in this context should not be understood primarily in its traditional, bourgeois sense, but rather "Bildung" as something to be consumed and displayed in a social setting, such as a suburban cocktail-party where books were one topic. Still, in the appeal to rigorous self-fashioning through cultural consumption and in accordance with a preconceived notion of the ideal citizen, the moral imperative at the heart of the Bildung-concept still echoes in the Club-ad.

The Club members and readers were indeed intent on educating themselves culturally and otherwise. In an article in 1921 in *North American Review*, before he became a judge, Canby wrote about the new audience created by education:

> Homes have changed, especially "refined" homes, and a new home means a new public. The refined home nowadays has been to college. (There are a million college graduates now in the United States.) Forty years ago only scattered members had gone beyond the school … Refined homes may not be better or happier than they used to be, but if they are intellectual at all, they are more vigorously intellectual. This means at the simplest that home readers of the kind I have been describing want stimulating food, not what our grand fathers used to call "slops." (437)

The readers from refined homes were a new and ever-growing audience, and their desires shaped the literary field and the image of the author/s, also in the sense of what authors they did not want to, or, according to Club-standards should or could not, read. Radway writes that

> the Book-of-the-Month-Club always wanted to have it both ways. It wanted to appeal to the general reader's desire for pleasure, entertainment, and titillation and, at the same time, to cloak itself in the highbrow garb of cultural significance. (319)

In the light of the Club's selections during the 1930s, Radway is unnecessarily harsh when she describes the dual agenda as "cloaking itself in highbrow garb" to cover up its purely commercial interest in satisfying consumer desires. There are a great number of titles during those years that reflect the educational zeal of Canby's and Canfield Fisher's Bildung-idealism, for example: *The Heart of*

Emerson's Journals (1927), *The Intelligent Woman's guide to Socialism and Capitalism* by George Bernard Shaw (1928), *All quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque (1929), *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy, *Living Philosophies* by Albert Einstein (1931), *Nine Plays* by Eugene O'Neill (1932) and *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck (1937).

There was an American dominance but a number of translated works of fiction and non-fiction were selected every year. Since data on the early membership of the Club has not survived, or never even existed, we cannot know for whom these rather challenging reading lists were intended. Lee was probably right when he observed that at least in the 1950s, the Club "eliminated" illiterate enrollees (146).[12] In a 1996-lecture to the Swedish Publisher's Association, Radway claimed that "doctors, dentists, lawyers, teachers – these were the people the club counted on," or, in other words, the professional-managerial class with enough money and spare time, and with cultural ambitions (*Books and Reading in the Age of Mass Production* 31). The only existing statistical survey of Club membership that I have come across, suggests that women have dominated the membership rolls, at least between the years 1947-1958 (Lee 147), suggesting that it might have been the home-making wives of the doctors, dentists and lawyers that the Club counted on, at least until the 1960s and 1970s.

Consumer Culture

In Canfield Fisher's introduction to *Seven Gothic Tales* in 1934, "new" is a key-word in the opening passage where the experience of reading this particular book is likened to eating a new fruit, with a strange new flavor, giving a new sensation (v). Almost immediately the notion of newness is coupled with that of tradition, when Canfield Fisher references a number of authors, such as Byron, "Romantic School," Cervantes, R. L. Stevenson and Hoffman, thus establishing a kinship between the brand new stories at hand and the kind of literary and cultural value that can only be accumulated over time. The references to tradition are, seemingly, only present to be discarded, because finally, writes Canfield Fisher,

[12] Without going into detail about how this elimination was carried out, or on what grounds.

"you can't find a comparison" (viii). What the reader will get, after all, is newness, but by now associated with that which has been tried and found valuable by the ages. They are buying an "important new book" and "stimulating food," but not "a pig in a poke" or "slops," to speak in the language of Book-of-the-Month-Club-advertisement, Scherman, and Canby. Or, as the well-known literary critic Hershell Brickell put it in his review of *Seven Gothic Tales* in *The North American Review* in June 1934: "seven novelettes whose flavor is finally their own, although it is possible to recognize some of the elements in the blend" (569). Brickell also admitted that while he liked the book, he found it "very odd" and difficult to describe, and he suggested that this was the reason why the publishers had added an introduction written by Canfield Fisher, which was "not only a charming essay in itself, but which will serve admirably as a sample; that is, it catches the essential quality of the stories and lets you know whether the book is for you or not" (569)

The food metaphors that pervade the writings of Scherman, Canby, Canfield Fisher and other central figures in the Book-of-the-Month-Club and on the American book market in general cannot be a mere coincidence. The readers are addressed as consumers of literature facing a market. Their tastes need to be cultivated through the intake of books carefully chosen by the Selecting Committee or a reviewer, in accordance with the understanding that you are what you consume. There is an over-determined, if not conscious, slippage between the levels of literal and metaphorical speech in the ways in which literature is being sold as a consumable item to be devoured.

Seven Gothic Tales, then, in Canfield Fisher's rendering, is a "dead-ripe pineapple. Yet only if it had always been watered with fine old wine. Grown out of doors in Siberia too, for all it has that southern tang. Nothing hothouse about it" (v). Clearly, there is nothing of the "plain fare of good books ... which most of us largely feed upon if we are to share the thoughts of our own time," as Canby put it in explaining the selections he made in his role as Book-of-the-Month-Club-judge (qtd. in Lee 118). At the same time, Canfield Fisher is careful to point out that *Seven Gothic Tales* "for all their bizarre power, can scarcely expect to have the thumping signboard of genius hung up above the stand in the literary market where they are for sale" (vi). In this single sentence, she cleverly captured the

innovative spirit of the Book-of-the-Month-Club that made it into such a successful actor on the American book market. First, by addressing the potential reader in her or his role as a customer ambling between the stalls of the literary market, Canfield Fisher was using the image of the market as socially levelling, egalitarian force. Books were no different than other consumer items, and culture in general was accessible to everybody who could afford to buy it. Secondly, she assured the reader that this particular work was not only accessible in market-terms, but also intellectually within reach of the potential reader. Defined as a good-enough book but not a work of genius, *Seven Gothic Tales* was presented as a typical Book-of-the-Month-Club product.

Still, there was a complication that had to be overcome in the marketing of *Seven Gothic Tales* that Canfield Fisher explicitly addressed when she wrote that she could not tell the reader the first fact "which everybody wants to know about a book – who is the author" (v). While Blixen/Dinesen was prepared to have the Americans change the order of the tales, and accepted their title-suggestion, she was adamant about using a pseudonym.[13] She also initially insisted on complete anonymity, and only allowed her publisher to reveal her identity once the book had been published and proved a success. In a letter written on the eve of publication in January 1934 when bound copies of the proof had already gone out to critics and book clubs, Haas made a final attempt to make her change her mind. It is worth quoting at some length as an example of a publisher's weary and wary attempt to explain the workings of the commercial, American book market to an inexperienced and recalcitrant author:

> Living in a small country you can hardly conceive of the immense flood of books that deluges the American critics in the Spring and Fall. To be assured of success a book has in some way to become established even before it is published. It must be by a popular writer who can command a

[13] In a 3-line telegram in February 1934, Haas informed Blixen/Dinesen that *Seven Gothic Tales* had been selected by the Book-of-the-Month-Club. He also wrote: "would you consent exchanging position of deluge and Pisa/ cable," that is, opening the collection with "The Deluge at Norderney" rather than "The Roads Round Pisa" (*Karen Blixen i Danmark. Bind 1* 126). There is nothing in writing to show whether this last-minute proposal had been discussed earlier, or whether Dinesen cabled back her approval. When the book was published in April, the order had been changed. While it cannot be proved, it seems likely that the Book-of-the-Month-Club-representatives informally shared their views with Haas on this matter, and he acted accordingly.

> large audience, or by some device the publisher must have established the merit of his book in the mind of the book world weeks before it appears. With *Seven Gothic Tales* we have the advantage of Dorothy Canfield's charming introduction. Against it we have the fact that the American public does not like books made up of collections of short stories, and it does want to know about the author of a book. The anonymity you have chosen is a very real difficulty. (*Karen Blixen i Danmark*. *Bind 1* 124)

There is a note of desperation in this letter as Haas enumerates the obstacles, counting Canfield Fisher's introduction as the only tangible asset in the marketing of *Seven Gothic Tales*. He was probably right in his assessment of Blixen/Dinesen's inability to understand the American situation, and not only in relation to the marketing of books but in relation to a general consumer culture evolving on the other side of the Atlantic at this time. To understand the "newness" of *Seven Gothic Tales* and the way in which its "newness" must have reverberated with the particular "newness" of the USA in the 1930s we need to understand something about the role played by the concept of "newness" at this precise time and place. This era marked the beginning of a "new" way of imagining and being in the world, including the author's "being" as a part of the marketing mechanisms.

In fact, Canfield Fisher's use of the image of eating a "dead-ripe pineapple" to define the "new" sensation of reading Isak Dinesen, suggests the particular quality of this "newness." It presents the act of reading as literal consumption and suggests that the concomitant notion of taste is a crucial aspect in the selection of a book on an ever-growing market of books. It is also significant that it references the imported fruits that, once exclusive, had become available to a wider range of consumers in the early 1900s and was advertised on a mass market. In 1907, Dole had produced one of the first nationwide consumer advertisement campaigns in the US. Canned pineapples made the transfer from an elite-consumer segment to the mass market that had already been made by other colonial products such as tea, coffee, tobacco and cocoa.[14] Canfield Fisher's choice of the consumption of a

[14] Blixen/Dinesen herself never wrote about pineapples, and in general there is not much eating going on in her stories, with the significant exception of *Babette's Feast*, first published in *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1950.

pineapple to represent the experience of reading *Seven Gothic Tales* in 1934 becomes an evocative way of selling the work at hand in a cultural context where "social practices and cultural values, ideas, aspirations and identities are defined and oriented in relation to consumption rather than to other social dimensions," as Don Slater writes in his study of consumer culture (24). Identity and self were continuously re-created through the increased accessibility to things which were themselves always presented as new and improved.

Slater points out that consumption is always a cultural process in the sense that *what* and *how* we consume has cultural significance in any society at any given time.[15] The terms consumerism and consumer culture, on the other hand, are understood as referencing a culture *of* consumption, where consumption is the dominant mode of cultural reproduction in a social context, and intimately bound up "with central values, practices and institutions" (8). In a consumer culture, the relationship between lived culture and social and material resources is predominantly mediated through markets. The individual is perceived and perceives her- or himself as a consumer on these markets, making free and rational choices about what and how to consume. Further, in a consumer culture, everything can be turned into a sellable commodity on the market. In her fiction, Blixen/Dinesen often productively used the tension between our lingering sense that certain things, experiences and beliefs somehow belong in a non-commercial, non-consumable sphere of existence on the one hand, and our sometimes painful realization that there can be no such sphere any longer on the other. In *Seven Gothic Tales*, this tension is present in the long, inset tale called "The Wine of the Tetrarch" where Barabbas and Peter meet the day after the crucifixion and Barabbas makes the latter an offer:

If, today, however, one uses the combination "Dinesen/pineapple" in a net-search, one gets a number of hits referencing a Danish movie based on the tale (1987). To read the tale and watch the movie in one sitting offers an illustration of the way in which consumer culture has evolved during the forty years that separate tale from movie. In the tale, eating and drinking is tastefully exclusive, restrained, and – set in rural Norway in the 1870s – in fact entirely realistic: Amontillado, Veuve Cliquot 1860, turtle-soup, Blinis Demidoff, Cailles en Sarcophage, grapes, peaches, figs. The movie, on the other hand, revels in imagery of tropical fruits such as papaya, pomegranates and pineapples, which, of course, undermines the realistic tendency of the original.

[15] A fact which *Babette's Feast* makes ample and highly amusing use of it in its representation of the way in which the profoundly religious and ascetic Norwegians approach and interpret the feast prepared by the French cook.

> ‘I have been informed that your Rabbi, on the night before he died, gave a party to his followers, and that at the time a special wine was served, which was very rare and had some highly precious body in it. Have you, now, any more of this wine, and will you consent to sell it to me? I will give you your price.’ (177)

Peter’s response is one of utter perplexity and distress, and we understand his perplexity while at the same time recognizing the modern consumer making a free and qualified choice on the wine-market in the figure of Barabbas. However we decide to describe and interpret the effect of this clash between two inherently opposed systems of value, I would argue that the effect is only achievable in a cultural context where Barabbas’ understanding of value is as applicable as Peter’s. To a reader in a consumer culture the suggestion that the precious body of the wine of the Last Supper can be sold and bought no longer primarily comes across a sacrilegious proposition. It becomes instead a hilarious and perhaps slightly troubling comment on the degree to which all values had become translatable into monetary terms.

In recommending the looked-for newness of a tale such as this in 1934, Canfield Fisher must have had a well-grounded sense of the contemporary readers’ sensibilities. Slater and other theorists on consumer culture and modernity dismiss the notion that consumer culture suddenly erupts at a particular point in time as the result of one single historical process. Still, the North American 1920s was, as Slater points out, the first decade to proclaim a generalized ideology of affluence, promoting a powerful link between everyday consumption and modernization. Modernity was present in the seemingly endlessly expanding markets of consumer goods, real estate and credit cards, and the spread of affluence and leisure to new social segments able to take up their positions as modern consumers (13). Consumer culture fostered a consumption ethics which placed value in the very act of consumption itself, propelling development and freeing the individual from the restraints imposed by an earlier culture defined by want and the restrictions imposed by social authorities of tradition, religion and political and economic elites. To be a consumer is to choose, and consumer sovereignty is, as Slater points out, an extremely “compelling image of freedom, providing one of the few tangible and mundane

experiences of freedom which feels personally significant to modern subjects" (27). Viewed from this perspective, both the question and figure of Barabbas appear as significantly modern. Neither recognizing the authority of divine cosmology, nor the authority of the Roman state, Barabbas exercises the consumer sovereignty granted to him by his apparent affluence. He is disguised as a poor shepherd in a goatskin cloak but sports "a fine crimson silk scarf … a gold chain … and heavy gold rings" (174).

The Barabbas of this tale is somewhat of a heroic and likable figure in his materialistic, sensual and fearless approach to life in comparison with the conceited, meek and angst-ridden figure of Peter who lowers his eyes as he professes that "at the end of the road a cross might await me," quickly adding "although you may think I am boasting" (179). Still, the critique of consumer ethics as a part of a materialistic, individualistic modernity that lacked collective values and truths was very much present in the literature of the 1920s, as it had been at least since the end of the nineteenth century. When, in the opening of his 1922 novel *Babbitt*, Sinclair Lewis described his protagonist as a man who "made nothing in particular, neither butter nor shoes nor poetry, but … was nimble in the calling of selling houses for more than people could afford to pay" he was giving a one-line definition of the on-going development of a consumer culture in the post- WW I-era (6). Lewis' novel may be heavy-handed in its satire of the Standardized American Citizen and the label of fiction extended to include it only by a sort of courtesy as influential critic H.L Mencken wrote in his praising review. Nevertheless, its immediate commercial and critical success suggests that Lewis' readers recognized the social and economic dynamics of Zenith, Babbitt's beloved home-town.

Industrialized America produced consumer goods on an ever increasing scale. Industrial production doubled during the 1920s and the wheels of industry and commerce "demanded a new ethic, an ethic that encouraged people to buy, a consumption ethic," as historian Warren Susman wrote in his essays on popular culture and social change in the 1920s and 30s (187). Babbitt the seller is also Babbitt the buyer contemplating his new water-cooler; "up-to-date, scientific, and right-thinking. It had cost a great deal of money (in itself a virtue)" (31). The nineteenth century industrial revolution had called for a production-oriented ethics

that stressed the virtues of self-restraint and discipline in the individual worker complying with the demands of an assembly line. Mature capitalism needed to re-educate the public in accordance with a consumer ethics that celebrated the virtue of achievement through spending and consumption; "how much it might pleasurably consume rather than how little it might get by on," as Roland Marchand writes in his study of American advertising between 1920 and 1940 (120). While production ethics with its stress on discipline may seem the opposite of consumption ethics stressing pleasure, mass consumption must also be seen as a function of production. The industrial system that had "socialized the masses into a labor force had to go further in order to fulfill itself and to socialize the masses (that is, to control them), into a force of consumption" as Jean Baudrillard writes in his analysis of consumer society (50). Baudrillard's understanding of consumption as social activity or even social labor is important. It is not primarily a matter of fulfilling individual needs and desires, but of generating a system of shared values and meanings. Consuming is not simply buying, it is a collective and active social practice, producing and reproducing normative patterns of action, thoughts and emotions.

In the process of generating the shared values of a consumer society, advertisement was crucial. Writing in 1960, Raymond Williams described advertising as a "major form of modern social communication" that passed from being simply a matter of selling goods and services into a discourse teaching social and personal values during the first decades of the twentieth century (184). The increase of total advertising volume in the US rose from $ 682 million in 1914 to $2 987 million in 1929, and national magazine advertising increased by 600 percent during the same period (Marchand 7). These figures obviously reflect the producers' need to boost the sale of their particular product in a commercial arena of mass production aimed an ever-growing mass of consumers. But, as Marchand points out, it also signals a shift in the role of advertising in a society teaching consumption as virtue by shaping a "community of discourse" and shared "frames of reference and perception" (xx).

In his analyses of copy text and style, Marchand shows how advertisement adopted the voice of authoritative, yet personal, counseling, shifting from "factory viewpoint" to "the mental processes of the consumer" as a representative of the

industry put it (11). Earlier ads had focused on presenting the product in a copy text laden with arguments and facts accompanied by a large picture of the product. In the 1920s, copy text and imagery tended to deal more with the potential buyer as an individual in need of help. People instead of products dominated illustrations, and the copy texts read as brief short stories, dealing with problems and offering solutions, under headings such as: "'And he wondered why she said no?', 'Little Dry Sobs Through The Bedroom Door,'" inviting the reader to play a vicarious, scripted role in the story (Marchand 12). As Celia Lury has shown in her study of the development of branding as a marketing strategy, it involved a conscious transformation of the connection between producer and consumer away from a view of it simply in terms of stimulus-response, towards a conception of it as a personalized, emotional relationship (139).

As the headlines above suggest, the ads invited their readers to partake in fictive, miniature sociodramas, laced with fear and suggestions of inadequacy and lack. She says no because he has a bad breath, the child sobs because she has been upbraided by her teacher at school for falling asleep during class. The ads invited the reader to identify with a personal failure in a social setting, a failure that could only be remedied by consumption of a certain product. While one type of advertisement invited the reader to identify with failure, another type invited him or her to identify with success. The success-oriented ad relied on references to the habits and tastes of the famous and wealthy, or allusions to classical culture and imagery. The design of a Chrysler car was compared, detail by detail, to the carvings and figures of the Parthenon friezes. The buyer of such a car did not just simply own a car, but also demonstrated his knowledge and appreciation of the eternal qualities of high art. The choice of a particular car, towel, cigarette, bathtub or book bore witness to the owner's ability to make distinctions based on taste. He or she was not quite simply a consumer at the mercy of the chaos of products on the mass market or an accumulator of things. His or her choices demonstrated a carefully delineated, refined personality that stood out in the crowd, just like the Chrysler as an inheritor of classic aesthetics was distinct from all other cars surrounding it.

In the world of advertisements there is no clear line between appealing to fear or a desire for success. While it may have been easier to sell Listerine by evoking

a fear of bad breath, rather than trying to create associations to classical culture or wealth, the fear-inducing advertisement always ended with a promise of success in the future. At the same time, the success-promising ads bred fear that the person who did not choose or who could not afford to choose this particular brand lacked the refinement inherent in the object. In both cases, the aim of the copy texts and the illustrations is to encourage an emotive response that blurs the line between individual and product, according to a consumerist logic where you are what you consume.

Since material goods and objects have always functioned as markers of social differentiation and hierarchies, it is easy to think of consumer society as only an extension of established systems of social signification, reflecting a democratizing leveling of society. Consumer society invited everybody who could afford it to enjoy the pleasures that had hitherto been reserved for the social elite. While you may not have read the classics and could not afford to visit the Parthenon, you could partake of its aura of culture by reading Isak Dinesen or driving a Chrysler. While you may never become a millionaire, a movie-star or a titled heiress, you could smoke the same cigarettes as they did, and use the same toothpaste. Advertisement appealed to the desire to be somebody else, infusing consumption with a magical, transformative power. At the same time however, in its appeal to a desire for change, advertisement relied on the stability of the social, cultural and economic orders in order to represent a product as desirable. The advertising system did not structure social relations; it did not create the millionaire or the titled heiress. But, as Baudrillard observes, it demarcated "them in a hierarchical repertoire" where the titled heiress signified a quality to be desired and emulated through consumption (19). In consumer society, transformation and change can only ever take place at the individual level. The industry hammered home the message that "failure was personal, not social, and success can be achieved by some adjustment, not in the social order but in the individual personality," as Susman writes (165).

Modernity is routinely associated with a sense of fragmentation linked to the eradication of older systems of value founded on kinship and local tradition in an increasingly urban and mobile society developing in the wake of a war that had weakened the authority of inherited morality and religious belief. While not

necessarily disputing this view, it needs to be considered in the light of the degree to which ubiquitous mass media in a consumer society created the sense of insecurity and inadequacy required to address the individual as a consumer in need of improvement in a competitive society. In advertisement, every kind of relationship was represented as a trial where the individual could fail or succeed in the role of parent, lover, husband, wife, employee, neighbor, student, friend, and bus-passenger or just simply by disappointing him- or herself. Your breath, intestinal vigor, bathroom fixtures, speech pattern, posture, reading habits, shoe polish, cooking bore witness to who you were, and whether this "you" was a success, or a failure. The advertisements of the 1920s and 30s frequently suggested that "people" talked about you behind your back, commenting on your dandruff, complexion or lack of knowledge. The copy texts were accompanied by accusingly pointing fingers or heads close together, whispering. In the context of these advertisements where life was presented as a struggle to fit in and be accepted by family and friends as well as by nameless, faceless "people," it makes perfect sense to speak of consumerism as a socializing, moral activity. Success was not only measured by the accumulation of wealth, power and influence, but also by how well one was liked by others and the degree to which the individual was able to adapt him- or herself to their expectations.

In 1930, a representative of the advertisement industry contentedly observed that the standardized age seemed to have created an inferiority complex that had turned out to be "a valuable thing in advertising" (qtd. in Marchand 13). This was nowhere more apparent than in the wealth of self-help books and courses that flooded the market. Babbitt and his son are seen perusing ads promising that the consumer is guaranteed to become "More Popular and Make More Money" by improving their memory, developing soul-power, learning to play the ukulele, or creating a strong personality in order to get on "the High Road to Prosperity and Domination" (66). Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 novel *The Great Gatsby* was set in the affluent and cultured social milieu which middlemen such as Babbitt were encouraged to emulate. Nick the narrator describes personality as "an unbroken series of successful gestures," and compares the sensitivity of the self-invented parvenu Gatsby to "one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away" (6). This was, as Susman points out, the great age of the

how-to-do-it books. Personality was presented as something to be assembled and bought piece by piece, screw by screw, in order to convince the indifferent, but potentially hostile, name- and faceless "people" that ruled your fate that you met the standards. In order to get ahead, the modern machine-like individual had to mold a personality based on a scientifically calibrated sensitivity to certain pertinent data. Personality itself was a product, the result of the individual's diligent study and interpretation of social demands fabricated in and disseminated through the mass media. The notion that personality had to be consciously and conscientiously constructed validates Baudrillard's suggestion that consumption should be thought of as social labor, rather than in terms of satisfaction or pleasure. As a product, personality was just as salable and consumable as cars and cereals, and just like other mass market products, personality was acquiescent to shifting market desires.

The Flood of Books and the Image of the Author

This background makes sense of Haas' anxious attempt to persuade Dinesen to promote herself along with her book. In the flood of products, books and authors alike had to be marketed as singular and unique, worthy of the consumer's attention. Many critics today seem to take for granted that the development where the author's public persona became a crucial part of marketing a book or an entire oeuvre was audience-driven. It was the readers who had a desire to know the renowned, who wanted the writers to be distinctive or even glamorous, or as Becnel writes: "America had begun to look to its authors for wisdom and leadership" (104).

While not specifically addressing the question whether capitalist consumer society is a matter of fulfilling needs, or creating desires in order to sell the promise of fulfilment, the view that author-centered marketing was audience-driven does seem to lend too little weight to the marketing devices of inventive businessmen such as Scherman, as well as to the dynamics of the market itself. The new author-centered strategy for selling books was a response to a market that was overflowing with authors, books and magazines as well as other types of media. Becnel writes that this was

> a period marked by a deluge of inexpensive books and a host of new authors, the concept of original genius was now invoked to separate these writers who were really original, and who were therefore true artists, and those who were merely craftsmen, playing by the rules and creating nothing new. (60)

Publishing houses and book clubs such as the Book-of-the-Month-Club needed to create cultural commodities that stood out in the flood, and they also needed to represent themselves as reliable and discriminating gate-keepers in relation to the deluge of books and authors.

One way of doing so was to invest money in the creation of an image of the singular, autonomous author, celebrating, in photos and biographical information, "the empirical uniqueness of the creator or of his creative achievement" in Walter Benjamin's words (244). The beauty of this creation was of course that it referenced a perception of the author as a unique genius that belonged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the period that immediately preceded the birth of consumerist mass market in the late nineteenth century. Ideologically untainted by commercialism, this image helped to sell some books as though they were a different kind of commodity than the ones offered by the mass of faceless, un-identifiable writers writing pulp fiction. Thus, the author as a public persona became part and parcel of book marketing in the early twentieth century. In his study of Hemingway with the suggestive title *Hemingway and His Conspirators. Hollywood, Scribners, and the Making of American Celebrity Culture*, Leonard Leff writes that

> the mass media of the late 1920s transformed the relationship between Americans and their public figures. Capitalizing on professional sports, network, radio, and Hollywood motion pictures, the press and its syndicated gossip columns produced a desire to know the renowned. (xvii)

While turning book-publishing and selling into a highly profitable business for itself as well as for many of its authors, the Book-of-the-Month-Club retained the ethos of non-commercialism through the Selecting Committee as well as in its projection of itself as a kind of educational institution. This balancing of

commercial reality and aesthetic and moral ideals is also reflected in the writing and correspondence of many successful Book-of-the-Month-Club authors. Two authors who were closely connected with the Book-of-the-Month-Club were Ellen Glasgow (born 1873) and Vicki Baum (born 1888). Their careers and strategies illustrate the ways in which authors dealt with the demands of a book market that retained the idea of author as unique creator at an ideological level, while in practice turning the author and her book into marketable products. When Glasgow published her first work in 1897, she did so anonymously in accordance with the notion that commercial writing compromised the ideals of true womanhood. Her third novel, *The Voice of the People* (1900), made her name as an author, it sold 12 000 copies in six months, and she had used her own name. Throughout the 1910s she would continue to publish a new novel every second or third year. She emerged, as Susan Goodman writes, as a major public figure in the 1920s when *Barren Ground* (1925) sold at over 1000 copies a week and *The Romantic Comedians* (1926) sold over a 100 000 copies within a few months of its publication, and was picked out by the Book-of-the-Month-Club in its very first selection (163). In 1938, she was admitted to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the sixth woman ever to be chosen, and in 1942, she received the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.

Goodman points out that Glasgow seems to have had a natural aptitude for business, but also an equivocal relationship to popular culture (231). When the *Cosmopolitan* wanted to serialize her novel *The Sheltered* in 1932, offering a stunning $ 32 000, she instructed her agent to turn the offer down, arguing that "I have stood against the commercialization of my work – for my work is the only thing in the world that makes life endurable. If I lose that integrity, I am lost indeed" (qtd. in Goodman 199). By then, Glasgow could afford to insist on her artistic integrity, but at the same time she was willing to sell *They Stooped to Folly* to Hollywood for $ 25 000. While *Cosmopolitan* may have offered a larger sum, Hollywood promised exposure to a world-wide audience that the magazines could not reach and Glasgow seemed to have been well aware of the commercial potentials of having her books turned into movies.

As demonstrated by the quote above, Glasgow had no qualms about her own status as an artist, being, as Dorothy Scura puts it: "a serious and committed artist

who received positive reviews of most of her books; nevertheless, she frequently wrote books that sold well" (xii). Scura's antithetical construction where Glasgow's artistic commitment is put in opposition to her commercial success, reflects the fact that writers have good reasons to express ambivalence about their own ability to sell what they write. Thus, while Glasgow seem to have felt secure enough in her role as an artist after a few decades of writing professionally, she still needed to affirm this identity by distancing herself from the commercial sector in 1932. No longer a genteel amateur, but definitely not the kind of commercial scribbler who would sell her soul to anyone, no matter what they offered. Glasgow apparently felt safe enough – at least towards the end of her successful career – to go beyond the ideal of genteel amateurism considered appropriate for female writers, and claim the kind of artistic integrity that had, until quite recently, been reserved for male writers. In her self-biography she unabashedly writes that

> as a whole, these five novels [*Barren Ground*, *The Romantic Comedians*, *They Stooped to Folly*, *The Sheltered Life*, *Vein of Iron*] represent, I feel, not only the best that was in me, but some of the best works that has been done in American fiction. (270)

Glasgow seems to have been highly aware of the importance of exposing herself in media as well as publicity material in order to sell her books: "From the very beginning of her career, Glasgow seems to have realized that the public wanted its writers to be as glamorous or at least as distinctive as their characters" (Goodman 61).

While Glasgow may be an example of an author who comfortably interacted with the media in an exchange profitable to both, not all authors were prepared to sell themselves along with their books. When Pearl Buck's novel *The Good Earth* was chosen by the Book-of-the-Month-Club 1931 and became the best-selling book that year, as well as the following year, the Club editors wrote that "We should like all biographical material you can jot down," and Buck replied: "I do not want to make selling the book more of a task than need be, but at the same time I really cannot endure personal publicity" (qtd. in Becnel 84). Nevertheless, when Pearl Buck moved back to the US in 1934, she, according to Becnel, "found

herself deeply entrenched in the 'literary racket' that Walsh [her editor and future husband] had mentioned" (55).

If Glasgow is an example of a skilful balancing of the ideal of unique, artistic creation and marketable cultural commodity, Baum's bitter autobiography tells of the difficulties of maintaining this balance. While Haas may have been right to stress the sheer mass of books as peculiar to America, the tendency to sell authors along with their books was present in Europe too at this time. Vicki Baum started her successful career as author/journalist in Germany, working for the publishing house of Ullstein, cutting-edge modern in its commercialism and possibly a source of inspiration for Scherman when he launched the Book-of-the-Month-Club. Her first five novels were serialized in the *Berliner Illustrierte*, owned and run by Ullstein where Baum also worked, during the 1920s and early 1930s. They were accompanied by feature stories about the author, identifying her with the female characters of her novels as representatives of the New Woman; self-supporting and independent. When *Grand Hotel* was published in book-form in Germany in 1929 (*Menschen in Hotel*), however, Baum herself became the focus of scrutiny: "she was now a brand name, and the commodity she was identified with was popular literary products ... each review addressed the issue of commercialism," as Lynda King writes in her study of Baum's career (112). Clearly, the public persona created by the publishing industry in order to sell books could backfire if the crude commercial apparatus behind it became too obvious and blatant. The bitterness of Baum's autobiography with its underlining of her craftsmanship as opposed to real artistry, can probably be traced back to her experience with the German press accusing her of writing kitsch or "Schriftstellerei" following the success of *Grand Hotel* (qtd. in King 114). Still, Baum's association with commercialism did not seem to have troubled the people who bought and read her books. *Grand Hotel* was probably, as she herself pointed out, her biggest success on both sides of the Atlantic.

Baum left Germany for the US in 1932 after her books had been banned by the Nazi regime. She continued her career in close cooperation with the Book-of the-Month-Club, possibly crowning it when her novel *Grand Hotel* was turned into a major Hollywood movie, starring Greta Garbo and Joan Crawford. Like Glasgow, Baum displays an equivocal relationship to the sphere of commercial, popular

culture where she made a successful living. In her autobiography she writes about how "I was and remained 'the woman who wrote *Grand Hotel*', and I felt like the cat with a rattling can tied to its tail" ("Jag var och förblev 'hon som skrev *Människor på hotell*' och kände mig som katten som man har bundit en bleckdosa vid svansen på" 214). At the same time, Baum is very clear about her reasons for writing: "When I've written potboilers I did so quite deliberately; to hone my tools, prove my skills, and, naturally, because I needed money" (qtd. in King 137). Throughout her autobiography, Baum distinguishes between "good books" and "great literature" on the one hand, and the kind of books she herself wrote. King writes that

> Baum certainly believed that most of her books were technically well-written and exhibited the craftsmanship (handwerkliches Können) that came from working hard at the details of writing. Since she could not or would not write what was considered good literature, craftsmanship was the word she used from at least 1931 on to describe the type of writing she chose to produce. (140)

Her autobiography stresses the notion of writing as a "job" that she learned in order to keep her family from starving, and the "publications of my books … have left me very indifferent" ("publiceringen av mina böcker … har lämnat mig mycket oberörd" 208). At the same time, however, there are traces of the nineteenth century ideal of genteel amateurism embraced by an earlier generation of female authors. While describing herself as someone who writes for money, she makes it abundantly clear that this was not a matter of choice: "I had two children and a husband who should never feel forced to sell his soul" ("Jag hade två barn och en man som aldrig borde känna något tvång att sälja sin själ" 199). She describes the process of selling her soul in bitter detail, but she simultaneously, seemingly paradoxically, insists that she feels an "insurmountable distaste for talking about money" ("Jag har motvilja mot att tala om pengar" 186). When writing about the success of her craftsmanship, she suggests that "I had apparently learnt the aristotelic principle of the three unities from Ibsen" whom she read, and "worshipped" as a child ("Jag hade tydligen av Ibsen lärt den aristoteliska principen om de tre enheterna" 122).

Unlike Glasgow, Baum as a bread-winner having to support a family in Germany and as a refugee in America seems to have felt that she could not afford any pretense to artistic integrity.[16] Instead, she stresses her own professionalism and her ability to churn out potboilers, finishing her first novel three days before she gave birth to her second son. Throughout her autobiography, Baum expresses a sort of bitter pride in her own ability to make money out of writing, signaling her awareness of the ideal of artistry as being completely untainted by commercial considerations, while simultaneously showing how poorly this ideal fitted her reality. At the same time, however, the very opposition that Baum constructs between her own writing on the one hand, and "great literature" on the other, safeguards the sphere of art from encroaching commercialism. In Baum's view, great literature can be written, but only by those who can afford it.

In 1934, 49-year old Blixen who lived with and was financially dependent on her mother was in a position more akin to Baum's than to Glasgow's, but the way she dealt with the commercial aspect of writing professionally and the public limelight was quite different. In her comprehensive study of Blixen/Dinesen's American and English publishing history, Grethe Rostbøll explains her insistence on anonymity and her use of the Dinesen-pseudonym in 1934 as an expression of her identification with her father who published his works under pseudonym (21). This explanation has remained as current as the argument that Blixen/Dinesen wrote in English in order to liberate her imagination, and there is plenty of evidence in letters and interviews to support this view. Throughout her career, Blixen/Dinesen would identify herself publicly with the kind of genteel amateurism that had been the ideal of an earlier age. In a letter to her English publisher in 1949, she wrote:

> I shall always remain in a way an amateur as a writer. Had I been able to keep my farm, I should never have written any books at all … My father, also as an amateur, wrote a most charming Danish "Sportman's Diary," always said that professional writing was beneath a man, - I cannot get away

[16] Goodman writes that "despite an income that would have easily kept a middle-class family comfortable, Glasgow could not live on her royalties" (199). We may assume that Baum and Glasgow with their different backgrounds also had very different expectations on life.

> from the feeling that it does somehow apply to a woman as well. (*Karen Blixen i Danmark. Bind 1* 529)

While this letter seems to prove Rostbøll right, I would argue that it in fact illustrates Blixen/Dinesen's conscientious construction of a particular public persona once she had become a recognized author, and that her insistence on anonymity pre-publication was simply a matter of fearing public failure and humiliation. Only a month after receiving Haas' telegram confirming the selection of *Seven Gothic Tales* by the Book-of-the-Month-club with an enclosed 5000-dollar check in February 1934, Blixen/Dinesen wrote him a letter which sheds a different light both on the question of anonymity and professional writing. She sent him photographs but also "a few short, quite truthful recounts of my life on the African farm." She wanted his "assistance" to have these stories published "in a *good* magazine" under her real name and since they could not be "classed as a book," she could see no reason why they should "interfere with our contract" (*Karen Blixen i Danmark. Bind 1* 127). In his gracious reply, Haas cautioned against publishing the stories at once since it may result in confusion, but wrote that he was delighted to read about her extraordinary background. At the same time, he must have been quite annoyed and a bit puzzled. Only two months earlier, in January, he had written a long, ingratiating letter where he had explained the difficulties of marketing an anonymous author, begging her to consider sending photographs and information. Or, at least, to let him go public with the author's real identity, ending his letter on a pleading note: "P.S. In the meantime, should you be willing to allow us to announce your name as that of the author, will you not just cable us the one word 'yes.' Thank you." (126). Baroness Blixen did not even deign to answer Haas' entreaty at that time, and when she did get in touch again she was not only treating him as her agent rather than as a publisher, but also suddenly not only willing but even eager to go public.

Over the years, Haas would get used both to Blixen/Dinesen's commercial initiatives, and her rudeness vis-à-vis her American publisher. The Americans may have made her career as an author, but once she was "made" she treated her American benefactors rather haughtily. Blixen/Dinesen had approached the English publisher Constant Huntington at Putnam & Co. in June 1933, but was turned down by him. After her American success, Putnam & Co. quickly bought

the publishing rights to *Seven Gothic Tales*, which was published in England in September 1934. Blixen/Dinesen triumphed when Huntington wrote her a fawning letter in April of the same year where he reminded her that they had met at Lady Islington's in London, replying that she remembered their meeting very well since it was their conversation there "which finally decided me to cable Mr. Haas, accepting his offer for my book" (*Karen Blixen i Danmark. Bind 1* 130). Having thumbed her nose at Huntington, she nevertheless added that she was glad to be published in England since that country was "in every way, nearer to my life and heart" (130). This feeling may explain why Blixen/Dinesen favored her English publishers in the work on what would eventually become *Out of Africa*, starting from the truthful recounts that she had sent to Haas in 1934. She communicated with the Americans through her English publishers, and Haas had to put up with reading her manuscripts second-hand when they had already been through the hands of English editors. He was, of course, upset and irritated by her preferential treatment of Huntington, but also concerned about the way in which this affected her chances on the American market, writing to her in the fall of 1937: "It seemed clear to me, upon comparing our revisions with Huntington's proofs, that ours were really infinitely better suited to the American market." Blixen/Dinesen curtly replied, through Huntington: "We ask you to answer Mr. Haas that the Baroness wants your and her edition to be published in America without alterations of any kind" (qtd. in Rostbøll 44). *Out of Africa* was published in England in November 1937 under the name Karen Blixen and four months later in the US, still under the name Isak Dinesen, where it, too, was chosen as Book-of-the-Month by the Club.[17] Blixen/Dinesen wrote to Haas that while she was pleased with the American edition, she would have preferred it to appear under her own name as in England, adding that she supposed the American decision was based "on editorial motives, and may be a better thing in America" (qtd. in Rostbøll 46). Blixen/Dinesen apparently trusted the Americans publisher's commercial know-how, while simultaneously manifesting her distrust for their literary abilities.[18] Once established as Isak Dinesen in America, she recognized

[17] Danish and Swedish editions were published at the same time as the English edition.

[18] It would be insincere to pretend that Blixen/Dinesen's view of American cultural competence is eccentric. In the fall of 2008, the then secretary of the Swedish Academy that awards the Nobel Prize for literature, Horace

the importance of sticking with the pseudonym as an identifiable brand name, but there is nothing to suggest that it had any significance to her beyond purely commercial considerations.

From the very beginning of her career, she comes across as an entrepreneurial kind of author in her correspondence with her publishers, especially with her American publisher. She was extremely concerned with the pecuniary side of things and always interested in the possibility of making money by selling material of "lighter quality" to magazines. In 1947, she wrote to Haas about her plans to place stories or serials with American magazines that may or may not be collected into a book-volume later on. What she wanted most of all would be to obtain an agreement with some magazine or publishing firm that would agree to publish a number of stories each year, since "such an arrangement would relieve me of much anxiety as to means of subsistence, and of fair working conditions" (*Karen Blixen i Danmark. Bind 1* 471). She insisted that she could pursue this lucrative side-line, while continuing with her "real" writing. As Rostbøll points out, the conflict between writing popular fiction in one context and serious literature in another, would become the main theme in Blixen/Dinesen's professional correspondence after the war, her publishers both in England and America repeatedly warning her not to be led astray by the lures of easy money (12). She was also very apt at placing the same material in a number of media, illustrated by the use she made of the story "Farah" which was broadcast by Swedish radio in May 1948, then published in the Danish daily paper *Nationaltidende* in August of the same year, then broadcast by Danish radio in March two years later, and published as a separate story by a Danish publishing house the same year, and eventually included in the book *Shadows on the Grass* in 1962.

At the same time she would very skillfully craft a public persona far removed from the money-making side of writing, starting with her self-portrayal in *Out of Africa* as a lady-of-the-manor in a colonial setting, telling stories to servants and

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Engdahl, raised a stir when he commented on the fact that there have been relatively few American literary Nobel Prize winners. Engdahl said that this was quite natural since Europe is still the center of the literary world, and that American literature is too sensitive to trends in their own mass culture. According to him, the US is insular and does not participate in the big dialogue of literature, and their ignorance of foreign literature is restraining.

titled guests alike. In her book *Notater om Karen Blixen* (1974), her secretary Clara Selborn has described the toll writing took on Blixen/Dinesen who was often seriously ill and a slow writer even at the best of times. Selborn's portrait of the professional, conscientious author who struggled with every sentence is far from the image of herself Blixen/Dinesen projected in public where she would appear in the role of oral story-teller, emaciated and dramatically dressed in black.

While many authors clearly felt intimidated by the demands of the publishing industry and even, as in the case of Baum, somehow damaged by them, others seemed to have been able to put it to good financial use, while simultaneously retaining their sense of self-determination. I would suggest that Blixen/Dinesen belongs in the latter category and that she, unlike her publishers, never worried about the impact her commercial writings would have on her career as an author of serious literature. Becnel discusses William Faulkner's ability to combine his hack writing for magazines with writings that clearly aimed at a different, more sophisticated audience, and "the desire to maintain an aristocratic lifestyle" while simultaneously presenting himself as an illiterate farmer (105). Becnel persuasively argues that in Faulkner's staging of his public persona, the combination of illiteracy and an aristocratic image associated with a romanticized southern past, suggested that his ability to write highbrow literature was due to innate genius rather than education. A man of genius did not need to be afraid to write sellable pieces every now and then, since it did not threaten his innate artistic integrity. In fact, he could even turn lowbrow into highbrow, as Becnel shows when she writes

> according to Faulkner himself, *Sanctuary*, published in 1931, was written as a 'potboiler' aimed at a lowbrow audience. According to Faulkner, he had made a thorough and methodical study of everything on the list of best-sellers, and then had made his own novel 'stronger and rawer'. (107)

Whether this was true or not, it does show that in a period when, according to Kevin Dettmar and Stephen Watt, "never before in Western literary history have marketing forces exerted so strong a force over artists in all media," it was still possible for a market savvy author to manipulate these forces rather than to be manipulated by them." (5)

Selling Stories

When Robert Haas wrote to Blixen in the fall of 1932, he reluctantly declined publication "on account of the difficulty of selling any collection of short stories in substantial quantity." To impress on Baroness Blixen the fact that it was the format rather than the quality of her writing that was a problem, Haas wrote: "if the obstacle of too short a length were eliminated, I can imagine no other reason which would prevent our being delighted to bring out your novel" (*Karen Blixen i Danmark. Bind 1* 95). He was concerned enough to return to the issue again when the book had already been accepted for publication, writing that "the American public does not like books made up of collections of short stories" (124).

This sensibility was in fact paradoxically linked to the very popularity of short stories on a market adjacent to but significantly distinguished from the book market proper, namely in the magazines. In his study of the culture and commerce of the American short story, Andrew Levy points out that from the "time of Poe, the short story has been designed as a culturally disposable artefact – a thing to be read once and enjoyed" (2). This deprecating view of the short story makes perfect sense of Edgar Allan Poe's well-known 1842 review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* which is in essence a defense of the superiority of the short story in relation to the novel. According to Poe, the latter could neither achieve the "immense force derivable from *totality*," nor the "single *effect*" of a prose tale that could be read "at one sitting" (522). In his vindication of the short story Poe was attempting to establish its inherent literary value. In fact, Poe wrote his review at a time when he was trying to raise money to found a magazine that would publish shorts stories, his own amongst others.

A century later, in 1957 in one of the stories in *Last Tales*, Blixen/Dinesen had one of her characters comment on the superiority of the short story in relation to the novel in words that eerily echo those of Poe.[19]

[19] While there is no evidence that Isak Dinesen had ever read Poe's review of Hawthorne, Robert Langbaum writes that she did express her poor opinion of Poe's tales in their conversation, proving that she had at least read his fictional works (89).

> "Madame", he said, "I have been telling you a story. Stories have been told a long as speech has existed, and *sans* stories the human race would have perished, as it would have perished *sans* water. You will see the characters of the true story clearly, as if luminous and on a higher plane, and at the same time they may look not quite human, and you may well be a little afraid of them. That is all in the order of things. But I see, Madam", he went on, "I see, today, a new art of narration, a novel literature and category of belles-lettres, dawning upon the world. It is, indeed, already with us, and it has gained great favor amongst the readers of our time. And this new art and literature – for the sake of the individual characters in the story, and in order to keep close to them and not be afraid – will be ready to sacrifice the story itself …
>
> "Mistake me not", said the Cardinal, "the literature of which we are speaking – the literature of individuals, if we may call it so – is a noble art, a great, earnest and ambitious human product. But it is a human product. The divine art is the story. In the beginning was the story." (*Last Tales* 23)

When Blixen/Dinesen wrote "The Cardinal's First Tale" in 1957, her publishers had been trying to get her to write a novel for more than two decades.[20] She did write *Gengældelsens Veje* (1944) in Denmark during the war (*The Angelic Avengers*, 1946 in England, 1947 in the US), but published it under the pseudonym Pierre Andrézel and always referred to it as her "illegitimate child." She was annoyed when it was chosen by the Book-of-the-Month-Club, since she did not consider it to be fit to stand with her other works. Critics have tended to agree with her, and Langbaum wrote that the book has no literary value (198). Blixen/Dinesen excelled in the short story and even though her publishers

[20] She also wrote "The Cardinal's Third Tale" but a reader looking for the second tale will be searching in vain. One way of interpreting this absence, is to see it as a part of Blixen/Dinesen's construction of herself as an oral story-teller, a Scheherazade who referred to her age as "three thousand years" in letters and public appearances (*Karen Blixen i Danmark. Bind 2* 47) When you have been telling stories for 3000 years, it is only natural that one or two of them have gotten lost in the process, especially if they were never written down. In the world of short story theory and writing, Blixen/Dinesen is not alone in projecting the image of writer as teller, and of stressing a proximity to, and/or identifying with, an oral tradition. At the same time, short story writers in general seem more prepared to, and capable of, reflecting on the technique and craft of *writing* short stories than most authors of fiction, which is perhaps why the roles of critic and practitioner often coincide within this field.

recognized this fact and had the selling figures to prove it, they kept on dreaming about the novel they hoped she would write one day.

Not surprisingly, the passage from *Last Tales* appears at the beginning of more than one text written by short story critics and/or writers on the nature of the short story. Since it is a rather forthright celebration of the short story, the passage is usually included without further comments. It speaks for itself, and quite unabashedly so. At the same time, it is clear that the celebratory tone is part and parcel of a defensive attitude. Short stories *are* usable and sellable as witnessed by the textbooks and anthologies used in classrooms in elementary school and higher education all over the world, but this seems to be precisely the problem. Short story theorist Susan Lohafer writes: "it may be that the greatest obstacle to the development of short story criticism has been the simple ubiquity, the serviceability, of the short story textbook" (5). Artistically as well as theoretically, the short story is a stage to be left behind as the author/scholar matures into a writer/interpreter of novels. While this may sound overly dramatic and self-pitying, it is nevertheless an underdog perspective that much writing on short stories conveys, and that necessarily finds its way into short story theory. The stated, professional aim to explain what a short story is and how it works, often seems to be intertwined with a more or less pronounced personal desire to lift the short story to the level of novel, or beyond.

Another brilliant short story-writer is Alice Munro, and in her latest collection of short stories, *Too Much Happiness*, one of her characters picks up a book in a bookstore and reflects:

> *How Are We to Live* is the book's title. A collection of short stories, not a novel. This is in itself a disappointment. It seems to diminish the book's authority, making the author seem like somebody who is just hanging on to the gates of Literature, rather than safely settled inside. (50)

Just like Blixen/Dinesen's "The Cardinal's First Tale," Munro's "Fiction" written 50 years later reads like a meta-reflection on the problematic status of the short story, but where the former was celebrating the divinity of the form, Munro's stance is ironic. The sinister shadow thrown by the novel in almost all discussions of the short story reflects a reality where the short story somehow is of lesser

value. Short story is apprenticeship, novel is art. Short story is creative writing courses, novel is genius. Short story is discipline and technique, novel is inspiration. Short story is textbook anthology, novel stands by itself. Short story is popular, educational and commercial culture, novel is just culture.

The American magazines, writes Levy, "had until the 1920s owned a virtual monopoly on the American mass marketplace, and until the postwar era had continued to exert an enormous economic and cultural power" (86). The growth of popular magazines clearly reflects this development. In 1885 there were 3 300 periodicals in the US, and over the next 20 years, 7 500 more were founded. While many of these magazines were short-lived and had a small circulation, by 1905 more than 160 of them were selling more than 100 000 copies and at the beginning of the 1930's there were 4500 periodicals, a figure that has increased to 6000 at the end of the decade, despite the Depression.

These magazines had a seemingly endless need for literary material in the form of the short story, and when the 1891 international copy agreement made it less profitable for American publishers to use foreign, that is to say British, material, American writers flocked to the genre and the magazines. In 1921, Canby commented that not only was the magazine a distinctly American creation, it also contributed to the development of the American short story by creating a need for short fiction (434).

Levy points out that at the beginning of the twentieth century, the short story "because of its popularity and its presence within commercial magazines had become an uneasy intersection of the fields of literature and commerce" (50). Even the short story handbooks teaching the art of writing, Levy writes, "contained apologia for the democratizing promises they offered" (89). The financial rewards of publishing shorter pieces and serializing novels in popular magazines meant that even authors considering themselves well above the standards and tastes of readers of the same magazines, published there. Becnel writes about William Faulkner who "quickly produced stories to sell to magazines when he needed money, and he did design these stories to appeal to a wider base of readers so that the magazines would buy them" (29). In 1921, Glasgow wrote to her agent: "Please get me the largest price you possibly can – even if it has to go to the *Cosmopolitan*!" (qtd. in Cook 23). Blixen/Dinesen's called her contacts

with American magazines a "side-line" that she quite openly defined as purely financially motivated writing: "Whether I shall write in Danish or English is to me, in this case, really a question of which would pay me best" she wrote to the editors of *The Saturday Evening Post* (qtd. in Rostbøll 57). In March 1949, she wrote to Haas that the short stories she was currently working on were written only for pecuniary reasons, even though she also wondered whether he would consider publishing them in book-form (Rostbøll 97). In the fall of the same year her English publisher wrote her, saying that while Haas had apparently offered to publish *Anecdotes of Destiny* as a book, he himself was not quite willing to do so:

> I have thought that you have written them hurriedly, without very much thought or study, with the idea that they would be good enough for anonymous magazine publication. This I don't consider a very good plan. Magazine stories are generally written under pseudonyms by the editorial staff or by famous writers under their own names. If the latter, they are expected to be up to the famous writer's standard which, though highly readable, these stories definitely are not. (*Karen Blixen i Danmark. Bind 1* 536)

While sympathetic to Blixen/Dinesen's need to make money, her publishers constantly attempted to persuade her to stay away from the lucrative side-line of writing stories for magazines, and encouraged her to focus on writing a novel instead. In September 1950, the man who had succeeded Huntington as Blixen/Dinesen's contact at Putnam & Co. wrote: "And I do hope you won't get quite side-tracked from your new novel by the swift rewards of writing about food for the ravening American magazine-readers!" (qtd. in Rostbøll 107). Like many other authors she did get side-tracked and when the collection *Anecdotes of Destiny* was finally published in 1958, only one of its stories was new. The same was true about the collection preceding it, *Last Tales* in 1957, where most of the stories had already been published in American, Danish or Swedish magazines over the years, one of them as early as 1938. In fact, looking at Blixen/Dinesen's entire production, only the stories in *Seven Gothic Tales* were original book-publications throughout.

Money was clearly important, but the appeal of the ever growing magazine-market was often more complex. It could be argued that the authors were indeed more savvy about marketing their products than the publishers, as well as less concerned with the boundaries between high- and lowbrow so nervously patrolled by publishing houses. Canfield Fisher serialized several of her novels, and in 1933 *Woman's Home Companion* paid $30 000 for the rights to *Bonfire*. With a circulation of 3 million copies a year *Woman's Home Companion* was the most-read women's magazine of the 1920s and 30s. Aimed at white, middle-class homemakers, the magazine still had a progressive agenda, culturally and politically, encouraging its readers to educate themselves in order to take part more fully in society. Editor Gertrude Lane (1911-41) wrote about the woman she had in mind when creating her magazine that "her horizon is ever extending, her interest broadening, the pages of *Woman's Home Companion* must reflect the sanest and most constructive thought on the vital issues of the day" (qtd. in Harker 35). When publishing in *Woman's Home Companion*, Canfield Fisher did not only make a lot of money; she also reached out to potential new readers and Book-of-the-Month-Club-members, and she publicly aligned herself with a political and cultural agenda akin to her own.

While Blixen/Dinesen certainly did not have Canfield-Fisher's knowledge of or interest in the American magazine-market, I agree with Rostbøll when she writes that her publishing in American magazines earned her – besides money – a "good-will" amongst readers who might very well decide to buy a collection of her stories, once they had tasted a sample of them in a magazine (105). Her most frequent place of magazine-publishing in the US was *Ladies' Home Journal*, which in 1934 meant that her stories could be read by 2.5 million readers. Founded in 1883, almost by accident, *Ladies' Home Journal* "opened the 1930s by doing what it had done for many decades – providing images of women serving as the moral steward of the home," as David Wekly writes in his study of American print culture during the Great Depression (114). Unlike *Woman's Home Companion*, *Ladies' Home Journal* advocated a rather traditional view of women as primarily mothers and housewives, but it also set out to furnish these women with high-quality writings by authors such as Pearl Buck, Willa Cather, Edith Wharton, H.G Wells, Agatha Christie, and Isak Dinesen.

The Club's selection was crucial to Blixen/Dinesen's career as an author, as was her strategy to sell her stories one by one before bringing them together as a book. At the same time, the specter of sordid commercialism has haunted the critical perception of her works. Instead of recognizing the commercial incentive of the author herself, the topic of commercialism in connection with Blixen/Dinesen, when touched upon, has routinely been traced to the hugely successful 1985 movie *Out of Africa*, based on her 1937 book by the same name. In an article written a decade after the release of the movie, Susan Hardy Aiken set out to address the "disquieting questions" that were raised by the fact that the Hollywood-movie once "again" made "Isak Dinesen" a "pop icon" ("Consuming Isak Dinesen" 4). Icon "Isak Dinesen" could sell anything from fashion to posh restaurants to reprints of Dinesen's own books "emblazoned with the insignia 'Official Movie Tie-In Edition, bear[ing] the 'bankable' images (Hollywood's term) of Robert Redford and Meryl Streep" (4). Writing under the dramatic title "Consuming Isak Dinesen. Devouring Dinesen: Art(ist) as Commodity," Aiken argued that the process of marketing "Isak Dinesen" (her quotation marks) as a brand-name, raised disquieting questions because they "recall, on a massive scale ... Dinesen's own performative self-displays – her deployment of herself, especially in the later years, as a consumable artefact" (4). Aiken is not primarily concerned with the logic of capitalism, but Blixen/Dinesen's own commodification of herself, her willing involvement in the culture industry which would make her

> profoundly complicitous not only with consumerist culture inseparable from what Gayle Rubin, following Emma Goldman, has called the 'traffic in women', but also with the widespread reactionary nostalgia recently evident in much contemporary popular culture of the West ... for an imperialist, aristocratic world. (4)

It is precisely this reading that Aiken first conjures up and then sets out to rescue Blixen/Dinesen from, by using Teresa de Lauretis' discussion of women's use of

masks and masquerade to represent a subjectivity that expresses a political consciousness of women's subjugation, and Aiken argues that

> far from being simply a perpetuator of reactionary ideologies, Dinesen anticipated insights of contemporary critics ... by deconstructing or radically ironizing her own self-representations in both autobiographical texts and public performances ... she simultaneously exploited, explicated, and exploded certain conception of "femininity" as well as the commercial construction and manipulation of both "woman" as textualized body and her writing as textual *corpus*. (7)

Aiken's central argument that Blixen/Dinesen anticipated late twentieth century feminist theories and her initial remark that the marketing of "Isak Dinesen" in the 1980s recalls Blixen/Dinesen's own self-promotion are interesting reversals of diachronic time. What Aiken suggests is that Blixen/Dinesen was modern even to the degree of being before her time both in her writings and in her self-promotion, but whereas the former is something to be cherished, the latter is only deplorable. That is to say, Aiken's project is essentially to rescue what she defines as a modernist, or even post-modern, aesthetics from modern commercialism.

In its attempt to decontaminate the aesthetic sphere, Aiken's thesis is an example of the academic and intellectual discourse and thought on modernity that Andreas Huyssen has labelled "The Great Divide," writing that "ever since the mid-nineteenth century, the culture of modernity has been characterized by a volatile relationship between high art and mass culture" (vii). This process reaches back, as Huyssen argues, well into the nineteenth century. In 1939, Benjamin writes in one of his essays on Baudelaire that

> The crowd – no subject was more entitled to the attention of nineteenth-century writers. It was getting ready to take shape as a public in broad strata who had acquired facility in reading. It became a customer, it wished to find itself portrayed in the contemporary novel, as the patrons did in the paintings of the Middle Ages. (166)

Benjamin discusses the image of the crowd not only in Baudelaire's poetry, but also in the writings of others, suggesting that "fear, revulsions, and horror were

the emotions which the big-city crowd aroused in those who first observed it" (174). In his work, "Baudelaire battled the crowd – with the impotent rage of someone fighting the rain or the wind" (194). The "crowd" in Benjamin's essay is a seemingly paradoxical but highly suggestive combination of natural forces with the comparison between the crowd with purchasing power and the wealthy patron of the Middle Ages, in itself a paradoxical juxtaposition. The faceless crowd as a force of nature ruling capitalist consumer society like a medieval prince by the strength of its purse.

In his acerbic study of the intellectuals and the masses, John Carey brings the study of the specter of the terrifying crowd to bear on twentieth century British literature, when he writes: "Dreaming of the extermination or sterilization of the mass, or denying that the masses were real people, was, then, an imaginative refuge for the early twentieth century intellectuals" (15). Carey illustrates his claim with examples from the writings of T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, W. B. Yeats, Virginia Woolf and many others. Carey is less generous than Benjamin in his view of the early twentieth century intellectuals and artist battling the crowd, since he understands this battle essentially as a class-struggle where, ultimately, democratic society is at stake. He also does not hesitate to apply the term modernism to this battle when he writes that "the principle around which modernist literature and culture fashioned themselves was the exclusion of the masses, the defeat of their power, the removal of their literacy, the denial of their humanity" (21). While Carey does not reference Huyssen's work on modernism and mass culture in the twentieth century, his characterization of modernism as an excluding reaction echoes Huyssen who writes: "Modernism constituted itself through a conscious strategy of exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by its other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture" (VII).

While both Carey's and Huyssen's studies are persuasive, they do not take into account the fact that many of the authors later labelled modernists did, or tried to, place at least some of their work in mass culture media. During the last decade and a half critics have challenged Huyssen's claim that the authors later labelled modernists created and maintained a chasm between themselves and the larger

public.[21] These authors in fact had quite a clear perception of marketing strategies that they also put into practice; they were, as Aaron Jaffe points out, "more canny about fashioning their careers … than is often appreciated" (3). Or, as Michael Murphy suggests in an article on contributors to *Vanity Fair*, "being modern – and by extension being modern*ist* – was not about market phobia at all, but precisely about market *savvy*" (64). Becnel writes about Djuna Barnes, that "like other modernists she was loathe to have her romantic vision of authorship sullied by the business of publishing" (33). She nevertheless tried to find a commercial publisher for her novel *Nightwood*, and by 1922 Gertrude Stein had contributed more often to *Vanity Fair* than to the exclusive *Little Review*.

Pecuniary reasons were of course decisive in many cases and should never be underestimated, but in for example Stein's case money could not have been the only issue. Already in 1915, Ezra Pound wrote to T.S. Eliot's father that there were only two ways for a writer to become important at the time: "either to write a great deal, and have his writings appear everywhere, or to write very little" (qtd. in Jaffe 8). Pound's attempt to placate Eliot's father is not without interest, coming as it does from someone who was instrumental in molding the writings and careers of several authors that have later been labelled modernists. What is interesting about Pound's advice is the fact that it does not at all address the quality of writing itself, only the quantity and the arena of publication. It is a thumbnail sketch of the workings of the literary market in the early twentieth century where you can either write and publish a lot, like Baum or Glasgow, or opt for exclusiveness. Still, even the exclusive author had and wanted to publish and be read and talked about, in the right places and by the right kind of people. The less exclusive author had to make sure that he or she did not write too much, and certainly not everywhere, since that was the market position of the faceless moniker. When in the 1930s, Glasgow said no to *Cosmopolitan* with a 1.7 million copy-circulation per year, she did so because at that stage in her career she did not need the kind of broad exposure guaranteed by magazine publication. As a successful author with Hollywood-options she could afford to say no to the wrong kind of magazine. Gertrude Stein, on the other hand, had just as good and

[21] By preventing "them reading literature by making it too difficult for them to understand" according to Carey (16).

carefully calculated reasons to want to appear in *Vanity Fair*, together with Virginia Woolf, Man Ray, Picasso, T.S Eliot, W.B. Yeats and many other authors and artists later labeled modernists. Compared to *Cosmopolitan* or *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Vanity Fair* (1914-1936) was small, its circulation peaked in 1936, also the year of its demise, at 90 000 copies as compared to 1.7 and 3 million ditto. But it was this exclusiveness that made *Vanity Fair* into a magazine where authors and artists who decried the advent of mass culture/education/readership could and would publish.[22] At the same time, *Vanity Fair* is known to have featured more pages of advertisements than any other contemporary American magazine which is why it foundered when the Depression hit the New York market. And while the authors and artists contributed the cutting-edge modern avant-garde-feeling, it was precisely the wealth of ads that connoted luxury; catering to a small audience with enough money to make it worthwhile the ads despite the limited circulation. Pound's "littleness" then, should perhaps not only, or even primarily, be understood in relation to the author's production, but rather in the consumption of his or her work. The "conscious strategy of exclusion" that Huyssen characterizes as a modernist trait was not primarily, as Carey would have it, a matter of how the writing was done. Carey's "difficult"-argument in fact reeks of the kind of elitism he is criticizing. Rather, it had to do with where and for whom it was published in a time of mass-literacy. Nor was it a matter of excluding commercialism or market dynamics, but rather of adjusting to or even embracing them. Enterprises such as Book-of-the-Month-Club, *Vanity Fair* or *Woman's Home Companion*, as well as the authors that published there, needed to create commodities that stood out in the flood of cultural products. Yet, they also needed to create the right kind of consumers for these products and the image of the ideal reader/buyer was constantly projected in editorials and advertisements. While the Book-of-the-Month-Club and *Vanity Fair* figured, and still figure, as each other's cultural opposites, the language of these ads tells a different story:

[22] "There is no doubt that in our headlong rush to educate everybody, we are lowering our standards," wrote T.S Eliot in *Christianity and Culture* in 1939. His own quarterly magazine *Criterion*, never exceeded 800 subscribers.

> Think over the last few years. How often outstanding books appeared, widely discussed and widely recommended, books you were really anxious to read and fully intended to read when you 'got around to it', but which nevertheless you *missed*! Why is it you disappoint yourself so frequently in this way? (early Book-of-the-Month-Club advertisement, qtd. in Rubin 99)

And, in *Vanity Fair*, next to a reproduction of a cubist painting by Picasso:

> Somebody paid $ 3,500 for this…WHY? Why did Picasso, master draughtsman, choose to paint a portrait like this? – Why Braque...Matisse...Derain…Cezanne?-What do they mean? What do you say when your pretty dinner partner asks you? – Could you even tell if this were wrong side up?- You've got to know. Not just gulp soup! – One way to find out...READ *VANITY FAIR*! (advertisement for annual subscription, qtd. in Meyer 61)

The fear of the mass that Benjamin traced back to Baudelaire and that Carey exemplifies in his readings of early twentieth century authors is reflected in these ads too. Only this time it is the faceless, fearsome mass itself that is being addressed and promised redemption through consumption. The individual could stand out in the flood of people by signaling his or her belonging in a delimited segment of society, culturally, and by implication also economically, elevated above the masses. Culture as a tool for social differentiation was nothing new, nor the sales trick of appealing to the fear of being indistinguishable from the masses. What was new was the scale and the presence of a mass media market.

While the ads above are mirror-images in the sense that they reflect identical marketing mechanisms and one copy-writer could have written them both, there are crucial dissimilarities. In the Club-ad the social usefulness of keeping up with the latest literature is implied, but it is the educational, self-improving aspect of actually reading good literature that is foregrounded. To read outstanding books is a moral obligation for the aspiring middle class consumer. The *Vanity Fair*-ad, on the other hand, dwells solely on the social usefulness of knowing what a Picasso is when you are sitting at a dinner table. The work of art has no intrinsic, autonomous value, morally or aesthetically, but only as something to be known

about in order to signal a belonging in a certain social sphere. In fact, you do not even have to look at a Picasso-painting, it is enough to read about his art and memorize the other artists' names that go with it. In Murphy's analysis of the early twentieth century "Slicks," *Vanity Fair* is singled out as the most striking example of branding as the sole purpose of the magazine: "it no longer mattered what was in a magazine, only what *brand* it was" (79).

Saving Isak Dinesen for Modernism

It may seem paradoxical that the authors and artists that would later be celebrated as modernists published and appeared in a forum that commercialized culture to an extent that the Club never even got close to. It does however make sense of Lawrence Rainey's provocative formulation that modernism's success depended largely on the promotion of the author's reputation among non-readers.

Retrospectively, the promotion among consuming non-readers would seem to have been more successful than the Club's morally based appeal to the reader bent on self-education. Not only are the works of T.S Eliot, Gertrude Stein and other *Vanity Fair*-contributors still in circulation on the commercial literary market, they have also become the better kind of literature. Jamie Harker describes this process when she writes that in the mid-1940s, "modernism and New Criticism fused into an academic field, and intellectual calling and a moral good" (153). The books singled out by the Book-of-the-Month-Club, on the other hand, have largely been categorized as a lesser sort of literature marked by time-bound commercialism. Paradoxically, they have lost their value on the literary market, are difficult to find in libraries, and are not included in school or university standard curricula. Modernism has become, as Harker points out, "the dominant paradigm of the twentieth century" (15).

In her assessment of the choices made by the Book-of-the-Month-Club's Selecting Committee during the 1920s and 30s, Rubin writes that:

> Thanks largely to Canby's and Fisher's conviction that it was their job to place before the public books that met their own rigorous aesthetic standards, the club's selections ... are better, from a literary standpoint, than

> today's; thanks to their animus toward modernism ... they are likewise not as good as they might have been. (144)

Both parts of this statement are interesting, but since I am focusing on the Book-of-the-Month-Club and the book market of the 1930s, I will only discuss the latter part. Clearly, Rubin's statement reflects a generally held opinion within the academic world at the end of the twentieth century about what good literature *is*; an opinion that encompasses that which is written today as well as that which was written almost a century ago. At first, Rubin's statement seems to necessitate a discussion of what the terms "better" and "not as good" signify. Is William Faulkner's *Sanctuary* a better book than *Grand Hotel* by Vicki Baum or *The Good Earth* by Pearl Buck: all published in English in 1931, the latter two Club-selections that year, and would the selection have been better if Faulkner's novel had been included?[23] On second glance, however, it is clear that Rubin uses "modernism" as the yard stick against which to measure the quality of the Club's selections. Modernism is used as synonym for quality; an evaluating concept that takes a great deal for granted. Taking my cue from Rubin's untroubled use of the term "modernism," I will consider it as a term of critical placement and judgment that defines and orders a work of art contextually and hierarchically in relation to other works of art. That is, unlike concepts such as for example Dada, vorticism or imagism, modernism is a concept used by the critics rather than the artists. What Rita Felski argues about postmodernism holds true in the case of modernism as well, that it is "not a discrete reality, but a series of perspectives ... the totality of discourses on [modernism]" (14). In my reading of Blixen/Dinesen-critics the term modernism is understood as critical perspective that places and judges

[23] In "Beyond the Cave: Demystifying the Ideology of Modernism," Fredric Jameson points out that there is no single correct answer to the question of literary merit, when he writes that "in their heart of hearts … everyone knows that John O'Hara's novels still give a truer picture of the facts of life in the United States than anything of Hemingway or Faulkner, with all their tourist or magnolia exoticism. Yet, the latter are palpably the greater writers" (18). While Jameson situates and contextualizes the question of "better" and "not as good" in a discussion of modernism that takes the concept of realism as its starting point, it seems that he would still agree with Rubin's assessment of the Book-of-the-Month-Club selections during the first half of the twentieth century.

Incidentally, John O'Hara was never a Club selection, despite his critical and commercial success in the 1930s and onwards. When his first novel *Appointment in Samarra* was published in 1934, Canby published a highly disapproving review headed "Mr. O'Hara and the Vulgar School" on the front page of *The Saturday Review of Literature*. To Canby, O'Hara's writing was too sexually explicit and the author himself a "sensationalist" whose characters were not "accurate studies of contemporary Americans" (qtd. in Matthew J. Bruccoli, 107).

literary works in relation to the totality of discourses on modernism, and as a tool for inclusion of certain literary works, and critics, within a canon produced and reproduced by intellectual and academic traditions and institutions, or, in Fredric Jameson's word, as the "ideology of modernism" ("Beyond the Cave" 3).

Since I understand modernism as a term of placement and judgment rather than as an analytical tool, I am interested in the process by which Blixen/Dinesen was made a modernist author, placed and judged contextually and hierarchically, starting in the early 1960s and on-going today. She has also been labelled a "post-modernist" and a "late modernist." Inspired by Felski, I am less concerned with the question of whether the ism-labels are "true (as compared to what?), than whether they are useful ... What do these terms allow us to see more clearly? What do they obscure?" (10). I want to understand what is achieved by labelling Blixen/Dinesen's works one thing or the other? What do the labels clarify and what do they obscure?

In 1964, Langbaum published *Isak Dinesen's Art: The Gayety of Vision* at University of Chicago press. Langbaum's book was not the first Dinesen-study to come out of the academic world. In the 1950s, Aage Henriksen published a couple of essays in Danish on Blixen's works and in 1961 American scholar Eric Johannesson published *The World of Isak Dinesen.* Both Henriksen who wrote his thesis on Søren Kierkegaard, and Johannesson, professor of Scandinavian literature, placed Blixen/Dinesen within a limited Scandinavian/Nordic cultural and literary context. Both of them also understood her works as literary anachronisms, albeit in a positive vein. Johanneson compared Blixen/Dinesen with Selma Lagerlöf, and he wrote: "*Seven Gothic Tales* like *Gösta Berlings saga* some forty years earlier, marked the return to myth and story-telling," away from naturalism and "psychological and sociological analysis" (7). Henriksen's studies written in 1952 and 1956 relied on a Jungian interpretative apparatus that also stressed the mythical, a-historical or even a-temporal dimension of Blixen/Dinesen's works.

In relation to these earlier works, Langbaum's study marks an important shift in Blixen/Dinesen-reception, and I agree with Norwegian scholar Tone Selboe's appraisal that his work, still, represents the most important study of her entire oeuvre (13). He starts off by pointing out that his work is inspired by the suspicion

among many Blixen/Dinesen-readers, including Langbaum himself, that they are in fact not reading good literature at all, but "brilliant mystifications and nothing more" (1). Langbaum set out to prove this suspicion wrong, and he did so by placing Blixen/Dinesen's works squarely within a European/American modernist literary tradition, stressing their thematic and structural affinities with works by for example T S Eliot and Thomas Mann, and locating their shared philosophical sources in the critics of Western civilization and the belief in Reason, such as Nietzsche and Freud.

Since then, quite a few academic critics have followed in Langbaum's footsteps in their attempts to analyze and define Blixen/Dinesen's modernism, and to defend her rightful place within a modernist canon, even suggesting that her works anticipate "conceptions of language and subjectivity more recently articulated by continental writers like Cixous, Kristeva, and Irigaray" (Aiken, *Isak Dinesen and the Engendering of Narrative* 8). That is, a sort of post-modernism before the fact. In 2006 Ellen Rees even took issue with what she perceived as a tendency to read Blixen/Dinesen "through the lens of postmodernism" and to make her works "represent an anachronistic example of postmodernism" ("Holy Witch and Wanton Saint" 333). Instead, she wants to fit Blixen/Dinesen into the less widely discussed literary movement known as late modernism and in her book-length comparative study of Blixen/Dinesen, Virginia Woolf and Djuna Barnes she attempts to re-contextualize these writers within the frame of European modernism, labelling Blixen/Dinesen's works "a peculiarly atavistic expression of modernist literary and aesthetic ideals" (*On the Margins* 36).

Between Langbaum's contextualization of Blixen/Dinesen within modernism in 1964, and Rees' re-contextualization of her works within modernism with a twist in 2005, lies feminism. In Langbaum's study, the reference list includes two female authors. Sigrid Undset because according to Langbaum Blixen/Dinesen's short story "Pearls" was written in response to an Undset-novel, and Canfield Fisher because of her role in the publishing of *Seven Gothic Tales*. When Rees decides to re-contextualize Blixen/Dinesen whom she describes as "a writer so often considered to stand entirely alone in her literary preoccupations," in the company of Woolf and Barnes, 30 years of feminist studies has broadened and

fundamentally changed the literary landscape created by academics and critics (*On the Margins* 13) .

Still, Rees' definition of Blixen/Dinesen as an "atavistic" modernist and someone who "stands alone" in the literary tradition strangely echoes the interpretations of Langbaum, Johannesson and Henriksen half a century earlier. It seems that viewed from the academic perspective, Blixen/Dinesen's works become somewhat of a problem, whether it concerns one critic's uncomfortable sense that they are not really "good literature" at all, or another critic's feeling that they do not really fit into the linear, temporal structure of canonized literary history unless labelled "peculiarly atavistic" modernism. The critics represent Blixen/Dinesen's work that they have singled out for their studies, as though it did not quite measure up on its own but is in need of critical, academic support.[24] Langbaum sets out to rescue her work from his own suspicion that it may not be literature at all by reading them into the Western canon. Rees inserts her into the company of two certified modernists, doing away with her pre-supposed loneliness in literary history.

I find this approach to Blixen/Dinesen's work problematic. Langbaum and Rees, while taking off from widely differing theoretical starting-points, nevertheless seem to share the sense that some literature, including Blixen/Dinesen's, needs to be canonically framed and contextualized in order to realize its potential: to become "literature" in Langbaum's words. Or, in Rees' case, to be properly understood as late modernism despite its peculiar atavism. Langbaum's approach is openly condescending despite his professed admiration for Blixen/Dinesen's works. Rees, on the other hand, is far from condescending. Like other feminist interpretations of Blixen/Dinesen, Rees places her in the company of Barnes and Woolf as a creator of "a new experimental realm where these women authors took the liberty of inventing their own rules" (*On the Margins* 44). Writing as she does in the wake of a feminist embracement of Blixen/Dinesen's works in the 1980s which eventually led to an inclusion of her within a broader academic context, Rees does not need to rescue the works from any suspicion that they are not literature at all. At the same time, her "desire to

[24] Langbaum writes: "I want to find the reasons why we like her – for one admires before one knows why – and to suggest that Isak Dinesen is an important writer, *that her work is literature*" (1, my emphasis).

illuminate a meaningful literary context" that is decidedly and self-proclaimed modernism, leads to strained interpretations (13). I do find Rees' comparative readings of Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) and Blixen/Dinesen's *Seven Gothic Tales* (1934) suggestive in two respects: the "gender bending and masquerade" and the concept of "magical realism" that Rees borrows from Tyrus Miller's work on late modernism (40). Then again, while both gender bending, masquerading and magical realism are conspicuous components of all Blixen/Dinesen-works, they are not so in Woolf's case. Rees' comparative reading would work much less well in the case of for example *Mrs. Dalloway* or *To the Lighthouse*. Also, I am not at all convinced by Rees' main argument that the works above together with Barnes' *Nightwood* (1936)

> concern themselves fundamentally with the question of what Europe signifies, posed by women writing from the culturally ambiguous positions of England, America and Denmark, all of which have highly ambivalent attitudes toward the idea of Europe. (37)

Surely, the question of what Europe is, is too broad a question to use as an argument to single out and link only three authors, especially in the inter-war period? And, could it not be claimed that cultural ambiguity and ambivalence toward the idea of Europe is similarly a much too generalized concept on which to base an interpretation that is, essentially, selective?

While sympathetic to Rees' feminist intentions, I cannot help but feel that it is Rees' desire to establish a context of "women authors" in which to place the otherwise lonely Blixen/Dinesen that underlies her interpretations. In fact, Rees openly says so, when she writes that she sees "Blixen – consciously or unconsciously – allying herself with other women writers of the period, such as Virginia Woolf and Djuna Barnes" (36). Since we do not know whether Blixen/Dinesen even read Woolf and Barnes, much less if she consciously or unconsciously decided to ally herself with them, Rees' vision has more to do with her own critical intentions, than with Blixen/Dinesen's literature.[25] Similarly, Rees' need to establish the image of Blixen/Dinesen as someone looking for

[25] Blixen/Dinesen mentions neither of them in her extensive correspondence.

female allies springs from her own representation of the author as a loner and ultimately from her definition of Blixen/Dinesen as a problem within literary history. Rees writes: "Blixen's status in relation to literary modernism has not really been resolved, and – claimed both by the Scandinavian and the Anglo-American canons – she is most often categorized as an anomalous writer without counterpart" (36). It is this dilemma that Rees constructs and then sets out to resolve by adding Blixen/Dinesen to the constellation Barnes-Woolf, since the two latter, as Rees points out, have been brought together in comparative readings before.

Of course, all these studies were written retrospectively, as it were. Blixen/Dinesen had been dead for two years when Langbaum published his book, T.S. Eliot had received his Nobel-Prize in 1948, Virginia Woolf had died in 1941 and Djuna Barnes had been silent for almost 30 years. In the 1960s, literary modernism had become a non-disputed part of university curricula and today, in the twenty-first century, modernism is the new "classics." To declare Blixen/ Dinesen a modernist is equivalent to claiming a place for her writings on the literary Parnassus; to canonize her. Langbaum's study initiated the canonization more than 50 years ago, and when the then-secretary Horace Engdahl of the Swedish Academy confided to Rostbøll in 2004 that it was an "unforgivable sin of omission" not to reward Blixen/Dinesen with the Nobel Prize in the mid-1950s, it may be argued that her election had been completed and sealed (171). Today, it is uncontroversial to argue that Blixen/Dinesen is a modernist writer.

I have dealt at some length with Rees' texts, partly because I view her as an important Blixen/Dinesen-scholar whose contribution to the field I value. But also because I find her approach representative of a tendency amongst academic scholars to fit Blixen/Dinesen into the modernist slot because of the status of *modernism* within the academic curricula and the intellectual tradition. That is to say, if she can be proved to be a modernist her perceived status would be made un-anomalous. In this context, I am inclined to agree with Valentine Cunningham who writes that "Literary Theory in fact diminishes the literary, diminishes texts, by reducing them to formulae, to the formulaic, to the status only of the model" (122). And I definitely agree with Harker who writes that modernism

> has been stretched to its limit … in including women modernists, Harlem Renaissance writers, and proletarian writers. Many other models of authorship can be seen in looking at literature of the interwar period, but these writers have not enjoyed cultural cachet, manifestos, and fifty years of critical work. (15)

I would argue that what this tendency clarifies is not primarily the possible modernism of Blixen/Dinesen's works, but the status of modernism within academic research; the modernist ideology. The question, following Felski, is what it might obscure? Here, I would like to turn again to Aiken, another important Blixen/Dinesen-scholar who also reads her with a clearly pronounced feminist perspective. In her influential interpretation of *Out of Africa*, Aiken claims that Blixen/Dinesen's text uncovers

> 'the interplay of heterogeneous elements' in what an Occidental phallocentric ontology would read *in*differently as monolithic, static, and same. [Dinesen] evokes alternative ways of seeing and being that ultimately subvert the politics and poetics of the very systems which, paradoxically, has made *Out of Africa* possible. (*Isak Dinesen and the Engendering of Narrative* 126)

Aiken's argument exemplifies the sub-category within the post-colonial field that raises the claim that white women in the colonies and their discourses in the form of literature undermine the hegemony of the Imperial family where colonialism is imagined and represented as a family romance. Consequently, their works should be read as a veiled critique from a sort of proto-feminist standpoint of the colonial, patriarchal system of which they were part. Aiken writes: "The 'blessing' of paradise regained that *Out of Africa* finally promises then, is not the dream of empire, but the bliss of writing and reading" (245).

In much feminist writing on Blixen/Dinesen, whether with a postcolonial or modernist slant, the idea of her work as liberating self-production/self-

construction is central, and both Rees and Aiken exemplify it.[26] While I find it understandable and to some extent politically necessary, I also find it problematic to make Blixen/Dinesen herself or her texts champions of a feminist and/or an anti-colonial cause. Partly because it means turning a blind eye to Blixen/Dinesen's public and very clear and conservative stand on questions of gender equality and sexual identity, as well as the racism inherent in her writings on Africa. More importantly however, the critics' desire to locate a feminist, anti-capitalist and anti-colonial theme or message in Blixen/Dinesen's works is ultimately grounded in the author herself, consciously or unconsciously allying herself, self-producing, reading and writing, and becoming an example of the "woman writer as the *meaning* of the texts studied," as Toril Moi writes in her discussion of Anglo-American feminist criticism. Moi continues:

> From one viewpoint this is a laudable project, since feminists obviously wish to make women speak; but from another viewpoint it carries some dubious political and aesthetic implications. For one thing it is not an unproblematic project to try to speak *for* the other woman, since this is precisely what the ventriloquism of patriarchy has always done. (67)

Like Rees, Aiken identifies Blixen/Dinesen herself as the meaning of the literary works. Against "Isak Dinesen" the pop icon, the aristocratic elitist complicit with consumerist culture and reactionary ideologies she pits a Blixen/Dinesen who actively deconstructs and, to use Aiken's own terms, subverts the politics and poetics of the very systems, capitalism and colonialism, which made her writing possible ("Consuming Isak Dinesen" 4).

While I do find Aiken's and Rees' readings of Blixen/Dinesen's works interesting in many respects, I also find their determination to construct her as a feminist, anti-colonial, and anti-capitalist heroine, and her writings as reflections of her heroic stance, problematic for several reasons. There is nothing inherently wrong with Rees' and Aiken's attempts to read Blixen/Dinesen's texts from a feminist perspective, exploring the feminist, political impact her gender bending

[26] Terms from Horton's study *Difficult Women, Artful Lives. Olive Schreiner and Isak Dinesen, In and Out of Africa*.

stories may have on a late twentieth and early twenty-first century reader. Quite the opposite! For some reason however, Rees and Aiken are not content with text-based interpretations but want to ground their arguments in the author herself, thus insisting on the identity of author and text. This approach where the author is made to conform to the critic's feminist interpretations of the texts weakens rather than strengthens the feminist argument. It suggests that the feminist critic is limited to dealing with texts written by self-proclaimed feminist authors, thus excluding a great number of contemporary authors both male and female, as well as almost all older authors. It also calls for an image of the historical figure of the author as a unified, self-conscious subject, pitting her strength against a similarly monolithic, unified patriarchal and/or imperialistic totality in order to create a "new experimental realm." It is ironic too, that feminism criticism produces the same author-centered understanding of the literary work as the promotion campaigns of the Book-of-the-Month-Club and the publishing house, while at the same time castigating the commercialism of this process.

In Blixen/Dinesen's case, Rees' and Aiken's author-based arguments also create more problems than they solve. While her texts may well be read on their own terms as playfully undermining or underpinning various ideological structures, the historical figure of Blixen/Dinesen does not as easily lend itself to a liberating feminist, anti-colonial or anti-commercial agenda. Why, then, include this historical figure in a literary analysis? Partly, I believe it has to do with a desire to create heroic narratives for feminism. This is a desire which I fully understand. More importantly however, I would argue that the need to portray Blixen/Dinesen herself as actively choosing selected female allies and subverting capitalist/patriarchal structures is the academic critic's response to the demands of a modernist ideology described by Huyssen as a "discourse which insists on the categorical distinction between high art and mass culture," understood as the amalgam of works, artists and audiences (viii).

In order for Blixen/Dinesen's texts to fit the mold of modernist ideology, the author has to be detached from the commercial, mass culture context that in fact gave birth to and has continued to sustain the authorship. In her case this becomes especially necessary since she, as Aiken points out, deployed herself as a consumable artefact in the author-centered marketing of her books. I would also

argue that the demands of a modernist ideology make sense of the defensive tone sounded by Langbaum in the introduction to his 1964 study. Blixen/Dinesen's first visit to the USA in 1959 – a visit that she had postponed for almost 30 years due to the war and her own illness – was still fresh in memory. Aiken writes about how, during her visit, Blixen/Dinesen had become "the center of media attention, the subject of public adoration, and the fetishized iconographic object of celebrated photographers Cecil Beaton and Richard Avedon" ("Consuming Isak Dinesen" 4). Langbaum's need to prove to himself and his readers that she writes literature and not just "brilliant mystifications" becomes understandable when related to modernist distinctions between art and mass culture. And against the background painted by Aiken, a commercial scene where Blixen/Dinesen willingly transformed herself into a fetish of capitalist consumer culture, and "capitalized, in every sense, on her role as *Baronessen* and literary lioness," as Aiken writes (4).

If modernism is understood as a term of placement and judgement that defines and orders a work of art contextually and hierarchically in relation to other works of art, today's use of the term faithfully mirrors and reproduces the excluding processes that operated already when Baudelaire battled the crowd, and when *Vanity Fair* promised that knowing Picasso meant an escape from it. It is not then so much a matter of the quality of writing which can never be settled anyway. Nor does it really have to do with the commercializing of culture from which intellectuals and the academic world want to distance themselves in order to defend their own autonomy and that of the artwork. Ultimately, it seems to be an attempt to avoid grappling with the emerging mass consumer society that not only produced the literary lioness cum Baroness, but also the tales of her fiction.

If, as Rees has written, Blixen/Dinesen is an author who has been "considered to stand entirely alone in her literary preoccupations," perhaps this is because the searchlight has been that of modernist ideology *(On the Margins* 13)? What happens, then, if *Seven Gothic Tales* is placed instead within the framework of mature capitalism evolving into a consumer culture that displaced inherited notions of cultural value in practice, while retaining them at the imaginary level?

A Race Apart?

A Peculiar Mania

In Canfield Fisher's Introduction to *Seven Gothic Tales*, she writes that "the people in this book are a race apart." She also describes it as a book which has "many aristocrats in it, cardinals, ambassadors, Chanoinesses [sic], exquisite and perverted young noblemen – and old ones too" (vi vii). Yet, she is careful not to establish any causal link between these two observations. In Canfield Fisher's account the people in this book are not a race apart *because* they are aristocrats. There is something slightly disingenuous about this representation, since the stories themselves are quite clear on this point. The notion that the aristocracy is in fact a race apart is explicitly and implicitly addressed in *Seven Gothic Tales* and it is difficult to imagine that an experienced reader such as Canfield Fisher could miss the way in which this tenet is fundamental to its structure and themes. At the same time, it is easy to understand why she wished to downplay this structuring principle. First, because it might have given the potential reader/buyer the impression that this was a historical romance in the vein of Walter Scott, which it certainly is not. Secondly, because there would have been something unsettling and even offensive to suggest to a reader in 1934 that these were stories that advocated the kind of autocratic blood-mysticism that the twentieth century had cast off in favor of democracy and notions of equal values and rights. By and large, academic Blixen/Dinesen-research has reproduced Canfield Fisher's decision to by-pass the thought-provoking, or just provoking, aspects of *Seven Gothic Tales*' aristocratic features, and indeed of her whole oeuvre. The predominance of aristocrats is noted but not analyzed, as though it was something that does not deserve critical attention, being a slightly embarrassing flaw in otherwise fascinating works. The "anachronism" of Blixen/Dinesen's work is never linked to the themes of blue-bloodedness that runs through the stories, even though the idea that the aristocracy is a race apart certainly seems to belong in the past.

In the public critical reception of Blixen/Dinesen – both her works and herself – the aristocratic theme has surfaced every now and then ever since 1934, especially in the Scandinavian countries. Often in a slightly ridiculing tone and

sometimes with a vengeance. In 1957, the Swedish edition of Blixen/Dinesen's *Last Tales (Sista berättelser)* was reviewed by author Arthur Lundkvist in the Swedish daily *Morgon-Tidningen*. By then, Lundkvist was a central figure in a Swedish and Nordic cultural context, having translated and introduced a number of authors since the early 1930s, including James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, William Faulkner, John Steinbeck, Pablo Neruda, Nadine Gordimer and many others. In 1968, he was elected member of the Swedish Academy and he continued to be influential until the time of his death.

Lundkvist had translated *Out of Africa* from Danish into Swedish in 1937, and when he wrote an introduction to an edition published in 1984, he declared his great admiration for her book on Africa. It was, however, quite different with *Last Tales*. I will quote his review at some length since it is, as he points out, representative of a critical tendency in Blixen/Dinesen-reception in Scandinavia.

> The Danes have been calling for a Nobel Prize for Karen Blixen. At the same time, the harshest criticism of her oeuvre has come from Denmark. When one has seen through her stylistic illusions, one has discovered magazine-style plots, coldheartedly manipulative marionette-spectacles and artfully perverted eroticism. Her stories are reduced to costume pieces, cleverly disguised pastiches, with a bombastic and contradictory profundity which does not survive a closer look. It is … entertainment, appealing to a wide audience looking for cheap sensations, and an elite that wishes for the same thing as long as it is decked out, disguised, and fitted out with an aesthetic distance.
>
> To this criticism, one may add yet another objection which strikes me as important. It concerns Karen Blixen's obsession with the upper classes, her peculiar mania for noble ancestry and blue blood. She persistently and admiringly deals with royalty, nobility and church-dignitaries, and also with artists in the shape of divas … She never for a moment lets us forget that she is a baroness, and that her world is so infinitely more refined and superior than ours, obeying laws and eternal contexts that remain indecipherable to the rest of us …
>
> Eventually, all this upper-classiness begins to look like a parody. One even starts to doubt its sincerity. Such a self-conscious aristocracy does not seem

> natural. Is it not in fact hiding the feelings of a parvenu, a self-doubt? Is Karen Blixen's taste not fundamentally vulgar, but hidden under a highbrow style, and with claims to links to classic literature? (qtd. In *Den främmande förförerskan* 288)[27]

When reading Lundkvist's diatribe, a well-read reader with a good memory would recall the reviews written by Danish critics when *Syv fantastiske fortællinger* (*Seven Gothic Tales*) was published in Denmark two decades earlier. In particular, they would remember the scathing review by the influential Danish critic Fredrik Schyberg in *Berlingske Tidende* who wrote that the main ingredients in these tales were snobbery, artifice and perversion. Schyberg was especially upset by the perverse eroticism in the tales "where there are no normal people," but their aristocratic mien also annoyed him and he concluded his text: "this is gossiping aristocratic ladies at high tea" ("Det er adelig Dame-Te, hvor der sladres" *Blixeniana* 228). Schyberg may have been more aggressive than most among the Danish reviewers in 1935, but his denunciation of the aristocratic air of the stories was echoed in almost all reviews, beginning with the reviews of the American edition in 1934 when Tom Kristensen wrote in *Politiken*: "It is a profoundly reactionary mind we get to know through this book" ("Det er saaledes et dybt reaktionært Sind, vi lærer at kende gennem denne Bog" 159). And Hans Brix wrote in *Dagens Nyheder* that this book represented: "La pourriture noble" – noble decay" ("La pourriture noble. Edelfaule" 174). The latter critic also reviewed the Danish edition in 1935, describing it as the "Hollywood of literature" and several other reviewers frankly suggested that this book would

[27] (Danskarna har ropat högljutt på ett nobelpris åt Karen Blixen. Men samtidigt har från Danmark riktats den hårdaste kritiken mot hennes författarskap. När man sett igenom dess stilistiska bländverk har man funnit följetongsintriger, kyligt beräknat marionettspel och raffinerat förvänd erotik. Hennes berättelser reduceras till kostymstycken, skickligt förklädda pastischer, med ett högtravande och motsägelsefullt djupsinne som inte håller vid närmare granskning. Det är artistiskt upplyft underhållning, vädjande till en stor publik som önskar raffel och till en elit som önskar detsamma bara det är tillräckligt garnerat, maskerat, belagt med estetisk distans.

Till en sådan kritik kan fogas ytterligare en invändning som förefaller mig väsentlig. Det gäller Karen Blixens överklasskomplex, hennes besynnerliga upptagenhet av börd och blått blod. Hon handskas ständigt och under oförställd beundran med kungligheter, adel och kyrkliga dignitärer, också gärna med konstnärer på divastadiet … Hon låter oss aldrig ett ögonblick glömma att hon är baronessa, att hennes värld är så oändligt mycket finare och upphöjdare än vår, underkastad för oss andra ofattbara lagar och eviga sammanhang … All denna överklassighet kan slutligen inte undgå att verka parodisk. Man börjar rentav betvivla dess äkthet. En så självmedveten adlighet verkar inte naturlig. Döljer den inte en uppkomlingskänsla, ett tvivel på sig själv? Har inte Karen Blixen i grunden en vulgär smak som måste döljas under högdragen stilisering, under anspråk på att stå nära klassikerna?)

never have been published in Denmark if it had not been for the American success. Schyberg wrote that only Americans could find the representation of aristocratic decadence glamorous, to a European it came across as mere sensationalism.

When Lundkvist wrote in 1957 the Danes' feelings for their by-then famous author had softened. The Danish society of Authors had nominated Blixen/Dinesen for the Nobel Prize already in 1950, and as Lundkvist points out they had continued to call for it. She had received a number of Danish prizes and had been sought out by a younger generation of authors, calling for her support and contributions to magazines. In short, by 1957, Blixen/Dinesen was an established figure on the Danish public scene, popular and respected, albeit a bit reluctantly so.

Yet, there is no getting around the fact that the aristocratic characters abound in Blixen/Dinesen's works, especially in *Seven Gothic Tales*, and her preoccupation with the aristocracy is not limited to her fictional works. In her letters from Africa she often returned to the notion that the aristocracy is an elect group of people to which she herself belonged. She described herself as "God's chosen snob" who could not stand the thought of living amongst the middle-class in a letter to her sister in 1928, and infamously claimed that her syphilis was a price worth paying for becoming a baroness, in a letter to her brother in 1926 (*Breven från Afrika* 393 281). Her faithful secretary-cum-maid Clara Selborn who lived and worked together with Blixen/Dinesen for twenty years had to call her baroness during their first ten years together. Only then was she allowed to use the name "Tania," reserved for close friends, and the year before Blixen/Dinesen's death: "Tanne," her name in the family (*Notater om Karen Blixen*).

Lundkvist's suggestion that Blixen/Dinesen's aristocratic mania in fact hid the feeling of a parvenu was mean, but not off mark which he of course knew. She *was* a parvenu and a baroness only by marriage, and when she wrote to her brother she put the word "baroness" in quotation marks to signal this awareness. And while she insisted on being addressed as baroness by the world at large, she probably had no illusions about the fact that the born aristocrats did not necessarily include her in their circle of elects.

When young Karen Dinesen set out to meet her fiancé baron Bror von Blixen-Finecke in December 1913, she traveled by boat from Naples to Mombasa. Aboard the boat were Prince Wilhelm of Sweden and his chamberlain, Count Lewenhaupt. On the first of January, the latter wrote in his diary that he and the prince were considering offering young miss Dinesen a place at their table, since she was clearly embarrassed by sitting alone in the dining room: "we will probably do so, since at least one knows *what* and *who* she is" ("Antagligen göra vi så, ty man vet åtminstone *hvad* och *hvem* hon är" qtd. in Aschan 58). This comment indicates what kind of world young Karen Dinesen was about to enter through her marriage to the Swedish baron. It was a world defined by strictly patrolled, absolute boundaries between those who by birth belonged in the aristocracy and the royalty, and those who did not. The prince and his consort knew what and who Karen Dinesen was in the sense that she was about to be married to a man who belonged in their own ranks. Yet, since she was not yet married she still belonged in the category of people with whom princes and dukes do not necessary mingle and mix; the unknowns. But then, she was not an unknown to the prince and the count and while the latter's diary is written to suggest that they suddenly discovered her presence aboard, they knew very well that she would be there. They were friends of Baron Blixen, and one of the reasons for their presence on this boat was the fact that they had agreed to be witnesses at his wedding in Mombasa where he was waiting for the three of them arrive. In the diary, Karen Dinesen appears as a liminal creature who could only "probably" be invited to his and the prince's table, since she had not yet made the complete crossing into the sphere of the select few. In Lewenhaupt's conceited and cruel description of the lonely and uncomfortable miss Dinesen, there is also the suggestion that even when she has made this crossing through marriage she will still remain an outsider, a nobody with whom one can choose to mix, or not.

Was Karen Dinesen, uncomfortably sitting by herself in the dining room and slowly traveling across the waters towards her destination and marriage, at all aware of the duke's and the prince's deliberations? Definitely. She was born into a wealthy, bourgeois family of merchants, land-owners and militaries, and on her father's side she was distantly related to the aristocratic Krag-Juel-Vind-Frijs family. She was intermittently invited to their estate, which is where she probably

met Bror and his twin brother Hans whose mother was born a Krag-Juel-Vind-Frijs. In her interactions with her distant relatives she had learned about the ways in which the aristocracy could choose to accentuate the importance of what and who you are through excluding gestures. In her biography on Blixen/Dinesen, Judith Thurman describes the way in which young Karen Dinesen was placed next to other untitled relatives or older married men at dinners, reserving the titled, unmarried young men for the aristocratic young women (98).

To anyone interested in the biography of Blixen/Dinesen, the complexity of the aristocratic theme is something that has to be explored at the level of individual psychology, but also in relation to the ways in which the author Blixen/Dinesen consciously staged herself as a baroness in the marketing of her works. When writing about her fiction the aristocratic theme is also something that has to be dealt with, again, especially in relation to *Seven Gothic Tales*, or as Langbaum put it: a question that has to be answered (74). Quite simply: what is the function of the aristocrats in her tales? To Langbaum, the answer to this question was fairly simple. Referencing Schyberg's vituperative review, Langbaum suggested that as an American he could afford to take "a kind of tourist's interest in Isak Dinesen's aristocratic point of view" (74). In doing so it became obvious to him that Blixen/Dinesen treated her aristocrats ironically, reviving them and creating a deliberately anachronistic literary universe in order to "use their obsolete virtues as a stance from which to understand and criticize modern values" (76). In Langbaum's reading, the aristocrats represent the voice of cultural memory and a sense of historical continuity that had been lost in the modern world. The view of Blixen/Dinesen's aristocrats as representations of an existential position severed from any socioeconomic or historical context has become the typical way of reading them, exemplified by Frantz Leander Hansen who writes "Thus, in Karen Blixen's works the bourgeois and the aristocratic are fundamentally manifestations of *approaches to life* which are to be found irrespective of time, place – and social class" (2).

Langbaum was probably right in his assessment of the way in which the proximity to real aristocrats affects the critics' judgment. Schyberg and Lundkvist, and especially the latter who was an autodidact from a humble background, were writing in the midst of an era of political and social upheaval that drastically

changed society, making Blixen/Dinesen's writings appear as a voice from an autocratic past. At the same time, Lundkvist and Langbaum reach similar conclusions: Blixen/Dinesen's use and treatment of the aristocratic characters and their anachronistic system of values is ironic and it creates parody. There is something laughable and even ridiculous about the counts, countesses and princes that people *Seven Gothic Tales*. Not only that there are so many of them, but also that they act like a race apart, so "unlike us and the people we know in books and in real life," as Canfield-Fisher wrote (vi).[28] Clearly, Blixen/Dinesen's aristocrats do not fall into the realistic category, if by realism we mean the representation of characters as complex personalities whose actions and thoughts can be understood with reference to an individualized psychological make-up and history with which the narrative has provided us. If, on the other hand, we think of realism as a representation of social reality and Blixen/Dinesen's characters as the means by which this social reality is exposed and explored, *Seven Gothic Tales* becomes very much a book about real life and real people, and the aristocratic characters the main vehicle for this representation.

A Race Apart and Verisimilitude

On a "fine May evening of 1823" the young Danish nobleman Count Augustus von Schimmelmann, sits by a table made out of a millstone, in the garden of a small hotel near Pisa ("The Roads Round Pisa" 7). He is trying to write a letter to an old, close friend, but unable to finish it he goes for a stroll. The air is warm, filled with swallows and the scent of grass and trees. He walks between tall poplars in the golden rays of the setting sun, brooding on his own unhappy marriage and the nature of truth and identity. Suddenly, his thoughts are interrupted by a terrible noise as a large coach comes towards him in a cloud of dust, the horses wildly galloping and hurling the carriage from one side of the road to the other. The coachman and lackey are thrown from their seats, and the carriage itself is thrown to one side of the road. Inside, there is a bald, old man and a young, broad woman. When the latter puts a bonnet with ostrich feathers on

[28] Even though Lewenhaupt's diary should caution us to be quite as confident as Canfield-Fisher was.

the head of the old man, he is transformed into a fine old lady of imposing appearance. The old lady is carried out of the wreckage and into the hotel, where she is placed in an enormous bed with red curtains. She is pale and her right arm has been broken. Outside, the horses are caught and brought back. The broad young woman, whom von Schimmelmann has identified as the maid, turns to him and asks whether he is a doctor, but before he has had time to answer, the old lady speaks: "'No', said the old lady from the bed, in a very faint voice, hoarse with pain. 'No, he is neither a doctor nor a priest, of which I want none. He is a nobleman, and that is the only person I need'" (11).

I have re-told the opening pages of "The Roads Round Pisa" at some length in order to argue that the old lady's recognition of von Schimmelmann as a nobleman is a decisive moment. As fleeting as it may be, this moment necessitates a very definite shift in one's mode of reading. Since the reader has been introduced to the young man as Count Augustus von Schimmelmann in the very first line of the story, it is easy to miss the shift: the old lady simply states what the reader already knows. The maid's question, however, draws attention to the fact that there seems to be nothing within the narrative to identify him as such. To her, he is simply a young man who may be the required doctor. In terms of physical appearances all we know about him is that he would have been good-looking if he had not been a little too fat. The no-nonsense account of his bodily characteristics is similar to the description of the maid as "broad," and in marked contrast to the portrayal of the old lady who is said to have a "refined" face and an "imposing appearance."

Yet, she somehow knows what he is, before she finds out who he is. In trying to make sense of the old lady's recognition, I want to turn to Tzvetan Todorov's discussion of the fantastic in *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. The full title of Todorov's classical work suggests that its primary aim is to exemplify a structuralist analysis of the concept of genre. The fantastic just happens to be the "principle operative in a number of texts" chosen for this aim (4). Identifying this principle allows Todorov to read Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, James' *The Turn of the Screw* and Gogol's short story "The Nose" (to name but a few examples) as belonging within the *genre* of the fantastic, despite our sense

that they may belong not only within three quite different literary traditions, but also within different genres.

Since I am not attempting a genre-definition of Blixen/Dinesen's tales at this point, I will leave Todorov's deductive genre-theory aside, focusing instead on its by-products which in fact take up most of the space in his study. While Todorov does not use the term verisimilitude in his study of the fantastic, his definition explicitly relates the concept to the real and the imaginary (25). At the heart of his argument is the question how readers deal with instances of the supernatural in literary texts, or rather, the ways in which literary texts determine the reader's response to these instances through linguistic devices. The text may choose to present the supernatural such as a ghost, devil or vampire, as a given fact which places it, according to Todorov, in the realm of the marvelous. Or, it may explain the supernatural as nothing but an illusion, a dream or a hallucination, in which case we are dealing with an instance of the uncanny, in Todorov's terminology. The fantastic is the state in-between, a state of hesitation and uncertainty where the reader is unable to choose between a supernatural and a naturalistic explanation of events.

The problems inherent in the kind of rigid structuralism that Todorov applies in this particular genre-study, surfaces in his struggle to keep up the distinctions between the marvelous, the uncanny and the fantastic, and especially between the latter two. He admits as much when he observes that the fantastic leads a life full of dangers, and may evaporate at any moment, characterizing it as an "evanescent genre" (42). What becomes clear in Todorov's attempts to trace boundaries around the fantastic as genre, is that in can only be defined in terms of the reader's relation to a statement. That is to say, in terms of a modal relation, rather than as an absolute category, independent of cultural and temporal contexts. As Jonathan Culler has observed, Todorov explicitly bases his genre-definitions on operations of reading arguing, for example, that it is the reader's *praxis* which makes it possible to read animals speaking in a fable allegorically, rather than as instances of the supernatural, or the language of poetry as precisely poetical, rather than fantastic, uncanny or marvelous (32). At the same time and in this particular work, Todorov himself is rather vague about the ways in which this praxis is bound by time and space. The real and the imaginary, the natural and the supernatural are

traced against the background of "our world, the one we know," a "familiar world," leaving aside the questions of what this particular world is, and how and why it draws *its* boundaries between the one and the other (25). Obviously, Todorov counts on *his* readers to be able to identify, and identify with, this un-interrogated, "familiar" world and the praxis of its readers. As Culler points out, Todorov's definitions of genre-conventions, whether fantastic or otherwise, are essentially possibilities of meaning that are realized in an act of interpretation and assimilation "within the modes of order which culture makes available" (137).

While much could be said about this world in terms of geography, time, gender, class, and education, that is to say its modes of order, at this point it is precisely Todorov's refusal to do so in his genre-analysis in *The Fantastic* that I find useful for my purposes. I quite simply want to consider how to deal with the old lady's recognition of the nobleman against the background of an unexamined world, where the categories of real and imaginary are conceived as stable and absolute.

In the very first, long, sentence, the reader learns that Count von Schimmelmann is sitting by a millstone-table writing a letter on a fine May evening in 1823. The rest of the first passage qualifies the temporality of this statement in a series of sensuous representations of "evening": the image of the sun-rays falling almost horizontally between the tall poplars, and the swallows cruising through the air to make the most of the last half-hour of daylight. von Schimmelmann goes for a stroll, witnesses the coach-accident, and discovers the broad young woman and the person he first believes to be a man inside the wreckage. The bonnet is fastened onto the bald head, and the old man is transformed into a fine old lady who smiles faintly at Augustus. Having introduced this rather extraordinary metamorphosis, the narrative abruptly turns its attention away from von Schimmelmann and the old lady. Instead, it spends a few sentences surveying the scene and the other characters who have figured in the narrative, however marginally. The coachman, all dusty, comes running towards the wreckage, while the lackey is seen lying in the road in a dead faint. The people of the small inn have come out, shouting and gesturing, and one of them manages to capture one of the runaway horses, while two peasants can be seen at a distance, trying to capture the other horse. Only when everybody has

been accounted for, does the narrative turn back to the old lady and the count, leading to the moment of recognition. Neither coachman nor lackey, horses, peasants, inn-people ever figure again in the story. These passages, with their wealth of seemingly unimportant details, could rightly be called "narrative luxury," borrowing a term from Barthes' essay on the reality effect in literature. The innumerable swallows in the sky, the dusty coachman and the horses combine to create a sense of reality in the opening of this story, the world we know in the words of Todorov.

Within this reality which we might call natural reality where swallows fly in the evening and where runaway horses are caught, there is however a second kind of reality embedded, one which could be called social reality. In her introduction to *Seven Gothic Tales*, Canfield Fisher wrote that they are "solidly set in an admirably factual background somewhere on the same globe we inhabit" (iv). In a few words, she was signaling to potential readers that while the stories may seem "new" and the people in them "a race apart", a Book-of-the-Month-Club-reader would still recognize their world as familiar and be able to assimilate their meaning within the modes of order made available by North American culture in 1934. Using a term introduced by structuralist writing, we might say that she was asserting the degree to which these stories adhered to conventional patterns of literary verisimilitude.

In his brief four-page-introduction to *Communications* 11 in 1968, Todorov distinguished between four different senses of this concept, all of them related to our perception of reality, or Canfield Fisher's factual background. The first is what he calls the most "naïve" sense where verisimilitude is constructed by the way a literary text conforms to what might be termed predictable reality. It is not, however, the predictability of the natural laws that make swallows fly at dusk. Rather, it is the predictability of human praxis, that is to say sequences which conform to the reader's experience of human behavior. In "The Roads Round Pisa," this kind of verisimilitude is exemplified by the moment when von Schimmelmann's thoughts are interrupted by the terrible noise of the approaching carriage; by the coachman getting up and running towards the site of the crash or by the people of the inn emitting loud exclamations of sympathy at the sight of the accident. The definition of this sense of verisimilitude as naïve indicates that it is,

as Culler points out, essentially a manifestation of "that which is taken as the 'real world'" (140). While seemingly innocuous and neutral, representations of predictable reality are in fact saturated with social and cultural values that determine our reading of the entire text. "The Roads Round Pisa" would have conformed to predictable reality if von Schimmelmann had continued his stroll unperturbed by the crash, or if the people of the inn had laughed and cheered at the accident. It would, however, have been a representation referencing a different set of cultural and social values. What the first pages of "The Roads Round Pisa" set out to represent is a solidly hierarchical society. The world view that underpins such an order is expressed in the representation of the serving classes as unswervingly loyal to their masters and mistresses: the coachman that gets up and comes "running" to the crashed coach and the maid who obeys, despite the fact that both of them have just had a terrible accident. They may look like marginal characters in the text, appearing and disappearing within the scope of a few lines. Yet, their presence and actions are absolutely essential in establishing the verisimilitude of this particular story, and indeed, the entire collection.

The social reality of these first few pages is clearly hierarchical and there are two recognizable, interrelated social layers: one consisting of people who serve, such as the lackey, the coachman, and the maid, and another consisting of people who are served, such as Count von Schimmelmann, and the as yet nameless old woman. Another way of thinking of these social identities would be to say that the former are defined by their functions as lackey or maid within the system of production, their labor, or quite simply by what they do. In the narrative the coachman runs, the maid finds the bonnet to place on the old lady's head, and the people of the inn and the peasants catch the horses, and carry the old lady to bed. The count, on the other hand, does nothing and his inactivity becomes especially pronounced in contrast to the activity and commotion created by the coach-accident. Thus, even before the narrative has reached the old lady's statement which explicitly addresses the nature of a nobleman, it has established his identity as something having to do with being, rather than doing.

The second kind of verisimilitude is related to what Todorov calls "public opinion." It is not always easy, or necessary, to distinguish from naïve verisimilitude, but it is more explicitly sociopolitical. Todorov stresses that this

kind of verisimilitude conforms to discourses that, while impersonal and anonymous, can still be identified as a social construction by the reader. In "The Roads Round Pisa," the maid is described as broad and the old lady has a refined face and an imposing appearance. The reader recognizes these characteristics as stereotypes that indicate social status and class, but would be hard put to pinpoint the exact source of his or her recognition. Yet, the fact that the maid is broad rather than graceful contributes to the construction of verisimilitude since it conforms to a general opinion on what maids look like.

"Public opinion" may seem like an opaque concept, referencing a sort of collective unconscious without links to material reality. Perhaps the best way to define it functionally is to think of it as an everyday actualization and manifestation of ideology or world view, understood as an imaginary representation of the real world. The *broad* maid in Dinesen's text is an ideological construct and an example of verisimilitude precisely because it does *not* refer to real maids, but to an imaginary, generic "maid." Since the physical appearance of real maids is arbitrary, it is the "broadness" of Dinesen's particular maid which signals the ideology at work in the construction of literary verisimilitude. The reader may think of her physical appearance as an indication of the fact that a maid performs manual labor, but it is more likely that he or she will assimilate the maid's broadness in relation to the description of the other passenger having a "refined face." In fact, the syntactical construction where the reader learns about the young woman's broadness before she is presented as a maid, suggests that a maid is not broad because she is a maid, but that she is a maid because she is broad. Physical attributes are not derived from a certain social position and function, but the other way around.

Most likely, however, the reader will not pause to think at all about the broadness of the maid, since it conforms to a public opinion on which the text relies to create a sense of verisimilitude. At the same time, the "broadness" performs its work in the construction of a fictional world which the reader recognizes as coherent, intelligible and familiar. What seems important about the concept of verisimilitude in relation to a "public opinion" is that it, like ideology, does not refer to a representation of the real world, but rather to a representation

of an imaginary relationship to this reality. Verisimilitude is what we believe the world to be like, a representation of a world view.

This understanding of verisimilitude makes it possible to read the first few pages of "The Roads Round Pisa," set in 1823, as a story about a familiar world in 1934, and still today. The "reality" to which these pages refer is the world view expressed in the representation of a hierarchical social order where adjectives such as "broad" and "refined" function as indications of social status. These attributes travel across the temporal and spatial boundaries that the story explicitly establishes because an average Book-of-the-Month-Club-reader in 1934 would recognize them as functional social demarcations in the public opinion of her or his own time.

Within the parameters of our known, familiar world the existence of noblemen is simply a social fact and a reality. The existence of a social segment identified as the aristocracy is historically grounded, and a noble family can trace its lineage back in time to the exact date at which a forefather received his title, and the political and economic reasons for it. The von Schimmelmanns, for example, originated in the bourgeois Schimmelmann-family, which made a fortune in the seven-year war between 1756-1763, and was rewarded for its financial services to the crown by the Danish king.

"The Roads Round Pisa" relies on the reader's ability to assimilate the events of the story and the characters within the modes of an order which naturalizes social facts, such as the existence of noblemen along with lackeys and maids. To go along with the reality of noblemen is not, however, the same as accepting that they may be recognized as such without recourse to names or titles. Nevertheless, this is precisely what the narrative demands of its reader when the old lady identifies Count von Schimmelmann. While in historical times, the nobility could indeed be recognized at a glance since the manner of dress and accessories, such as carrying a sword for example, were regularized trough sumptuary laws, this is clearly not the case in this story. Not only because such laws had become defunct by the year 1823, but also because of the maid's question which brings attention to the fact that von Schimmelmann's appearance reveals nothing specific about his social identity. Except, that is, to the old lady. Her words thus require a shift in the mode of reading as they give rise to the question of *how* she knows. To

make sense of the old lady's knowledge, the reader has to reckon with the presence of the supernatural. Since the reader knows that she is right, this is not a case of the supernatural that can be explained by recourse to hallucinations or dreams, that is to say the uncanny in Todorov's terminology. Instead, the reader is initially conditioned to interpret this event as marvelous, or magic, and the supernatural is simply assimilated and accepted by the reader according to the modes of order laid down by the text.

To identify the event of recognition as marvelous, however, does not really finalize and settle the question of how to read this text, since that which is recognized, Count von Schimmelmann, does not really belong in the category of the supernatural. Or, does he? If, using an example from Todorov, the old lady would have said: "He is a vampire, and that is the only person I need," the text would be a clear-cut example of the marvelous or explicit supernatural. Here, however, we are dealing with a social category that while entirely familiar and very much part of the world we know, is also and at the same time the only social category besides royalty that is legitimized and reproduced differently from every other social category. Count von Schimmelmann is a count by virtue of birth, and although his social position may change and vary in terms of wealth and influence, his identity as a member of the aristocracy is unalterable. The aristocracy as an identifiable social group is maintained without links to a position within the order of production and social reality. The son of a lackey may become a lackey himself, but he is not born as such. The son of a count is born a count, and even if he became a lackey he would still be a count. Identity and destiny is defined in terms of blood, outside historical and social dynamics that change human conditions of being. In this sense, the aristocracy is a construction founded on a notion of an absolute and unalterable essence of being that is passed down through generations within an exclusive group.

While a count is not supernatural in the sense that a vampire is within the modes of order of our culture, he is also not quite natural in the same way as a maid or a lackey is within the same order. A maid is defined by what she does, while a count can only be defined by what he is, an essence of being that extends beyond the boundaries of the individual self, and that is, just as in the case of the vampire, a matter of blood. I want to suggest that the old lady's marvelous

recognition of von Schimmelmann extends its magic by drawing the reader's attention to the potentially supernatural quality of the aristocracy. If a count can be recognized at a glance, is that not because there is something inherently magical and unearthly about both his being and his existence in the first place?

The juxtaposition of the maid's question and the old lady's statement creates a textual structure where the reader's sense of the marvelous is transposed from the moment of recognition to the very existence of counts, that is to say, to social reality. The reader simply cannot choose between a supernatural and a naturalistic explanation of events within the parameters of this story and the familiar world on which it relies. On the one hand, the old lady's recognition is impossible according to the unexamined modes of order regulating this world, a fact confirmed by the maid's misrecognition. On the other hand and in the same world, so realistically and meticulously constructed by the narrative, the aristocracy does exist as a social entity distinct from all other social groups since it is based solely on blood: a race apart. And, in such a world, would not the old lady's accurate recognition be entirely possible? Perhaps the best way to describe the kind of supernatural that is revealed by the old lady's recognition is to think of it as the magic produced by social reality and by the unexamined, familiar world itself. For this very reason, it is a magic kept on hold by a narrative structure that determines the reader's response in a way reminiscent of the fantastic mode understood in Todorov's sense as a state of hesitation and uncertainty. The moment of recognition necessitates a shift in the reader's modal relationship to the register of real and imaginary, but not only at the textual level. It is a moment which de-familiarizes the familiar world by bringing to the surface the possibility that it is our concept of the real and the accepted modes of order of our culture that makes the supernatural not only visible, but inescapable.

Ridiculous but Real

The first few pages of "The Roads Round Pisa" sensitize the reader to the imaginary and magical dimension of our perception of social reality. The aristocratic theme brings this paradox to the surface, but it is also set forth in the representation of the broad maid and the old man with a refined face. At the same

time, the notion of stable gender-identity is unhinged as the old man transforms into an old lady by the simple act of donning a wig and bonnet. *Seven Gothic Tales* will return again and again to the idea that we are deceived by our preconceived and socially constructed notions of *what* and *who* a person is. It is present in the representation of a valet who successfully disguises himself as a noble cardinal in "The Deluge at Norderney" or in the story about the opera-singer who decides to become "many persons" and re-invents herself in the roles of prostitute and revolutionary in "The Dreamers." It is also present in the way in which the characters of these stories imagine and create their own histories, for example the spinster miss Malin Nat-og-Dag who in her old age "believed herself to have been the grand courtesan of her time, if not the great Whore of the Revelation" in "The Deluge at Norderney" (138). People in this book continuously invent and reinvent themselves, act roles and exchange identities, such as when Agnese takes the place of her friend Rosina in "The Roads Round Pisa" and much has been written about the theme of role-playing, masks, masquerades and unstable identity, both with respect to Blixen/Dinesen's works and her own life.[29]

I am, however, more interested in the way in which *Seven Gothic Tales* in fact sustains the notion of the aristocracy as a race apart, defined by blood-lines. *Seven Gothic Tales* is a universe where boundaries are continuously transgressed: humans may turn into animals as in "The Monkey" and a dead man returns to the world of the living in "Supper at Elsinore", while themes of incest and homosexuality are brought to the fore. Yet, the magical recognition of Count von Schimmelmann in "The Roads Round Pisa" sets the tone for stories where the blood-will-tell convention of the traditional fairy-tale or courtly romance is

[29]A selection of titles from Blixen-bibliography is suggestive:
Bag Blixens masker. Min far, mig selv og månefruen. Samtale med Aage Henriksen. Henriksen, Morten, 2010. (*Behind Blixen's Masks. My Father, Myself and the Lady of the Moon*)
Karen Blixen - masker och magi. Combüchen, Sigrid, 2000 (*Karen Blixen – Masks and Magic*)
Karen Blixen, 'Isak Dinesen' og rummet mellem dem. Aikin, Susan Hardy, 1993 (*Karen Blixen, 'Isak Dinesen' and the Space in Between*)
Who Am I? The Story of Isak Dinesen's Identity, Thorkild Bjørnvig, 1993
The Mask of Form in 'Out of Africa', Judith Lee, 1993
Isak Dinesen and Karen Blixen. The Mask and the Reality, Donald Hannah, 1971

challenged, but upheld. The noble bastards Kaspersen and Jonathan Maersk of "The Deluge at Norderney" may not be recognized as aristocrats by the strict edicts that regulate this particular social group. The story however, makes it clear that their behavior and personalities reveal the innate qualities of a race apart. Young Jonathan Maersk who is revealed to be the illegitimate son of Baron Gersdorff is unable to escape his destiny to be "a glass of fashion and a mould of form" just as his father, despite the fact that he fights it. It is true that Dinesen treats her aristocrats ironically in the sense that she ridicules the way in which society treats them as a race apart, the whole of Copenhagen's social elite recognizing in Jonathan the glass of fashion when they find out about his parentage. Or in the representation of Baron Guildenstern in "The Dreamers" who holds himself to be a "giant," while he is in reality a man whose sense of self-esteem is completely dependent on the admiration of others (357).[30]

What *Seven Gothic Tales* suggests is that while the existence of a race apart may be ridiculous it is nevertheless real, since social reality and hierarchy is grounded in an imaginary register that is produced and re-produced in the form of a world view. The world is what we perceive it to be, and our beliefs structure the world fantastically. Blixen/Dinesen's use of authentic aristocratic names such as von Schimmelmann, von Schreckenstein or Nat-og-Dag underlines that these beliefs are not a matter of personal choice, but rather of "general opinion." We may choose to believe that there is no such thing as blood-determined lineage, but it nevertheless exists.

Profitable Appearances

Blixen/Dinesen-interpretations have generally treated the memoir *Out of Africa* as a book that reconstructs an imaginary European, feudal past. Sometimes, this view is paired with an understanding of *Seven Gothic Tales* as a book that was made possible by Blixen/Dinesen's experience of colonial Africa. Langbaum succinctly writes that "*Seven Gothic Tales* is a great book about Europe, because Isak

[30] It has been suggested that baron Guildenstern was intended as a caricature of Blixen/Dinesen's ex-husband Bror Blixen.

Dinesen's experience of Africa stands behind it; and Europe stands, in the same way, behind every word of *Out of Africa*" (119).

The idea that an idealistic image of a harmonious feudal European past stands behind *Out of Africa*, and that the aristocratic milieu and feudal ethos of *Seven Gothic Tales* was made possible by colonial reality, is, at first glance, persuasive. It is a neat explanation of the anachronistic aspect of Blixen/Dinesen's first collection of tales, since it points to a source of inspiration in the social reality of colonial Kenya where Blixen/Dinesen lived for almost eighteen years, and where she started writing her stories. The problem with this view, however, is that it does not explore and take into account what the social reality of the colony in fact looked like. While most critics agree that the harmonious feudalism of *Out of Africa* has very little to do with Blixen/Dinesen's actual life at the farm at Ngong, the exploration of the material political and economic conditions of colonial Kenya are left outside the interpretation of *Seven Gothic Tales*.[31] I want to argue that Blixen/Dinesen's experience of "Africa" does stand behind *Seven Gothic Tales* but not only as an experience of the feudal mimicry made possible by colonial power-structures, an anachronistic taste of a European past, but also the inspirational experience of feudal mimicry and imagery brought up-to-date and turned into an marketable economic asset. In order to understand the contemporaneousness and marketability of feudal mimicry in the colonial setting, I will look closer at the kind of "Africa" that Blixen/Dinesen experienced between 1914 and 1931. In this reading, *Out of Africa*, published in 1937 but begun already in the early 1930s, does not figure as a nostalgic re-creation of a European past, but rather as an apt analysis of what made colonial Kenya so sellable on a Western market. And, as a map for reading the aristocratic/race-apart-theme of *Seven Gothic Tales* as a reflection on the ways in which social fantasies and public opinion sustain a magic perception of the world and shapes social reality.

In the spring of 1931, Blixen wrote her brother Thomas Dinesen a long letter. It is a letter of grief and bitterness. The coffee-farm which had been her home for seventeen years had been sold at a compulsory auction. The 6000 acres of farm-land which she had claimed as hers was going to be divided into lots and turned

[31] The recent publication of Blixen/Dinesen's complete African correspondence gives an even more clear view of the ways in which her literary representation of the farm differs from her actual life there.

into a suburbia of bungalows for the growing middle-class of Nairobi; the "shop-people" who ran out into the hills on Sundays on their motor-cycles and shot at anything they saw, as she resentfully referred to them in *Out of Africa* (15). 1200 farm-hands and squatters would once again be driven off the land that had been expropriated by the British colonial government in the early 1900s and set aside for European settlers, such as the young Karen Dinesen and Baron von Blixen-Finecke. The land which for ages had been a site of agrarian production, initially in the form of Kikuyu small-scale agriculture and Masai livestock production, later in the form of large-scale, export-dependent, European-owned farming of primary products, became a real estate market.

To Blixen this was a personal tragedy that she blamed on her tight-fisted bourgeois relatives back in Denmark, uncles and aunts who had invested in the grand colonial project initiated by the young Blixen-couple in 1913. Over the years they had lost not only their faith in Karen's and Bror's capacities as farmers, but also a great deal of money. Karen Blixen's hard-working, prudent bourgeois relatives understood the failure of Karen Coffee in moral terms and blamed in on the Blixens' sumptuous consumption, her uncle Aage Westenholz writing already in 1921 to Thomas Dinesen that

> While we back home are forced to sell the shirts off our backs for the sake of Karen Coffee, Tanne blithely keeps her splendid house, all her expensive furniture, her costly *boys*, her horse and, above all, her dangerous husband. (qtd. in Westenholz 33)
> (Mens vi herhjemme gradvis klædes af for Karen Coffees skyld, har Tanne stadig behold sit fine hus, alle sine kostbare møbler, sine dyre boys, sin ridehest og, fremfor alt, sin farlige mand.)

While it is true that Blixen/Dinesen was an ardent and self-professed consumer of goods that would demonstrate the social standing of a baroness, Parisian clothing, thoroughbreds, exclusive crystal, china and furniture, and a staff of white-clad servants, her failure as farm-manager was neither personal nor moral, at least not in any simple sense. Colonial Kenya was a late addition to the British empire and it was imagined and shaped by its European settlers as well as by the colonial administration in a very particular and definite way. In 1906, this was

formulated by Colonel John Ainsworthy, top administrator and Chief Native Commissioner, when he wrote: "White people can live here and *will* live here, not as colonists performing manual labor, as in Canada or New Zealand, but as planters, etc., overseeing natives doing the work of development" (qtd. in Wolff 54.). This view of what kind of colony Kenya should and would be was seconded by the kind of people who set out to be its colonists. Most famously perhaps by Lord Delamere, The Rt. Hon. Hugh Cholmondeley, 3rd Baron Delamere, a man appropriately and admiringly described by another colonist, Elspeth Huxley, in 1935, as someone in whom the "feudal system was in [the] bones and blood" (6). The colonial empire at large in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century permitted, as Benedict Anderson has pointed out, "sizeable numbers of bourgeois and petty bourgeois to play aristocrat off centre court: i.e. anywhere in the empire except at home," naming this mimicry a "feudal-aristocratic drag" (150). This kind of drag-show was probably nowhere as manifest as at the mythologized Muthaiga Country Club in Nairobi between the wars where the "Happy Valley"-set mingled and partied. They were a group of people from Europe's upper echelons, infamous enough to have generated a number of books, and a film, over the years, and searchable on Wikipedia today. Karen Blixen was never really a part of this clique, partly from choice and partly because she voiced dissenting opinions on the ways in which the English viewed and behaved towards the colonized Africans, both at the level of colonial administrative politics and in the case of individuals. Three months after her arrival in Kenya in April 1914, Blixen wrote a letter to her brother very different in tone from the one she would write seventeen years later as she was leaving the country. She criticizes "the English" for their lack of interest in learning anything at all about the "natives," and applauds the latter's ability to learn "our habits": "an old Somali may in six months learn enough about the arrangement of a dinner, so that he is able to vary a menu made up of six-seven courses; I always expect to be served soup after dessert" ("på ett halvår kan en gammal Somali lära sig en middags komposition så hjälpligt att han kan variera en meny på sex-sju rätter; jag väntar mig alltid att vi ska få soppa efter desserten" *Breven från Afrika* 36). Blixen's attitude towards the "natives" was, as Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o would point out in a speech in 1980 to the Danish Library Association, "the love of a man for a horse or for a

pet" (665). The difference between her opinions and those of "the English" was one of degree, rather than kind. In the very next sentence of this enthusiastic letter written in 1914, Blixen calls forth an image of feudal harmony by way of a reference to an Icelandic saga, exemplifying colonial ideology where the relationship between periphery and metropolis was understood in temporal, rather than spatial, terms;

> I often think that our lives out here must be like Erling Skjalgason's or Hårek at Tjotta with all our thralls … You, who are interested in social issues, would find useful material. In fact, there are no societal difficulties here, neither conflicts between poor and rich, nor between men and women. (*Karen Blixen i Afrika* 36)
>
> (Jag tycker ofta att våra liv här ute måste likna Erling Skjalgassons eller Hårek på Tjotta med alla våra trälar … För Dig som är intresserad av samhällsfrågor, skulle här finnas stoff för intressanta studier. Här existerar faktiskt inga sociala frågor, varken konflikt mellan fattiga och rika eller mellan män och kvinnor.)

But of course there were. British East Africa, later Kenya, was a conflict-ridden colony from the start. The conflict between a native, African majority-population and the white minority, was always present long before the 1950s and the Mau Mau uprisings. There was a continuous conflict between settlers and administration (London/metropolis), not least concerning the status of the "natives" and the running of the colony. At a financial level, the colony was dependent on the metropolis, a situation that parallels Blixen's relationship to her relatives back in Denmark, and it bred the same kind of bitterness and resentment. Intertwined with the periphery-metropolis-conflict was a class-conflict that not only divided the settlers whose political representatives came from aristocratic backgrounds from the British tax-payers, but also divided the white colony from within along class-lines. As early as in the 1920s, twenty percent of the fertile lands known as the White Highlands – expropriated from the African population and reserved for white settlers – was in the hands of only five owners. Thus, colonial Kenya quickly saw the same economic development as the colonial West

Indies had seen in the seventeenth and eighteenth century where small, white landowners were pushed out by bigger ones with larger financial reserves.

In his book on the economics of colonialism in Kenya between the years 1870-1930, Richard Wolff concludes that "the quantity and quality of official assistance to European agriculture in Kenya were among the highest in any colonial experience" (88). While many of British Kenya's laws were routine colonial measures the administration, pressured by Lord Delamere and his followers both at home and in Kenya, went further than usual in their attempts to placate this group who were still never really satisfied. As Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale write in their study of social conflict in colonial Kenya, significantly called *Unhappy Valley*, the settlers where

> characterized by a striking combination of political and social organization and 'clout', and economic weakness and inexperience, and they responded with frustrated rage when the state showed reluctance to use its power to further their private material interests. (195)

This response seems to have been largely successful. In 1921, the Nairobi court ruled that even land that had been set aside for "natives" was in fact Crown land, and thus also open for the kind of land speculation that was rife in the colony due to extremely low prices and favourable lease-arrangements running to 999 years. In 1903, Lord Delamere received a one hundred thousand acre grant that was to become the object of Parliamentary inquiry due to its sheer size (Kennedy 40). Huge tracts of land were bought, sold and leased, but only thirty percent of the land owned by Europeans was in agricultural use by 1930. Wolff's strictly economic analysis of colonial Kenya's finances suggests that European agriculture in the 1920s was inefficient, artificially protected and, in strict accounting terms, an unprofitable use of resources at all levels. The investments made by individual settlers, or, as in the case of Karen Company, a European-based company run by relatives, as well as direct and indirect governmental subsidies to European farming, was quite simply lost. Wolff concludes: "The European settlers, as a class, more resembled a landed aristocracy than a capitalist entrepreneur group" (146).

The problem was that their notions of a paternalistic feudal life-style were economically unviable on a capitalist, globalized market. The trickle of raw products coming out of colonial Kenya could not compete on the world market, and tax-based subsidies could not remedy this fact. Ironically, the economic mechanisms and technological developments that brought Karen Coffee Company to bankruptcy were exactly the same forces that wiped out small-scale farming in Europe and the US during the same time-period. The Great Depression clinched the inevitable outcome of the Karen Coffee Company-adventure, its 6000 acres of coffee too small a venture, its thousands of human hands and ox-carts too inefficient and – despite everything – too costly.

Karen Blixen never really understood the mechanisms that wiped out her way of life or the massive scale of change that mature, globalized capitalism and technological development entailed.[32] She blamed the disaster on the miserliness of her bourgeois relatives and they in their turn blamed it on her extravagant life-style. The truth is that Karen Blixen could have sold off all her horses and gone to live in a hut, and it would not have made any difference to the outcome of the Karen Company. While it is true that many of colonial Kenya's aristocratic settlers exhibited, as Dane Kennedy puts it, a "cultural distaste for the ledger-book mentality," the financial conundrum of European agriculture in the colony has to be explained at a macroeconomic level (41). Global, capitalist economics and technological development had no place for pre-industrial farming.

What global capitalism did have a place for was a different kind of efficient exploitation of natural resources. Colonial Kenya failed as a plantation-based economy, but from its very inception it was a prime example of what Ali Behdad has called the most advanced stage of colonialism, namely the tourist industry, creating new markets and businesses that were monopolized by European colonizers (49). The tourist industry is inextricably linked to the development of a consumer culture where the whole world is a consumable experience, and consumption the privileged site of the production of self and identity. To be a tourist is to make a number of public claims about who you are, most apparently

[32] I agree with Dane Kennedy who writes that "much of *Out of Africa*'s special power derives from Isak Dinesen's failure to fully comprehend the subversive forces that undermined her lived pastoral and drove her from her farm in Africa" (37). His essay is significantly called "Isak Dinesen's Recovery of a European Past".

about your economic power which buys you leisure and the ability to spend your leisure-time away from home. But being a tourist is also about making the choice to travel, and where and how to do it, and thus also a statement about identity that goes beyond the mere matter of wealth.

Lord Delamere had initially come to Kenya for big-game hunting, and this was true of many of the settlers. The Blixens themselves had been swerved from their initial plan to buy a rubber-plantation in Malacca by Bror Blixen's uncle Count Mogens Krag-Juel-Wind-Frijs, who came back from a safari-trip to Kenya with stories of lion-hunting and rivers of champagne at the Muthaiga Club. Following the Blixens' divorce in 1921, Bror Blixen left the farm and set himself up as an organizer of and guide on big-game hunting-safaris. His clients over the years included nobility and royalties such as the Prince of Wales as well as a number of American and European business magnates, and, perhaps most famously, Ernest Hemingway who wrote *Green Hills of Africa* (1935) about his experience. Unlike his former wife and other settlers who struggled on with their unprofitable farms, Bror Blixen was able to make a decent living and did not leave Kenya until in 1938. The Hon. Denys Finch-Hatton, close friend and possible lover of Karen Blixen, also made a living as a guide on hunting tours, using his airplane to scout for game from the air.

The customized trips for wealthy westerners included guaranteed opportunities to collect the heads of the "Big Five", visits to Masai villages and to especially arranged Ngomas or native dances, as well as to Muthaiga Club in Nairobi and its famous race-course. Beryl Markham, English-born and Kenya-raised aviatrix, game scout, and race-horse-trainer, wrote in her autobiographical book *West With the Night* (1942) that was praised by Hemingway whom she, of course, knew, that when her father, Captain Charles Clutterbuck, left England and bought land at Njoro in 1906 he did so "because East Africa was new and you could feel the future of it under your feet" (67). The fate of plantation-style farming in colonial Kenya as well as the story of her own life proves her both wrong and right. Wrong, in that Clutterbuck's farm at Njoro was, just like Blixen's farm at Ngong, a failure and went bankrupt following WW I. Right, in that the entrepreneurial segment of market capitalism that she herself contributed to and lived off, marked

the beginning of what is today one of the most financially important sectors of world economy.

To reformulate Wolff's description of the European settlers we might say that some of them did indeed prove to be excellent, forward-looking capitalist entrepreneurs. And, that their success depended on the conception of colonial Kenya as a haven for a landed aristocracy put under pressure in Europe both by capitalism's radical re-structuring of agricultural production, and by politically radical movements, "flotsam from Europe's old landed elites, dispersed by the stormy social and economic changes occurring at home" as Kennedy writes (39). Simply put: Markham needed Baroness Blixen, not necessarily the failed farmer but definitely the titled consumer of thoroughbreds, Parisian dresses and white-clad servants whose marriage in Nairobi in 1914 had been witnessed by a Swedish prince. To make sense of this seemingly paradoxical statement, it is useful to turn to American sociologist and economist Thorstein Veblen, an early theorist on consumption patterns and social status and a contemporary of colonial settlers such as Lord Delamere and the Blixens. His theory on social status as measured by the distance or exemption from productive labor and conspicuous consumption echo in Colonel Ainsworthy's vision of British East Africa and in Karen Blixen's letters filled with entertaining anecdotes about teaching servants how to make a perfect Cumberland-sauce for the Prince of Wales' visit to the farm. Leisure is not idleness, but non-productive activity in the consumption and display of goods and knowledge completely severed from productive labor. This may include

> knowledge of the dead languages and the occult sciences; of correct spelling; of syntax and prosody; of the various forms of domestic music and other household art; of the latest proprieties of dress, furniture and equipage; of games, sports and fancy-bred animals, such as dogs and race-horses. (Veblen 47).

To have time and money to waste on acquiring and cultivating this kind of knowledge signified a social and economic supremacy that allowed the leisure classes to exist as non-productive consumers of the useless.

The budding industry of big-game hunting-safaris in colonial Kenya built on the consumption ideals of the leisure classes, reaching far back in history. In fact,

Veblen argues that the trophy is the first consumer goods and a severed elephant-head on the wall a sign both of the hunter's skill and his or her freedom from the functional need to hunt in order to eat. Thus, it was no coincidence that the first big-game-hunters coming out to British East Africa where men such as Lord Delamere or Count Krag-Juel-Vind-Frijs; men and a handful of women from a social layer that was defined and defined itself precisely through its exemption from productive labor. It was, and is, also a group where the social position and status is a matter of blood, and part of a cosmological order where power is ordained by God through the royal agency. No other part of the leisure classes was more distinctly defined by their distance from productive labor than the European nobility. In fact, their non-productivity was the ideological basis of their existence and as Kennedy writes: "Hunting sport retained deep residues of social significance for the aristocratic class; it offered a lingering symbolic expression of their lost warrior role" (39).

The conspicuous presence of European nobility in the colony and the feudal-aristocratic drag-show combined to create a stage for emulation of the life-style of the most prestigious part of the leisure classes by those who had the wealth, but not the blood, to prove their belonging there. As Veblen pointed out at the turn of the nineteenth century, "the lines of demarcation between social classes have grown vague and transient" as market capitalism continuously added new groups of people to the rank of the leisure classes (70). Wealthy industrialists could afford to buy the status symbols and manners traditionally associated with the aristocracy such as big-game hunting safaris, and thus, as Slater puts it, "aping a life-style founded on non-productivity" (156). Social status manifested in the consumption of the useless became consumer goods on a market regulated, not by birth or blood but by economic power. Just as Kennedy points out, many of the settlers who re-oriented themselves from farming to the safari-industry in the role of "white hunters", did not have much money to go with their titles. Both Denys Finch-Hatton and Bror Blixen were younger sons and fated by the strict aristocratic rules of primogeniture. And while princes and nobilities were among their clients, many were American and European industrialists who paid well for the opportunity not only to consume conspicuously, but also to associate with the titled elite they desired to emulate. Ironically, then, the titled "white hunters"

could remain part of the leisure classes by selling their non-productive knowledge of hunting skills and the proper hunting-manners (not shooting at anything they saw), as well as themselves in the role of embodiments of the exclusive segment of the leisure class whose status could never, at least in theory, be bought, but only inherited.

Colonial Kenya in the first half of the twentieth century is a prime example of the advent of a consumer culture awash with signs and images, where the structure of status and meaning had become unstable and negotiable and where "appearance becomes a privileged site of strategic action in a unprecedented way," as Slater writes (31). To appear in the company of men and women embodying the signs of social status in their hyphenated names, imitating their table manners, dress-style, and language was a strategic action and an investment in a time where social status and identity had become an open-ended, ever-on-going project where calculated consumption was imperative.

The social order envisioned by the colonial elite of British Kenya, and deferentially sponsored by the colonial administration, must be understood as the creation of a cultural product for sale on a global market. The colonists' self-proclaimed pre-modern, feudal ideals that expressed a conscious, systematic alienation from the entire sphere of business and industry was paradoxically what made "their" product – "Africa" – desirable on the market.

When the Kenyan author Ngugi spoke at the Danish Library Association in 1980 it was precisely the creation of this "Africa" that was the topic of his talk. He mapped the contours of three versions of "Africa," present in Western Europe as economic realities and imaginations. One is represented by the "businessman's Africa," the hunter after profit coming to Africa in search of raw materials and cheap human labor. The second is "the European hunter after pleasure," the tourist. To Ngugi however, the most dangerous "Africa" is the "Africa" in European Fiction, "beloved by both the hunter for profit and the hunter for pleasure," and therefore "*Out of Africa* is one of the most dangerous books ever written about Africa" (665). He is far from alone in his perception of *Out of Africa* as somehow exceptional in the flood of books representing Africa to European and Western readers. In a comparative reading of a number of biographies and memoirs written by colonial settlers in Kenya, Thomas Knipp claims that *Out of*

Africa "is the paradigmatic white African memoir" (53). Since Knipp just like Ngugi is eager to stress the degree to which Blixen/Dinesen's writings on Africa must be considered as a part of the production of the racist ideology, "paradigmatic" is as double-edged a praise as the latter's observation that the author had a gift for words and dreams. If the danger and "paradigmatic" quality of *Out of Africa* can be measured in number of re-prints and its continuous presence on a global literary market, Knipp's and Ngugi's appraisals certainly seem accurate. Unlike the books enumerated by Knipp, written about the same time-period and the same social circles (they figure in each other's books), *Out of Africa* is read well beyond the scope of those limited few who are interested in the specific time and place of colonial Kenya during the first three decades of the twentieth century. Only five years after Ngugi's speech in Denmark Blixen/Dinesen's book was turned into a blockbuster movie by Hollywood-director Sydney Pollack, featuring Meryl Streep and Robert Redford cast as Karen Blixen and Denys Finch-Hatton. This film signaled a renewed commercial interest in Blixen/Dinesen's literary works and the turning of her Danish home Rungstedlund into a Karen Blixen-museum was, ironically enough, made financially possible by a film that scarcely acknowledged her life in Denmark at all. In Nairobi, the film led to the opening of a Karen Blixen-museum where the film-props left behind act the role of Karen Blixen's original furniture.

While the Hollywood movie inaugurated a renewed interest in Blixen/Dinesen's writings on Africa and in "Africa" as an object of European consumption, *Out of Africa* did hold a distinct place in the colonial canon even before then. What I find interesting in Ngugi's talk is the fact that he neither places her writings within the limited setting of the first decades of the twentieth century, nor in the long tradition of colonialist discourse to which it certainly belongs. Instead, he presents *Out of Africa* as a book belonging in the immediate present of the late twentieth century. I do not want to appear cynical or naïve. I do recognize that he was taking a political stance in reminding his audience that the inherently racist power structure that shaped colonial Kenya had remained essentially unaltered after independence. At the same time, his perspective is refreshingly different from much that has been written about *Out of Africa* as an "elegiac" written for "the angst-ridden haute bourgeoisie," a "cultural nostalgia,"

as Kennedy writes (3). Or, as "a paradise lost" in Langbaum's more benevolent and less acid analysis (119)

I would suggest that these readings are very much in agreement with how *Out of Africa* consciously presents itself to the reader, closing its very first chapter by pointing out that "the colony is changing and has already changed since I lived there" and modestly suggesting that what has been set down in this book – as "accurately as possible" – "may have a sort of historical interest" (28). *Out of Africa* clearly does belong in the colonial sub-genre described by Behdad in terms of belatedness, nostalgia and tragedy, where, as Langbaum writes, Africa is imagined in terms of a European past and thus becomes a refuge from the European present (141). This type of nostalgic colonialist literature very consciously sets itself up as an escape from Western modernity understood as urban, industrial, conflict-ridden, bereft of moral values, consumerist and shallow, by positing a pre-modern, Edenic world elsewhere. In doing so, it draws on various traditions and strains of colonial discourse, combining eighteenth century ideas of the noble savage with the spatialization of time in nineteenth century evolutionist anthropology. The inversion of time and space is explicitly addressed in a passage entitled "Of Natives and History" in *Out of Africa* where the Natives are said to inhabit the stone age, "walking on the shadowy paths of our own ancestors" they embrace the spiritual experience of the Transubstantiation in much the same was as "our ancestors" did, preferring it to the material rewards of modernity, such as bicycles or motorbikes (252).

It easy to concur with the idea that colonialist nostalgia was and remains sellable due to a general Western malaise with the ways in which industrial, capitalist modernity swept away and continues to change traditional ways of life. It is important to remember, however, that the nineteenth century scientific discourse on spatialized time on which the nostalgic genre relies was far from melancholy. It was, as Johannes Fabian has pointed out, a politics of time closely allied with colonial forces of oppression that exonerated violence and exploitation in the name of civilization and development (17).

In the same way, Ngugi's speech shifts the perspective away from nostalgia and elegy towards an understanding of *Out of Africa* and the genre to which it belongs as a simultaneous celebration of Western modernity understood as the

freedom to consume the world. Mature capitalism evolving into a consumer-based, global economy created a market for the consumption of meaning-creating leisure that could be profitably exploited. From this perspective nostalgia appears as a marketing device, and *Out of Africa* as a promotional piece selling the possibility of experiencing a past, feudal harmony in the present of colonial Kenya.

To call *Out of Africa* a piece of promotional writing may seem unnecessarily harsh, but I want to stress the fact that the immediate success of this book well outside of the "angst-ridden haute bourgeoisie"-readership, not least because of the Book-of-the-Month-Club, is inseparable from the development of consumer-oriented capitalism in the 1920s and 1930s. While most of the readers of *Out of Africa* in the 1930s could certainly not afford to travel to Kenya to go big-game hunting in the company of aristocrats, train white-clad servants in the art of haute cuisine, breed thoroughbreds, or send off to Paris for a new dress, they did have what their ancestors only a generation back did not have: leisure and money enough to be able to make the effort to emulate the truly leisured, encouraged to do so by mass-advertising.

Out of Africa may be appropriately described as a pastoral (Langbaum) or a romance (Kennedy), but it is above all a beautifully written book about leisure. At the center of this book there is a coffee-farm where no-one is ever seen to work. There are squatters, workers, servants, boys and totos aplenty, but we do not follow them into the fields, to the laundry-room, or even into their own small allotments. The lady of the house is never seen bent over ledgers, in business transactions or in correspondence with company representatives. We are never allowed to see the material, economic mechanisms behind the running of the farm, and in this respect *Out of Africa* is very different from the contemporary memoirs mentioned by Knipp. By leaving sordid reality behind it effectively transforms base matter into dreams that could be shared by anyone in a consumer culture which encouraged the individual to believe that dreams of adventure, power, joy and transformation could be realized through consumption, regardless of his or her position within the chain of production.

In this sense, *Out of Africa*'s commercial success testifies to the explosive growth of the middle-class following WW I. While this development was

discernible in Europe it was especially marked and rapid in North America, its industries untouched by war. The middle-class consumer whose parents or grandparents had perhaps toiled under conditions not unlike those of Blixen's workers on the Kenyan farm, were now invited to identify with the colonial version of a landed gentry, not only by virtue of a racial affiliation, but also in their role as potential consumers of leisure and the use-less, including literature.

Knipp's suggestion that we understand *Out of Africa* as a romance with Dinesen in the staple-role of "sorceress-queen, equal parts Merlin and Guenevere, who slays lions rather than dragons and uses medicine rather than magic to save lives and communities" is interesting in this context (4). It identifies the hierarchical structure of *Out of Africa* where the white, powerful self at the heart of the narrative is what Abdul JanMohamed has called "the centripetal force" that guarantees order and stability (77). *Out of Africa* read as a romance should also be understood in relation to Erich Auerbach's discussion of medieval romance as an expression of a feudal ethos adopted by the ruling class to conceal its real function, describing "its own life in extrahistorical terms, as an absolute aesthetic configuration without practical purpose" (138). While Auerbach suggests that we read the courtly romance as a form of literary escapism created at a moment of social crises for the feudal aristocracy, he also points out that "the knightly ideal survived all the catastrophes which befell feudalism in the course of the centuries," since this ideal was adopted by the emerging bourgeois (137). That is to say, *Out of Africa* can be read as a romance in the sense that it left the historically conditioned systems of production and ownership outside the story and offered a white, literate reader who could afford to buy the book and had the leisure time to read it, a vicarious experience of belonging to a ruling class. The feudal ethos expressed in the romance form is transferable across time and space, and can thus be recycled in relation to shifting power structures as long as there are ruling classes at all. In the case of *Out of Africa* it was recycled in a colonial setting at a time of an expanding consumer market in the West and this combination of historical forces helps to explain its success as well as its lasting influence and presence in the Western canon. It also explains why the Danish edition, *Den afrikanske farm*, was well received and reviewed in the Danish press in marked contrast to the critical reception of *Syv fantastiske fortællinger* three

years earlier. In *Social-Demokraten*, Svend Erichsen wrote: "She no longer writes about the waning nobility of times past, or about peculiar people – copied from the paintings or tapestries of castles – but about today's Negroes and Mohammedans from inner Africa. And she writes masterly" (Hun skriver ikke mere om Fortidens falmede Adel, om sære Figurer – snittet ud af gamle Slotssales Malerier eller Gobeliner – men om Nutidens Negre og Muhamedanere fra det Indre af Afrika. Og hun skriver som en Mester"). In *Nationaltidende*, Haakon Stangerup praised *Den afrikanske farm*'s "passionate tenderness," and Kjeld Edfelt in *Berlingske Tidende* recognized the voice of a "wise and experienced woman" in its lines (""intens Varme", "klog og erfaren Kvinde"). There were a few dissenting voices, such as Emil Frederiksen in *Kristeligt Dagblad* who found Blixen's observations of the natives as "banal as those that may be found in any kind of women's literary salon. Her stories about the Negroes clearly reveal that she delights in their perception of her as a higher kind of being" ("saa banala som i en hvilken som helst litterær Dame-salon. Hun fortæller om Negrene med en gennemtrængende Tone af at nyde den Opfattelse, de har af hende som et højere Væsen"). In general though, the feudal ethos was palatable in Denmark when brought to life in a particular socio-economic context, in this case the colony with its racialized social structures.

This observation should caution us to think about the appeal of the feudal ethos to social groups outside the nobility proper or of the expansion of the leisure classes in terms of democratization or social levelling. Both the feudal idea and the reality of leisure, presupposes the existence of a hierarchical, social order where production is carried out off-stage and by someone else. And while *Out of Africa* depended on the emerging, consuming Western middle-class for its commercial success, it also relied on the continued existence of socio-economic differences and hierarchies within Western societies. In the world of capitalist consumption- and mass media-dependent marketing there must always be someone and something that is superior to what I am and have. There must be someone whose tastes in clothes, furniture, food, hobbies, reading, coiffure and music the consumer can be enticed to try to emulate through consumption.

I want to suggest that reading *Out of Africa* towards the end of the twentieth century in a culture immersed in copy texts selling an "Africa" of adventure and

freedom that is only a flight away, its copy text-potential surfaces. The copy text, touristic quality was always there in Blixen/Dinesen's book by virtue of its use of the romance format, mood and archetypes where the sorceress-queen and the knight-errant Denys Finch-Hatton perform the magic of Western technology in a stable and hierarchically ordered and pastoral universe of masters and servants. In the manner of copy text, or romance, *Out of Africa* never touches upon the material conditions that go into the creation of this pastoral, nor the historically grounded power structures that bring it into being. The Ngong farm is, like today's holiday resort or the enchanted palace of romance, represented as purely aesthetic configurations without practical purposes and entirely exempt from the system of production.

Today, apart from the Karen Blixen museum of Nairobi, located in the suburb called Karen, there is a Karen Blixen camp in the wildlife reserve Masai Mara and Karen Blixen Coffee cottages and restaurants, close to the Karen Golf and Country Club. The historical person Karen Blixen may have lost her farm, but her name lives on as a sign for leisurely and privileged consumption on the global market of tourism. As I have tried to show the process whereby her name came to signify consumption of a certain kind of experience and the commodities to go with it, cannot be understood in isolation, taking into account only her person or indeed only the particular time and milieu of colonial Kenya. It was and is part of global context, understood as the development of a mature capitalist economy that restructured the systems of production and consumption.

When Blixen sat down to write a letter to her brother in Denmark in 1931, she had no idea that her mere name would turn out to be a profitable commodity more than half a decade later. She was desperately and despondently casting around for ways of making a living, but, as she points out, it was "frankly speaking, very difficult to imagine what I could possibly do in the world" ("Uppriktigt sagt, så är det ju mycket svårt att se vad jag över huvud taget kan göra i världen" *Breven från Afrika* 426). Since the farm had always been a financial failure letters such as this one where Blixen miserably and aggressively pondered her economy and what to do if the farm had to be given up, were routine in the correspondence between her and Thomas Dinesen These letters are sprinkled with pecuniary complaints mixed with covert suicide threats, for example, a letter written in 1926: "I would

agree to lose a leg in return for £ 5000 a year ... since I believe that I can be myself without a leg, but it seems to me incredibly difficult to be myself without money" ("Jag skulle gå med på att mista ett ben för att få £ 5000 om året … därför att jag tror att jag kunde vara mig själv utan ett ben, men det förefaller mig så utomordentligt svårt att vara mig själv utan pengar" 286). When trying to envision a future beyond the management of the farm, she had listed suggestions ranging from the absurd to the questionable, such as becoming a slave-trader, a hotel manager in Nairobi or a chef in Paris.

In the letter of 1931, written just a few months before leaving Africa, something had changed in her stubbornly immature approach to financial matters. She had, in fact, started to do something: "doing what we siblings do when we do not know what else to do – I have started to write a book. I wrote in English, since I thought it would pay better" ("gjort vad vi syskon gör när vi inte vet vad vi annars ska göra – jag har börjat skriva en bok. Jag skrev på engelska därför att jag tänkte att det skulle löna sig bättre" 426). My translation is clumsy, but even in the original, "do" appears three times in the first sentence quoted. Not only had she written, but she had also sent her manuscript to a publisher to ask his opinions, especially about her language. His positive response encouraged Blixen to consider a career, perhaps as a journalist. In the context of her letters, Blixen's first serious attempt at authorship is represented as a peculiar mixture of the ideal of genteel amateurism where writing is represented as a pastime rather than hard work, and canny pragmatism with a view on the literary market. Still, against the background of the way in which the ideals of the leisure classes were successfully brought to the expanding tourist-market, this paradoxical representation of writing professionally as a leisurely pursuit of the use-less in order to making a living makes perfect sense as yet another way of profitably exploiting leisure, the writer's as well as the reader's.

Readers just like tourists were an ever-growing group of consumers at this time, and while Blixen seems to have had no clear conception of the most important market for books written in English at this time, that is to say the North-American market, her decision to write in English is explicitly framed in monetary terms. In her study of the international literary space, Pascale Casanova points out that "the 'choice' of writing in a great literary language, is never a free

and deliberate decision…What needs to be described, then, is a general structure whose effects are felt by writers on the periphery without their always knowing it" (178). While questioning the possibility of defining a single forceful structure that would fit all trans-linguistic authors, I believe that Casanova's observation that the decision to write in a language that is "great," has to be thought of in structural terms rather than those of the immediate life-circumstances of the individual author. Thus, I find the attempts to interpret Blixen/Dinesen's choice to write in English as yet another reflection of her self-proclaimed identity as an outsider vis-à-vis the Danish cultural context too limited. It is true that Blixen/Dinesen herself often referred to her own sense of not "fitting into" this milieu. In 1947 she was asked to write a few lines that would be engraved on a memorial to the Danish resistance-movement during the war. She declined to do so, and in her reply she wrote:

> I do not believe that the Danish people see me as their true representative, in reality neither as Danish nor of the people …. I have often felt – despite all benevolent recognition – this distrust, e.g. in an overview of contemporary Danish literature, where our critics hardly ever are able to fit me in, without expressing concern or dislike. (*Karen Blixen i Danmark. Bind 1* 467)
> (Jeg tror ikke at det danske Folk føler mig som sin fuldgyldige Repræsentant – i Virkeligheden ikke som hverken dansk eller folkelig … Jeg har ofte, - al velvillig Anerkendelse tiltrods – følt denne Mistro, f.Ex. i en Oversigt over vor Tids danske Literatur, hvori vore Kritikere sjælden uden nogen Uro eller Modvilje finder en Plads for mig.)

Blixen's feeling should certainly be taken seriously and it was a well-founded feeling. In 1978 the Danish critic Henriksen wrote:

> Finally, I would argue that what she [Karen Blixen] says about Byron; that his superior creation was his own life, holds true in her case also. That her life is superior to her books, and that this life is a greater, more striking unity, and also a much more gripping tale, than her books. (31)
> (I sidste instans mener jeg – ligesom hun mener om Byron, at det bedste han fik produceret, det var hans liv – at hendes liv er overordnet hendes bøger,

udgør en større, mere forbavsende helhed, også en langt mere rystet enhed end hendes bøger.)

Henriksen's statement that Blixen/Dinesen's life is superior to her books is slightly unsettling, coming as it does from someone who spent several decades and six books on her literary production. Henriksen might be considered the majordomo of Danish writing on Blixen and when he discussed her work he spoke with the authority of someone who knew her fairly well. His relationship to Blixen was personal and complex. In 2003, Henriksen received the Rungstedlund Prize and was interviewed in the large Danish daily *Politiken* in April 2003 under the heading "The Kiss of the Baroness." Henriksen is quoted saying that Blixen entered his life "like a cruise missile" (in 1951) and the article describes the "domineering Karen Blixen" as Henriksen's "soulmate" and "fate". The article was written by *Politiken*-critic Ebbe Mørk, whose coffee-table-book *Karen Blixens gæstebud- billeder fra Rungstedlund* had been published the same year by *Politiken*'s own publishing house. The *Politiken*-interview interestingly reflects and encapsulates Blixen's position in the cultural economics and politics of contemporary Denmark. She is grudgingly revered in the shape of literary super-star Isak Dinesen, and dramatically staged and ironically undermined in the role of Baroness Blixen at Rungstedlund, and, ultimately, endlessly sellable.[33]

Against this background it is easy to see why Blixen/Dinesen would feel ambivalent about her identity as a Danish author, and why English would remain her literary language together with Danish. It is just as easy to concur with feminist interpretations represented by for example Judith Lee and Inge Lise Rasmussen of her use of the English language and a pseudonym as an expression of her desire to define herself as an artist. Still, I believe that Blixen/Dinesen's construction of herself as an outsider, however well-founded, has to be seen as an afterthought in relation to her reasons stated as she began to seriously consider professional writing in 1931. In his comprehensive discussion of the world

[33] The story of Henriksen's and Blixen's relationship is told – from his perspective - in a book recently written by Aage Henriksen's son, Morten Henriksen: *Bag Blixens maske, min far, mig selv og månefruen, samtal med Aage Henriksen*, 2010 (*Behind Blixen's Mask, My Father, Myself, and the Lady of the Moon, Conversations with Aage Henriksen*. Morten Henriksen has also created a documentary film out of these conversations between father and son (2011).

literature concept, Mads Rosendahl Thomsen roughly delineates two potential approaches. One stresses the Goethian understanding of world literature as "the idealistic vision of the symphony of the masterpieces from different nations." The other is "the more cynical vision of global distribution of books as commodities," where Marx and Engel rather than Goethe, are the founding proponents and ideologues (26). There is an interesting and potentially explosive dualism inherent in Thomsen's twofold definition of world literature. Can a book be a "masterpiece" and "commercial" at one and the same time? I believe that Blixen/Dinesen brings this tension to the surface even without her own clearly stated ambition to write in English in order to make money, explaining perhaps why she is so briefly and dismissively treated by Thomsen as quite simply an author with a "cosmopolitan attitude" (46). On the other hand, she is completely absent from the studies of other world literature-theorists such as David Damrosch and Casanova, exemplifying the striking absence of female authors in general from their discussions. Thomsen's, Damrosch's and Casanova's bibliographies read as highly traditional Western canonical lists including Franz Kafka, James Joyce, Jorge Luis Borges, with the addition of a handful, male authors originating from non-western countries, typically Salman Rushdie, Chinua Achebe, Orhan Pamuk and a couple of others. In Damrosch's list of authors who "broke with the norms of realism and began to set their stories in mysterious, emblematic locales" he includes Kafka, Borges and Beckett, Kipling and Pamuk. He writes that "all three chose to move beyond a provincialism they found stultifying," and I cannot help but feel that Blixen/Dinesen's absence from this list marks a conspicuous and meaningful void (108).

Blixen/Dinesen who was certainly no Marxist obviously thought of her own writing as a commodity for sale on a market and the choice to write in English was simply a matter of calculating potential profit. What is interesting about her uncompromising market-analysis set in colonial Kenya is that it complicates the view that there is such a place as "the periphery." Further, it exemplifies the fact that the colony plays a crucial, formative role in the development of a consumer culture. Slater stresses the importance of colonial trade since the West was a "master consumer of imperially expropriated goods before it was a consumer of goods it produced itself" (18). This observation is important because it

accentuates the fact that colonial expansion and exploitation, from its very inception, makes it impossible to think or speak in terms of national or even regional economies or systems of production, consumption and acculturation. While often useful in analyzing the unequal distribution of economic and political power, the terms metropolis and periphery easily invite a binary manner of thought. The image of center and margin suggests a one-directed flow of ideas, inventions and influences where the metropolis brings already existing cultural patterns, infra-structural technology, commercial know-how, and organization of production and consumption to bear on the periphery. Slater suggests that we understand colonial expansion in terms of a global commercial revolution that generated a vast range of new notions and activities which we call modern. Colonialism not only created the necessary economic conditions and the necessary financial instruments such as transnational banking systems, but it also offered a model for "large-volume production, to be sold over wide geographically dispersed markets to a 'general public' of consumers rather than locally to known customers," as Slater writes (21). Thus, the export-oriented, mono-crop, plantation-economy that Kenya's colonialist settlers imagined in terms of a revival of a feudal, European past, was in fact the achievement of commercialized, colonial-based systems of agricultural production that were not realized in Europe until well into the twentieth century. When speaking of the systems of production of raw materials, what is routinely called the periphery was modern in the sense of being large-scale and export-oriented way before the metropolis, using cheap or enslaved human labor to accomplish what technology could not yet realize.

Colonialism created new patterns of production and marketing that radically affected the concepts and conditions of production and consumption within Europe itself. The wealth of new commodities flowing into Europe, coffee, tea, sugar, fruits, potatoes, cloths and dyes, created new kinds of consumption patterns. It radically added to the group of potential consumers, but also widely extended the range of products available to those consumers. Fashion, in the sense of the conspicuous and changing display of status through consumption, was no longer restricted to the aristocracy. The breakdown of an older social order combined with the incessant influx of new commodities, generated the notions of

discerning choice and taste closely associated with a consumer culture where social distinction is manifested in the ability to choose. There was a general orientation towards commercial exchange and trade where social interaction was no longer thought of only in terms of established hierarchies and traditional bonds of loyalty, but as a potential and impersonal market. In this process where the experience of the world was entirely transformed the colonies were important in a way which also complicates the notion of a center influencing a periphery. The colony was not only a generator of new wealth but also an arena where social interaction was predominantly defined in terms of commercial, impersonal market-transactions, and where there was no old order of inherited values to reckon with. When the Blixens arrived to the farm at Ngong in 1914 there were no bonds of loyalty, oral traditions or intricate family relations that bound the Europeans to their 1200 native laborers, or vice versa. They were strangers to each other's languages, religious beliefs, histories and cultures, even though the Africans of course were much less so. Viewed from the perspective of the interchange between settlers and Africans, the farm at Ngong was fully post-traditional in the sense that the needs and/or desires of the present took precedence over any truths embodied in shared history, tradition and continuity. The laborers were brought there by their need to make a living and the settlers by their desire to flaunt a particular kind of living. Need and desire translatable into monetary terms brought them together. And, since colonial politics institutionalized enforced relocation together with the expropriation of land, not even the native laborers did necessarily have any ties to the land itself. In fact, the relationship between employer and employee at farms such as Ngong were more reminiscent of the impersonal pecuniary transactions of large-scale industrial operations, than of the complex social web generated by centuries of social interaction between landed gentry and their workers.

Thinking of colonialism as a truly global commercial revolution that changed the world in terms of economy, culture and social interaction, destabilizes the notion of the metropolis as the site of transformative power molding the periphery in its image. When Blixen decided to write in English in 1931 her English was not the language of the imperial metropolis London, but the language of a colonial experience that cannot be defined as peripheral in relation to global processes. It

was the language of experience of a cultural, political and economic reality that was, in many ways, more modern than contemporary Europe.

The concept of feudalism in relation to colonial Kenya, then, must be understood as referencing a purely economic structure of exploitation, completely severed from any traditional understanding of feudal relationships in terms of social interactions or mutual loyalties. The European estates in colonial Kenya may have had, and were intended to have, the appearance of time-honored family seats where masters and servants had interacted through many generations, but this was no more than an appearance. And, as merchandise, appearance was easily transformed into a marketable commodity on a global market. In this forward-looking social milieu where social interactions were market-mediated, aristocrats such as Bror Blixen and Denys Finch-Hatton could transform the abstract value of their titles into concrete, monetary value in a commercial barter with wealthy industrialists. And in her writings on Africa Blixen/Dinesen could sell the fantasy of feudal harmony.

When, in *Shadows on the Grass* (1961), Blixen/Dinesen returns again to her colonial experience, she writes about the relationship between herself and Farah Aden, "my servant by the grace of God," comparing it to the "particular Unity, made up of essentially different parts … that of Master and Servant. We have met the two in rhyme, blank verse and prose" (6). She illustrates her claim by listing a number of other Master-Servant unities from literary history; such as the Old Testament prophet Elisha and his servant Gehazi; Don Quixote and Sancho Panza; King Lear and the Fool; Calidorus and Pseudolos from Plautus' play, and a handful of others. The ideal of master and servant acting in pre-scripted roles in a fixed, social order to achieve a perfect, hierarchically shaped union was a theme to which Blixen returned many times in her fictional writings too; most explicitly perhaps in "Sorrow-acre" and "The Invincible Slave-Owners" in *Winter's Tales* (1961). In the context of *Shadows on the Grass*, however, it is interesting to note the way in which the supposedly biographically based relationship between her and Farah Aden is introduced and characterized through fictional agency. It is a wonderfully grand claim where Blixen/Dinesen places her own writing in the company of Shakespeare, Cervantes, and the Bible, but it is also a tacit acknowledgement of the degree to which the representation of hers and Farah's

relationship *is* fictional. His and her characters are as made up as those of Lear and the Fool, Quixote and Sancho. Farah Aden's loyalty to Karen Blixen may in reality have been as unswerving as that of Sancho Panza to Don Quixote, but we really do not know anything about that since Farah Aden did not write down his version of the story. What we do know is that their relationship was a financial one; Farah Aden was hired by Bror Blixen to function as his wife's servant. Unlike the entirely fictional story of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza there is an identifiable and precise beginning to their interaction, just as there is an identifiable end which is not the death of the Master, but her leaving the country. Farah went on making a living, working intermittently in Bror Blixen's safari-venture and as a driver of other Europeans.

When, is *Shadows on the Grass*, Blixen/Dinesen points out the she and Farah were separated by race, gender, religion, environment and experiences, she draws our attention to the fact that their relationship is set apart from the fictional unities she calls upon to solidify her claim that difference is needed to create the mystical unity. Unlike Blixen and Farah, the literary characters she enumerates did share religion, environment, experiences, language, gender and history. And, simultaneously to the fact that racism as the cornerstone of colonial exploitation generated a fixed status order that was as absolute as the divinely ordained social hierarchy of Cervantes' or Shakespeare's time. In fact, it was even more absolute since both Cervantes and Shakespeare wrote at a time when colonial, trans-Atlantic trade was already generating a more dynamic social structure in Europe. In early seventeenth century Europe, the social dynamics made Don Quixote possible as a supreme example of a realistic parody of traditional romance where the Master has taken on the properties of comedy traditionally associated with the Servant, as Northrop Frye points out in his study on romance, (39). It is racism that generates the essential difference that Blixen/Dinesen's dualistic imagery requires. At the same time, it is institutionalized racism that brings them together in their roles as Master and Servant, and in the absence of shared values the bond between them has the form of a business transaction. While racist ideology and practice has always been ripe with validating theories on intellectual disparities, it has always also relied on appearances, literally speaking, in making these distinctions. This explains the racist obsession with perceptible variations in hair-,

skin- eye-colors and facial contours. In a racist society meaning is, literally, only skin-deep. In Blixen/Dinesen's writings on Africa, racism cloaked in feudal garb is installed as the only remaining fixed social order on which a hierarchically ordered universe can rely. This is a post-traditional world where aristocrats are for hire by the bourgeois, and where there may be three women claiming the title Baroness von Blixen-Finecke walking around Nairobi at one and the same time.[34] It is, ironically, an ordered universe which depends on the significance ascribed to appearance in the colonial commodification of human bodies on a mass-scale, created at a time when commodified appearance – the images we construct on the surfaces of our bodies – begun to power the wheels of production on a hitherto unknown scale.

In *Seven Gothic Tales* appearances are deceptive. The old man turns out to be a woman, the prioress a monkey, and the cardinal is really a valet. At the same time, the stories make it abundantly clear that anyone looking for stable essential truth behind the mask of deception is searching in vain. The prioress and the monkey are two inseparable aspects of the same being and the valet impersonating the blue-blooded cardinal is not only an actor, but also the illegitimate son of royalty. He may be acting the part of cardinal, but he simultaneously belongs in the race apart to which he lays claim through his acting. What *Seven Gothic Tales* seems to suggest is that deception *is* the truth, and that it is useless to think of appearances in terms of a surface hiding depth. In "The Poet," the futility of making meaningful distinctions between surface and depth, appearance and content, is explicitly addressed in the representation of Count von Schimmelmann who returns in this final tale to sum up his experience of life as a masquerade. Having come into a fortune which the world thought was a wonderful thing to happen to him, he has "accepted the happiness of life in a different way, not as he really believed it to be, but, as in a reflection within a mirror, such as others saw it" (330). The "others," the "world," "general opinion" furnish the count with an identity that he inhabits as though it was a role, recognizing the distance between a self that he is unable to imagine on the one hand, and the self that the world imagines him to be on the other:

[34] Bror Blixen remarried once, and while he never married his third lover, Eva Dickson, she did call herself baroness in public.

> He looked stronger than he was, like a man who enjoys his food and wine and sleeps well at night. He did not enjoy his food or wine much, and thought that he slept very badly, but to be envied by his neighbors for these goods of life became to him quite an acceptable substitute for the real goods. (330)

The young count who was magically recognized as such at the beginning of the collection has become someone whose appearance is a fraud, but a fraud which the count himself has come to accept as the only available version of truth. Throughout *Seven Gothic Tales*, there is an ongoing investigation of the feudal ethos and ideals that served to construct colonial Kenya as a sellable consumer item. In "The Roads Round Pisa" the aristocratic characters are larger-than-life, passionate believers in eternal love and unswerving loyalty, who send each other off on romantic quests, challenge each other in duels and quote Dante. This fairy-tale or courtly romance-ideal is firmly established in the first tale only to be progressively dismantled. In "The Old Chevalier", Baron von Brackel reminisces about his youth in the decadent and adulterous circles of Parisian aristocracy where true love has been transformed into barren and murderous passion (57). "The Deluge at Norderney" introduces the idea that nobility has become mere performance as the two bastard aristocrats Maersk and Kaspersen act the roles of aristocrats in front of audiences to whom social value is measured in terms of fashion and form. In "The Dreamers," both Guildenstern and Hohenemser are represented as pathetic, the former because of his conceited self-appreciation, and the latter because he has no sense of self at all and "all people who came near him had, somehow, the same feeling about him, that, while they had nothing against him, here was a fellow with whom they could do nothing at all" (254). At the same time he does "not get on badly in society, which, I suppose, demands a minimum of existence from its members," a characterization which prepares the ground for the re-introduction of Count von Schimmelmann in last tale as someone whose identity and being is a mere reflection of what "the others" perceive it to be.

Against the colonial background, it seems insufficient to say that Blixen/Dinesen traced the decline or "decadence" of the aristocracy in the course of the nineteenth century in order to call attention to the demise of an old order,

and to defend the obsolete values of this order against modernity, as Langbaum suggests (76). What *Seven Gothic Tales* demonstrates is rather the viability of the aristocratic idea and the feudal, hierarchical ethos as image, appearance, and as fiction. Hohenemser of the noble family of Coburg and Guildenstern may be ridiculous aristocrats, and von Scimmelmann a tragic one, but they are nevertheless functional and desirable in the social setting, playing the roles of aristocrats that still carry the imaginary quality of being magically recognizable as a "race apart." *Seven Gothic Tales* makes American readers of us all, taking, as Langbaum wrote, a tourist's interest in the aristocratic characters. To be a tourist in this context, however, is not equivalent to being a disinterested visitor to an exotic theme-park exhibiting an image of the past tinged with nostalgia. It is rather the experience of always constructing identity and character through emulative consumption.

Navigating Through the Literary Fog

Gothic Tales?

Towards the end of her introduction, Canfield Fisher apprehensively asks her readers whether she has given them the "idea that the book is filled with a many-colored literary fog" (ix). I do not read this as a purely rhetorical question, even though Canfield Fisher hastens to assure the reader that if that is the impression her description of the tales has given, she has been exceptionally inept at describing them. In her role as Book-of-the-Month-Club-associate, Canfield Fisher was probably as concerned as Blixen/Dinesen's publisher Haas about the ways in which these incomparably "new" tales would be received by the Club's members. Were they perhaps too difficult and strange for the average member, despite the fact that they were not works of genius? In 1934, Swedish critic Klara Johansson read the English edition of *Seven Gothic Tales* and wrote to a friend:

> I have finally gotten hold of *Seven Gothic Tales*. If I were a reviewer, I would read it at least seven times before I would dare to write about it. The fact that this book has become a popular success must be due to some curious mistake. (qtd. in *Den främmande förförerskan* 265)
> (*Seven Gothic Tales* har jag nu äntligen fått i mina händer. Vore jag recensent skulle jag läsa den sju gånger minst innan jag vågade mig på den. Att den boken har gjort publiklycka måste bero på något sällsamt misstag.)

To a professional reader such as Johansson, the popular success of *Seven Gothic Tales* was inexplicable because to read it required an almost scholarly familiarity with literary tradition if one were to decipher the wealth of allusions that it contains. The sheer literariness of Blixen/Dinesen's writings, especially in her first published work, is daunting, and Johansson wrote: "I do not think that I have yet discovered half of all the allusions and traps hidden in this book" ("Ännu tror jag mig inte om att ha upptäckt hälften av de allusioner och fällor den gömmer" 265). To a well-read critic such as Johansson or to professional academic readers *Seven Gothic Tales* really does present itself as a potential trap, or maze to get lost in. Many critics have pointed to the almost overwhelming wealth of intertextual references in Dinesen's works. Unlike these critics, I am not so interested in

puzzle-solving per se, but rather in the way in which *Seven Gothic Tales* presents itself as a meaningful work of art to potential readers, ranging from the professional critic intent on puzzle-solving to the average reader addressed by Canfield Fisher in 1934, and still today. Why did *Seven Gothic Tales* become, and remain, a popular success, despite that fact that someone like Johansson felt that it was much too difficult? What tools does the work itself offer its reader in the navigation through a many-colored literary fog?

As Culler has pointed out, the structuralism concept of intertexuality is closely related to the concept of verisimilitude, and Todorov's third and fourth senses of verisimilitude have to do with the way in which a literary text conforms to and deviates from genre-conventions in a number of ways (139). Leaving the intertextual puzzle aside for the time being, I want to start by considering the way in which *Seven Gothic Tales* uses paratextual and extratextual components to place itself and become recognizable to a reader.

Aristotle's discussion of comedy and tragedy laid the ground for the development and refinement of a strict and normative genre-system founded on the notion of unity between form, subject matter, characters and style during the Renaissance. And while the rigor of the French Classicists may have been the last battle-cry of genre-exactitude, the system was still operative well into the nineteenth century when the realistic novel was still considered to be a low-status kind of writing. Today, we still talk about genres such as poetry, biography, short story or novel, but the system is less hierarchical and the boundaries between genres are fluid. In practice, the concept of genre has essentially become an indication of subject matter or literary mode when we speak of fantasy, crime and science-fiction as separate genres on an increasingly diverse and heterogeneous book market. But while the concept of genre may no longer reflect and sustain a strictly regulated social order and world view, the use of genre-definitions still function to establish a contract between work and reader, so "as to make certain relevant expectations operative," as Culler writes (147). The contractual aspect of genre is perhaps best understood in terms of genealogy where the individual work combines form, style, characters and subject matter in a way which complies with and deviates from the reader's expectations and knowledge of the genre at hand.

In fact, today's fluid genre-boundaries may have made the notion of genre as contract as important as in the time of the Renaissance, albeit in a different manner, witnessed by, for example, the hybrid genre of fictional biographies. Successful books such as Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* (1998), Joyce Carol Oates' *Blonde* (2000), Calm Toibin's *The Master* or David Lodge's *Author, Author* (both in 2004), use the poetic license of the novel to construct fiction based on the lives of actual, famous people: Virginia Woolf, Marilyn Monroe and Henry James. Since these books are defined as "novels," sometimes explicitly as a part of the title, and written by well-known and established "novelists," the reader does not expect them to provide sources or to necessarily be biographically accurate. At the same time, a work such as *Blonde* makes generous use of biographical material in its cover illustrations, and back and front cover blurbs.

As this example indicates, the weakening of a normative genre-system has made the concept of genre more dependent on paratextual, but also extraliterary elements. Looking at a work such as *Don Quixote*, published at the beginning of the seventeenth century, it is obvious that this work derived its meaning and coherence by explicitly relating to the chivalric romance, parodying a well-known and highly formulaic genre by using its staple characters, attributes and events. When, in 1922, James Joyce published *Ulysses*, the relationship between the heroic epic genre that Joyce's novel alludes to is less direct and apparent in the text itself. Without the title, it is doubtful whether the average reader of Joyce's novel would have caught its intertextual reference at all. At the same time, extra-literary elements such as the fact that the book was written by James Joyce and published by Shakespeare and Company, served the same contractual purpose as Cervantes' explicit references to the chivalric romance. The names of author and publisher functioned as relay-points by which *Ulysses* assumed a relation with the universe of literature, and a very definite corner of this universe.

That is to say, a definition of genre has to be both textually and contextually based, and it has to take into account that a literary work may be defined as belonging to several genres at once, depending on the reader's context but also on paratexts and extratextual conditions. Today, *Don Quixote* is read as a significant parody of the chivalric romance since it prefigures the development of literary forms liberated from formulaic genre-convention, but also as a novel. Then again,

if it was read without knowledge of literary history it would still function as a parody, but then perhaps in reference to the traditional fairy tale or Walt Disney's recycling of the chivalric code in movies.

In fact, the publication and reception history of *Seven Gothic Tales* offers an excellent example of the ways in which paratextual and extraliterary contexts determine the reading and reception of a literary work as belonging to a particular genre. It is a book which forces us to think about the work of art as an object for sale on a market, even without Canfield Fisher's introductory text which explicitly places it there. One of the most obvious ways in which a book targets an audience on the market is through its title. Blixen/Dinesen's first work exhibits an interesting plasticity in this respect that reflects the identification of consumers on an increasingly globalized mass market as a diverse group, and maximizing profit by constructing the modern work as a kind of multi-purpose object designed to be used by each subgroup after its own fashion and needs ("Beyond the Cave" 17).

Seven Gothic Tales was published in the US in April, 1934, and in England in the fall of the same year. In September, 1934, her collection was published in Swedish under the title *Sju romantiska berättelser*, and, finally in 1935, in Danish under the title *Syv fantastiske fortællinger*. Susan Brantly rightly points out that the choice of titles in English, Danish and Swedish, has to be thought of as reflections of a "canny assessment of her potential audiences and the literary traditions with which they might be familiar" (14). That is to say, the titles were tailored to suit different cultural contexts. While it could be argued that the appellations gothic, fantastic and romantic all aptly reflect the content of Blixen/Dinesen's tales, this was not the most important aspect of their function on the mass market. I want to take Brantly's observation one step further and suggest that while the assessment of the audience's willingness to buy this particular object did take into account national differences, it did not count on the readers' familiarity with specific literary traditions, but rather on the way in which these appellations signified literary tradition per se: literary brands.[35] You did not have to know classical architecture and aesthetics in order to want to drive a car that supposedly signified the cultural value inherent in the idea of ancient Greece. You

[35] In the Scandinavian languages and in German, "Gothic" translates as "skrekkromatik" and "Schauerroman" in a literary context.

did not have to have read Walpole or Byron, in order to want to buy a book the title of which promised that you were reading or just displaying on your bookshelves something that was part of established, recognized and valued culture. In buying Blixen/Dinesen's tales, the consumer could claim an affiliation with Literature, not only in the act of buying the book, but through the branding established by its title(s).

The marketing of her first collection of stories also reflect the breakdown of the homogenous, bourgeoisie Western reading public that had been taken for granted by the publishing industry only a couple of decades earlier when reading for pleasure was an activity limited to a small segment of society. A class of people who, like Blixen/Dinesen herself, knew and read several European languages, and whose approach to literature was not primarily defined in national terms but as a manifestation of social belonging and standing. Her original idea for a title was *Tales of Nozdref's Cook*, an accurate expression of her own belonging in the educated bourgeoisie. It was a title that presupposed an intimate knowledge of Gogol's 1842 novel *Dead Souls* in order to be interpreted, a novel where Nozdref (or Nozdrev) is a minor character and his cook only indirectly present for half-a-page in the description of the food she has cooked. A few decades earlier, this title would have functioned as a desirable demarcation of an exclusive audience. In 1934 and in the Book-of-the-Month-Club-context on a mass market it would have signaled unattainable sophistication and accumulated learning of the kind that could not be packaged and marketed for immediate consumption by a middle-class audience.

At the same time, to the reader familiar with the traditions alluded to the titles do suggest a mode of reading, a set of expectations that the reader brings to his or her reading of the book. In the world of professional readers trained in identifying intertextual allusions, genres and structures, the explicit reference to the gothic not only invites a certain mode of reading. It becomes an imperative call for a reading grounded in knowledge of this particular tradition. This would explain why *Seven Gothic Tales* has been read and interpreted in relation to a gothic tradition by, primarily, English-speaking critics and academics. In an interesting relatively recent Swedish article, arguing that Blixen/Dinesen should be read within a gothic tradition, Claudia Lindén suggests that the reason why

> the gothic has played a subordinate role in Danish Blixen-research, may also be understood as a consequence of the Danish *Syv fantastiske fortællinger*. Even if the fantastic is close to the Gothic, the self-evident association to a genre has disappeared. (107)
>
> (Att det gotiska spelat en underordnad roll i den danskbaserade Blixenforskningen har kanske också sin förklaring i översättningen till danskans *Syv fantastiske Fortællinger*. Även om det fantastiska ligger nära det gotiska, så har den självklara genreassociationen försvunnit.)

Just like the English and Danish titles, the Swedish title references an identifiable literary tradition, namely romanticism, and in a Swedish context, Dinesen's – or Blixen's – tales have often been read in relation to a Romantic tradition, most recently by Leif Dahlberg in a dissertation entitled *Tre romantiska berättelser* (*Three Romantic Tales* 1999); a study of three twentieth century Swedish authors where Blixen/Dinesen's writings are constant and crucial intertexts, signaled already in the title alluding to *Sju romantiska berättelser*.

To a reader of *Seven Gothic Tales*, the gothic is something that has to be dealt with at some point, whether or not the professional reader aims to show and exemplify that Blixen/Dinesen's tales are indeed part of a gothic tradition. The degree to which she is considered to belong there seems to reflect the critic's intentions as well as the status of gothic fiction at the time and place of writing. In 1964, Langbaum, in passing and without explicitly mentioning the gothic, stresses that her tales are neither hair-raising, nor filled with the "blatantly supernatural" (88). They are, he writes, "fantastic in the way wit is – in the jubilant freedom with which possibilities are stretched and ideas combined" (89). Langbaum was at pains to distance Blixen/Dinesen's writings from the gothic, in favor of what he labels her "Romantic wit" (74). A decade later, critic Ellen Moers placed Blixen/Dinesen squarely within a tradition that she identified as "Female Gothic" (5). In her by now classical feminist work *Literary Women*, she constructed a female gothic genealogy, starting with Ann Radcliffe and Mary Shelley, including Emily Brontë, Christina Rossetti, Djuna Barnes, Carson McCullers, Sylvia Plath and reaching into the present through the works of the poet Robin Morgan and her collection *Monsters* (1972).

Moers' identification of the "Female Gothic" as a tradition reaching back into the late eighteenth century and continuing interrupted into the twentieth century has, as Lindén points out in her article on one of the tales in the 1934 collection, continued to inspire in particular feminist critics. Important Blixen/Dinesen-critics such as Juhl and Jorgensen, Stambaugh, James, Aiken, Jackson, and Lindén herself read Blixen/Dinesen as part of this tradition, comparing her with Radcliffe at one end of the temporal spectrum, and Barnes and Woolf at the other. There is no doubt that the readings of Blixen/Dinesen as a gothic author have been and continue to be critically productive, in at least two respects, also identified by Lindén. They place her writings within a recognized literary tradition and context, and instead of being labeled atavistic and anachronistic she becomes, as David Punter writes, "one of the most important Gothic writers of last two centuries" (411). Further, as part of an ongoing tradition with claims to academic recognition, Blixen/Dinesen's writings can always be brought up to date theoretically, making them today, as Dag Heede writes "a goldmine for postsexual, postfeminist and queer theory" (13). Readings of her works within the field of queer-theory continue along what Lindén calls the "gothic trail" in reading the fantastic and supernatural as explorations and disruptions of stable notions of sexuality and gender (103).

I do not want to diminish the value of Blixen/Dinesen-studies with a gothic and/or queer theoretical slant. I find them both inspiring and insightful, and I am well aware of the importance of half-a-century of feminist engagement with Blixen/Dinesen's writings. I am also grateful for the impact it has had on the standing of female authors and women within and outside the academic world. At the same time, I want to suggest that the reading of her works as part of a Female Gothic tradition which is in itself an academic tradition by now, also reflects the degree to which the necessity of branding a product and to continuously reinvent it within the parameters of the brand in order to make it visible and consumable on the mass marketplace permeates society. This includes sectors that would not necessarily identify themselves with the consumerist logic.

The branding of Blixen/Dinesen's tales as gothic encourages diachronic analyses of her works, identifying thematic similarities in trans-historical readings where the late eighteenth century is as relevant to the interpretation as the

concerns of the early twenty-first century. [36] Or, when the approach is structural rather than thematic *Seven Gothic Tales* may become, as in Jaqueline Howard's bakhtinian approach to gothic fiction, yet again, an "anachronistic" example of gothic writing (105). While this makes her writings forever potentially contemporary in the hands of the critic, it also makes them strangely a-temporal. While acknowledging the importance of studying Blixen/Dinesen as a "rewriter" of patriarchal tradition, and being inspired by, for example Rees' study of her "intertextual use of ... gothic precursors," I believe that the intense contemporaneousness of her writings demands a more flexible understanding of the way in which *Seven Gothic Tales* conforms to more than one genre ("Holy Witch and Wanton Saint" 333). That is to say, a reading that is prepared to leave the gothic trail pointed out by the English title, or at least stray from the path every now and then.

I choose to read the first word of Blixen/Dinesen's title as an indication of the role played by marketing considerations and extratextual components in genre-construction on a modern, dynamic and transcultural book market. The second word in the title, while more consistent across languages, must also be considered extratextually. "Tale," "fortællinger" and "berättelser" all refer to oral tradition: to telling (fortalle and berätta), and Blixen/Dinesen would stick with this oral reference throughout her career, writing *Last Tales* and *Winter's Tales*. [37] Blixen/Dinesen also used the image of herself as a story-teller in the marketing of her stories, appearing on the stage in public, on radio and television, telling stories. It is significant, however, that the stories she chose to tell on stage or television were either shortened versions of stories from her non-fiction writings on Africa, such as "Barua a Soldani" from *Shadows on the Grass* (1962), or inset tales from her fiction, such as "The Wine of the Tetrarch" from "The Deluge at Norderney." When her stories were broadcast by Danish radio, she of course *read* them. By all accounts, Blixen/Dinesen was an excellent story-teller on stage as

[36] Or, indeed, "fantastic" or "romantic"

[37] As I have already indicated, the "Angelic Avengers" was a "failed" novel which Blixen/Dinesen did not want to count among her real works. "Anecdotes of Destiny" (1958) was the last fictional work she published, and in a letter to Haas in 1956 she compares it to *Last Tales*, which she insists on having published first, saying that while she does not think of *Anecdotes* as a work of lower quality than *Last Tales*, it is "played on a different kind of instrument, and does carry less weight." (*Karen Blixen i Danmark. Bind 2* 328)

witnessed by, for example, Arendt who went to listen to and see Blixen/Dinesen in New York and who wrote to a friend

> She came, very very old, terribly fragile, beautifully dressed; she was led to a kind of Renaissance chair, given some wine, and then, without a shred of paper, she began to tell stories [from the *Out of Africa* book], almost word for word as they exist in print. The audience, all very young people, was overwhelmed … She was like an apparition from god knows where or when. And even more convincing than in print. Also: a great lady. (qtd. in Young-Bruehl 18).

The narratives of *Seven Gothic Tales* also foreground the act of story-telling at various levels. The characters are brought together within an enclosed space and a delimited time-frame, such as a sinking hayloft in "The Deluge at Norderney" or on board a dhow in "The Dreamers," where they tell each other stories. These narratives are essentially stories about people telling stories and responding to each other's stories by telling yet another story. The characters also explicitly refer to the art of story-telling and the figure of the story-teller. The cardinal in "The Deluge at Norderney" encourages miss Malin Natt-og-Dag to transfer her talents as a hostess of a salon to the sinking loft in order to make everybody keen to be at his or her best even in the face of death. When everybody has told his or her story, dawn breaks and the water slowly floods the floor-boards. Miss Malin Nat-og-Dag

> stopped and looked toward the wall. Between the boards a strip of fresh deep blue was showing, against which the little lamp seemed to make raid stain. The dawn was breaking.
>
> The old woman slowly drew her fingers out of the man's hand, and placed one upon her lips. '*À ce moment de sa narration*', she said, '*Scheherazade vit paraître le matin, et, discrete, se tut*.' (188)

In "The Dreamers" the professional story-teller Mira Jama who appears again in Blixen/Dinesen's future works, reflects on his own profession and what a story is before he settles down in the role of listener as Lincoln Forsner tells his story, which turns out to be in fact four tales, one inserted within the other.

Thus, the title and narratives of *Seven Gothic Tales* like Blixen/Dinesen herself reference an ancient oral tradition that had been lost in a time and place of general literacy, magazines and radio broadcasts. At the same time, modern technology in the form of radio and television is decisive in the creation of the image of Blixen/Dinesen as a story-teller. In the twentieth century, the author may again *appear* in the role of story-teller, but only as apparition and mediated presence: a body-less voice or a face on the screen. Human interaction represented as the exchange of stories which is both a theme and a structure in *Seven Gothic Tales*, has become monetary-based exchange in a one-way communication with a paying audience. Perhaps the figure of Mira Jama, the professional story-teller who has fallen silent and decided to tell no more stories can be read as a sign of Blixen/Dinesen's awareness of the irony inherent in reviving the figure of story-teller in the twentieth century. While making good use of the deliberate anachronism of story-telling, she hints at the sheer impossibility of story-*telling* in a time and place when print-culture and mass media ruled supreme.

The Allegorical Compass

Story-telling and the reference to an oral tradition is not only present at the para-textual, extratextual and thematic level of *Seven Gothic Tales*. It is also very much present in the structure of these stories where inset tales and the wealth of explicit intertexts are the most conspicuous narrative features. In his discussion of the medieval romance genre and its relation to an oral tradition and culture, Eugène Vinaver points to the ways in which the romance tradition conceived of composition as a precarious balance between *conjointure* and *contes*, between coherence and digression, "leaving part of its material free from the restraints of design," and measuring the degree of artistry in the ability to build up sequences out of already existing stories (52).

While the box-within-a-box structure and the intertextual references that characterize *Seven Gothic Tales* are traceable back to an oral culture, Langbaum was the first to point out that despite Blixen/Dinesen's own claim that she was a story-*teller*, "the complexity of pattern, the need to read backwards and forwards, would make the stories impossible to take in by ear" (25). Not only impossible to

take in by ear, but also impossible to interpret without a profound knowledge of Western cultural tradition, history and languages, and access to a well-stocked library. Theoretically, the lists of topics and themes that is opened up by Blixen/Dinesen's extensive use of intertexts is endless, and it might very well lead the reader into something that feels very much like a wild-goose chase, but still within the parameters of intertextual interpretation.

Blixen/Dinesen research and criticism has dealt with the intertextual wealth in the only way possible by starting out with a very definite view of what to find, and interpret allusions in accordance with this view. Langbaum's book is a learned and sensitive study of the ways in which Blixen/Dinesen belongs within the main stream of literature which to him consisted of Yeats, Mann, Joyce and Eliot. Thus, he interprets the intertexts as examples of how Blixen/Dinesen salvages the romantic idea of a self emerging from archetypal identities, and grounded in internal instincts that originate from the "earliest tremors of earthly life" (284). Later critics have followed in his footsteps, reading the tales as "multilayered texts embedded with new clues to be discovered upon each rereading" as Brantly writes (1). Or as "intricate intertextual puzzles" as Rees puts it ("Holy Witch and Wanton Saint" 333). While using the same interpretative tools, that is to say solving the puzzle by identifying the clues, later critical writing has shifted Langbaum's main-streaming project towards an understanding of Blixen/Dinesen as essentially a re-writer of the ideological underpinnings of main stream literature (Rees, Glienke, Brantly, Stambaugh, Aiken and others). Often, but not always, with an explicitly feminist understanding of the relationship between text and intertext. In Rees' interesting and persuasive article on Blixen/Dinesen's intertextual use of R.L. Stevenson's short story "Olalla" and the French author Amadée Barbey d'Aurevilly's 1874-story "À un diner d'athées" in "The Dreamers," she suggests that "Dinesen actively inverts the characteristics of the two female characters by reversing their roles and calling into question the assumptions about female identity that the source stories present" (334). Other influential non-feminist scholars define her works in a similar vein, as, for example, Bernhard Glienke who writes that Blixen/Dinesen's "creativity often

works though so-called 'counter-stories'"("arbejder hendes kreativitet gerne med såkaldte 'modhistorier'" 422).[38]

However, even when the interpreter has a very definite idea of what he/she will find in Blixen/Dinesen's intertextual references, there is always the possibility of being led by one's ardent desire to make sense and create meaning into a maze of interpretations. In "The Dreamers," Lincoln Forsner's tale of his meeting with Olalla frames the inserted tales of two other men, who have met and fallen in love with the same woman, but they know her as Lola and Rosalba respectively. One of these characters is called Baron Guildenstern and the other Friedrich Hohenemser, but the latter was, according to Forsner who is telling the story, "in looks and manners, so like a dog I had once owned and which was named Pilot, that I used to call him that" (254).[39] The name Pilot will lead the well-read critic to "Rochester's dog in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1874), making him a very minor Gothic character indeed" as Brantly writes (60). Or, raise the question whether this is indeed a significant intertextual reference or merely a rather common dog's name? In "The Monkey" the observant reader of a collection of short stories described as gothic by the title, will note the fact that the peculiar monkey has been given to the prioress by her cousin, Admiral von Schreckenstein (75). Perhaps he or she will also remember that Count von Schimmelmann in "The Road Round Pisa" reminiscences about "adventures" – possibly of the adulterous kind – that he has had at Ingolstadt (8). He or she will perhaps struggle to find a connection between a possible Frankenstein-intertext and the bust of Immanuel Kant on the pedestal on to which the monkey gracefully leaps on the final page of the story. Several critics place the monkey on top of Immanuel Kant in their interpretations, suggesting the importance they attach to the Kantian

[38] Glienke has very meticulously established a 60-page "inventory of references" (Referenzinventar) in his book on Dinesen, and he has even counted the number of times a particular author and his (always) works are referred to in Blixen/Dinesen's works. Shakespeare heads the list with 139 instances, outdistancing Homer (39), Goethe (33) and H.C. Andersen (24). Glienke does not include the Bible in his list, but points out that references to biblical passages and the appearance of biblical figures in these stories are more frequent than even Shakespeare (*Fatale Präzendens. Karens Blixens Mythologie*. Skandinavistische Studien, Band 18. Neumünster: 1986).

[39] While both names - Guildenstern and Hohenemser – are actual non-literary names, the former is also the name of the servile and treacherous baron of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Thus, the reader intent on looking for meaningful clues in the intertextual web will try to understand the function of Blixen/Dinesen's Guildenstern in relation to his role and character in *Hamlet*, a play directly alluded to in the very first tale of *Seven Gothic Tales*, as well as in the title of "The Supper at Elsinore."

intertext. In reading "The Deluge at Norderney," the fact that the poet Count August Platen-Hallermund is discussed by the characters suggests that his poetry may be an interesting intertext, but since it is mainly Platen-Hallermund's homosexuality that is targeted in the text, Heinrich Heine also figures as a possibly meaningful intertext. Heine wrote about the homosexual "von Platen-affair" in *Die Bäder von Lucca* (1829), and he also wrote about his stay at the fashionable seaside resort of Norderney in 1825. Johansson commented on Blixen/Dinesen's reference to von Platen: "She invents 'historical' characters, and she provides the real historical characters with astonishing biographies. It is difficult to imagine anything as wonderfully impudent as her treatment of poor August von Platen" ("Hon uppfinner 'historiska' personer, och de verkligt historiska ger hon en fantastisk biografi. Man kan inte tänka sig något mer överdådigt fräckt än hennes behandling av stackars Augustus von Platen" qtd. in *Den främmande förförerskan* 266). "The Supper at Elsinore" will again bring Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to mind, and the character nicknamed Timon of Assens in "The Deluge at Norderney" will invite an intertextual comparison between Dinesen's story and Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*.

A well-read reader intent on pursuing the intertexts always runs the risk of being overly creative. Brantly writes that "no doubt, Dinesen also noticed the similarity of the name 'Olalla' to the 'Oh-la-la!' of the Parisian cancan girls (59). Since there are no Parisian cancan girls in "The Dreamers," this suggestion relies entirely on a supposition about the associations of an author who has been dead for half-a-century. In "The Supper at Elsinore," the sisters de Connick are visited by their long-lost brother Morten's ghost, and Fanny reproaches him for having taken off and deserted the woman, Adrienne, whom he was supposed to have married. She looks at him to see what he would say to this but instead of saying anything Morten starts to quote "one of Uncle Ferdinand's ditties. This had been made on a special occasion, when the old aunts of the King of France had been leaving the country" (224). The siblings take turns in quoting, in original French, the verses of this song that was written in 1792 and that playfully suggest that Marat's shirts had all been stolen from the King's aunts: "Avait-il des chemises?

Moi je crois qu'il n'en avait pas. Où les avait-il prises?"(225).[40] The quoting of a childhood ditty seems to renew the bond between the siblings, and "with these words the brother and the sisters lightened their hearts and washed their hands for ever of fair, unhappy Adrienne Rosenstand" (225). Langbaum, however, is not satisfied with this rather straightforward interpretation of the significance of the French intertext, but suggests instead that "the point seems to be that just as Marat had only the shirts he had stolen from the aristocrats, so Adrienne never had any existence to destroy" (92). That this "seems to be" the point signals Langbaum's awareness of how weak his interpretation is. Nevertheless, he cannot abstain from suggesting it since the puzzle-character of Dinesen's writings challenges the professionally trained reader to interpret and pursue all intertexts as possible clues, as signs of culture and tradition. In his reading of "The Monkey," Langbaum also struggles to fit two passages from Aeschylus's *Eumenides* into the puzzle. Boris has been sent by the prioress/monkey to attempt to seduce Athena, and while walking to her room, Boris quotes Orestes' prayer to Pallas Athena for help in his forthcoming trial where he will be charged with matricide. Langbaum suggests that "in violating his own ideal of chastity, Boris is perhaps in a psychological sense killing his mother" (84). When Boris leaves Athena's room after the failed seduction, he again quotes from the *Eumenides*, this time Orestes' prayer to the goddess after having been exonerated of his crime. Langbaum writes that Athena "would seem, for some psychological reason that is obscure, to have helped Boris overcome the sense of guilt about sex that is associated in his mind with matricide" (87). In Langbaum's text the words "perhaps," "would seem" and "obscure" again signal doubts about his own interpretations of the intertext, and, again, he cannot abstain from pursuing them. Boris arrives at Closter Seven after a homosexual scandal to ask his aunt the prioress to help him to arrange a marriage: "'I should like' – here he swallowed to keep his rebellious heart in place, knowing how little indeed it would like it – 'to marry'" (79).[41] While Boris' decision to marry certainly violates his homosexual desire that the story discusses at some

[40] In a footnote, Langbaum traces the source text, and it seems that he might have been put on the right track by Karen Blixen herself.

[41] Langbaum suggests that Blixen/Dinesen's cultural intertext in this case is the Eulenberg Affair that took place at the Prussian Court in the early twentieth century.

length, there are no traces in his character or actions of the ideal of chastity or the guilt-ridden sexuality that Langbaum invokes. The theme of matricide is introduced by the quote from *Orestes*, but there is nothing in the story that connects Boris' supposedly lethal feelings for his mother with sexual desire, indeed Boris' mother is hardly mentioned at all.

In order to solve the Orestes-puzzle, the critic Annelies van Hees introduces the idea that Boris' homosexuality is the result of an oedipal complex, and Brantly follows this lead when she writes that Boris "has become so bonded to his mother that sexual relations with another woman would constitute a betrayal" (37). Read in the light of an oedipal complex, the lines from *Orestes* suddenly become meaningful as "sex with another woman is tantamount to the murder of [Boris'] mother and betrayal" (Brantly 38). Again, the absence of Boris' mother in the narrative makes this a difficult interpretation to sustain outside of the intertextual reference in isolation.

If, as Vinaver suggests, the romance with its roots in oral traditions measures and demonstrates artistry in the artist's ability to build up sequences out of already existing stories, it might be argued that Blixen/Dinesen's stories displace the demonstration of artistry onto the reader, who has to work hard and be creative in order to identify the clues and solve the puzzle. Johansson felt that she could smell an army of rats in Blixen/Dinesen's extensive use of allusions, suggesting that she was in fact making fun of the reader ardent on solving the textual puzzles.[42] Whether Johansson was right or not, the intertextual puzzles and the box-within-a-box structure are two textual features that function as allusions to an oral tradition, while simultaneously and somewhat paradoxically accentuating the literariness of *Seven Gothic Tales*. The reader cannot for a moment forget that she or he inhabits a work of art, as Langbaum points out (25). This observation brings me back to Johansson's question in 1934: how did the masses that made *Seven Gothic Tales* into a bestseller, in fact read this book? Obviously, there is no clear-cut answer to that question, but I believe that Canfield Fisher's foreword offers a clue in its extensive use of references to classical literature in the attempt to define the nature of this intensely "new" book. Again, *Seven Gothic Tales* offered and

[42] One of Johansson's examples is the way in which quotes straight from Søren Kierkegaard are spoken by characters belonging in a time when the Danish philosopher had not yet started writing.

continues to offer itself as multi-purpose object designed to be used by each subgroup after its own fashion and needs. For the academically trained reader, the intertexts read as exciting challenges and puzzles that call for neat solutions. To the Book-of-the-Month-Club-reader, *Seven Gothic Tales* presents itself as a work of art that puts the reader in touch with canonical culture.

Seven Gothic Tales strikes a very clever balance between being, as Johansson wrote, "difficult" and highbrow on the one hand, and accessible and middlebrow on the other. To say however, that the average Book-of-the-Month-Club-Reader read Blixen/Dinesen's tales simply because he or she wanted to flaunt cultural know-how is to underestimate both the average reader and the tales themselves. I want to illustrate this by looking at one passage in "The Roads Round Pisa". Count von Schimmelmann has been sent by the old lady into an adventure ripe with traditional romance-themes. Rosina loves her cousin Mario, but is forced to marry the old, powerful Prince Potenziani. A month after the wedding, Rosina petitions the pope for an annulment, on the grounds that the marriage has not been consummated. The prince then sends his young friend Prince Nino into Rosina's bedchamber to rape her in order to prove the consummation of the marriage. On that particular night, however, Rosina has persuaded her friend Agnese to take her place in the marital bed, in order to slip away and meet her lover Mario. Thus, it is Agnese who is raped by Nino. Prince Potenziani believes that his friend Nino has betrayed him, and challenges him in a duel. At this point, Agnese steps forward to reveal the truth. Prince Potenziani forgives his friend, and dies without a single shot being fired. Following the duel-scene and its revelation of Nino's rape of Agnese, the two young people stand facing each other as the cock crows, "a descendant of the cock in the house of the high priest Caiaphas" (44). Nino then quotes the lines from *Divina Commedia* where Dante meets Beatrice at the top of the mountain of Purgatory. He goes on to quote Dante's repentance for his unfaithfulness to Beatrice, and Agnese responds by quoting Beatrice's forgiveness. All in Italian.[43] In a persuasive interpretation of this brief passage, Langbaum suggests that the crowing cock alludes to Peter's denial of Christ, thus expressing the "intensity of Agnese's unspoken accusation against Giovanni". By

[43]Blixen/Dinesen did not translate quotes in Latin, German, Italian or French, while quotes from the Scandinavian languages were translated into English.

referring to Dante, the two young people who "were brought together physically when they acted out the old comic tale of the substitute bride … step[ping] into a more exalted artwork" and are brought together spiritually (17).

Langbaum's learned uncovering of the intertextual references certainly adds depth to the scene and the exchange between the characters. Still, to a reader without any knowledge of Italian or unable to recognize the quote as being from Dante, this scene would also be significant because of the way in which it is structured. Agnese and Nino are described as "marionettes" on a stage, speaking in quotes, which is of course what actors do, and Blixen/Dinesen's theatrical imagery has been noted by many critics. Langbaum observes that marionettes are, besides the Book of Job, the reference that recurs most often in her works and I will quote some of these instances (48):

> "They all stood perfectly immobile, like a party of little wooden dolls placed on that terrace of the inn." ("The Roads Round Pisa" 41)
>
> "Over our softly hissing glasses we were brought back to seeing ourselves and this night of ours as a great artist might have seen us and it, worthy of the genius of a god. I had a guitar lying on my sofa, for I was to serenade, in a *tableau vivant*, a romantic beauty." ("The Old Chevalier" 68)
>
> "In the warm and cosy room he supped by himself. Like, he thought, Don Giovanni in the last act of the opera." ("The Monkey" 96)
>
> "Out of gratitude to his godmother, he had resolved to do his best. He had laid his mask with great care in front of his mirror, and had exchanged his uniform for that black colour which he considered more appropriate to his part." ("The Monkey" 102)
>
> "As if they had been four marionettes, pulled by the same wire, the four people turned their faces to one another." ("The Deluge at Norderney" 131)

The recurrent theatrical imagery of these short stories conditions our reading of certain incidents in the stories as "scenes." The narrative pauses momentarily as the characters turn to one another in foregrounded and ritualized dialogue, reminiscent of a duet in an opera. Whether or not the reader is able to fully interpret the reference or the language, she or he will read the Dante-passage as fraught with meaning, even if the precise meaning is obscure or ambiguous. To

use a phrase from Walter Benjamin, we might speak about the "allegorical outlook" that Blixen/Dinesen's tales inspire in its readers, as witnessed by the professional readers' attempts to fit each and every intertext into all-embracing interpretations (*The Origin of German Tragic Drama* 220). Allegory understood as a sustained metaphor always aims to illustrate an idea or a moral, and *Seven Gothic Tales* uses the cultural and literary intertexts to construct a narrative that encourages allegorical readings, giving the reader a sense of complexity and the presence of concealed meanings.

The inset tales function in a similarly allegorical fashion, being, as Langbaum pointed out, "the symbolic language through which the main story is told" (24). The narrative of *Seven Gothic Tales* combine inset tales, or *contes*, to create a main story "through the expansion or unrolling of a number of interlocked themes," as Vinaver writes in his study of classical romance (75). These *contes* seldom relate themselves directly to the events of the mains story. Rather, they function allegorically in relation to the main story, obliquely offering a frame of interpretation. In "The Monkey," the prioress tells the story of an African elephant being sent to the King of Ava who had it chained and put in a cage. Within the frame of the main story, the elephant-tale reads as a comment on the 'caging' of sexuality that the dual character of prioress/monkey sets about to amend (107). Towards the end of the main story, when the reader and the other characters learn that the prioress speaking at the dinner table is really the monkey, the inserted tale can also be interpreted, retrospectively, as a comment on the (African) monkey's situation as the prioress' pet in Closter Seven as well as on the atmosphere of Closter Seven as a retreat for unmarried ladies of noble birth.

While the relationship between inset tale and main narrative seems rather straightforward in the case of the caged elephants, the allegorical meaning of an inset tale is just as often dependent on the reader's knowledge and point of view. In "The Roads Round Pisa," Prince Potenziani tells a story of the poet Monti who, having just finished his *Don Giovanni*, is asked by his friend Monsignor Talbot why he is so gloomy.[44] Monti rhetorically asks if it should not "weigh upon the

[44] Monsignor Talbot might very well be the secretary to Pius IX, immortalized in Lytton Strachey's mischievous biographies of a number of admired public figures in *Eminent Victorians* (1918). The Prince carries the same name and title as the governor of Rome, Prince Potenziani Spada (1880-1971), whose official visits

mind of a man to have created a human being who was to burn through eternity in hell" (26). Talbot responds smilingly that this could only happen to real people and asks whether the poet really believes himself to be a creator in the same sense as God. Monti then erupts into a soliloquy, calling on Homer's Ulysses, Cervantes' knight, Orlando and the Misanthrope to suggest that the artist is God's tool and that while the Monsignor himself will go out as a candle when he dies, the literary creations will walk the mansions of eternity. When the Monsignor questions this heretical view, Monti cries "oh, go and find out for yourself then!" and shoots him (27). "Monti, the poet" is perhaps the Italian writer and translator Vincenzo Monti (1754-1828), quite influential in his time, but certainly not very well known in 1934.

In her reading of this passage, Brantly points out that Donald Hannah has traced Monti's words to a similar passage in Luigi Pirandello's play *Six Characters in Search of An Author* (1921), and Brantly finishes her discussion of Blixen/Dinesen's playful use of intertextual connections by asking, in brackets:"(Could Monti have been the author Pirandello's six characters were looking for?)" (47). In fact, all of these intertextual references could be brought to bear on the meanings of Blixen/Dinesen's story. The story about Monti establishes a connection between her story and other texts, and the function of this inset tale within "The Roads Round Pisa" can be understood as alluding to a number of themes such as love, artistic creativity, seduction, spiritual redemption, quest, sacrifice, betrayal, the ways in which inherited values will always be undermined and re-evaluated as time passes, literary tradition and so on.

Theoretically, the lists of topics and themes that is opened up by Blixen/Dinesen's use of inset tales is endless, depending on how far and wide a reader is prepared to search. Unlike Brantly, I have not found any literary treatment of Don Giovanni by Monti, but a work called "La Lettera di Fransesco Piranesi al signor generale don Giovanni Acton" from 1794. It was written by Monti at the instruction of the artist Piranesi to defend the latter's dealings with the Swedish envoy in Naples, Baron Gustav Mauritz Armfelt who conspired against the Swedish regency. The Don Giovanni of this work was Sir John Acton

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both to London and New York in the mid-1920s made it into newspapers and newsreels. The real Prince Potenziani was forced by Mussolini to resign in 1928.

(1736-1811), the prime minister of Naples at the time of Armfelt's stay there. While we may consider this entirely random and apocryphal, the early nineteenth century probably did not in the wake of the French revolution and the assassination of the Swedish king Gustav III in 1792. And what about Blixen/Dinesen who, despite being removed by a hundred years from these dealings between barons, counts and kings, had a very definite view of the meaning of nobility and the unswerving loyalty to an ideal that they supposedly represented? And who was also, it should be remembered, incredibly well versed in the ins and outs of European aristocratic and royal lineages and doings. Is her reference, then, to the minor poet Monti's work *Don Giovanni*, a canonical subject in Western culture, and the poet's violent reaction, really a tongue-in-cheek comment on the affectations of any author claiming to create immortal literary characters more real than reality, when he is in fact nothing but a hired pen in the service of material, political interests? This too, would fit into a reading of the entire *Seven Gothic Tales* which finally brings us to the councilor of the last tale, where the appellation 'Poet' has become a lethal insult and culpability.

I find Brantly's and Hannah's tracing of Monti back to Pirandello both persuasive and much easier to endorse since it is interliterary. At the same time, it is impossible, once one has started thinking about it, to completely dispel the thought that the figure of Monti and his work *Don Giovanni* is possible to read as something which devalues any highfaluting celebrations of art as a vehicle of spiritual truth. Finally, both allegorical interpretations of this inset tale can be defended against the background of "The Roads Round Pisa" in isolation, as well as in relation to Blixen/Dinesen's entire collection.

In order to make sense of the inset tales, the reader is often forced to read backwards and forwards. In "The Poet" Anders Kube envisions the council at Caiaphas' house in Jerusalem where Mary Magdalena persuades the Jewish elders "that Christ was in reality the only-begotten son of God … and that what they were about to do would be the only true crime in all the history of mankind" (322). Eventually the council decides that "they must carry through their prospect. If the world had really this one hope of salvation, they would have to fall in with the plan of God, however dreadful the deed" (322-23). This beautiful inserted tale seems quite meaningless at the point in the story at which it is told, and only

realizes its full allegorical potential at the end when Kube shoots his protector the councilor in order to save his beloved from having to marry the councilor, and also to save himself from the councilor's desire to make a poet of the young man by denying him love. Still, even then this allegorical relationship remains obscure, and open to a number of different interpretations. Like the Jewish council Kube has to commit the "true crime" of killing the councilor in order to realize his own calling, un-enslaved by someone else's desires and ambitions. Or, is it the councilor who, like the Jewish Council, sacrifices himself in order that Kube may realize his life's calling, an interpretation suggested by Anders' vision where "the Councilor's own face was somewhere in the council of the high priests" (323)? Or, are we to read Kube in the figure of "red-haired Judas" who kills the councilor for the simple reason that he is evil and wants the bride-to-be for himself (323)? Or, does the inserted tale have no bearing at all on the events of the main story? This question often comes to mind when reading Blixen/Dinesen.

The inset tales in *Seven Gothic Tales* seem to function in a way highly reminiscent of the function of *contes* in traditional, courtly romances, where they create what Frye has called a vertical perspective, where the romancer who scrambles "over a series of disconnected episodes, seems to be trying to get to us to the top of it" (50). Only, in Blixen/Dinesen's stories, the role of romancer is no longer acted by the character of the knight-errant hero of the traditional romance, but rather by the reader. The inset tales have to be correctly interpreted and understood in order for the events at the level of main story to proceed in a meaningful way. At the same time, the allegorical content of the inset tales create a digressive horizontal extension, where the fiction is kept going by adding tale to tale.

While Langbaum only mentions romance in passing in his study of Blixen/Dinesen's works, his reading of her as "an important writer because she has understood the tradition behind her and has taken the next step required by that tradition" is clearly influenced by Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, published only a few years earlier, and in his succinct summation of what the "next step" entails, Langbaum writes:

> Like the other, more massive writers of her generation – Rilke, Kafka, Mann, Joyce, Eliot, Yeats too, though he is older – she takes off from a

> sense of individuality developed in the course of the nineteenth century to the point of morbidity, and leads that individuality where it wants to go. She leads it back to a universal principle and a connection with the external world. The universal principle is the unconscious life of man and nature, which, welling up in the human consciousness as myth, is the source of civilization, individual consciousness, and our concept of God's unlimited consciousness … to effect a transition from the individual to the archetypal character: from the novel, with its separation of psychological and external data, to the myth which speaks with one voice of both. (53)

I have quoted Langbaum at some length to suggest the flavor and tone of his reading of Blixen/Dinesen's art in a vein reminiscent of Frye's. Art in general, and certain literature in particular, takes on the teleological role hitherto reserved for religious writings, with the author in the role of prophet leading her readers towards closure and a sense of unity, from individual to collective consciousness. The romantic movement initiated the celebration of the author in the role of visionary, but I would suggest that Langbaum's author- centered view where the artist and the artwork fuse into a self-explanatory wholeness is also closely connected to the marketing-of-the-author-strategy launched by the publishing industry and the mass media market in the early twentieth century. Thus, Blixen/Dinesen figures largely in Langbaum's study as a consequence of successful marketing strategies that created the "public figure", author, actor, politician, millionaire, industrialist, and artist, as a role model to be admired and listened to, and paradoxically reflects the "morbid" development of individuality as a sellable item in consumer society.

Interestingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, Langbaum's author-centered, teleological interpretation of Blixen/Dinesen's works has been taken over by feminist/queer readers. They represent her as a purposeful re-writer of patriarchal/heteronormative traditions, implying that an all-encompassing, teleological perspective on her works is both possible and desirable. Langbaum argued that the thematic preoccupations with masks, masquerades, riddles, unstable identities and marionettes in her works were resolved at the level of a unifying myth. Today's critics read these figures as symbolic enactments of liberation and freedom from stable identities and sexualities. In both cases, the

work is approached as a harbinger of happy tidings, where the correct interpretation will reveal the presence of new, and improved, order and social vision.

Thinking about the way in which inset tale and main narrative relate allegorically to one another, it becomes obvious that *Seven Gothic Tales* is a type of literature that like fable, fairy-tale, myth or sacred scripture invites a message-oriented, intensely interpretative reading. At the level of structure, allegorical digressions, the interlacing of inset tales with main story, and the wealth of intertextual references create a processional or sequential narrative where each sequence seems to be charged with meanings that have to be revealed and understood in order for the reading to continue towards the end and closure.

I want to suggest that it was precisely this allegorical element in Blixen/Dinesen's writings that made Lundkvist fume at her bombastic and contradictory profundity in 1954 and that the Danish critics found pompous and artificial in 1934. Langbaum too framed his attempt to prove that Blixen/Dinesen wrote literature against the background of a perception of her writing as brilliant mystifications and pastiche (1). To learned readers such as Langbaum and Lundkvist there was clearly something potentially tasteless and irreverent about Blixen/Dinesen's use of intertexts where literary and cultural material is referenced to produce a sense of profound, but ambiguous or unresolved significance. Or to put it differently, where a sense of depth and significance is produced through proxy.

I also want to suggest that the referential, allegorical structure of *Seven Gothic Tales* was one reason why it became a popular success. It referenced Culture with a capital 'c' in combination with a message-oriented structure that was familiar to the average Book-of-the-Month-Club-reader in 1934 who was also a consumer trained in the art of interpreting omnipresent commercial messages referencing desirable cultural values. Extending Canfield Fisher's market-metaphor, it might be said that *Seven Gothic Tales* is not only a book on the market but also a book which mimics the market overflowing with decipherable and value-laden signs beckoning to the reader/consumer. Reading *Seven Gothic Tales* in this vein is not unlike the experience of talking a walk in the maze of a commercial downtown center, or leafing through the pages of *Vanity Fair* where each and every page

confronts the reader with signs referencing culture, refinement and socially useful knowledge with the magical potential of transforming the self and the world if correctly interpreted. The simple copy text story about the man who was turned down because he had a bad breath contains, like allegory, a hidden, spiritual meaning that has to do with identity and being. While the average Book-of-the-Month-Club-reader in 1934 may have been unable to trace and identify all the intertexts that *Seven Gothic Tales* explicitly and implicitly used, she or he was highly sensitized to the presence and importance of hidden meanings and messages. When Canfield Fisher filled her introduction with references to Byron, Stevenson and Cervantes she was not only giving the potential reader an orientation in literary tradition, she was also erecting the thumping signboard of Culture to entice prospective consumers. In consumer society, Culture is a sign that sells, just like Health, Love or Fame. *Seven Gothic Tales* represents the experience of living in this world of consumption in a form which we recognize; flooding us with a torrent of signs, meanings and values out of which we construct the semblance of coherence. But since the sign-flood is potentially endless it continuously shifts the ground for our attempts to create meaning and significance, reminding us that there can be no final closure and no completeness. Read against the background of modern consumer culture, the compositional aspect of the romance-tradition where tradition is foregrounded to demonstrate artistry in the interlacing of old and new, takes on a new significance.

Perfectly Real Human Beings

Salvaged by the Past?

So far I have discussed *Seven Gothic Tales* as a malleable, multi-purpose work of art and I have tried to show how its ostensibly anachronistic traits function in relation to diverse audiences, interpreting these features in accordance with distinct fashion and needs. Now, I want to consider how *Seven Gothic Tales* in its entirety may be read as a typical Book-of-the-Month-club book in the sense that it invited its readers "to share the thoughts of our own time," as Canby put it in explaining the selections (qtd. in Lee 118). In the final lines of her introduction, Canfield Fisher defended the book against her own suggestion that it may seem a many-colored literary fog, by writing that it was in fact a book where the light may be strange, "but it is clear light, and in it we see a series of vigorously presented, outrageously unexpected, sometimes horrifying, but perfectly real human beings" (x). In the final instance the race-apart is revealed to be like the collective "us" and the "we" that Canfield Fisher's text consciously sets out to create: the Book-of-the-Month-Club readers in 1934.

Seven Gothic Tales was published in the midst of the Depression that hit the US in 1929, a disaster that is perhaps best represented in a scattering of figures. Between 1929 and 1934, the GDP fell around 30 percent. More than 1 million families lost their farms. The income figures of the average American family dropped by 40 percent. 5000 banks went out of business. 2 million Americans were homeless and migrated around the country looking for jobs. As Susman points out, people in general, the "enormous American middle class," who had lost their jobs, homes, and savings did not react with anger and rebellion against an economic and political system that had promised eternal progress for all but had delivered ruin to many. Instead, the reaction was one of fear and shame, which, writes Susman, makes it easier to understand "why the period proved in the end so fundamentally conservative as it concentrated on finding and glorifying an American Way of Life" (192). One of the sources Susman uses in his discussion is Studs Terkel's classical book of interviews *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (1970), and Terkel himself wrote in a commentary

> The suddenly-idle hands blamed themselves, rather than society. True, there were hunger marches and protestations to City Hall and Washington, but the millions experienced a private kind of shame when the pink slip came. No matter that others suffered the same fate, the inner voice whispered "I'm a failure" …. Outside forces, except to the more articulate and political rebels, were in some vague way responsible, but not really. It was a personal guilt. (5)

While experts still debate and disagree on how to explain the economic and political mechanisms of the Great Depression, a public addressed and socialized as consumers responsible for producing themselves through consumption, interpreted the cataclysmic events at the level of personal failure.

The degree to which consumerism ideology had saturated society becomes apparent when reading John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) that has become, as Casey points out in her essay on the American Depression literature, "the arbiter of Depression imagery" (96). This is a novel that explicitly, energetically, and politically, attempted to relocate failure from the personal to the political level, from the individual to the macroeconomic level. The "failure [that] hangs over the State like a great sorrow" is not the failure of the Joad-family and millions of poor tenant-farmers along with them (385). They have been forced from their barren lands, ploughs and mules in order to go west where "men of understanding and knowledge" use technology and chemistry to augment and diversify the yields of the land, developing new colors, flavors and fruits for the consumer market (383). Steinbeck's novel decries the moral failure of technological development harnessed to profit-driven consumption-based economy. It produces an endlessly growing variety of consumer goods on a large scale but there is "a failure [here] that topples all our success. The fertile earth, the straight tree rows, the sturdy trunks, and the ripe fruit. And children dying of pellagra must die because a profit cannot be taken from an orange" (385).

But while this is a novel that persistently calls for anger and solidarity as a reaction to a moral failure identified as social and systematic, it is also a novel that is peculiarly nostalgic in its effort to imagine resistance and social change. When Tom Joad walks out of the novel towards the end, the dialogue between him and Ma Joad resonates with the imagery of rebellion and revolution. Yet, what Tom

envisions as the goal of collective struggle, is markedly individualistic and backward-looking; for "our folks [to] eat the stuff they raise an' live in the houses they build," to "farm our own lan'" (463). Casey argues that the popular success of *The Grapes of Wrath* was due precisely to its ability to fuse an intimation of collective, progressive action with the fundamentally individualistic, conservative and nationalistic values of the yeoman farmer (96). In his novel, Steinbeck pitted the simple, agrarian folk who had not changed with industry and to whom land and food were one, against the "machine man, driving a dead tractor" (126). The machine man is in the service of faceless producing industry, and the consuming "Californians [who] wanted many things, accumulation, social success, amusement, luxury" (257). Steinbeck created a powerful manichean drama in *The Grapes of Wrath* by calling on the reader to make a morally infused choice between the nebulous, undefined and seemingly insatiable wants of the Californians and the literally earthbound, modest wants of the Okies (257). Yet, while celebrating the heroism of the simple, victimized folk, the novel acknowledges the impossibility of imagining the future as anything but a return to a past that has been blasted out of existence by irreversible social change. The choice is ultimately nonexistent and the novel reverts to a strikingly mythical, archaic imagery in the final pages where the young woman, Rose of Sharon, who has given birth to a still-born child breastfeeds a starving stranger in a deserted barn, filled with the broken and rusty tools of a doomed agrarian society. The iconic rendering of the lactating, nurturing woman with a mysterious smile on her lip, cradling the stranger's head in her hands, liberates the novel from the strains of realism and the tragedy of not being able to envision a viable, collective future beyond a morally failed but triumphant system.

Using a formulation from Casey, it could be argued that Steinbeck's successful novel struggles with the problem of how to "narrate stasis? The question cuts to the core of fictional expression during the Great Depression" (iv). Actively and passionately resisting and questioning the linear notion of progress, the novel opts for a covert but nonetheless distinct regress into a mythologized, American past.

While Steinbeck's novel may have become the quintessential account of the Depression era, its nostalgia for a simpler, agrarian past and its celebration of the resilient and honest farmer was typical of much cultural and intellectual

production at the time. As Susman points out, the 1930s was marked by a complex effort to describe and define the singularity of American culture, "distinguished from the material achievements (and the failures) of an American industrial civilization" where "civilization itself – in its urban-industrial form – seemed increasingly the enemy" (156). In this effort historical retrospect played a crucial role. In his study of popular literature during the first half of the twentieth century, Gordon Hutner writes that "the sheer enthusiasm for history animating so many plots may never, in America, have been more fully sustained or widely shared" than during this period (163).

It is tempting to think of the popularity of historical romances and popular studies in earlier American history and culture at this time, simply in terms of an escape from contemporary problems. Together with an ever-growing number of murder mysteries they topped the annual best-seller lists during these years when American progress seemed to have reached an impasse, the mechanisms of which no-one seemed to be able to fully explain. Looking, like the Joad family, for an answer to the question that runs throughout Steinbeck's novel – "what's it comin' to?" or the answer to the question that animates the crime genre – whodunnit? – the public looked to increasingly available forms of popular culture. Susman suggests that the 1930s should be called the age of Mickey Mouse and Walt Disney, creating a world that initially appears brutal, "absurd and even terrifying … where the inanimate become living things, men become artificial, and nature human, accepted scientific laws seem somehow no longer to apply … a world out of order" (197). Yet, this is also a world where order is eventually and magically restored, wishes fulfilled and traditional values reinforced.

To talk about popular culture in terms of escapism, however, suggests the possibility to imagine that there is a somewhere else to go. As Steinbeck's novel makes clear, that "somewhere else" in the age of consumerism can only be imagined in temporal terms. Thus, it is perhaps more productive to think of popular culture in the 1930s as an arena creating, in the words of Anderson, a "narrative of identity" encompassing the nation as an imagined community grounded in a particular history (205). Like in a crime story, the riddle of the present could only be solved by constructing a narrative of the past.

In this context, *Seven Gothic Tales* seems to offer itself as a book very much about the past, its stories set in nineteenth century Europe where revolutions may have come and passed but where the social order remains stable. The "proud and kindly spirit of past feudal times seems to dwell" not only in Closter Seven of "The Monkey," but also in the fashionable sea-side resort of Norderney where ladies, marriageable daughters, young dandies and old gentleman gather to gossip, court and become one with romantic nature (75). It is a world of leisure and wealth where young aristocratic men travel Europe in search of romantic adventures and old ladies preside at social gatherings, creating an aura of wit and refinement even if the "salon" happens to be located on a sinking hayloft or in the presence of a ghost. In a sense, *Seven Gothic Tales* does present its reader with a fairy-tale or romance universe where young noblemen are sent out rescue young maidens as in "The Roads Round Pisa," and where one can imagine, as Boris does in "The Monkey," a herd of unicorn grazing upon the sunny slopes (84). While Blixen/Dinesen's image of the past may seem to represent the absolute political opposite of Steinbeck's celebration of the agrarian working-class, it can, like Steinbeck's work, be read as distinct regress into a mythologized past in the face of troubled and conflict-ridden present.

To say that the past of *Seven Gothic Tales* is an image of a serene past would, however, be to close one's eyes to the violence that runs through the collection, both on a thematic and a structural level. *Seven Gothic Tales* is brutal and bloody. There is, as Langbaum has pointed out, heartlessness in Blixen/Dinesen's stories, or, as Canfield Fisher wrote in her introduction, a "tense, fierce, hard, controlled, over-civilized, savage something-or-other" atmosphere in these tales (vi). People are shot, hanged, drowned, or just die because their hearts give up. Death and violence sometimes takes place off-stage, but just as often on-stage. And in the one story where there is no death, "The Monkey," there is still violence and blood as a man and a woman meet in the dark on what is supposed to be a night of seduction, or rape, but which turns into a fight where they scratch and bite, drawing blood. In these stories women are raped, left on the day of their wedding, hunted down like wild animals, driven off, bought and sold. People kill each other, plot and deceive, and they take pleasure in the sorrows of others.

Yet, Blixen/Dinesen's stories have never been read as horror-stories, pulp-fiction or tragedies. They neither make us shiver nor cry. They are neither sentimental nor crusading. They do not make us pity the woman raped, nor curse the rapist; they do not condemn or punish the murderer, the betrayer or the ruthless plotter. In fact, the stories place their characters and thus their reader in a sphere beyond emotions and morality, where we are not called upon to pass judgment or to feel anything about the atrocities committed. Canfield Fisher captured something important when she described these tales as over-civilized and savage. First, because savagery in Blixen/Dinesen's vocabulary is not a bad thing. It is an ideal characterizing the native, the nobility and the proletariat: those who, unlike the bourgeoisie, have nothing to lose and who place their freedom higher than possessions or safety. Secondly and more interestingly however, is the way in which the constant presence of death and violence at the thematic level of *Seven Gothic Tales* heightens our awareness of the violence inherent in culture and in the past. It selects intertexts from various genres, traditions and eras that remind us of how steeped our cultural tradition and its most esteemed works are in representations of condoned and even holy violence, suffering and death: the *Bible*, *Frankenstein*, *Divina Commedia*, *Faust*, *Hamlet*, and *The Eumenides*. *Seven Gothic Tales* suggests that savagery is perhaps the most important way in which we understand ourselves in Western civilization, that we are merciless savages that will not let anything or anybody come between ourselves and our desires.

Thirdly, while we can speak of the ways in which the new feeds on the old, deconstructing while simultaneously transmitting inherited material, in terms of influence and inspiration and of this process as tradition, *Seven Gothic Tales* reminds us that there is violence in this process too. The narrative rips whole passages, a line or just a single name from its original context and forces it to signify in accordance with the new context. Like the scientists of Steinbeck's novel who used old products to engineer new colors, flavors and fruits for the consumer market, *Seven Gothic Tales* approaches the past, tradition and history as a storeroom to be used in creating the taste of the new in the same way as Nozdref's cook used yesterday's left-overs. While *The Grapes of Wrath* may be read as the quintessential account of the Depression era because of its nostalgic

representation of an imaginary, mythical past, *Seven Gothic Tales* explores and exploits the past in an uncompromising, unsentimental fashion.

Salvaged by Romance?

It is not, however, fair to represent Blixen/Dinesen as a happy-go-lucky iconoclast in relation to the questions raised by the sense that Western civilization had come to a dead end as all values were being swept away by mechanization and the seemingly blind forces of unrestrained capitalism. In fact, *Seven Gothic Tales* represents a chillingly dystopian and claustrophobic vision of a world where there is no longer any answer to the question "what's it comin' to?" But where Steinbeck's novel explicitly posed this question within the frame of a realist novel, *Seven Gothic Tales* poses and explores this question at the level of form. The romance form of *Seven Gothic Tales*, with a focus on the quest for identity, meaning and closure is an organizing principle that is both posited and challenged. The proposition to treat these stories within the interpretative framework of romance invites an objection that is eerily similar to my own reservations about reading Blixen/Dinesen diachronically within the tradition of a female gothic. As Heidi Hansson points out, the term "romance" can be used to describe both a literary form and a literary quality, and in both senses, it can be made to encompass a wide variety of works; stretching from *Le Morte D'Arthur*, through *Ivanhoe* to *Fifty Shades of Grey* (11). As a genre-concept, romance is elusively elastic both in time and social space and the suggestion that *Seven Gothic Tales* could be read as part of a tradition beginning in at least the early Middle Ages seems to suggest the kind of a-temporal reading that I want to distance myself from.

In his essay on romance as genre, Jameson in fact suggests that it is precisely the possibility of positing romance's diachronic existence as a kind of relatively autonomous formal development, or a type of narrative that makes a temporalized reading possible ("Magical Narratives" 156). Such a reading would look for what Jameson calls difference and discontinuity in the realization of the romance form in a particular work, at a particular time. Thus, the generic affiliations that characterize the work would serve as a sort of background against which the

systematic deviations from the generic code would become apparent and significant, read as "protopolitical response[s] to a historical dilemma" (157). In Jameson's reading discontinuity at the level of form is not equivalent to the concept of "rewriting" that has been central in feminist readings of Blixen/Dinesen as a part of a female gothic tradition. "Rewriting" places agency in the author, grappling, critiquing and ultimately controlling both her own text and tradition, using it to formulate an alternative vision in the form of a message interpreted and presented by the critic. To think of difference and discontinuity in Jameson's terms, on the other hand, places agency in history and social change to which the literary work cannot choose but to respond at the level of form.

This approach contextualizes the reading as well as the work historically and socially. What Frye calls the "blood will tell"-convention of romance will, for example, when realized in *Seven Gothic Tales* in 1934 take on a different meaning than in a medieval, chivalric romance. But also, and more importantly, it distinguishes between the accepted academic understanding of what Frye has described as romance's pervasive social snobbery as an example of ironic pastiche on the one hand, and the possible significance of this romance-convention in the setting of a 1934-consumer society where everything about a person would "tell," in the sense of revealing social standing in a socially mobile society (161).

To think of *Seven Gothic Tales* as a romance that creates meaning by conforming to and deviating from a romance-type of narrative does not necessarily preclude reading it as gothic, witnessed by the fact that we may speak of "gothic romance." Rather, it suggests a perspective that emphasizes romance as genre that combines a particular structure with a cluster of properties proper to romance. Thus, while the presence of the marvelous or supernatural in and by itself could be used to motivate a reading of *Seven Gothic Tales* as gothic (or, "fantastiske"), it is not sufficient to a reading of the work as a romance, however important the fantastic element may be in the romance tradition. Instead, such a reading needs to move back and forth between a concept of romance structure and conventions belonging to the genre, recognizing that while love may be a crucial property of romance, being "almost by definition a love story" in the words of Frye, the structure of the particular love story told will determine whether it is indeed a romance or something else (83). This becomes especially important in

the case of *Seven Gothic Tales* since the short story-format shares some crucial features with romance. How do we decide whether the simplified characters are the "virtually inevitable" result of brevity as Levy argues in the case of the short story (75)? Or, a consequence of a combination of typical romance features such as a strongly enforced code of conduct with the importance of destiny outside of which "character has no existence," as Vinaver argues (92)? Or, the short story-tendency to leave significant things to the reader's inference because of brevity, versus the traditionally allegorical, digressive mode of romance that continuously calls for the reader's interpretation? And, perhaps most importantly for my argument, the way in which short story "endings conditions the whole of the text," as Lohafer argues, which brings the short story in close contact with romance understood as structured by the quest and its possible outcome (111). The point here is not to argue that the stories in *Seven Gothic Tales* are not short stories which they clearly are, but to suggest that they are short stories that should be read in relation to the romance genre, and that this generic affiliation is more decisive to an interpretation than their relative brevity.

Patricia Parker's understanding of romance as a form which simultaneously quests for and postpones a particular end, objective or object will be crucial to my reading. In his comprehensive study of romance, Frye writes that most romances end happily and Gillian Beer also lists the happy ending among the "cluster of properties" belonging to romance (10). While this may seem as such a general observation that it borders on the useless, it becomes important if romance is, as Frye suggests, "nearest of all literary forms to the wish fulfillment dream" (186). Or, in Beer's, words: "always concerned with the fulfillment of desires" (12). In Frye's understanding of romance as a secular scripture that attempts to restore order to a fallen, lower world of human experience, the concept of a happy ending takes on extensive, existentialist meanings. In a consumer, mass media society saturated with representations of dreams and promises of fulfillment through consumption, yet conditioned by a perpetual postponement of fulfillment, romance understood as a representation of desire fulfilled takes on an interesting significance.

In the original version of *Seven Gothic Tales* "The Roads round Pisa" came first. The American editors, however, decided to open the collection with "The

Deluge at Norderney" which they thought was the most powerful of her stories. Blixen/Dinesen did not argue the matter, probably because she felt that she was in no position to do so. In all other editions except the German one from 1937, she made sure that her original conception was realized. When *Seven Gothic Tales* is read in the order in which it was originally conceived it reveals itself as a systematic reflection on literary form, taking off from the classical romance of the first tale and gradually exposing its form to the impact and demands of historical change. Read as a sustained interrogation of the possibilities and restrictions of narrative forms at a particular historical moment, *Seven Gothic Tales* exemplifies what Parker has called "the cloven fiction of an increasingly remote or evasive 'faery land' and an increasingly pressing reality" (11). Parker's comment is specifically geared to the development of romance but in her description of a "cloven fiction" that reluctantly registers the historical moment as a determinant in relation to literary imagination we may recognize the dilemma of Steinbeck's essentially realistic and highly political Depression-novel. *The Grapes of Wrath* attempts but fails to fulfill its own desire for a particular closure. Unlike *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Seven Gothic Tales* is not an explicit attempt to represent and critique the particular historical moment of writing and publishing. It is also not a novel, but a collection of short stories. Nevertheless, I want to argue that *Seven Gothic Tales* invites an interpretation that revolves around the question of the degree to which pressing reality not only determines the limits of literary imagination, but structures imagination itself at a specific historical moment. Further, I want to argue that *Seven Gothic Tales* pursues this discussion in terms of literary form, where the romance quest becomes the touchstone against which the relationship between reality and imagination is tested.

In Blixen/Dinesen's original conception the two tales that frame the collection are significantly linked in two ways. Count von Schimmelmann reappears in the last tale in a minor but important role, and both tales revolve around the theme of young love impeded by an older, wealthier man. In "The Roads Round Pisa," Rosina loves her cousin Mario, but is forced to marry the old, powerful Prince Potenziani. After a series of staple fairy-tale or romance-adventures and complications the young loving couple is brought together, grandmother and granddaughter are reunited and a child is born. This straightforward account of the

story does not really do justice to its remarkable and intricate form which is anything but straightforward. “The Roads Round Pisa” very consciously presents itself as a piece of traditional romance craftsmanship where inset tales, or *contes*, are combined to create a main story through the unrolling of a number of interlocked themes: truth, love and loyalty. Love can only triumph if loyalty is observed and the truth is told. Prince Nino’s loyalty to Prince Potenziani and Agnese's loyalty to Rosina combine to create the moment of revelation and truth that kills the old man standing in the way of the young lovers. The *contes* have to be correctly interpreted for the events at the level of main story to proceed in a meaningful way.

While “The Roads Round Pisa” conspicuously sets itself up as beautifully crafted romance both thematically and structurally, it also initiates a breach in the mold of romance by introducing a romancer, or hero, whose character is fundamentally foreign to the demands of the romance genre. Count von Schimmelmann is introduced to the reader in the form of a long-winded first-person inner monologue where he reflects on the nature of truth and love in general and the truth about himself in particular, seeking it in the reflections of mirrors. The image of the mirror indicates, as Frye points out, ”the threshold of the romance world” revolving around the quest for identity and meaning (109).

In a reading of “The Roads Round Pisa” as a romance quest, the old lady magically recognizes the count as a potential hero and he soon finds himself in the midst of the traditional, blue-blooded romance-adventure that make up the bulk of “The Roads Round Pisa.” Unlike the other, traditional romance characters of this tale, however, the I-centered, self-reflective von Schimmelmann cannot dedicate himself to a quest where individual identity is eclipsed and even canceled by collective fate in the form of a story. Even though he responds to the old lady’s, Countess di Gampocorta, request in the proper formulaic manner - “’I am at your service, Madame’” - his role in the story remains that of a mere bystander or witness (17). His failure as a romance character is confirmed in a final passage where the countess once again offers him the possibility of becoming part of a collective story. In his pocket, von Schimmelmann carries a smelling bottle painted with an image of a landscape and a pink, crenelated castle, left by a maiden aunt who had traveled to Italy as a girl and “every dream of romance and

adventure was in her mind attached" to this castle (9). The countess offers him a precious gift in the form of a similarly shaped smelling-bottle, a dear memory of a childhood friendship with a girl from a foreign country, one of only three people that the countess had ever loved. Painted on the bottle is a landscape and a house that von Schimmelmann immediately recognizes as his own place back in Denmark, and he as well as the reader understand why a "vaguely familiar note within" had struck him as he watched the landscape outside the countess' villa:

> He could feel his own little bottle in his waistcoat pocket, and came near to taking it out and showing it to the old lady. He felt that this would have made a tale which she would forever have cherished and repeated. (50)

True to character, however, he withholds his bottle, and thus also the tale "held back by a feeling that there was, in this decision of fate, something which was meant for him only – a value, a depth, a resort even, in life which belonged to him alone, and which he could not share with anybody else" (50). Being a character unfit for romance he cannot comprehend the meaning of fate in a romance quest where "character has no existence outside destiny, and destiny means the convergence of simultaneously developed themes, now separated, now coming together" as Vinaver writes on classical romance (92). He is a character that instead of allowing a tale of loyalty and love to emanate from fate, makes his own deliberate, individual decisions that go against the grain of romance design "charged with echoes of the past and premonitions of the future" (Vinaver 92). "The Roads Round Pisa" is a romance that ends happily for the simplified, unreflective characters which are functions of the romance format and acts in accordance with its code. Identity and meaning are confirmed by the completion of the quest and the countess, having become a great-grandmother, confides in von Schimmelmann that "Life is a mosaic of the Lord's, which he keeps filling in bit by bit. If I had seen this little bit of bright colour as the centerpiece, I would have understood the pattern" (49). He, on the other hand, unable to perceive and fit into this pattern, is lost in his lonely, self-preoccupied search for identity and the final line of the story suggests that he has learned nothing from the story he has witnessed, as he takes "a small mirror from his pocket. Holding it in the flat of his hand, he looked thoughtfully into it" (51).

While the mirror-imagery in the opening of "The Roads Round Pisa" represents the threshold moment of romance as a quest for identity the presence of the mirror in the count's hand at the end of the story suggests that complete closure cannot be achieved if the romance form is not understood on its own, stringent terms. What Frye has called the spiral form of quest romance, where the "end is the beginning transformed and renewed by the heroic quest" remains uncompleted as the count returns to his own reflection in the mirror (174).

The degree to which "The Roads Round Pisa" is a meta-literary discussion of genre conventions and form is indicated by von Schimmelmann figuring not only as an inept character in this tale but also in the role of inept reader and interpreter, unable to understand the conditions of the kind of story he must submit himself to. At one point early in the tale he watches a marionette comedy, "the immortal *Revenge of Truth*" where the plot revolves around a curse cast on a house to the effect that any lies told within it, will become true. [45] In a concluding soliloquy the witch-marionette sums up the "truth," or "moral" of the play which is that "we are, all of us, acting in a marionette comedy. What is more important than anything else in a marionette comedy, is keeping the ideas of the author clear'" (36). The "cursed house" of the play is the form of the particular kind of romance literature that "The Roads Round Pisa" explicitly exemplifies and discusses. Inside of romance with its "problematic" association to reality, as Hansson writes, conventional definitions of truth and lies are no longer valid (12). While a predominantly realistic novel achieves truth through complex, "life-like" characters whose interactions set the plot in motion, romance achieves its particular kind of truth through observance of a traditional quest-form where character is a function of the demands of plot. Watching the play, the count seems to be on the verge of giving in to the lure of romance as he thinks "if my life were only a marionette comedy in which I had my part and knew it well, then it might be very easy and sweet … If I have now at last, he thought, come into a marionette play, I will not go out of it again" (36).

The tragic irony is of course that the very fact that he thinks these "thoughts" reveals the degree to which he is unable to become a romance marionette.

[45] Langbaum points out that this was an "private joke", since "The Revenge of Truth" was a comedy written by Blixen/Dinesen herself as a child, and published in 1926 in a Danish literary magazine (11, note 2)

Surrounded by characters prepared to rape and kill in the name of loyalty and honor, the count appears as the only perfectly real character in this first tale. There is absolutely nothing horrifying, unexpected or outrageous about him. He is, if anything, rather boring in his self-preoccupied and narcissistic reflections that will eventually peter out in his pragmatic acceptance of his own identity in the final tale "The Poet": "not as he really believed it to be, but, as in a reflection within a mirror, such as others saw it" (331).

In "The Poet" von Schimmelmann reappears in the role of a friend of one of the main characters, the councilor. Without this apparent intertextual linkage between the two tales it would perhaps be easy to overlook the ways in which "The Poet" continues the exploration initiated in "The Roads Round Pisa": what happens when our conception of the world as a coherent narrative where everyone plays their pre-scripted role breaks down in the face of the forces of the real? Where "The Roads Round Pisa" was an example of classical romance-structure, "The Poet" is essentially a strictly diachronically progressing, linear narrative with very few inset tales. If "The Roads Round Pisa" exemplified and tested the romance-form by introducing a modern, individualistic character into its midst, "The Poet" presents itself as a question of what romance becomes once its sequential, digressive form has dissolved into a linear narrative where romance only remains as a possible mode. What happens to the quest when meaning-creating deferral in the form of allegorical *contes* that call for continuous interpretation is replaced by an undeviating narrative that proceeds uninterruptedly towards completion and closure? With its essentially linear structure and realist mode, the final tale of *Seven Gothic Tales* is significantly different from the tales that lead up to it. The main narrative progresses stately through a serene, pastoral, Danish landscape without castles or catastrophic floods. It is uninterrupted by long inset tales and in no need of allegory or intertextual references in order to make sense. There are no shape-shifters, ghosts, homicidal actors, masquerades, rapes or lethal chases across Swiss mountain passes. "The Poet" is, as Langbaum points out, the most naturalistic and least witty of the *Seven Gothic Tales*, one that one admires "rather more than one likes it," as he writes (118).

The narrative of "The Poet" repeats the central plot of "The Roads Round Pisa" where young love is impeded by the desires of an old, powerful man, but in a form that is fundamentally different. The story is set in a provincial Danish town of "average burghers" called Hirschholm, and the setting in Denmark in and by itself becomes significant as a move from southern to northern Europa (312).[46] In "The Roads Round Pisa" the Count's reflection on the sweetness of being a marionette is followed by his understanding of this "ideal" as possible only to the people of the South, "as immune to the terrors, the crimes and miracles of the life in which they took part as were the little actors upon the old player's stage … as if life were, in any of her whims, a comedy which they had already rehearsed" (36). "The Poet" can be read as a comment on the geographic convention typical of certain kinds of romance where southern Europe is represented as exotic, mysterious and potentially threatening to the rationality of the "people of the North [to whom] the strong agitations of the soul come each time as a strange thing" (36).

The main character of "The Poet" is not a nobleman but a state servant, a chamber-councilor named Mathiesen provided with a thorough biographical background, complete with his ideas on politics, history, literature and art. The councilor does not have to search for his identity in mirrors, since he has found it in an identification with the actual historical figure of the great Geheimrat Goethe. Mathiesen has tried to write poetry in an attempt to emulate the great Geheimrat, but recognized his own limitations, and settled for the role of Maecenas to a young district clerk by the name of Anton Kube; "a nearly perfect specimen of a type of Danish peasant" who also happened to be born with a gift for poetry (315).

The third character is a young Italian widow, Fransine. She has ended up in Hirschholm as a result of a marriage to an old Dane which we are made to understand was dictated by poverty rather than love. The councilor who is afraid that his protégé will be distracted from writing poetry by drinking, decides to

[46] In Dinesen's original conception of *Seven Gothic Tales*, the tales move north from a beginning in Italy, into Paris, Prussia, an island outside the continental Baltic coast, and finally to Denmark in "Supper at Elsinore" and "The Poet". Inserted between the last two Denmark-based tales is "The Dreamers" which takes off on a boat sailing to Zanzibar, but, since the bulk of this story is made up of inserted tales, later moves through several continental European countries.

arrange a marriage between Anders and Fransine but on seeing the young woman dance, changes his mind and decides to marry her himself. Meanwhile, Anders and Fransine have fallen in love but reveal nothing to the old man. The councilor proposes to Fransine who accepts, but on the night before the wedding he comes upon the young couple as he takes a walk in the woods. Hidden, he watches them quarrel and when Fransine runs off, Anders who has brought a gun for shooting ducks, discovers the councilor and shoots him. The councilor drags himself to Fransine's house and asks for help, but she kills him with a big stone, crying out "You poet!" (363).

In the terminology of romance we might say that Anders and Fransine are made for each other and that they, unlike the councilor, are potential romance characters. Anders is a peasant-cum-poet character and in the single passage where his poetic gift is demonstrated, he appears in the role of archaic *conteor* or oral story-teller, reciting a "ballad" to his protector and the visiting Count von Schimmelmann. Fransine is not only Italian, but also described as

> a doll; not like the dolls of the present day, which are imitations of faces and forms of human babies, but like the dolls of old days which strove, parallel with humanity, toward an abstract ideal of female beauty. (319)

Anders and Fransine are misplaced pastoral romance characters caught in the wrong kind of story: he as a peasant-cum-poet that has to make a living as a clerk, and she as a character who has had to trade her ideal feminine beauty for economic security. As a reader of poetry the councilor recognizes the pattern of romance destiny as he watches the two young people's first meeting: "It was, he thought, like the opening bars of a piece of music, or the first chapter of a romance called *Anders and Fransine*" (321). But, since the councilor is not a romance character the immediacy of his "impression" is transformed into pragmatic reflection in the next passage where he conceives his idea of arranging a marriage, not as an acknowledgement of the primacy of love and destiny, but as a practical arrangement that would provide his protégée with a home, a stable income, and keep him from drinking. Where "The Roads Round Pisa" used structure in the form of allegorical *contes* to explicate and orchestrate the movement of the quest, "The Poet" relies on naïve verisimilitude to create the

logic of its fictional universe. This crucial difference and its effect are highlighted in a comparative reading of "The Poet" and "The Roads Round Pisa" with a focus on the function of money in each story. Prince Potenziani and Councilor Mathiesen are older, wealthy men, both described as Maecenas, and they function as impediments to young love in both stories. In the romance narrative the wealth of the former is nothing but a minor detail in the first inset tale where the countess provides von Schimmelmann with the background story to her request. In "The Poet," however, wealth has become the way in which the councilor defines himself and the force that structures the narrative. His scheme converts the central romance-theme of destined love into explicitly monetary terms, suggesting a financially dictated code of conduct as absolute as that of romance. When the councilor changes his mind a few pages later and decides to marry Fransine himself, his inner monologue does not contain the word "love." Instead, his reflections revolve around his own standing as a "rich man." It is as such that he is able to value and deserve the "rarest things in life," such as a doll-like wife, and it is as such that he holds the power of a Maecenas over the poet Anders, a "supremacy" that might be lost if the two young people were united (327). The councilor understands himself as a creditable potential husband because he is credit-able and the narrative of "The Poet" confirms the credibility of his reasoning and actions. Unlike the two young lovers of "The Roads Round Pisa," the destined lovers of "The Poet" do not even consider the possibility of an adventurous escape, and the romance quest is nipped in the bud. Like the councilor they act in accordance with naïve verisimilitude that understands identity and destiny as determined by pressing reality in the shape of money.

Perhaps the ways in which a comparative reading of "The Roads Round Pisa" and "The Poet" can be brought to bear on the question of how social reality impinges on imagination itself, is most apparent in the function of death in these two tales. Prince Potenziani and Councilor Mathiesen are both characters that understand desire in terms of consumption. As wealthy men they are entitled to claim ownership of young, beautiful women. They are both villains in narratives that revolve around the fulfillment of desire in destined love and therefore they both have to die, but they die very differently. Where the prince dies magically,

sacrificially "ascending to heaven, and they his disciples, left behind, gazing up toward him" (43) the councilor dies brutally and realistically

> The blood spouted to all sides. The body, which had a second before possessed balance, a purpose, a conception of the world around it, fell together, and lay on the ground like a bundle of old clothes, at the pleasure of the law of gravitation, as it had fallen. (364)

Where in the first tale the villain's death is the turning point which clears the way for the happy-ever-after ending and the birth of a child, the councilor's death in the final tale ends the story and we do not learn what happens to Anders and Fransine. In romance death is generative, but in the absence of a romance perception of the world and its manifestation in narrative structure, death is merely death and "engulfing darkness" (364).

Should we, then, as Langbaum suggested, read Blixen/Dinesen's tales as a celebration in the romanticist vein of art's ability to transcend the limits of social reality? Her writing effecting a "transition from the individual to the archetypal character: from the novel, with its separation of psychological and external data, to the myth which speaks with one voice of both," set forth in a cleverly constructed collection of tales moving from the perfect, blue-blooded, happy-ending romance of the first tale to the sordid realism of the last tale? This is certainly a possible reading, and one which fits well with Blixen/Dinesen's professed view of herself as "God's chosen snob" who, at least in theory, defied middle-class values, and in an often quoted passage from a letter to her sister Ellen Dahl in 1928 wrote that if she could not live with the aristocrats or the intellectuals, she would chose the proletariat or the natives of colonial Kenya over the middle-class, defined and delimited by its fear of loss (*Breven från Afrika* 393). Councilor Mathiesen can certainly be read as an expression of Blixen/Dinesen's despise for what she perceived as bourgeois urges: a character who like Lewis' Babbitt or Steinbeck's Californians is driven by a desire to possess and a simultaneous fear of losing his possessions, and a character who for these very reasons ultimately loses his life.

But, what to do with the fact that *Seven Gothic Tales* turns the transition Langbaum described on its head: taking off from archetypal character and myth,

and ending in individualized and sordid realism as though it was impossible to maintain myth beyond the scope of a single tale? Reading *Seven Gothic Tales* as a sustained interrogation of the conditions of a cloven fiction suspended between desire fulfilled in the form of romance myth and desire perpetually displaced, the series of tales appear as a progressive dismantling of the romance formula at several levels, or, as Parker writes, "a centrifugal process" away from the first tale's concentration of meaning where the mosaics eventually fall into place (69).

Unachievable Closure

In his 1957 diatribe on Blixen/Dinesen's artificial trickeries, Lundkvist made an important observation. Perhaps because he was less concerned with celebrating Blixen/Dinesen's essential wisdom than critics such as Arendt or Langbaum. He wrote that "Karen Blixen's stories are conspicuously often left unfinished" ("Karen Blixens berättelser är påfallande ofta oavslutade" qtd. in *Den Främmande Förförerskan* 289). To Lundkvist, the inconclusive character of Blixen/Dinesen's tales was a consequence of her allegorical outlook where profound truths were hinted at but never fully revealed, and in the final count by the fact that the only truths Blixen/Dinesen had to offer the world were those of an outdated feudal social order. The image of an ordered world where god and the lord of the manor ruled supreme was no longer viable and while Blixen/Dinesen struggled to re-establish this image, she came up against the forces of history and indirectly admitted defeat by "having to finish in the form of the unfinished in order not to expose her artifice" ("nödgas sluta oavslutat för att inte avslöja sin konst" 290).

Again, Lundkvist does have a point in his observation, but his obsession with Blixen/Dinesen's obsession with the aristocracy blinds him to the fact that what he reads as a failure on the part of the *author* may in fact be read as a reflection of the way in which art responds to a historical dilemma: how to narrate stasis at a point in time when the grand narrative of progress and fulfillment is no longer valid? *The Grapes of Wrath* responded by bringing its story to a closure of sorts by reverting to an archaic imagery mustered from a mythical source located beyond the confines of history and change. *Seven Gothic Tales* on the other hand, performs the disintegration of narrative, closure and fulfillment at the level of

form as the romance structure erodes, splitting the inset tale from the framing main narrative and bringing the former into focus while the latter recedes and loses all significance.

Looking at the three longer tales of the collection it becomes obvious that *Seven Gothic Tales* performs a progressive dismantling of the classical romance-*contes-conjointure* structure of "The Roads Round Pisa." In "The Monkey" there is still a main narrative where action progresses but its outcome has become unimportant. In "The Deluge at Norderney" the main narrative brings the reader to a sinking hayloft where people tell stories and respond to each other's stories by telling yet another story while waiting to drown. In "The Dreamers" the main narrative is nothing but an insignificant framing device and we are left with one story-teller creating an intricate box-within-a-box structure which remains completely unrelated to the frame narrative. There is then, throughout these tales, a movement towards complete stasis at the level of main narrative in "The Dreamers" as the *contes* liberates themselves from the horizontal structure where meaning is produced through advancement towards meaningful closure and end.

One of the most obvious examples from literary history of the inserted tale as simultaneously a quest for and a postponement or delay of a particular end is Scheherazade's story-telling in *One Thousand and One Nights*. The final passage of "The Deluge at Norderney" reads: "The dawn was breaking. The old woman slowly drew her fingers out of the man's hand, and placed one upon her lips. '*À ce moment de sa narration*', she said, '*Scheherazade vit paraître le matin, et, discrete, se tu.t*' (188). Like Scheherazade or the story-tellers of the *Decameron* the characters on the sinking hayloft tell stories in the shadow of death. The stories told in "The Deluge at Norderney," however, cannot postpone or delay the inevitable: "The water had risen to the level of the hayloft. Indeed, as they moved, they felt the heavy boards gently rocking, floating upon the waters" (188). Where Scheherazade not only survives by her stories but also earns the Sultan's heart, the inserted tales of "The Deluge of Norderney" make no difference at all to the main story that frames them. The story-tellers simply fall silent, and drown. In "The Monkey," the reason for the prioress to transform into a monkey is to bring about the marriage of the two unwilling young characters Boris and Athena. At the end, the prioress transforms, but we learn nothing about their future or the marriage-

plans that initially set the events in motion. In "The Dreamers," the professional story-teller Mira Jama confesses that he has given up telling tales because "I have become too familiar with life; it can no longer delude me into believing that one thing is much worse than the other" (239). I am suggesting that Mira Jama's words could be read as a meta-reflection on the endings of all the stories in *Seven Gothic Tales* with the exception of "The Roads Round Pisa"; they do not really matter. In "The Old Chevalier" the narrative focus is divided between the old baron's love affair with a married woman who eventually tries to poison him and his encounter with a young prostitute in Paris. Once the story of the married woman has been told she completely disappears from the story. In the final page the listener asks about the young girl in Paris: "'And did you never see her again?' I asked him. 'No, he said, and then, after a little while, 'but I had a fantasy about her, a *fantaisie macabre*, if you like." (74). The baron goes on to recount how many years later, a friend of his shows him a skull, and how looking at this skull had reminded him of the young woman: "'Did you ask your friend anything about it?', I said. 'No', said the old man, 'what would have been the use? He would not have known'" (74). Again, the reader is left with three disconnected stories – the love affair, the young prostitute, the skull – that end with a statement that seems to echo Mira Jama's: what is the point of asking for full knowledge when it does not really matter what happens one way or the other? In "The Dreamers," the character Forsner tells four inserted tales, one within the other, and the main story where the boat sails towards Zanzibar never interferes in these tales. The final lines, "Lincoln sat for a little while, smoking a cigarette or two. Then he also lay down, turned himself over a couple of times, and went to sleep," put the reader back on the boat, which is just the same as when we left it (309). We do not learn what happens to Said Ben Ahmed, the passenger introduced in the beginning with the words: "It was the hope of revenge within Said's heart which, more powerful than the monsoon, was in reality forcing the boat on" (237). Said or his thirst for revenge is never again mentioned in the story.

The heartlessness of *Seven Gothic Tales* is structural as well as thematic. The intricately constructed narrative of the past falls apart and the answer to the question of what the world is coming to is quite simply silence and emptiness.

While the Depression era culture may have looked to the past for redemption and identity, technological developments in the mass media fundamentally changed the nature of cultural communications. The narrative of identity took shape as a collective effort, aiming at welding a sense of social coherence and to create and enforce uniform national values. Simultaneously, and like the copy text of advertisement, the individual was brought into focus as the President´s voice reached out to each American through the radio in the living room, and as *Life* – re-invented in 1936 as a photo magazine – offered everybody glimpses into the lives of the powerful, wealthy and famous. While *The Grapes of Wrath*, significantly written in 1939 and thus writing the Depression era in retrospect, intermittently calls forth the image of a people welded together, walking together, the narrative never realizes successful unity in action beyond the unit of an extended family. From the debris of an imagined, agrarian past, Steinbeck instead salvages the resilient, sturdy individual represented in the figure of the matriarch Ma Joad struggling to keep her family together. Speaking up against her husband's despondent declaration that "our life's over an' done," she calls forth the philosophy of Woman where life is not the sum of material objects, but a stream and a river that alters its flow when running into obstacles and "goes right on. Woman looks at it like that. We ain't gonna die out. People is goin' on – changing a little, maybe, but goin' right on" (467). Ma Joad's vindication of a future in the face of despair and doom reverberates with the final words of another literary heroine of the 1930s, in a novel that, just like Steinbeck's, was a commercial and popular success, a Pulitzer-prize-winner, and quickly turned into a blockbuster movie. Set in a time of social rupture and violent upheaval, Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* celebrates the individual's ability to adapt in order to survive.

In the same year as *Gone With the Wind* was published, Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* sold 5000 copies a day and it remained on the top-seller-lists throughout the decade, and still in print today, remains one of the best-selling self-help books ever. Carnegie used material culled from newspaper columns, biographies, court material, radio shows, his own life, psychology, and interviews with scores of successful people ranging from

President Roosevelt to Clark Gable. He drew on anecdotes to illustrate his overarching proposition that it is possible not only to change your own behavior in order to achieve success, but also the behavior of others in ways that are to your advantage. The elusive "Manself" that Steinbeck's celebrated in one chapter and that the novel as a whole mourns in the exalted style of a sermon, is an absolute, unchangeable essence of man. The self that Carnegie constructed in his anecdotal, casual style was malleable and exploitable material. Relationships, including marriage, were a matter of human engineering. Your personality was the tool with which to manipulate the social machine in order to win, succeed, be popular, better, influential and wealthy since financial success was the ultimate goal of all social interactions. If you followed the detailed behavioral rules laid down by Carnegie's book, based on scientific research, your personality-change would work its "magic." If you failed to do so, the chapter-headings warned you of the dire consequences: "He Who Can Do This Has the Whole World with Him. He Who Cannot, Walks a Lonely Way", "If You Don't Do This, You Are Headed for Trouble."

Despite the overwhelmingly cheerful tone of Carnegie's book and other self-help books at the time, society was essentially represented as fiercely competitive. The only thing that stood between the individual and failure was his or her ability to construct personality as "an unbroken series of successful gestures" that would magically ward off danger. In his discussion of how the Depression affected advertisement, Marchand emphasizes that while Depression-ads looked different, visually more cluttered, favoring a wealth of stark black-and-white pictures and cartoon-style illustrations, their content was the same personal-failure-oriented message that had developed during the preceding era. In fact, Depression-ads tended to be even more blatant in their stress on the degree to which the individual was responsible for failure. The notion that society was essentially competitive was explicitly brought into focus with captions such as "Gee, Pop – They're All Passing You" to sell fuel, or "The Lonely Uphill Struggle You Would Like to Save Your Boy" to sell life insurance (Marchand). What Marchand calls the-first-impression-parable where the consumer was invited to identify with a script where the protagonist failed because of bad breath, unpolished shoes, or lack of knowledge became even more important in an era when unemployment figures

rose from three percent in 1929 to a staggering 25 percent in 1933. What the advertisement suggested was that the consumer could literally not afford to disregard the importance of appearances, and that every minute detail in the make-up of a personality needed to be carefully tended to: "every American was to become a performing self," wrote Susman (280).

Thinking of society as a stage and the individual as a script-reading actor creating a personality for this stage are expressive metaphors in analyses of the way in which a developing consumer mass society produces and re-produces collective social practice. At the same time, these metaphors invoke the image of an elsewhere, a world beyond society-as-stage which would allow for the real identity behind the enforced personality-masks to be developed. Even Marchand's suggestion that we think of advertisement as parables implies the existence of an independent reality to which the copy text can refer in the way of simile. What popular novels such as *The Grapes of Wrath* written in the aftermath of the Depression, or *Babbitt*, written in the preceding era, suggest, however, is that there is no such elsewhere from which to reflect on and resist the logic of consumerist society. Babbitt is a laughable caricature of the Standardized American Citizen, but he is also profoundly tragic. Throughout Lewis' novel, Babbitt is seen yearning for something beyond the circle of Good Fellows whose relationships are first and foremost defined and saturated by commercial considerations. His "incredibly mechanical" and futile way of life makes him sick, and he intermittently and pathetically tries to envision and create an identity untouched by the ethos of "hustling": as a friend, father and lover (109). He escapes to idealized nature and at night he dreams of the fairy child in a setting straight out of a romance novel. What Lewis' novel makes explicitly clear is that even Babbitt's vague dreams of being somebody else in a world beyond commerce and consumption are figments of thoroughly commercialized and consumerist imagination. Babbitt's tragedy is that while his unformed longing may be his own, his dreams are not. They are culled from the Standard Citizen's consumption of radio shows, movies, popular literature, and, not least, advertisements.

Unlike Steinbeck, Lewis did not intend to offer his main character or his readers any escape from this modern world where the individual's boundaries,

sources of meaning, social relations and needs become blurred and uncertain. A world where choosing religion and toothpaste are interchangeable acts of consumer-choice in the construction of a marketable identity as commodity.

In *Seven Gothic Tales* there is a continuous movement from action to telling as the main story recedes and it is accompanied by a move towards identity as the main theme of the narrative, explored in the form of inset tales. In "The Deluge at Norderney" the main story brings a number of people to the sinking hayloft one of them being Cardinal Hamilcar von Sehestedt who has played a heroic role in the rescue mission. When all the inset tales have been told the main narrative is resumed as the cardinal stands up and starts undoing the bandages around his head:

> 'I had better get rid of these', he said, 'now that the morning is almost here'. 'But will it not hurt you?' Miss Malin Nat-og-Dag asked anxiously. 'No' … 'It is not even my blood. You, Miss Nat-og-Dag, who have such an eye for the true noble blood, you ought to recognize the blue blood of Cardinal Hamilcar.' (181)

The character of the cardinal is revealed to the other characters and reader alike as the cardinal's valet. Having killed his employer in the chaos during the flood, the man Kaspersen – an actor by profession – has donned the cardinal's clothes and this is enough to deceive both peasants and aristocracy. Unlike the countess in "The Roads Round Pisa," Miss Nat-og-Dag at first seems to fail to recognize that Kaspersen is an impostor, but in the very next moment Kaspersen reveals that he is the bastard son of the Duke of Orléans "who insisted on being addressed as Citoyen, voted for the death of the King of France, and changed his name to that of Égalité" (183). The revelation of Kaspersen's true identity towards the end of the story suddenly makes sense of his inset tale about how Barabbas and Peter meet the day after the crucifixion and Barabbas complains that all his wine has gone bad. It is only when Kaspersen reveals himself that the significance of Barabbas' inability to understand the unique body of the wine functions as a commentary on the magic of aristocratic blood but also as a way to understand the meaning of the preceding tales as revolving around the matter of identity.

While "The Roads Round Pisa" introduced the theme of vicariousness, masks and role-playing as necessities in order to further the action of the plot and to bring about a particular end where desire was fulfilled, role-playing takes on a life of its own as the reader moves further into *Seven Gothic Tales*' maze of inset tales and intertexts. In "The Deluge at Norderney," Kaspersen describes his life as a series of identities: as a ballet dancer taken up by "the great elderly noblemen of Berlin" he knew "what it was to be a lovely woman," a barber in Seville, a printer of revolutionary papers in Paris, a dog-seller in London, a slave-trader in Algiers, lover of a dowager princess in Pisa, an explorer in Egypt, a hostler in Copenhagen, and finally the cardinal's valet (184). The answer to Miss Nat-og-Dag's question why he killed his master is simply: "I am an actor. Shall not an actor have a role?" (184). Kaspersen impersonates the cardinal in the same way as Agnese impersonated her friend Rosina, but where in the latter story, role-playing is a means to an end, the former story represents role-playing as an end in itself: Kaspersen does not kill the cardinal in order to save people from the flood, but because he is an actor in search of a role.

In "The Dreamers," the main narrative has shrunk to a meaningless frame, and the inset tales have no necessary relationship whatsoever to the framing. Instead, they explore the theme of role-playing and identity understood as a potentially endless series of impersonations as Pellegrina Leoni/Olalla/Rosalba/Lola roams through Europe in the roles of prostitute, revolutionary and saint, pursued by three lovers who unwittingly chase her to death. She is, as her name indicates, a pilgrim on an interminable quest structured by a permanent reinvention of self. They are the remains of the figure of the knight-errant, driven by a desire to possess that reverses the notion of sacrifice in the name of love.

The first and last tales of *Seven Gothic Tales* are the only two tales of the collection that could properly be labeled "romantic" in the sense that they uphold the classical romance ideal of love, and are structured by the possibility of its fulfillment in the form of quest. In the other tales, the romantic concept of "love" is brutally mocked and challenged, represented as the "barren passion" of adulterous affairs in the highest social circles or prostitution in "The Old Chevalier," forbidden homosexual desire that has to be remedied by a forced marriage of convention in "The Monkey," betrayed and incestuous love in "The

Supper at Elsinore," narcissistic desire in "The Dreamers," or imagined debauchery in "The Deluge at Norderney."

In these tales, the concept of romantic love is ground to pieces by desires that are represented not only as barren, but lethal. The married mistress of "The Old Chevalier" tries to poison her lover and a forced kiss in the midst of a fight in "The Monkey" has the effect of a "rapier." Morten in "The Supper at Elsinore" runs away from his young bride and returns many years later as a ghost to his spinster sisters who have put their lives on hold, waiting for him. In "The Dreamers," the lovers pursue the woman in a chase that finally kills her, and in "The Deluge at Norderney" the two young people are united in an improvised wedding, and meet their death on a sinking hayloft.

At the same time all of these tales could be described as quests for identity, but an identity that no longer uses or understands love as both vehicle and fulfillment in the quest. The desires that run through *Seven Gothic Tales* cannot be represented or fulfilled in the form of romantic love, but roam aimlessly like Morten across the sea, like Pellegrina across the map of Europe, or like Kaspersen through a series of identities, and only death puts an end to this interminable quest.

In fact, the impossibility of representing romantic love is present already in the first tale where, paradoxically, the ideal of love progresses and structures action. The two young lovers Rosina and Mario are never present in the story, except as characters in inset tales told by others. When Rosina does appear in the last passage of the tale, the narrative seems unable to imagine her presence. All the other characters have been described in sensuous, intimate detail with "eyelids that were like crêpe" (49), "extraordinarily small and elegant feet" (40) "soft locks" (44), or with colors like "the patina of old paintings" (25). The narrative conspicuously passes over Rosina at the only moment when she is directly present, quickly passing from "the young mother, on a sofa" to the nurse on whom it, again, sensuously pours forth: "a large, magnificent young woman in pink and red, like an oleander flower" (49). The notion of star-crossed lovers and love is an ideal that remains as form, structure and interpretative tool in the "The Roads Round Pisa," but only indirectly representable in the form of inset tales. The second young couple of the tale, Agnese and Nino, quote Dante to each other but

the ideal of transcendent love that overcomes death has no bearing on their further actions: "she walked away, and though she passed so near to him that he might have held her back by stretching out his hand, he did not move or try to touch her" (45). The intertextual reference may illuminate the moment as Langbaum suggested, by reaching outside of the story in order to find the words of love that the story itself seems unable to produce, but it is unable to bring about love or change anything at the level of main narrative. While "The Roads Round Pisa" uses the romance love-quest as a centripetal, structural force, it also initiates the centrifugal process where romantic love is displaced by multifaceted desire unable to name its object in a search that know no bounds. Agnese, like Athena of "The Monkey," wants to study astronomy and "turn to the infinity of space," no longer imaginable as Dante's celestial spheres of Heaven made navigable by romantic love (22).

But where romantic love is no longer a viable or even representable ideal, there may be freedom of a kind, for women. In 1923, Blixen wrote to her mother from the Ngong farm in Kenya:

> I will give all young women two pieces of advice: to cut their hair and learn how to drive an automobile. These two things change life completely. The long hair has really been a kind of slavery for thousands of years; you suddenly feel free in a way that words cannot express, with a short mane that you can fix in a minute and through which the wind blows. And then, out here, where you do not wear the corset, you can really move like a man's equal. (*Breven från Afrika* 156)
>
> (Två råd ska jag ge alla yngre kvinnor: att klippa av håret och att lära sig köra automobil. Dessa två saker förändrar hela tillvaron. Det långa håret har verkligen varit ett slaveri i årtusenden; man känner sig plötsligt så fri, som ord inte kan uttrycka, med en kort man som man kan ordna på en minut och som vinden kan blåsa igenom. Och när man sedan inte har korsett här ute, så kan man verkligen röra sig som en mans jämlike.)

In *Seven Gothic Tales* some of the women walk away like Agnese or young Calypso who escapes Count Seraphina's misogynistic castle. Athena Hopballehus refuses marriage and turns to the infinity of space. Fransine kills her husband-to-

be, and Pellegrina Leoni and miss Malin Nat-og-Dag set out on interminable flights from the shackles of identity, imagining and reinventing themselves. It would be wrong to claim that Blixen/Dinesen's representations of the women characters are triumphant. They are no Scarlett O'Hara who leaves the reader with the promise of another day to come. Pellgrina dies in the manner of the opera-diva she once was and miss Malin Nat-og-Dag and Calypso fade away into silence. But they are also not like Ma Joad or the Rose of Sharon, representations of archetypical, nurturing womanhood defined by loyalty to family-bonds. For the women who survive the slaughter-house called *Seven Gothic Tales*, Agnese, Athena, Fransine, the lack of closure reads, if not as a promise, then at least as a possibility.

Conclusion

In this study I have used Canfield Fisher's introduction as a guide through my reading of *Seven Gothic Tales* as a potentially desirable object for sale on the market in 1934. But also in my reading of this collection of stories as a literary investigation of the conditions of being and identity-construction at a time when mature capitalism evolved into a consumer-based, global economy during the first half of the twentieth century. In this reading, the Great Depression figures as a moment that reveals the degree to which consumerist ideology and logic had become the only way to imagine being and identity, a condition that *Seven Gothic Tales* both reflects and resists. In doing so, I have shown that *Seven Gothic Tales*, far from being anachronistic, can be read as a work of art that shared the thoughts and concerns of its time. A historicized interpretation that addresses the material circumstances of Blixen/Dinesen's writing does not need to prove the value of her works through recourse to the sorting tools of canonization. It does not need to perform a dissociative operation whereby the historical figure of the author on the one hand and her works on the other, are pried apart in order to salvage the works from the commercial sphere. Nor does it need to construct an image of the author as champion of virtuous values, whose works reflect these very virtues.

In her introduction to *Seven Gothic Tales*, Canfield Fisher explicitly addressed the reader as a consumer when she used the image of the market as a place where he or she could stroll amid the stands, a compelling image of abundance and the freedom to choose. At the same time Canfield Fisher's introduction by itself and as a part of the Book-of-the-Month-Club's communication with its members, also addressed the reader as someone who needed to improve him- or herself and construct an identity in order to get on in society. In Canfield Fisher's rendering, *Seven Gothic Tales* combined elements from canonical tradition - Byron, Stevenson, Cervantes - to create a "new sensation" that could not really be described but had to be experienced: "'Take a taste yourself. You'll eat it to the core, if you do'" (v). Like the scientists of Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, the anonymous author had engineered a new kind of fruit out of already existing material, and to eat it was to incorporate the kind of newness that would magically

transform identity. To read *Seven Gothic Tales* was to consume in order to become consumable.

In the first part of this study, I described and discussed the Book-of-the-Month-Club as a commercial enterprise that did not only offer its members books, but also the opportunity to conscientiously construct a marketable identity through consumption. The Book-of-the-Month-Club's marketing strategies have to be considered in relation to an evolving consumer culture, a steadily growing market and the role played by advertising in the process of creating pliable consumers concerned with developing agreeable and interesting personalities. I argued that the creation of an author's public persona that could be used in the promotion of his or her books has to be considered as yet another aspect of consumer culture, mass market and advertising strategies, rather than as a response to the readers' innate desire to known the renowned. Likewise, the authors did not necessarily seek out the public limelight willingly, but responded to the demands of the publishing industry. In this context, Blixen's insistence on using a pseudonym in 1934 could have been considered as an expression of an author's desire to avoid the harsh, unflattering light of the public domain. Still, the fact that her correspondence reveals that she was not only willing but even eager to go public following the success of *Seven Gothic Tales* suggests that her initial reticence had more to do with her fear of failure combined with her ignorance of the workings of the American market. Since her use of the pseudonym "Isak Dinesen" has often been read as yet another significant expression of her claim to multiple identities, or of her identification with her father, or of the female artist's claim to self-production, it is interesting to consider her willingness to discard it once she had made it as an author, as well as her somewhat grudging acceptance of it based on American editorial motives. The fact that Blixen/Dinesen is a writer of short stories must also be considered in relation to literature understood as an object for sale on a market. Like many other authors of the time, she proved herself to be less worried than her publishers about maintaining the boundary between book- and magazine-publishing. While recognizing the urgent financial motives behind Blixen/Dinesen's short story-writing and -publishing, I also argued that her publishing strategies should be considered in terms of purposeful self-marketing in relation to the mass market offered by American magazines. In the final section

of this first part, I interpreted the critical and academic reception and treatment of Blixen/Dinesen as marked by a desire to salvage her works and her public persona from the commercial market by creating a space for her within canonical literary history. I also suggested that this desire has generated the image of Blixen/Dinesen's works as "anachronistic," as well as a need to present both author and works as champions of feminism and anti-colonialism.

In the second part of this study, I discussed the way in which *Seven Gothic Tales* uses the aristocratic characters to install fantastic or magical elements in the midst of an otherwise realistic narrative. In doing so, *Seven Gothic Tales* draws the reader's attention to the fact that our perceptions of social reality and hierarchy are grounded in an imaginary register that could also be labelled ideology. The world is what we perceive it to be and our beliefs structure the world fantastically, but the fantasies are, like the nobility, engendered by an existing social hierarchy. The existence of counts and countesses may be as ridiculous as the idea that buying a particular product could change one's life and being, but understood as a fantasy supported by the ideological and economic apparatus of consumer culture it is a functional fantasy in the sense that it shapes self-perception and action. Blixen/Dinesen's criticism has by and large, if at all, read the aristocratic theme of *Seven Gothic Tales* and her later works in the vein explicitly suggested by the author herself in her extensive correspondence. That is to say as manifestations of timeless, universally valid approaches to life where the aristocratic mien is contrasted with bourgeois values, and the former celebrated. This study, on the other hand, suggests that the aristocratic theme in *Seven Gothic Tales* should be read in relation to the socioeconomic context of colonial Kenya where the stories were begun and where the aristocratic idea and the feudal, hierarchical ethos proved their market value as image, appearance and fiction in the context of a budding tourist industry. I argued that while *Out of Africa* should be read as a part of the fictionalization of "Africa" as a commodity for sale on a global market, *Seven Gothic Tales* in fact reflects on the social fantasies that made this marketable fictionalization possible.

The third part of this study started off from Canfield Fisher's description of *Seven Gothic Tales* as a many-colored literary fog, and discussed the work as an example of a malleable, multi-purpose work of art that functions in relation to

diverse audiences. I considered Blixen/Dinesen's title(s) as indications of the role played by marketing considerations and extratextual components in genre-construction on a modern and transcultural book market, explaining why her works continue to function both on the popular and the academic markets. The intertextual elements and the inset-tale structure of her stories invite a message-oriented kind of reading that tends to interpret her stories allegorically, looking for hidden meanings in the interlacing of old and new material. I suggested that the compositional aspect of the romance-tradition within which *Seven Gothic Tales* consciously places itself, takes on a new significance in a consumer culture overflowing with value-laden signs beckoning to the reader/consumer.

Reading *Seven Gothic Tales* as a romance and romance as a literary form cloven between a desire for fulfillment and closure on the one hand, and the pressing demands of reality on the other, becomes especially relevant in the light of the fact that it was published in the midst of the Great Depression. The fourth part of this study considers *Seven Gothic Tales* in relation to the question of how to narrate stasis in an era when the wheels of American progress grinded to a brutal halt and the future loomed as a threat rather than a promise. In this atmosphere of fear and doubt people looked to an imagined, mythical past for comfort and solutions to the question of what it was all coming to. Set in the nineteenth century of a seemingly serene and stable old-world civilization, *Seven Gothic Tales* may at first appear as an example of the kind of literature where an imaginary past figures as an escape route from the chaos of the present. Still, read in relation to Steinbeck's representation of the Depression era couched in nostalgia in *The Grapes of Wrath*, it becomes clear the *Seven Gothic Tales* in fact explores and exploits the past in an uncompromising, unsentimental fashion both at the level of form and of narrative. The romance structure aiming at closure and fulfillment breaks down as the inset tales engulf the frame narrative and action comes to a standstill as questions of identity move to the fore. In the brutal and lethal world of *Seven Gothic Tales* closure and fulfillment are revealed as unachievable ideals at a time when identity has become an interminable project driven by desires that cannot be fulfilled according to the logic of a consumerist economy. Read in the context of the time and milieu in which it was published, *Seven Gothic Tales* becomes very much a work that shares the thoughts of its

time, and of our own time, inviting us to reflect on the price we may have to pay for the freedom of inventing our selves anew each day.

In his essay on advertising as a system of magical inducements and satisfactions, Williams wrote: "We are the market, which the system of industrial production has organized" (187). The notion that we are the market may seem like a banal statement of the obvious fact that products are produced, sold and bought by people. In a consumer culture, however, the proposition that we are the market has to be understood literally, and in that sense the notion that market equals being is far from banal. Basing her definition of what consumer culture entails at the level of being on empirical studies consisting of in-depth interviews and focus-group discussions, Lury suggests that

> People's involvement with consumer culture is such that it infiltrates everyday life not only at the level of economic decision-making, social activities and domestic life, but also at the level of meaningful psychological experience. It affects the construction of identities, the formation of relationships and the framing of events. (193)

In a consumer culture where the individual is encouraged to construct his or her identity through the act of consumption but also to perceive of this identity as a commodity for sale, the market cannot be construed as an exterior space that we can choose to visit and leave at will, but as an integral part of our being. We are the market not only in our capacity of potential buyers, but also in our capacity of potentially marketable identities. Today, almost a hundred years after *Seven Gothic Tales* was first published, few would quarrel with the description of the consumer as today's master category of identity. During the twentieth and twenty-first centuries the availability and range of products have increased steadily together with the sites for purchase and consumption, ranging from the Internet to shopping malls. Former publicly or state-run services such as education, transport and housing have been placed on the market, and people who once thought of themselves as citizens, tax-payers and students have been re-trained to think of themselves as consumers, while political discourse identifies freedom with individual choice. We are encouraged to borrow money in order to consume and shopping has become a leisure pursuit, driven by pervasive advertising. At the

same time, shopping and consumption are not merely about satisfying individual desire, but just as importantly about satisfying someone else's desires. Personality has to be constructed as "an unbroken series of successful gestures" in order to create a marketable identity (Fitzgerald 6). One may, as Arendt or Hertel did, deplore this process and its consequences but it is difficult to even imagine a space or a human activity untouched by it.

Karen Blixen died on the 7th of September 1962. She was 77 years old and the cause of death was undernourishment. In one of her vary last letters, written six months before her death, she wrote:

> I cannot walk two steps without support, nor stand up and keep my equilibrium – some time ago I fell in my bathroom and broke a rib, - and I cannot eat, so cannot get my weight above 70 pounds … The doctors tell me that I have all the symptoms of a concentration camp prisoner, one of them being that my legs swell so that they look like thick poles and the feet like cannon balls. This last thing is terribly unbecoming and for some reason very vulgar. Altogether I look like the most horrible old witch, a real Memento Mori! (*Karen Blixen i Danmark. Bind 2* 463)

Yet, she lived throughout the summer, receiving visitors and admirers. She had to be carried around the house and since even the slightest touch caused bruising on her emaciated body, she was always wearing thick sweaters and was wrapped in blankets. Every now and then discussions still erupt in public, revolving around the unsolvable question whether it was syphilis or anorexia that eventually caused Blixen's death. Her relentless pains and her failing heart were symptoms of syphilis in the third and final stage. But anorectics also eventually die, like she did, from a heart-failure resulting from long-term starvation. She wrote that she could not eat, but her servants and close friends have suggested that it was rather a matter of her not wanting to eat during the last years of her life. In 1956, a gastric ulcer had led to surgery where parts of her stomach had been removed. Looking at photographs from this time, one can see how the ageing, slim but still healthy-looking woman transformed almost overnight into the shrunken, old witch that she described in her letter. Instead of following the dietary recommendations of

her physicians, she kept a diet she had composed herself consisting of oysters, strawberries and champagne. Or, she did not eat at all.

We know all these intimate details about Blixen's body and its ailments because so many of Blixen/Dinesen's friends, relatives and admirers have written books about her. Parmenia Migel's *Titania* that was published in 1967 and is still in print today and that was reviewed by Arendt the following year, was only one book in a flood of books about Blixen/Dinesen that have deluged the book market after her death and over the last half-century. One of them being a commercial book I wrote in Swedish in 2006. Perhaps Arendt would have liked my writing on Blixen/Dinesen better than she liked Migel's. I spent quite a lot of letters and space on discussing syphilis and anorexia, and its cultural significance as well as its significance to Blixen/Dinesen herself, whose father also suffered from syphilis and committed suicide when she was ten years old. In connection with this biographical tidbit I also created a rather elegant link between Blixen/Dinesen's own life and her fiction, suggesting that we read a passage from a story in *Last Tales*, written at about the same time as the author begun her self-erasing diet, as a redemptive reflection on her own tragedy. In "A Country Tale" a middle-aged mother complains to her daughter that she has gotten old, and even worse than that: that she has gotten fat:

> "If I had grown thin!" Sibylla moaned on her daughter's breast. "If I had become a skeleton, a skull, a memento mori to the trivial crowd, who refuse to think of time and eternity! Then I should still be an inspiring figure to them! And upon my entrance into a ballroom I should still strike sparks from them all: epigrams, poetry, heroic deeds – and oh, passion as well. I should at least inspire them with horror, Rikke, and I should expect to inspire horror." (214)

It is of course so easy, and therefore so tempting, to create an association between these lines and the image of emaciated Blixen/Dinesen herself on stage or on the screen, telling her stories in a voice made deep and husky by years of chain-smoking: the apparition from god knows where or when that Arendt went to listen to in New York in 1959. There is nothing wrong with this kind of associative reading where the text is interpreted as an organic reflection of the author's life

and vice versa. There is also absolutely nothing wrong with using Blixen/Dinesen's life, public persona and works to sell one's own writing. I have done it, and I would say that I am in rather good company. Hertel's four-page essay on "Karen Blixen Superstar" is included in a 371-page-volume of texts that he wrote in various Danish magazines and daily papers and on various topics between the years 1954 and 1996. This single essay, however, has also lent its title to the entire volume called *Karen Blixen Superstar. A Glimpse of Literary Life in the Age of Media* (*Karen Blixen Superstar. Glimt af det litterære liv i mediealderen*). On the front cover is a reprint of Hertel's article taken from the daily, including a photo of a turban-clad Blixen with a lop-sided smile on her wrinkled face. On the fly-leaf there is a drawing of her in profile and again it is the aged, emaciated author clad in black. To a reader interested in Blixen/Dinesen and especially the ways in which she interacted with modern mass media in various ways, the title and front cover of this book would make it almost impossible to by-pass. Upon opening the book, however, the consumer may very well experience a sense of disappointment and even of being the victim of dubious marketing tactics. I know I did.

Having once again had the opportunity to return to Karen Blixen and Isak Dinesen in this study written in a public sphere that still holds out against the commercial sphere that created Blixen/Dinesen, I have learned that her stories in *Seven Gothic Tales* have the power to inspire horror in their readers all by themselves. It is not the kind of horror that can be contained or redeemed by the author's own life or public persona. It is the horror of being at the mercy of the bound-, face- and body-less process we call modern, capitalist consumer-society.

Sammanfattning

Det här är en studie av den danska författaren Karen Blixens framgångsrika debut med novellsamlingen *Seven Gothic Tales* på den nordamerikanska bokmarknaden 1934, lanserad av bokklubben Book-of-the-Month-Club. Utgångspunkten är bokens säljbarhet där och då, och begreppet säljbarhet är det perspektiv som styr mina tolkningar både av boken som ett objekt på en marknad, och av novellernas innehåll och form. Med avstamp i förordet till *Seven Gothic Tales* som skrevs av författaren Dorothy Canfield Fisher som också var medlem i Book-of-the-Month-Clubs urvalsjury diskuteras dels hur boken marknadsfördes i ett samtida ekonomiskt och kulturellt sammanhang, dels hur novellerna är möjliga att läsa i relation till just detta sammanhang där konsumtion, säljbarhet och marknadsföringsbarhet blivit ett sätt för människor att förstå och förhålla sig till subjektskonstruktion och sin egen identitet. I Canfield Fishers presentation av *Seven Gothic Tales* framställs boken som ett åtråvärt konsumtionsobjekt på marknaden därför att den kan förvandla det läsande subjektet till ett likaledes åtråvärt objekt på en marknad, i besittning av kunskaper och bildning som bidrar till en säljbar identitet. Novellerna framställer och förhåller sig till just denna historiska förskjutning av identitetsskapande till och på en kommersiell marknad där identiteten representeras som ett ständigt pågående projekt som per definition aldrig kan fullbordas, utan ständigt måste uppdateras och förbättras.

Grundläggande för avhandlingens argumentation är uppfattningen att de materiella villkor som råder vid en given historisk tidpunkt och på en given plats tar sig uttryck i den litteratur som skrivs, oavsett om det är författarens medvetna intention eller ej. Uttryck förstås här alltså inte som en fråga om en realistisk återspegling av rådande villkor, utan som den litterära textens gestaltning och bearbetning av verklighetens samhälleliga konflikter i berättelsens form.

Studiens tidsram omfattar nittonhundratalets tre första decennier och framväxten av en global, kapitalistisk marknadsekonomi baserad på ständig produktions- och konsumtionsökning. I avhandlingen första del presenteras Book-of-the-Month-Club inom ramen för den framväxande nordamerikanska konsumtionskulturen där reklam och marknadsföring var avgörande i formandet av bilden av människan som i första hand en konsument. I bokklubbens

marknadsföring liksom inom reklamen i allmänhet framställdes och tilltalades hen som en otillräcklig människa i behov av stöd och råd. Reklamsektorns explosiva tillväxt och innovationer under nittonhundratalets första hälft måste ses mot bakgrund av produktionssektorns snabba tillväxt och behovet att framhäva den egna produkten i konkurrens med andra produkter inom samma sektor.

Det förhållandet gällde också bokmarknaden och i det sammanhanget blev utvecklandet av en säljbar offentlig författaridentitet som kunde marknadsföras tillsammans med bokprodukten av avgörande betydelse och något författarna tvingades förhålla sig till. Avhandlingen diskuterar Blixens initiala insisterande på anonymitet och en författarpseudonym i relation till Ellen Glasgow och Vicki Baum, två författare som också marknadsfördes och såldes av Book-of-the-Month-Club. När det gäller Blixen har både populärvetenskapliga och akademiska verk tolkat hennes val att använda pseudonym – och själva valet av pseudonymen Isak Dinesen – som ett betydelsebärande uttryck för hennes identifikation med fadern eller som en återspegling av hennes önskan att inte låta sig begränsas av en enda identitet, utan i egenskap av författare framträda maskerad. Hennes korrespondens med den amerikanske förläggaren Robert K. Haas i kölvattnet efter framgången med *Seven Gothic Tales* visar tvärtom att Blixen ville publicera sin nästa bok under sitt egentliga namn också på den amerikanska marknaden, och att hon något motvilligt böjde sig för Haas förläggarerfarenhet och insikten att ”Isak Dinesen” blivit ett värdefullt varumärke.

I korrespondensen mellan Haas och Blixen framstår också novellformen som ett problem i marknadsförandet av *Seven Gothic Tales* eftersom den amerikanska publiken, enligt Haas, inte tyckte om noveller. Avhandlingen diskuterar Haas uttalande i ljuset av novellens status i förhållande till romanen med tonvikt på novellens säljbarhet på den expanderande tidskriftsmarknaden gentemot vilken bokförlagen ville markera avstånd. Trots att Blixens förläggare under hela hennes liv fortsatte att hoppas på att hon en dag skulle skriva en roman, förblev hon en novellförfattare. Det finns naturligtvis många infallsvinklar på Blixens val av litterär form, men i föreliggande studie hävdar jag att det bör tolkas som ett val betingat både av ekonomiska skäl och i termer av marknadsföring. Novellformen gav Blixen möjlighet att publicera och få betalt för samma text i ett flertal olika

medier och sammanhang, och det innebar dessutom en möjlighet att marknadsföra författarskapet i en mängd olika fora.

Det sista avsnittet i avhandlingens första del behandlar den akademiska receptionen av Karen Blixen och Isak Dinesen med början i Robert Langbaums inflytelserika bok om författarskapet från 1964. Här hävdas att den har präglats av en önskan om att skilja författarskapet från den kommersiella sfär som skapade både författare och verk, och att begreppet modernism - förstått som ett redskap med vars hjälp verk placeras och bedöms i ett hierarkiskt system – har använts för att placera Blixen/Dinesen på rätt plats, det vill säga utanför den kommersiella sfären. Jag hävdar också att framställandet av Blixen/Dinesen som en medvetet feministisk och/eller antikolonial röst likaledes bottnar i en önskan om att omskapa författaren i enlighet med den modernistiska ideologins särskiljande mellan högt och lågt. Som en konsekvens av dessa ideologiskt färgade tolkningar av Blixen/Dinesen beskrivs hennes texter ofta som anakronistiska och författaren som en avvikare eftersom varken hennes verk eller Blixen/Dinesen själv enkelt låter sig fogas in i det fack som tolkaren skapat åt dem.

I avhandlingens andra del diskuterar jag de aristokratiska karaktärernas betydelse i *Seven Gothic Tales*. Den rikliga förekomsten av aristokratiska karaktärer och miljöer i Blixens författarskap har tidvis uppmärksammats och, i synnerhet i ett skandinaviskt sammanhang, blivit föremål för en biografiskt orienterad kritik med början i de danska recensionerna av *Syv fantastiske fortællinger*. Även när receptionen inte har varit kritisk, har den i huvudsak utgått från och övertagit författarens egna tolkningar i brev och andra dokument av begreppet aristokrati som en beteckning för en livshållning snarare än en identifierbar samhällsklass. I denna avhandling hävdas istället att aristokraterna i *Seven Gothic Tales* bör förstås med utgångspunkt från det kulturella och ekonomiska sammanhang i vilket novellerna påbörjades, nämligen den brittiska kolonin Kenya där Blixen bodde mellan åren 1914 och 1931. Kolonin Kenyas ekonomiska och politiska system som dominerades av representanter från främst brittisk men också kontinental adel, återspeglade en uttalad önskan att etablera en feodal samhällsordning där rasismen utgjorde fundamentet för en oföränderligt hierarkisk ordning. Kolonins feodalt uppbyggda agrarbaserade ekonomi var dock, i likhet med nordamerikanska och europeiska småjordburk, inte konkurrenskraftig

i ett globalt sammanhang där tekniken alltmer ersatte mänsklig arbetskraft. Däremot var det feodala idealet och föreställningar om aristokratins blodsbundna utvaldhet och kulturella förfining möjliga att framgångsrikt omsätta som vara på en framväxande turismmarknad. Det aristokratiska varat är unikt i det att det till skillnad från andra sociala kategorier är undandraget alla materiella och ekonomiska villkor, och det gör detta vara till en åtråvärd och säljbar vara på en konsumtionsmarknad där identitet saluförs inom ramen för en hierarkiskt uppbyggd världsbild. *Seven Gothic Tales* gör läsaren uppmärksam på den magiska och fantastiska dimension varpå föreställningen om aristokratins utvaldhet vilar, men betonar samtidigt denna föreställnings grund i en reell samhällshierarki genom användandet av familjenamn hämtade från verkligheten. Ett annat namn för denna magi, fantasi eller världsbild är ideologi, och i *Seven Gothic Tales* är det just framställningen av de aristokratiska karaktärerna som tydliggör ideologins funktion som tolkningsram i förhållande till den sociala verkligheten. Den ideologiskt färgade föreställningen om varats betydelse synliggörs i *Seven Gothic Tales*, och avhandlingen hävdar att det är en förklaring till bokens säljbarhet på en nordamerikansk marknad styrd av och uppbyggd på föreställningar om identitetskonstruktion genom konsumtion.

I avhandlingens tredje del diskuteras *Seven Gothic Tales* som ett modernt konstverk i den bemärkelsen att den var säljbar på en bred, transkulturell litterär marknad med många olika typer av läsargrupper. Novellerna betecknades som ”Gothic”, ”fantastiske” eller ”romantiska” beroende på kultursfär, och i samtliga fall refererades en erkänd och igenkännbar litterär tradition inom varje språk- och kulturområde. Referensen till en muntlig tradition genom beteckningen ”tales”, ”fortællinger” och ”berättelser” refererar en muntlig tradition och avhandlingen diskuterar det muntliga berättandets och berättarens betydelse både tematiskt och strukturellt i en tid när masskommunikation via radio, och så småningom också TV, gjorde det möjligt för författaren att framträda i rollen som just muntlig berättare. Vidare diskuteras hur *Seven Gothic Tales* apostroferar den höviska riddarromanens tradition både tematiskt och strukturellt, dels genom den aristokratiska miljön, dels genom sitt flitiga användande av intertextuella referenser och sammanflätandet av huvudnarrativ och inskjutna berättelser som är möjliga att läsa allegoriskt i förhållande till huvudnarrativet. Jag hävdar att det

skapar en litterär text som inbjuder till en genomgående allegorisk, intensivt tolkande läsning där varje intertextuell referens är potentiellt betydelsebärande, och mängden betydelser potentiellt oändligt många. För en akademiskt skolad läsare framstår *Seven Gothic Tales* som en komplex gåta som kan och måste läsas och lösas genom en tolkning grundad i kännedom om litterära traditioner och verk där urvalet betingas av läsarens intentioner. I Canfield Fishers förord marknadsförs också boken i förhållande till den genomsnittliga Book-of-the-Month-Club läsaren som en åtråvärd vara därför att den sätter hen i förbindelse med en kulturell, kanonisk tradition. Avhandlingen hävdar att även om den genomsnittliga bokklubbsläsaren 1934 inte kunde identifiera eller ens förstå *Seven Gothic Tales* alla intertextuella referenser, var hen en läsare skolad i konsten att betrakta och förhålla sig till omvärlden som ett teckensystem där viljan och förmågan att tolka tecken framställdes som livsavgörande i reklamen.

I avhandlingens sista del diskuteras möjligheten att betrakta *Seven Gothic Tales* som en typisk Book-of-the-Month-Club-bok mot bakgrund av den djupa lågkonjunktur som rådde. Konsumtionskulturen byggde på och projicerade bilden av den enskilda människan som en i grunden bristfällig varelse, och den sociala och ekonomiska katastrofen tolkades följaktligen på individnivå. Avhandlingen tolkar John Steinbecks *The Grapes of Wrath* mot den bakgrunden och verket framträder då som ett uttryck för konsumtionsideologins grepp om förmågan att föreställa sig människan och hennes möjligheter och vara. I Steinbecks roman är framtiden bara möjlig att föreställa sig i termer av en mytisk och romantiserad förflutenhet, och trots romanens uttalat radikala politiska ansats befinner den sig i en samtida kulturell huvudfåra där mytisk historieskrivning och absoluta, oföränderliga identiteter fungerar som en besvärjelse mot en oviss och skrämmande framtid. Medan *Seven Gothic Tales* vid en första anblick tycks ansluta sig till samma mytifierande och romantiserande bruk av historien, hävdar avhandlingen tvärtom att boken förhåller sig både osentimentalt och våldsamt till historien, förstådd både som föreställning och tradition. Den höviska riddarromanens form där slutet är liktydigt med den goda ordningens återställande etableras i samlingens första novell, men dekonstrueras stegvis allteftersom den klassiska sammanflätningen av huvudnarrativ och inskjutna berättelser faller sönder. Handlingen avstannar, det identitetsfokuserade berättandet träder i

förgrunden och novellerna betonar sin oavslutbarhet eftersom det inte längre är möjligt att föreställa sig en ordning där den mänskliga identiteten är avgränsad och på förhand given. *Seven Gothic Tales* framställer istället det mänskliga varat som en oändlig serie identiteter, ett existentiellt tillstånd som avhandlingen betecknar som nomadiskt och grundat i ett begär som aldrig kan tillfredsställas. *Seven Gothic Tales* brukar den litterära traditionen för att skapa ett verk som brutalt iscensätter det moderna konsumtionssamhällets omformande av det mänskliga varat och identiteten till ett säljbart objekt på en marknad, underkastad ett ansiktslöst, amorft begär som kräver ständig förändring, förnyelse och förbättring.

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Index