Playing Around with Id(entity):
Re-conceiving the Self as Subject in Five Stories by Isak Dinesen

by

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ABSTRACT

In her introduction to Susan Aiken's book, *Isak Dinesen and the Engendering of Narrative,* Catherine Stimpson says that Isak Dinesen appears to have been a "prophet of post-structuralism and feminism." This thesis attempts to analyze the validity and the limitations of such a claim by studying Dinesen's reaction to two highly structured and traditionally patriarchal social institutions, marriage and Christianity.

The Introduction looks at the concept of structure in society. It investigates both the human need for stability and the tendency for individuals to limit their selfhood to their function or role within a social structure. While restricting one's self-definition can make life comforting and predictable, maintaining a limited selfhood can also restrict growth, change, and self-expression. This belief seems evident in Dinesen's essays and short stories.

Chapter One studies the institution of marriage and Dinesen's negative -- though short-sighted -- view of it. In *On Modern Marriage*, Dinesen suggests that self-sacrifice is inherent in the ideal of marriage. Moreover, Dinesen sees the female sense of self as particularly sacrificed to this institution. As Jessica Benjamin points out, marriage has historically established the wife as a dependent, desireless, and de-sexualized Object. This view of wifehood is most vividly portrayed by Dinesen through the wives in "The Dreaming Child," "The Ring," and "The Cardinal's First Tale."

Chapter Two investigates Dinesen's uncompromising view of fundamentalist Christianity, which she saw as a structure which is as restrictive and objectifying to its followers' sense of self as marriage is to a woman's sense of self. "Peter and Rosa" and "Babette's Feast" reveal characters who have restricted their sense of selfhood to their "Christian" role, and who have thus sacrificed personal expression and physical desire. Like the wives discussed in Chapter One, the "brides of Christ" in Dinesen's stories are expected to be desireless, de-sexualized, and selfless servants.

Combining L.S. Vygotsky's theory of "play" as an opportunity to re-assess categories of meaning with Benjamin's theory of the boundary-blurring qualities of the erotic union, Chapter Three suggests that sexually-charged "play" offers

Dinesen's objectified characters an escape from their limited self-definition. This kind of play allows individuals to see a "trace" of what least defines them within themselves, and this enables them to envision their sense of self as something quite different from what societal structures dictate. Play allows individuals to re-conceive who they are and helps them to become re-born as newer, freer individuals; the objectified can claim the subject position, and the desireless can claim desire. Chapter Four, therefore, is an exploration of specific instances of (re)creational, sexually-charged play in the previously mentioned stories. All but one of these stories ends with the re-conceiving of a character's self-definition.

Christopher Norris defines post-structuralism as the "dismantling" of the "concept of 'structure' that serves to immobilize the play of meaning." He claims that a post-structuralist is one who acknowledges "the powerlessness of ready-made concepts to explain" a person or a thing. By this definition, Dinesen may seem to be "post-structuralist." Hers is a philosophy of multiple -- or at least malleable -- possibilities of meaning. She often gives her characters a chance to free themselves from objectifying structures through play, and as the Conclusion shows, she even refuses to limit her *own* self to a single identity, especially if that identity is an inherently limiting one. Moreover, her specific concern that women should be able to claim a freedom of selfhood reveals certain "feminist" tendencies. It seems, therefore, that Stimpson's claim stands up to scrutiny.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AD	*Anecdotes of Destiny*
Carn	*Carnival: Entertainments and Posthumous Tales*
Dag	*Daguerreotypes and Other Essays*
LT	*Last Tales*
OMM	*On Modern Marriage and Other Observations*
OA	*Out Of Africa*
Shadows	*Shadows on the Grass*
SGT	*Seven Gothic Tales*
WT	*Winter's Tales*

This work is dedicated to David Kerins,
without whose
patience, encouragement, and faith in my abilities,
it might never have been completed.

INTRODUCTION

I

Jacques Derrida says that "it would be easy enough to show that the concept of structure and even the word 'structure' itself are as old as the episteme -- that is to say, as old as Western science and Western philosophy" (*Structure* 278). Randomness and perpetual change can, after all, lead to a certain "anxiety," whereas a belief in structure can feed the human need to envision the universe in terms of "fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude" (*Structure* 279). Once a thing is named, and its functional purpose determined, that thing is, in a sense, under human control. Likewise, if general laws and rules can be discovered about a thing, then future events may be anticipated. It is therefore not surprising that movements such as Structuralism have surfaced; when even a poem can be viewed as a "functional structure" which is governed by distinguishable laws, then the world loses some of its frighteningly chaotic nature (Eagleton 99).

Unfortunately, this human need to understand and predict the universe through the establishment of structure, while assuaging our insecurity of the unknown, can also be rather limiting. For a structure to be solid, all the fundamental units must remain reliable and unalterable -- the foundation must not shake. Any small change to the definition of a single element within a structure spells "disturbance and disequilibrium" for that entire structure (Eagleton 110). For this reason, once the meaning of a thing, and its function within the structure, has been decided -- or to put it in Saussure's linguistic terms, once the signified of a sign have been recorded within the context of the system of signs -- that thing becomes locked into its definition, frozen, immobile; a sign must never act like anything other than what it has been determined to

be. As Derrida would say, human nature desires to see the sign "beyond the reach of play" even if that means the sign must surrender its potentially dynamic quality (*Structure* 279).

Structuralist thought professes that "meaning is not mysteriously immanent in a sign but is functional, the result of its difference from other signs" (Eagleton 97). This means that no individual unit in the structure, no sign in the system of signs, has any meaning except in relation to all the other signs. Thus, the meaning of a unit within the structure will usually be determined within a system of oppositions. What places even more limits on the sign is the fact that part of its definition is usually established by setting it up in a dualistic relationship with that which has been decided to be its opposite. Thus, functional, relational, and antagonistic meaning is appointed, and this appointed meaning must not be radically altered, for if it is, there is a risk that the entire structure will topple.

It is precisely this de-stabilizing of the structure, this freeing up of meaning, that has become the post-structuralist's mandate. As Christopher Norris puts it, post-structuralism is "devoted to the task of dismantling a concept of 'structure' that serves to immobilize the play of meaning . . . and reduce it to a manageable compass" (2). For the post-structuralist, meaning cannot be so definitively stated or conveniently limited. If, as Saussure suggests, meaning can only be determined through difference, if something can only be known by comparing it to what it is not, then "every sign would seem to be made up of a potentially infinite tissue of differences" (Eagleton 127). Jacques Derrida discusses this in his explanation of the "trace"; hidden behind every sign is the shadow of all the other signs that had to be excluded in order for that sign to have meaning (*Margins* 12-13). The most obvious and prominent of these

traces is the sign's own binary opposite; lurking behind Male is Female, behind Self is Other, behind Subject is Object.

Meaning, then, to the post-structuralist mind, "is the spin-off of a potentially endless play of signifiers, rather than a concept tied firmly to the tail of a particular signifier" (Eagleton 127). It is "scattered or dispersed along a whole chain of signifiers: it cannot be easily nailed down, it is never fully present in any one sign alone . . . we can never quite close our fists over meaning" (Eagleton 128). No sign implies simply one thing or definition; it is not linked just to a single signifier and set up against its opposite, but it is enmeshed in a web of other signs (Eagleton 132). Indeed, categories can become so interdependent, and thus, so blurred, that a sign can even come to be defined *as* -- rather than defined antagonistically *against* -- that which is supposed to be its opposite. Understandably, this can erode the contrasting nature of binary oppositions. Thus, structure crumbles and the definitive meaning of things is freed up, if not to the point of chaos at least to the point of shaking the binary oppositions.

II

Isak Dinesen lived and wrote before the heyday of the post-structuralist movement. Nevertheless, Catherine Stimpson says that Dinesen appears to have been "a prophet . . . of post-structuralism" (*Introduction* x). Certainly it is true that -- through both her fiction and her non-fiction -- Dinesen frequently dismantles long held beliefs of what is inherent, and inherently good, in society and its structures. Her essays, for instance, openly describe and condemn any social structure that tries to restrict a person's sense of who he or she is -- what he or she is understood to mean -- by acknowledging only his or her functional

role within that structure. As well, Dinesen's fiction provides examples of this type of immobilization; many of the characters in Isak Dinesen's short stories have surrendered their entire identity to a single social role. While these characters are helping to ensure the structural integrity of their society by not upsetting the balance of meaning upon which the structure is founded, they are also necessarily entombing their sense of self. By allowing a structure to determine their meaning, these characters freeze the play of meaning, and preclude the many possibilities of signification which could re-define them; they have thus cut themselves off from certain vital forms of self-expression.

More than one social structure became the object of Dinesen's own form of "deconstruction." For instance, she repeatedly voiced her reservations about certain rigid religious structures, particularly the more puritanical and fundamentalist sects of Christianity. Dinesen interpreted such groups as equating spirituality with self-denial and she saw their uncompromising codes of behavior as restrictive and limiting for a person's identity. In her short stories, therefore, she portrays characters who have adopted the label of "Christian" to the exclusion of personal exploration and expression, and who have allowed their self-definition to be restricted by their understanding of what a "Christian" is. While their humble selflessness is beneficial to the stability of their church, Dinesen saw it as unnaturally binding for that person's sense of self, his or her sense of who and what he or she is.

Another social institution which Dinesen repeatedly attempted to lay open -- so as to free the people inside the structure -- is marriage. In her essay *On Modern Marriage and Other Observations*, she describes how the marital structure can freeze the identities of the people within that institution. She suggests that, in marriage, people become limited signs -- Husband and Wife --

with pre-determined meanings. This, she suggests, is a kind of death sentence imposed on the self; it locks identity into a single limited definition and disallows change or growth. These ideas also surface in her fiction where marriages are shown in a very unflattering light, and those characters who find themselves locked into this structure often find it restrictive, denying of their own selfhood, and personally unrewarding.

Of course, Dinesen's views on religion and marriage are extreme and over-generalizing. They do, however, betray a certain affinity to post-structuralist thought; above all Isak Dinesen seems to attack stable, structured institutions because she privileges change, growth, and freedom of meaning.

Catherine Stimpson also calls Dinesen a prophet of feminism, and many other critics agree with this assessment (*Introduction* x). This too suggests that Dinesen was interested in loosening long held beliefs about who or what a particular kind of person is. As many recent feminist scholars have pointed out, social structures in general -- and I believe that Dinesen would argue marriage in particular -- can be even more detrimental to the identity of a woman than they are to the identity of a man. Certainly Dinesen's fiction offers examples of women suffering from unfulfilled selfhood within societies that allow them very limited -- and limiting -- readings. In her essay "Daguerreotypes," Dinesen even categorizes the various readings men allow women. However, while Dinesen does show that women's identities are frequently frozen within social structures like marriage, her fiction and essays alone do not provide a satisfying account of why this is so; for that one must turn from author to theorist.

Terry Eagleton points out that "a structure always presumes a centre, a fixed principle, [and] a hierarchy of meanings" (134). For example, structures such as marriage are built around the idea of a solid, transcendental signified,

in this case the religiously and socially sanctioned ideal of marriage itself. When perceived opposites -- such as male and female, husband and wife -- come together, their differences are supposed to be reconciled in this center. In such a situation, however, a hierarchy tends to form; one side of the opposition tends to be privileged over the other because, as Derrida says, "difference implies positive terms" (*Margins* 11). To understand difference, we tend to equate that which we assume to be the "norm" with a positive term, and we define everything else in relation to this positive term, in the negative. For example, as the feminist movement has shown, when it comes to the differences between the sexes, the male is generally assumed to be the default sex and the female is generally defined, in the negative, as the *not* - male. Her identity, therefore, is established upon a lack of qualities. What she is *not* is more important than what she *is*. Obviously, this kind of hierarchy of meaning can lead to an imbalance in things like the partnership of marriage.

Jessica Benjamin, in *The Bonds of Love: Feminism, Psychoanalysis and the Problem of Domination,* studies gender privileging in the context of sexual relationships and she also provides a convincing psychoanalytic theory as to why it is the *male* who is privileged in inter-gender unions.[1] Her theories suggest that certain biological realities, as well as early parenting practices, collaborate with the infant's development of self-awareness to perpetuate the idea of the father as the active, desirous, independent "self" and the mother as the limited, passive object of desire, the "other" to the father's "self." This perception, she suggests, sets the standard for how children come to understand all sexual relationships -- and by extension we might conclude

[1]Many feminist critics have discussed gender privileging, but because Benjamin speaks specifically about the relationship between self-perception and sexuality, her theories seem best suited to the topic of this thesis.

marital relationships -- and how the unprivileged position in most hierarchical social structures tends to be equated with the female. This, in turn, helps clarify why some social structures, while limiting to the identity of all concerned, tend to be even more so for the female.

Benjamin admits that the assumption that the male has exclusive rights to agency and desire is "at best no more than a description of our culture" (112). Unfortunately, since she argues that such patriarchal constructs are deeply rooted within the pre-oedipal stage of all of us, and since she admits that biology itself provides fertile ground for these constructs, Benjamin's readers may be understandably skeptical that civilization will ever achieve an equality of the sexes. Nevertheless, Benjamin does attempt to offer a solution. She suggests that a particular, carefully constructed, mode of parenting might allow the child to envision the mother as an independent subject. Benjamin believes that "given substantial alteration in gender expectations and parenting, both parents can be figures of separation and attachment for their children" (112). To achieve this end, Benjamin says that the child must be able to witness "a mother who is articulated as a sexual *subject* one who expresses her own desire," for "when mother and father (in reality and as cultural ideals) are not equal, the parental identifications will necessarily oppose each other" and gender privileging will propagate (114). "This split can be repaired only when each parent sustains sexual cross-identification" says Benjamin, a situation wherein each parent "integrate[s] and express[es] both male and female aspects of selfhood (as culturally defined)" (114, 113).

Although Benjamin believes that it is possible to dislodge assumptions about gender and its relation to desire and agency, she also admits that her solution is "both modest and utopian" (223). While she is suggesting that

"women must claim their subjectivity" and thereby simultaneously deconstruct their own gender assumptions, Benjamin's real hope is that, by way of example, a mother might end the patriarchal objectification of women in the *next* generation. In essence then, she is saying that women currently objectified by patriarchal social structures can only begin social re-construction for their daughters; it is the fresh, new-born minds, who will truly reap the rewards. Perhaps what is more frustrating about Benjamin's conclusions, however, is that besides encouraging -- in abstract and general terms -- an alignment to the feminist movement, Benjamin does not offer any practical advice on how women are to claim their subjectivity.

Ironically, Dinesen's writings, which seem unconcerned with finding out the *why* of patriarchal objectification, do offer their own suggestion as to how a woman might claim her desire. Not surprisingly, given Dinesen's professed aversion to the institution of marriage, Dinesen believed that the solution rested in finding one's sexual identity outside of the marital structure. In her essay *On Modern Marriage and Other Observations*, Dinesen suggests, that if one rejects the structure of marriage in favor of "free love" then there is less of a tendency to make the relationship into the stable, structured kind -- the kind that demands mutually complimenting, but uneven, categories of being. In Dinesen's view of "free love," the interpersonal exchange remains, as does the intimate love relationship, but the self is not locked in to a socially determined role. The couple is not locked into a structure which seeks to cut off their play of meaning, and consequently, each partner need not assume one side of a subject/object opposition. Without the label of husband or wife, Dinesen suggests, the self is

able to remain the self; without the rules of the structure, the identities of the participants need not remain unalterable.[2]

Turning from Dinesen's non-fiction to her fiction, however, one rarely finds characters that have cast off the institution of marriage in order to embark, hand in hand with their lovers, on some wonderful journey of free love and dynamic self-awareness. The reason for this is simple; although Dinesen herself lived during the twentieth century, and was therefore free to advocate such liberal ideas, her fictional characters exist in the much more traditional and morally rigid era of the nineteenth century. But while these characters are not as readily able to denounce the sacred institution of marriage, many do free themselves from their entombment within social structures through a means which is similar in spirit to free love. A sexually charged encounter, with a non-spousal member of the opposite sex, is often enough to help these characters discover who they could be outside of what is dictated by society. This kind of sexual play is subversive enough to the structures of society, particularly to the structure of marriage, to open up the play of meaning of the individuals involved; through this play they can envision themselves as more than -- indeed, sometimes the opposite of -- their socially dictated role.

These encounters, which are frequently found in Dinesen's fiction, are what I call moments of *(re)creational play.* It is the effect of this play on the objectified individual's sense of self that will be the focus of this thesis. The bracketing of the word "(re)creational" is important; not only are these acts "recreational" in the sense of being based in impermanent fun, but they are also an opportunity for the individuals involved to re-create their identity. Indeed, I

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[2]It is worthwhile to point out that this severely exaggerates the role of marriage in the construction of the male and the female identity. Breaking out of this one particular element of society cannot mean a free break with all sources of limiting gender identity. Marriage is only *one* arena in which women suffer objectification.

am suggesting here that individuals who are caught within rigid, hierarchical social structures which seek to immobilize their meaning to that of Objects can free themselves from that structure through (re)creational play and come to accept themselves as active agents and independent Subjects.

In short, I see this change in self-perception beginning, in Dinesen's stories, when the objectified character is confronted with a strong, active "subject," someone who is everything the objectified person is not. Unlike what happens when a couple comes together in marriage, however, these two people do not form a union based on binary opposition. These people are in a *play* situation, which means that they have reached *beyond* the concept of structure.[3] They are acting instead within the sort of free play of signification that most structures attempt to choke off. Once inside this play, the individuals are able to see a "trace" of the other person's reality within their own beings. This is possible here -- and not in marriage -- because, in play, the individuals have not locked themselves into set definitions and oppositions; they have not accepted the labels of Wife or Husband, and likewise, they do not have a pre-conceived notion about what each of them must be in order to serve the structure. Instead, they can see that part of what makes up their own identities is something which seems most unlike them. Acknowledging this trace enables them to re-interpret the categories into which society has placed them. The socially-determined Object can then claim, as part of him or her self, subjectivity. In play, a person can see his or her self as a Self instead of as an Other.

Since these (re)creational encounters in Dinesen's work involve an interchange between the sexes, they might also be thought of as acts of procreation; male and a female come together and the sexual energy between

[3]This is not to suggest that certain rules do not influence the interaction. As I will discuss in Chapter Three, even "play" is, to some extent, governed by rules.

them creates a new person. To put it another way, when a person can *conceive* his or her identity as being outside of a structure, it is possible to achieve a *birth* of the "Self" within a person who has always before seen his or her self as an "Other." In this sense then, a person can be re-born, or re-created, through these encounters; his or her meaning can be re-conceived.

The psychologist L.S. Vygotsky has also discussed the importance of play, and his theories lend support to this idea that play can lead to a freedom from structure and a re-negotiating of meaning. In *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, Vygotsky discusses play as an opportunity for the child to separate meaning from objects and anoint objects with new meanings; through play, Vygotsky suggests, a child can re-conceive meaning outside of the way it is usually structured. Thus, whereas Benjamin suggests that patriarchal beliefs about subject/object relations, once established, are extremely difficult alter -- and only be truly achieved when a young child has been taught to see different categories than those established by a patriarchal society -- Vygotsky's theories suggest that it may be possible for children, through play, to re-negotiate the categories that have already been established. Indeed; in Dinesen's stories, people do not have to be children in order to re-negotiate categories; they merely have to be re-born through a childhood activity, play.

What all of this suggests is that the limitations that social structures attempt to impose on individuals may be overcome; if an individual chooses to privilege "play" over "structure," their definite, limited meaning -- that which is dictated by the structure itself -- can be replaced with a freer play of meanings; play allows the self to be something different: in play one need not limit one's self to what society says one should be.

III

This study will focus on the (re)creational encounters in five works by Isak Dinesen: "Peter and Rosa" and "The Dreaming Child," which are found in *Winter's Tales*, "Babette's Feast" and "The Ring" from *Anecdotes of Destiny*, and "The Cardinal's First Tale" from *Last Tales*. I have chosen these particular stories for a number of reasons. First, Robert Langbaum, perhaps the most seminal critic of Isak Dinesen's works, has said that *Winter's Tales* is concerned primarily with "rebirth" (156). Certainly, some drastic shifts in identity do occur in *Winter's Tales*, and for that reason I have chosen two stories from this collection. I also believe, however, that the theme of rebirth is not exclusive to *Winter's Tales*. In all the stories I have chosen, there are characters who initially seem rather stock and stereotyped, living exclusively within their social role, but by the end of the story they have been given a chance to re-create themselves into vibrant, dynamic individuals.[4]

My second reason for choosing these particular stories is that they are all fairly contained in time. The plots generally do not span the entire life of the protagonist, but instead focus on pivotal moments of self re-creation. In these brief and intense encounters with an individual who is -- in more ways than gender -- the protagonist's opposite, the sense of self is quickly and noticeably altered. Such is not the case in many other of Dinesen's stories. For instance, those stories in the *Seven Gothic Tales* collection are long, involved and cover much more time. In such cases, the alteration of the self is not as obviously linked to interpersonal play because there are too many other factors involved.

[4]I am saying that they are "given the chance" because, as I will discuss in Chapter Four, some characters find that they do not have the strength to complete their process of re-birth. Instead, these characters choose to cling to the safety and security of stable categories.

Another important consideration in my selection is that each story I have chosen contains a considerable amount of sexual suggestion. Even though none of the characters I will be discussing actually engages in sexual intercourse, they are all able to conceive of a new Self only through the contemplation -- be it conscious or unconscious -- of the sexual act. Without at least the suggestion of free sexual play, there could not be, in these stories, an initiation into a freer play of meaning. This may also help explain my choice of title for this thesis; *identity* can only enter a play of meaning when the *Id* is acknowledged; a person can only be re-born after an act that hints at the procreative.

I will begin my study with an investigation into those social constructs that tend to place limits on the self-concept of Isak Dinesen's characters. Chapter One will investigate how the role of women is perceived, in terms of society, marriage, and sexuality, and how this perception affects a woman's sense of self. Much attention will be paid to Jessica Benjamin's theories on this topic. In Chapter Two, I wish to study Isak Dinesen's view of the Christian church as a construct which can be just as patriarchal, objectifying, and suffocating to the sense of self as marriage can be for women. Indeed, I will suggest that highly devout Christians, be they male or female, become, in essence, the bride of Christ and are thereby limited in much the same fashion as any wife. Chapter Three will explain -- with the help of the theories of Benjamin and Vygotsky -- how (re)creational play between the sexes can provide an escape from both the construct of marriage and that of fundamentalist Christianity. Finally, in Chapter Four, I will discuss the instances of inter-gender play in the stories of Isak Dinesen that I have chosen, distinguishing between the aborted and the successful attempts to re-conceive the "self" as "subject".

CHAPTER ONE

Marriage and the Objectified Woman

I

It can be argued that marriage is one of the most basic structures of society. Since a range of biological, familial, cultural, legal, economic and religious elements of human interaction fall under its aegis, marriage can be seen as an important symbolic manifestation of the human need for order and consistency. Indeed, Tony Tanner, in his book *Adultery in the Novel: Contract and Transgression*, suggests that the "stable social structure" of marriage is one of the most fundamental symbols for "emergence of man [sic] as a social rational being" (59). In Tanner's words:

> Marriage . . . is a means by which society attempts to bring into harmonious alignment patterns of passion and passions of property; in bourgeois society it is not only a matter of putting your Gods where your treasure is . . . but also of putting your libido, loyalty , and all other possessions and products . . . there as well . . . . Marriage is the all-consuming, all-organizing, all-containing contract. It is the structure that maintains the Structure, or the System (if we may use that word . . . to cover all the models, conscious and unconscious, by which society structures all its operations and transactions). (15)

As with any structure, unalterable stability is the key to marriage. This stability is possible because the social contract itself establishes the perimeters of the structure; it dictates categories and duties for the individuals involved. The roles of husband and wife are well-defined by society and tradition, and

how husband and wife interact with each other, and with the larger community, is made to be comfortably predictable. "If the mediation of marriage works," says Tony Tanner "then everything is, as it were, at rest, all the patterns moving harmoniously together" (16). By entering into the state of matrimony, individuals take their place within the structure, loyally promising to be whatever the structure requires them to be in order to avoid "the possible breakdown of all mediations on which society itself depends" (Tanner 17).[5]

Unfortunately, the acceptance of the category of husband or wife tends to place limitations on the overall definition of one's selfhood; an individual sense of self can become engulfed, altered, utilized or even lost within the marital structure. Indeed, Isak Dinesen sees this process of self-sacrifice as an inevitable part of marriage. As she describes in her essay *On Modern Marriage and Other Observations*, "the love relationship . . . becomes a marriage when it is entered into in the recognition that the personal feelings of both partners . . . must be subordinate to, and serve, an idea" (54). "In a marriage," she contends, "two personalities meet in an idea, and neither one of them is the most important thing in life to the other, but marriage itself is to them both" (*OMM* 55).

Devotion to this higher ideal, devotion to the *structure* or *idea* of marriage -- which is believed to be the ideal state of human unity and social stability -- thus involves a relinquishing of individual desires and goals. Moreover, if "personal longing and passion shall be sacrificed," then any further

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[5]Tanner's book is primarily concerned with adultery. His discussion of marriage, therefore, is provided only as a means for his readers to understand the 'contract' that is 'transgressed' by such an act. His argument is that adultery gains its seriousness because "*without anything or anyone necessarily having changed place or roles (in social terms)*, the action of adultery . . . demonstrates the latent impossibility of participating in the interrelated patterns that comprise its structure" (my italics, 17). In this way then, adultery may be seen to work in the same way as I will later show "(re)creational play" to be working in Dinesen's fiction; by refusing to adhere to the limited roles that make up the inert structure, both acts subvert the social determinacy of the self. To word it another way, adultery and "(re)creational play" are both breaches of social conduct, involving sexuality, that refute structure and re-open the play of meaning for the self.

exploration of the self would be superfluous (*OMM* 76); the self, after all, is supposed to be subordinate to the Idea. To protect and promote the unchanging structure of marriage, each component of the structure, as Tanner indicates, must itself be unchanging; women must limit themselves within the sign of Wife, and men must limit themselves within that of Husband. The assumed reward for such a sacrifice is that, "by representing their social role, man and woman [will gain] a symbolic worth, thus *transcending* their individuality" (Cederborg, my italics, 11).

Yet, despite her acknowledgment of the abstract rewards of ideal marriages, Dinesen also saw this kind of limiting and labeling as potentially doing nothing more than holding a living, changing thing in an unnatural state of suspension. This idea is consistent with her other works in which she often expresses a belief that if a person allows his or her definition to be limited to a single name or a single meaning, it could prove fatal for that person.[6]

In *On Modern Marriage and Other Observations*, Dinesen uses several images to advance the idea that marriage presupposes a kind of personal death. "Often when one goes into one of these idealized homes," she says, ". . . one [gets] the same feeling, morally and intellectually, that strikes one physically in a crowded carriage or waiting room, where the windows are closed: the air is stale" (*OMM* 74). Dinesen also likens marriage to "a nice soft bed," which, although comfortable and restful, promotes an unhealthy amount of immobility (*OMM* 74). Perhaps the most vivid comparison Dinesen uses to describe marital union, however, is that of "mutual mental cannibalism" (*OMM* 75). Not

[6]As I hope to show later on in this thesis, these ideas are manifest throughout Dinesen's biography as well as her fiction. Just as she herself could not be contained within a single name, language, literary genre or language of discourse, so too do many of her characters escape labeling. The most notable example is the character of Pellegrina in "The Dreamers" (see *Seven Gothic Tales*). Once Pellegrina is made to commit to a single name, a single meaning, she dies.

only, it seems, does Dinesen not see marriage as being conducive to personal growth and change, but she also views it as little better than social parasitism.

Of course, if individual matters are to be transcended, then this sacrifice of the dynamic, individual self is not such a loss. If the overall rewards -- to one's society and one's deity -- greatly outweigh the personal costs, then "stale air" should hardly be a concern. However, symbolic transcendence of one's individuality is only possible if the higher element, the ideal for which one reaches, is believed to be solid and real; the ideal must truly be seen as *worth* the sacrifice of two independent selfhoods.

It used to be that the concepts of the family, the home, and God bolstered the belief in the ideal of marriage (*OMM* 48). They were seen as bigger and more valuable than the two individuals involved, and it was believed that they were best served through marriage (*OMM* 48). It was these abstractions that held together the bond between husband and wife and made the sacrifice worthwhile. However, as Dinesen herself says, "the god of the moderns is the god of the individual" (*OMM* 63); the twentieth century individual is not as willing to have his or her personal desires subordinated to a structure, no matter how ideal. As well, the very idea of a transcendental signified, particularly a god, does not seem to sit as well with the modern mind as it did a few generations ago. Now personal satisfaction tends to hold more weight than the desire to secure a solid, structured, immobile foundation for society, and the sanctity of the home or the holiness of the union is not taken as seriously.

In the introduction I suggested that an individual's sense of selfhood can become frozen and limited when a social structure is privileged over the free play of meaning of the individual. *On Modern Marriage and Other Observations* seems to suggest that marriage is one of those structures; it locks people in and

retards their natural growth, development and ability to change. When a couple surrenders personal desires in order to maintain the marital union, Dinesen sees each individual replacing his or her self -- a self which is able to engage in a relatively free play of meaning -- with a self that is determined strictly by the label of Husband or Wife. She sees this as being necessary in marriage because only by limiting individuals to these pre-determined societal roles can marriage become a rigid, unchanging structure. What this suggests is that it is the *stability* of marriage -- the very quality that made it a socially desirable institution -- that demands this personal death, this freezing of meaning, this limiting of the self.

Yet, despite this required sacrifice, marriages still exist. Men and women still come together and adopt social roles and they still submit to a structure which, Dinesen says, cannot promise them transcendence but only an entombment of their sense of self and a suffocation of their personal growth. Moreover, couples often marry under the assumption that marriage will fill some *personal* need; they are not primarily concerned with whether their marriage would benefit their society's need for stability. Thus, contrary to Dinesen's opinion, it seems that many people see marriage as an opportunity for self-expansion and growth, a chance for two individuals to become more, not less, than they are. In fact, the union of two selfhoods is ideally supposed to provide or expose a new and more fulfilling meaning of the self. This positive outlook on marriage seems to have eluded Dinesen, who instead tended to view any solidification of identity, particularly that which came by way of an organized structure, as an impingement of freedom and self-expression.

There seems to be yet another weakness in Dinesen's negative view of marriage. Although structures such as marriage can be seen as restrictive of

meaning, they can also be interpreted as a mandatory prerequisite for any kind of meaning at all. Even if it is inevitable that a personal sense of self will, in some way, be sacrificed to the marital structure, Dinesen does not acknowledge that marriages can also serve as a means by which to understand one's self. The human mind, as Derrida says, seeks structure to lend some meaning to existence (*Structure* 279). Without a certain degree of structure, some sort of grounding and permanence of being, identity cannot exist. Men and women seek out a stable union so a relationship that will give their existence meaning can develop. Furthermore, they use those very labels which Dinesen saw as negative to add grounding, security and meaning to their life together. To be entirely free from social function, to have one's meaning entirely loose, is to court chaos and meaninglessness. Thus, although I will assume -- with Dinesen -- for the purposes of this thesis, that the structure of marriage is restrictive, I must acknowledge that which Isak Dinesen does not seem to fully appreciate: a complete *abandonment* of structured relationships and social roles would be equally as unsatisfying for the person who is truly craving self-expression.

II

Although the married male and the married female each has to surrender much of the self to the good of the marital structure, it seems that, historically, women have had to surrender more. Biology is partially to blame for this. Since the production of offspring is one of the most pervasive goals of marriage, and since only females can bear children and lactate, biology demands that the wife give over a considerable amount of her personal resources to the *marriage's* agenda. As Isak Dinesen stresses in the "Intermezzo" chapter of *On Modern*

Marriage and Other Observations, a pregnancy will alter a woman's entire way of life. Her occupation, her priorities, and even her physical body must be surrendered to the child. Thus, when a married woman decides to make her marriage fruitful, she must subordinate her own self -- even physically -- to the marriage's procreative priorities.

However, as Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn point out, "the inequality of the sexes is neither a biological given nor a divine mandate, but a cultural construct," and this is as true in marriage as it is in other realms of society (1). "That men have penises and women do not, that women bear children and men do not, are biological facts which have no determinate meaning in themselves but are invested with various symbolic meanings by different cultures" (Greene and Kahn 2). Thus, it seems that a simple biological breakdown of reproductive duties does not entirely explain the fact that the male self tends to be less consumed by the marital structure than that of the female. For a more complete answer, then, as to why the position of Wife is more limiting than that of Husband, one must look into gender constructs and how these affect male/female interactions.

The structure of marriage, like most structures, is built on the idea of a binary opposition, in this case male versus female. In such binary situations, as post-structuralist thought has shown, it is not only necessary for all of the participants in the structure to limit themselves to their assigned side of the binary, but half are expected to assume the unprivileged position, the negative term which helps define the positive term. As the feminist movement persistently endeavored to demonstrate, when this kind of opposition falls along gender lines, it is generally the male side of the structure that is privileged and the female side that is given the supporting role. Simone de Beauvoir makes

this observation in *The Second Sex* when she asserts that Man is perceived as the absolute human, and Woman as the "other" to Man. Women are thus assumed to be submissive where men are aggressive, dependent where men are independent, and emotional where men are reasonable. More importantly, however, women are assumed to be "objects" where men are seen as "subjects." To put this another way, women, historically, have not been allowed to claim an *active* self; they are supposed to be that which serves, rather than asserts, a being.

Nowhere is this gender construction open to more exploitation than in the marital situation. Bertrand Russell in "Marriage and the Population Question"[7] suggests that it is *men* who "have invented, and women in the past [who] have often accepted, a theory that women are the guardians of the race, that their life centers in motherhood, that all their instincts and desires are directed, consciously or unconsciously, to this end" (237). The male-constructed image of the ideal wife is thus of the "placid maternal type which has no interests outside the home and no dislike of the burden of motherhood" (Russell 239). She is a "saintly, self-sacrificing woman" who "[does] not seek self-development, or see in marriage anything but an opportunity for duties" (Russell 243). Indeed, Russell compares the role of women in marriage to that of the loyal servant, the medieval serf, and the orthodox follower of the church; all have been told, by their patriarchal dominator, that it is their duty to remain locked into a position of self-denial and service to another.

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[7]Evidence to suggest that Isak Dinesen was reading Bertrand Russell's views on sex and marriage just prior to writing *On Modern Marriage and Other Observations* can be found in *Letters from Africa,* November 19, 1927 (*Letters* 320-26). Further, Vivian Greene-Gantzberg and Arthur R. Gantzberg claim that *On Modern Marriage and Other Observations* is "very much in tune" with Russell's ideas on love and marriage (160).

Isak Dinesen's writings also expose the patriarchal rhetoric that women are meant to be servants to men. In her essay "Daguerreotypes" Dinesen says that because mythology informs us that "Eve was created from Adam's rib," man asserts that "it was for man's sake that woman existed" (33). Dinesen also contends that there are four categories into which the male mind has tended, in the past, to place women. Not surprisingly, three of these categories are based on what the female can *do* for the male. There is the Guardian Angel figure, who redeems the male's soul, the Housewife, who keeps the home and raises the children, and the Bayaderé or prostitute, whose function for man should be obvious. The fourth kind of woman, the Witch, is self-determining, sexually liberated and extremely powerful. She does not require men to shape her sense of self and, as a consequence, she is hated and feared by mankind (*Dag* 32-34).

But while de Beauvoir, Russell and Dinesen can all recognize the existence of these gender constructs, and while they can all see how these fabricated realities are detrimental to the female sense of self, Jessica Benjamin, a feminist psychoanalyst, forwards a theory as to *how* and *why* it was possible for these constructs to be established. Benjamin also postulates a theory as to why these constructs still exist, particularly within marriages, despite the fact that the feminist movement has completely exposed and denounced them. In *The Bonds of Love: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Problem of Domination*, Benjamin suggests that the same basic human drive for recognition that Hegel claimed results in the establishment of the master/slave dialectic also works -- inside the social and familial setting -- with biology to promote gender constructs which subjugate the female. I believe that looking at

Benjamin's theory in some detail may help explain why it is so easy for the female sense of self to become lost in the structure of marriage.

To find the beginning of patriarchal privileging of the male within male/female relationships, Jessica Benjamin looks toward the newborn child. She agrees with Daniel Stern's contention that "the infant is never totally undifferentiated (symbiotic) from the mother"-- as classical Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysts believe -- but instead, the infant "is primed from the beginning to be interested in and to distinguish itself from the world of others" (Benjamin 18). The ramification of Stern's theory is, as Benjamin says, that:

> Once we accept the idea that infants do not begin life as part of an undifferentiated unity, the issue is not only how we separate from oneness, but also how we connect to and recognize others; the issue is not how we become free of the other, but how we actively engage and make ourselves known in a relationship to the other. (18)

Hegel suggested that the self can only be sure of itself when it is recognized by an Other. Recognition, in this sense, is the acknowledgment by an Other of the Self's existence, agency and independence. Recognition is what "makes meaningful the feelings, intentions and actions of the self" (Benjamin 12). In this way the Self relies on the Other for its determination; one may *believe* one's self to exist and possess the ability to effect change in the world, but until one's actions are acknowledged by someone outside of oneself, one cannot be certain of one's selfhood. The need for recognition, then, contains a paradox:

> At the very moment of realizing our own independence, we are dependent upon another to recognize it. At the very moment we

> come to understand the meaning of "I, myself," we are forced to see the limitations of that self. (Benjamin 33)

In the early stages of infancy, recognition usually comes from the mother. When the baby expresses a need or desire -- and an infant's most primary and powerful need is to be fed -- the mother's fulfillment of that need confirms the child's ability to effect action in the world; her action assures the infant's existence, authorship and selfhood. The biological reality of nursing, however, usually culminates in a traditional division of parenting roles; when the baby cries, even for something other than breast milk, it is usually the mother who responds. The mother, then, becomes the first Other in relation to which the newly emerging Self is asserted. It is she who allows the baby to realize its agency and its ability to manipulate the actions of someone outside of itself in order to gain satisfaction. Benjamin sums up the way in which the mother comes to be seen as follows:

> The mother is the baby's first object of attachment, and later the object of desire. She is provider, interlocutor, caregiver, contingent reinforcer, significant other, empathic understander, mirror. She is also a secure presence to walk away from, a setter of limits, an optimal frustrator, a shockingly real outside otherness. She is external reality -- but she is rarely regarded as another subject with a purpose apart from her existence for her child. (23)

According to Benjamin, it is when a child realizes the paradox of recognition -- the fact that its individuality is limited by its dependence on the mother's recognition -- that the child looks for a way to rebel against his or her dependence. In this struggle the father becomes the symbol of freedom, individuality, independence, and desire; he is "the magical mirror that reflects

the self as it wants to be -- the ideal the child wants to recognize himself" (Benjamin 100). Thanks to the male's biological inability to lactate, traditional parenting roles tend to place men in the workplace -- usually outside of the home -- while the women remain at home with the children. The father is thus perceived to be a strong, independent subject with his own desires. The father thus represents "freedom from dependency" on the recognizing mother and, through association, the father's phallus becomes a symbol of fulfilled desire to the child who is seeking "a pathway to individuation" (95).

The introduction of the sexual organ at this point in the discussion is important because, as Benjamin says, "the child's struggle for autonomy takes place within the realm of the body and the pleasures" (98). Since the child's first needs and wants are physical, he or she will look to how his or her parents receive physical satisfaction. In so doing, the child will notice that the father's sexual desires are fulfilled by the same person that serves the infant's physical needs. The mother, however, is not as readily perceived as possessing sexual subjectivity or externally-fulfilled physical needs. She is "not articulated as a sexual subject, one who desires something for herself" for she is understood as only being the Other or the "Object" of desire, both for her children and for her husband (88). As Benjamin says, "just as the mother's power is not her own, but is intended to serve her child, so, in a larger sense, woman does not have the freedom to do as she wills; she is not the subject of her own desire" (88).

This polarization of desire along gender lines not only colors the way gender, in general, is perceived by the child, but it also creates expectations as to the way men and women interact with each other sexually. Since sexuality is a large part of marriage, this polarization will also affect the way the marital roles are understood. For instance, it is Benjamin's contention that the male

child -- who identifies with the father through gender -- will likely grow up assuming that it is acceptable to exploit his subject position at the expense of a female. Since his birth, this male child has perceived the female as the Other who will confirm his selfhood, the Object who will serve his subjectivity, and the desireless on whom he can focus his desire. Moreover, when this child looks to his father to find a role model for the masculine attitude, the idea that the female is understood to be an Object, particularly sexually, is likely confirmed. Still later, when that child embarks on his own marital situation, he will likely perpetuate the kind of patriarchal privileging that he has unconsciously perceived, from infancy, in his parent's relationship (Benjamin 75-78).

This perceived polarization of desire also explains, in a fairly circuitous fashion, how a female may come to allow herself to be objectified. As an infant, the female child strives just as hard as any male child for recognition and independent selfhood. It is only with the acknowledgment of the supreme subjectivity of the father, says Benjamin, that a female child will, ironically, come to surrender her subjectivity in order to confirm her agency. Simply stated, Benjamin claims that female children come to believe that, because their gender disallows them to be like their father -- independent, strong, subjective, and sexual -- they can only hope for a *vicarious* agency of the sort that can be found through a strong connection or bond with a powerful male lover. This they achieve by giving up their own subjective desire and becoming the ultimate *object* of desire for a male. A woman will thus allow her sense of self to be sacrificed for the sake of a sexual union -- a marriage if you will. This does not seem a sacrifice to her; since she is a female, and is therefore supposed to identify with her mother, she perceives herself as a non-self anyway. By uniting with a strong male, however, even if she is united within a position of

objectification, she feels she can achieve a *borrowed* subjectivity. Furthermore, the more subjugated she is the stronger her lover will seem, and thus, the more agency she will feel can be hers through association (Benjamin 78-132). Patriarchal subjugation then -- as Benjamin stresses -- is as much the rooted in the self-concept of the dominated as it is that of the dominator.[8]

III

The image of the de-sexualized and objectified woman -- as opposed to the sexual and subjective man -- recurs throughout Isak Dinesen's work. In "Daguerreotypes," Dinesen not only exposes the contention that *good* women -- that is, women who make good wives -- create their sense of self around the service of a man, but also that they lack sexuality. Of the four categories into which men place women, only two -- the Bayaderé and the Witch -- have their sexuality acknowledged.[9] The way men feel about the Witch has already been established; witches are *bad* because their "center of gravity" is not to be found in a man, and man's disgust of the Witch is merely compounded by her sexual frankness, which is seen as coarse, unattractive, and perverse (*Dag* 33). The male attitude towards the Bayaderé is different; her sexuality is not feared -- because it is surrendered to the service of men -- but the fact that she has it at all means she is not to be revered as a respectable kind of woman. Her blatant sexuality makes her a shameful, and certainly unmarriable, kind of woman, but at least her flaws can be harnessed for men's pleasure. This is to say that,

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[8]As Benjamin says early in her introduction, "above all, this book seeks to understand how domination is anchored in the hearts of the dominated" (5).

[9]Dinesen describes female sexuality in terms of the exposure of a woman's legs. "It would certainly be profane or actually precluded to direct attention to [the guardian angels] legs" she says, and the housewife, who "wears decent long garments . . . didn't have legs either" (30). On the other hand, the bayaderé "did have legs to be sure" and "the witch had absolutely no scruples about showing her legs; she sat quite unconstrained astride her broomstick and took off" (31-33).

while the Bayaderé *is* undeniably sexual, at least she is not subjective; she still acts *for* another.[10]

It is from the remaining two categories -- Housewife and Guardian Angel -- that men choose wives; an ideal wife will be a mixture of the two (*Dag* 29). The implication here is that, in order for a marriage to function properly, the wife must remain the servant, the Other, the Object of her husband. A good wife -- one that will not threaten the stability of the structure of marriage by being anything other than a complement to her husband -- should, like the guardian angel and the housewife, lack self-determination, personal desire and sexual subjectivity. If she is to be a wife and a mother she must be, quite literally, selfless.

As many of her recent critics have observed, it is not only Isak Dinesen's essays but also her short stories that expose the existence and the harm of these patriarchal concepts of Woman as Object. Sara Stambaugh, for instance, believes that "a central concern in Dinesen's fiction is the position of women," and thus Stambaugh dedicates an entire book to unveiling this concern (3). Janet Burstein similarly contends that Dinesen was "sharply aware of the restriction -- in the form of sexual, social, and cultural responsibilities -- that [the world] placed upon women," and that "in many of her stories [Dinesen] calls attention to the special burdens of the female experience" (632 n19). This attention is perhaps sharpened by the fact that most of Dinesen's stories are placed in the nineteenth century, a time when patriarchal structures were even

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[10]The bayaderé is a good example of what Benjamin would call the "sexy" woman. In so being, she is no less a victim of gender subjugation and de-sexualization than the housewife or the guardian angel. As Benjamin says:

> The "sexy" woman . . . is sexy, but as an object, not as a subject. She expresses not so much *her* desire as her pleasure in being desired; what she enjoys is her capacity to evoke desire in the other, to attract. Her power does not reside in her own passion, but in her acute desirability. (89)

more firmly entrenched than today; things are easier to identify in the exaggerated form.

I agree with Janet Burstein that "with few exceptions . . . Dinesen's female characters are allotted a standardized social role which explicitly limits their ambitions, their power outside the home, and their images of themselves" (632 n19). Dinesen's women, particularly the married women, restrict their selfhood, their sense of who they are, to that which their social role dictates. When they assume the label of Wife they also internalize society's suggestion that they are dependent, servile, domestic, and de-sexualized. In short, once they marry, Dinesen's women tend to give up their subjectivity and work solely towards being the object and fulfiller of their husbands' desires. Although Dinesen did not say so explicitly in *On Modern Marriage and Other Observations,* it seems that her fiction betrays a belief that, although marriage asks both man and woman to surrender their personal longings to the structure, marriage strikes a more fatal blow to the female selfhood.

Other critics agree that, in Isak Dinesen's short stories, marriages are almost always a deathtrap for women. Susan Gubar acknowledges this contention in her reading of "The Blank Page." Gubar sees marriage, in that work, portrayed as "martyrdom," in the sense that it requires the voluntary death of the female self for the sake of a larger ideal (167). Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn, in their discussion of the same story, make a similar observation but they focus on the loss of a woman's *sexual* self through marriage. "With the image of the sheets," they say, "Dinesen evokes an ideology built on male control, through the institution of marriage, of female sexuality" (6). Arthur Gantzberg and Vivian Greene-Gantzberg also discuss Dinesen's portrayal of marriage in terms of loss of female subjectivity. They

interpret marriage as a "forfeit[ing] of self-realisation" and they show how, in Dinesen's stories, a woman "denies her own desires" by being married (167). [11] Many examples can be found in Dinesen's fiction of women who have surrendered their sense of self in order to fulfill their social role of wife. I now wish to look at three such examples in some detail.

IV

For Emilie in "The Dreaming Child," patriarchal restrictions on her identity began even before her marriage. "If it had not been for her sex," the narrator informs her reader, Emilie "would with time have become head of [her father's shipping] firm" (*WT* 86). She is clever, business-like and independent, but because she is a woman, her only responsibility to the company is that she marry a man capable of running it. When this strong, self-sufficient woman initially thought of marriage, however, she had "strange, sudden misgivings, [and] the strength of her own feelings alarmed her" (*WT* 86). These feelings are explained by the fact that "she held it beneath her to be so entirely dependent on another human being" (*WT* 86). At the cost of her self-determination and independence, marriage can only promise Emilie "a house to her taste and a secure, harmonious position in her family and in the world of Copenhagen" (*WT* 88). Emilie, who seems rather suited to running a business, is thus relegated to running a home and performing charity work, the first in service of her father and husband, the other in service of the poor.

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[11] This article discusses the story "Carnival." The character of Mimi seems only able to work at being an object of desire for her husband. "Nothing at all has got any meaning'" Mimi says, "except . .. for the sake of what he [her husband] thinks of me" (*Carn* 642). Not only does this passage clearly illustrate how a wife functions as object, but the story also exposes Mimi's dissatisfaction and lack of personal fulfillment in this position.

Jakob's view of his wife Emilie perfectly illustrates Dinesen's contention that a good wife is seen, especially by the nineteenth century mind, as a de-sexualized combination of guardian angel and housewife. In Jakob's mind Emilie represents "an ideal of purer womanhood" (*WT* 88). He maintains an "ethereal and romantic" mental image of her in such diminutive and fragile forms as "a doll or an icon," despite what the narrator suggests is her "competent," "upright" and somewhat "cold" reality (*WT* 88, 90). This image of his wife is starkly contrasted with that of the women whom Jakob understands as sexual beings, the prostitutes he visited in his youth. As Sara Stambaugh points out, Jakob's values "demand a strict separation between sex and love" and therefore between wife and sexual partner (85). This division does not seem to waver after Jakob and Emilie begin a sexual relationship either. Indeed, Dinesen tells us that Jakob finds "his domestic atmosphere almost too perfect" and seeks out the occasional sexual "adventure in town" (*WT* 90).

Initially, Emilie too accepts this de-sexualized image of herself and maintains a certain distaste for the sexual act. To admit sexual desire, Emilie has been raised to believe, is to betray "her mother's memory and all the maidens in the world" (*WT* 87). Likewise, she believes that engaging in sexual relations for the sake of enjoyment is a "horror" and an "abomination" to the finest image of womanhood (*WT* 87).

As the inevitable consequence of such an attitude, the couple remains childless for the first five years of marriage and because of this Emilie feels "that she [is] lacking in her duties" as a wife (*WT* 89). As paradoxical as it is, not being a mother is as much a sin as the possession of female sexual desire. Emilie is aware that a good wife will be quick to surrender her body to the marital agenda even though a good wife is not supposed to be a sexual being.

When adoption is suggested Emilie welcomes the idea because she knows "that when a child has been adopted there would be no more obligation on her of producing an heir to the firm, a grandson to her father, a child to her husband"(*WT* 89). Through this adoption she can serve all three generations of men which she is meant to serve -- father, husband, son -- and she will not have to leap off of her pedestal of idealized womanhood to accomplish it.

It is important to note, however, that Emilie also sees in this adoption an opportunity to retain a little of her self. "There was indeed something neat and proper about settling the affairs of nature according to your own ideas. 'And,' she whispered in her mind, as her glance ran down her looking-glass, 'in keeping your figure'" (*WT* 91). While such a selfish thought is not acceptable in a proper wife, it must be remembered that Emilie is not *by nature* a selfless woman. At one time, she had been hesitant to give herself over to dependency on a husband, and -- what will prove even more significant -- at one time before she entered the restrictive structure of marriage she had acknowledged her sexual desire. As she stood at the gate with a desperately amorous lover, Emilie had been torn between her own desire and the fact that she knew she was not supposed to possess it. "Her own feelings for [her lover Charlie] made her an accomplice in the crime" of lust, and though she bolted the iron gate on him "as if it had been the cage of an angry lion," she had been unsure as to which side of the gate the lion was on (*WT* 86). For still another moment Emilie had not been able to surrender her desire and she had clung to the gate. In the end, however, the socially dictated image of the good woman who lacks subjectivity and desire wins Emilie's identification. Perhaps it had been that decisive moment that allowed her to marry Jakob despite her reservations

about the institution. Her moment of hesitation at the gate, however, will prove significant for later discussion.

V

When the young woman in "The Ring" finally marries her childhood sweetheart, she believes that her life will be "wonderfully happy" from then on (*AD* 235). "The stolen meetings and secret tearful love letters [are] now things of the past" and Lovisa is surprised to find that married life is full of "the things of everyday life" (*AD* 235). Nevertheless, she approaches her new situation with joy. Like all young girls in her century, Lovisa had been raised from infancy to find contentment in the role of wife. "It was not a long time since she had played with dolls," Dinesen says, and now Lovisa is simply living out her childhood games (*AD* 236). "She dressed her own hair, looked over her linen press and arranged her flowers . . . gravely and solicitously, and all the time [she] knew [she] was playing" at the role of wife (*AD* 236).

What young Lovisa fails to realize about her real-life fantasy, however, is the serious ramifications that it can have for her sense of self. Her hair, of course, is to be dressed in order to please her husband; it is done to make her his ultimate object of desire. Likewise, the linen and flowers indicate Lovisa's role as keeper of the house. In that role she will be expected not only to make the surroundings pleasant for her husband but also to serve and obey him. Indeed, Lovisa "wished to obey him in everything" for that too is part of the game (238). She knows that she is to hold nothing back from her husband and is "never to have any secret" from him, but she does not interpret this as a surrendering of her selfhood. Instead, she ironically feels that this situation will allow her to move and breathe in "perfect freedom" (*AD* 235).

Lovisa's husband Sigismund is equally well-versed in conventional marriage roles. He has promised himself that "from now there should be no stone in his bride's path, nor should any shadow fall across it" (*AD* 235). In other words, Sigismund acknowledges that it is his duty to protect his wife as a father would protect a child. This is the same reduction of the female to a quaint, helpless, angel-like image of which the husband in "The Dreaming Child" is guilty, and which also runs hand-in-hand with the reduction of womankind to the status of Object. Sigismund's shortening of his wife's name to Lise, while it could simply be taken as an innocent token of affection and familiarity, could also be seen as a refusal to acknowledge her own separate, unique, subjective identity. It may also be an example of the same sort of patronization or paternal condescension that is seen when Sigismund sends his wife away from the sight of a hurt lamb.[12]

The one element of married life that seems to have pleasantly surprised Lovisa is the sexual one. While her "white muslin frock," as Janet Burstein says, reveals that her "essential innocence is still intact" and that "her being [is] as yet untouched . . . by the experience of the world," Dinesen makes it clear that Lovisa has learned well the lessons of the marriage-bed and rather enjoys these wifely duties (627). Bored with her husband's conversation with his shepherd, Lovisa's mind wanders and "twice her own thoughts made her blush deeply and happily, like a red rose" (*AD* 237). Indeed, even when she is thinking about the power and danger of wolves, Lovisa is reminded of the sexually suggestive story of Red Ridinghood and "a pleasant little thrill ran

[12]It is important to point out that although the husbands in Dinesen's fiction do exhibit patronizing and objectifying behaviors, they are usually well-meaning and loving towards their wives. They are, however, also the product of their unapologetically patriarchal society. The problem with each marriage, therefore, does not rest as much with the actions or attitudes of the man towards his wife as it does with what that man's society has taught him about the male/female dialectic.

down her spine" (*AD* 237). All and all, this new bride seems rather distracted by her own pleasant sexual thoughts; she has recently discovered her own desire and is fascinated with it.

What Lovisa does not understand about her new-found sexuality, however, is that, as an idealized wife, she is not supposed to experience it subjectively. This starts to become evident, however, when she finds herself "turned away by an impatient husband" and begins to feel that "his sheep [mean] more than his wife" (*AD* 238). This sentence illustrates the frustration of the sexually awakened woman who wishes to dominate her husband's attention; she takes her husband's rejection as a sign that her sexual desires have been disregarded and, in effect, her subjectivity as well. It is then that she starts to speak of "vanishing" from the earth and hoping her husband will soon "long for her company" (*AD* 239). As she wanders off frustrated Lovisa muses about how sweet it would be "in the long flowering meadow grass, slowly, slowly . . to let her husband overtake her there" (*AD* 239). The statement itself is highly sexually suggestive and therefore in keeping with Lovisa's general train of thought, but what is interesting is the hint at male sexual domination. Lovisa seems to be supporting Benjamin's theory that the birth of domination can be traced back, at least in part, to the psyche of the dominated. Lovisa has discovered that, because of her gender, her sexual desires cannot be acknowledged directly, so she hopes to become the ultimate passive object of a man's desire and thus passively achieve satisfaction. It seems then, at this point in "The Ring," that Lovisa has become aware of the objectification and de-sexualization inherent in being a wife. How she responds to this information will be discussed later on in this thesis.

VI

Another of Isak Dinesen's female characters who initially accepts the limitations that the label of Wife places on her sense of self is the Princess Benedetta in "The Cardinal's First Tale." At fifteen years old, this girl is "given away in marriage" to a much older man "who took a wife to have his name live on" (*LT* 5). Obviously then, this marriage is shamelessly based on the idea of woman as Object, as Other. Her body is to serve her husband sexually and procreatively, and her presence in his home will complement his, allowing his sense of self to be recognized and furthered in his social world. Her subjectivity will receive little acknowledgment along the way. That she once possessed "rich gifts of heart and mind" is no longer relevant unless those gifts can somehow serve to advance the marriage and the family name (*LT* 5).

Benedetta's husband not only expects his wife to conform to a traditional role but, like Sigismund, he also conforms himself to the conventional role of husband. He, too, exhibits paternal responsibility to protect his wife from any realities that he feels might be disturbing to her. This is deemed necessary because, like the last two husbands discussed, Prince Pompilio chooses to view his wife as an ideal woman. He sees her as delicate, angelic, childlike and innocent, and therefore he assumes that she requires his guidance in everything. Certainly the prince assumes that his perfect wife is without desire, particularly sexual desire. He therefore assumes she will have no trouble with the three year sexual abstinence that he has decided she needs (*LT* 5).

Like Lovisa, Benedetta is not bothered by the sacrifice of self that this marriage demands of her; she too was given dolls to help her to understand her inevitable selfless role in life. Thus the Prince's young wife initially "accept[s] her circumstances in life, her marriage and her husband" without

hesitation (*LT* 5-6). She also accepts the idealized view her husband has of her as fully as she accepts her selfless duties to him. As the narrator says:

> During her pregnancy . . . she had come to see herself as a fragile, precious vessel, within which a rare seed had been laid down to germinate, and at the end of the term it had been her husband's old name to which she had given birth. Her personal share in the venture was now but the slightly aching echo of a faint little cry. (6)

It seems, then, that Benedetta has entirely submitted to the limitations of self that society deems part of being a wife. She has given up her body, her independence, and her potential sexuality in order to serve her husband's name and the sacred ideal of marriage. Like Emilie's moment of hesitation before the iron gate, however, the existence of Benedetta's "faint little cry" will prove significant in later discussion; this cry is the sign that a speck of unsacrificed selfhood still remains and it is this cry that allows Benedetta "in the course of the three years by the mountain-lake" to "[learn] how to dream" (*LT* 6).

Many more examples of these kinds of marriages can be found throughout Dinesen's work, but I have chosen these three for a specific reason. Not all of Dinesen's female characters are as fortunate as Emilie, Lovisa and Benedetta; as we will see in a later chapter, there is a way for these women to re-claim their subjectivity, their self-determining agency, and even their sexual desire. Another person's presence will allow them to see past their socially appointed label of Wife, as well as past their status as Object, and when they can see beyond the socially imposed limitations on their self-definition, they will be able to express their true subjective selfhood instead of seeing themselves merely as Others.

CHAPTER TWO

Married to the Lord

I

In addition to marriage, another structure through which most of western society seeks to order its reality is that of the Christian church. Moral and spiritual guidelines, along with a generally accepted mythology, can provide a feeling of consistency and relative predictability that human beings seem to crave. Yet, while a religious structure may provide stability and comfort, it also has the potential -- just as the marital structure has -- of being detrimental to the growth and freedom of an individual's sense of self.[13] In this chapter I wish to show how, in Dinesen's stories, Christianity tends to function in much the same way as marriage does; in her works Dinesen often portrays Christianity as a structure that requires individuals to accept a limiting label and surrender their personal goals and desires to an ideal. To put it another way, Dinesen portrays strict adherence to fundamentalist Christianity as being just as restrictive to a person's sense of self as marriage can be to a woman's sense of self.

Before I proceed, it is important to stress that Isak Dinesen herself was not adverse to spirituality nor did she have reservations about maintaining a belief in God.[14] Not only are some of her most admirable characters also the

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[13]Just as was the case in the previous discussion of marriage, this is a matter of interpretation and approach to the structure. Just as many see marriage as an opportunity for self-expansion and growth -- a chance to become more, not less -- so too is Christianity, for many, a gateway into greater personal understanding. Dinesen, however, did not see either of these institutions in such a positive light.

[14]Many of her major critics -- Hannah, Johannesson, and Henriksen, for instance -- have stressed Dinesen's firm belief in God. It seems, however, that *her* god is an amalgam of the Old Testament Jewish God and the God worshipped by the Africans. Sara Stambaugh suggests that Dinesen embraces the "pantheistic" and the "pagan" (59), and that Dinesen's stories "characterize God as a feminine, high-spirited trickster" (61). Dinesen's view that "God and the Devil are one" suggests a belief that "a proper conception of the deity must embrace all aspects of experience, feminine as well as masculine, dark as well as beneficent, and see both as part of the richness of life" (61).

most spiritually grounded, God-fearing, and God-loving characters she creates,[15] but one of the most commonly discussed themes in Dinesen's work is that of the Marionette comedy, an idea which postulates God's ultimate control over human existence. Her frequently negative assertions about the Christian church are therefore not a reflection of atheism but rather of her distaste for the self-denying approach to spirituality that puritanical Christianity can condone. She seems to take issue not with the faith but with the ability of religious interpretation to enclose a potentially rewarding interaction -- such as that between God and humankind -- within legalism and doctrine. To put this another way, Dinesen's conflict was not with *religion* but with the limitations that can become imposed by specific kinds of church structure.

It is also important to note that when Dinesen does portray devout Christians in her stories -- so as to, as Stambaugh says, "argue against Christian dogma" (59) -- those characters generally display uncommonly severe forms of religious interpretation. Through these characters Dinesen attacks the religious extremists, not those Christians who incorporate Christianity into their life in a balanced and healthy way. Moreover, Dinesen's fiction does not explore -- or even actually acknowledge -- the many churches and individuals who treat religion as a way to *expand* the self, rather than lock the self in. Yet, if it were not possible, within the confines of Christianity, to find self-fulfillment and spiritual growth, if Christianity truly always closes its followers off from personal expression and joy, then the religion would not continue to attract the great number of followers it does. Thus, just as Dinesen's view of marriage denies its

[15]Peter, in "Peter and Rosa" for instance, is given a long speech stating his immense love and respect for God. He calls atheists "terrible blasphemers" and in his confession to Rosa he boldly states: "I love God beyond everything. I think of the glory of God before anything else" (*WT* 154-5). Like Dinesen, however, Peter cannot believe that God would wish him to become "stale" by enclosing him within the self-denying structure of the church (*WT* 155). Peter feels that to truly please and serve God one must, like the fox, remain true to one's own independent nature.

ability to feed the human need for stability, meaning, and self-expansion, her stance on religion is similarly short-sighted.

To understand how Dinesen could interpret the structure of the Christian church as similar to the structure of marriage -- and thus to understand how she could see Christianity as similarly limiting to the self -- I must return to the most basic premises upon which structures are understood to function. As I discussed earlier, most structures seem to be based on the reconciliation of two opposing elements, and the stability of these structures is usually reliant on the unchanging nature of those elements. Marriage, I argued, is based on the union of male and female, and in order to maintain the stability of the marital structure, the male is usually expected to remain in a dominant, subjective role while the female is expected to remain in a submissive, objectified role. The structure of religion is similar in that it too is based on the union of two elements -- God and humankind -- and its stability is also somewhat reliant on each of these elements remaining consistent within their understood roles.

Although current theology interprets the Christian God as being without gender and acting as both Father and Mother, Dinesen lived and wrote in an era when Christianity -- with its male god, its male Messiah and its mostly male cast of prophets -- was exceedingly androcentric and patriarchal. She therefore would have seen the Christian God as the ultimate male figure of patriarchal power and, when making a comparison between religion and marriage, she would have seen Him in the privileged, male position. Dinesen would therefore also have seen any individual, whether male or female, who decides to become part of the Christian church structure, as automatically filling the subservient, underprivileged, female position. However, this would be the case whether or not the deity is interpreted as male or female; it is understood that God, or

His/Her human embodiment, will always assume the privileged position; if He/She did not, then He/She could hardly be called a god.

In effect then, Dinesen seems to have justifiably interpreted every Christian as assuming a sort of femininized role. Likewise, it should be no surprise that the church is sometimes referred to as the bride of Christ. Indeed, the relationship between Christ and the church is presented as a model marital relationship in Ephesians 5:22-33. This passage claims that "the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church" and thus, "as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives *ought to be* to their husbands in everything."

As we witnessed in the previous discussion of marriage, however, the role of wife tends to demand a surrendering of personal subjectivity, agency and independence of action. A Christian, who above all else, seeks to obey the word of God and act strictly in keeping with his or her established role within the religious structure, may therefore be seen as denying his or her own natural self-development and expression. Certainly Dinesen seems to have seen things this way. She saw the devout Christian's sense of self as being entirely given over to, and subordinated by, an ideal. Dinesen believed that if an individual whole-heartedly accepted the label of Christian -- just as a nineteenth century woman accepted the label of Wife -- that individual would inscribe his or her sense of self within a structure where he or she plays the Other, the Object.

Just as we have seen the patriarchal marriage strip the desire and sexuality from the objectified wife, certain denominations of Christianity can be accused of demanding the same of their followers. Catholic nuns, monks and priests, for example, surrender their physical desire by taking a vow of chastity. Surrendering of physical desire, however, also manifests itself -- sometimes to

the point of outright *denial* of physical desire -- in the Protestant idea of dualism. Certain veins of Protestantism tend to draw a strict line between the Christian spirit and the Christian body; if a person is to elevate one, he or she must sacrifice the other.[16] According to this extreme interpretation, the best way to serve the Lord is to not seek fulfillment of one's own physical urges. Indeed, dualism can be extended to the point where any physical urge -- be it for food, wine, or sex -- that does not function in accordance with Christian ideals is considered a sin. Of course, for the truly objectified servant of Christ, bodily desires should not cause a problem; if one does not have subjectivity, one should not suffer from longings. Thus, Dinesen seems to believe that, for individuals who align themselves to an extreme system of religious beliefs, the Lord demands a desireless, as well as servile, marital partner.

II

The Christian religion plays a leading role in many of Isak Dinesen's stories and, as Sara Stambaugh has pointed out, "when she [Dinesen] wrote stories about Christian themes, it was to argue against Christian dogma" (59). As Dinesen was a professed admirer of Nietzsche, it should not be surprising that she generally speaks of Christianity in a cynical, if not antagonistic tone.[17] Like Nietzsche's, it seems Dinesen's argument against Christianity has to do with the religion's ability to hold self-discovery and growth in an unnatural

[16]Again, it is important to stress that this attitude does not apply to all forms of Christianity. In fact, it can be argued that a belief in the incarnation and the resurrection is an acceptance, if not a celebration, of the physical vessel. It is therefore interesting to note that many of those characters in Dinesen's work who seemed to have renounced the flesh for religious reasons -- the parson in "Peter and Rosa" for example -- also have a difficult time accepting the doctrine of the resurrection. It seems that Dinesen feels compelled to set her extreme characters apart from the more typical and balanced Christian, one who can find a place for the flesh in his or her faith.

[17]Judith Thurman discusses Dinesen's familiarity with, and admiration for, Friedrich Nietzsche's work in her biography, *Isak Dinesen: The Life of a Storyteller* (Thurman 50-51).

suspension. Throughout his work, Friedrich Nietzsche makes clear his contention that a submission to the Christian church is a renunciation of life, in part because of Christianity's dualistic separation of the spirit and the body. It was Nietzsche's belief that a truer model for spiritual fulfillment could be found in the Dionysiac worship of art and ecstasy, a reunion of the two elements of life that Christianity wishes to keep separate. Further, Nietzsche's doctrine of the "Will to Power" espouses ultimate self-fulfillment and self-betterment in place of the Christian belief in self-sacrifice for the sake of an "Otherworldly" ideal. Nietzsche's is a philosophy of change, growth, and individualism, and thus stands in direct contrast with what he saw as the static, restrictive, self-denying values of Christianity. It therefore seems feasible to suggest that what Dinesen found refreshing in Nietzsche's philosophy is its tendency to privilege freedom of an individual's sense of self over loyalty to a structure which can limit that self.

Critics who analyze Dinesen's seemingly anti-Christian views generally discuss one of three things: her rejection of the doctrine of the atonement, her distaste for the Christian idea of dualism, or her disapproval of the somewhat draconian conversion of the Africans by the Christian missions. All of these, in my interpretation, are indicative of a more general belief, on Dinesen's part, that the demands of Christianity can freeze an individual's sense of self; each of these Christian beliefs or practices, in its own way, asks the individual to enclose him or her self within the confines of a passive, dependent, and static identity.

Donald Hannah, in *Isak Dinesen and Karen Blixen: The Mask and the Reality,* describes Dinesen's rejection of the doctrine of the atonement as a acceptance of self-determination. He shows how, in Dinesen's work, a refusal to accept Christ's sacrifice provides an individual with the opportunity to

become "the self-appointed master of [his or her] own destiny" (166). To allow Christ to take on one's sins is to enmesh one's self within a system in which one's identity is limited. The Christian identity is formed by the knowledge that every Christian is a sinner, indebted for life to Jesus. As Dinesen sees it, however, if one does not take responsibility for one's own sins, one must accept that one is nothing more than an indebted sinner who owes the savior a lifetime of self-denying actions in order to pay off the debt. This, says Hannah, is why, when the characters in "The Heroine" are offered a choice as to whether or not they will allow a scapegoat to die for them, they reject the opportunity. As the narrator of "The Heroine" says, "they would never have got over it" and they do not wish to permanently perceive themselves as "great sinners" (*WT* 79). According to Hannah, Dinesen's refusal of the Atonement speaks of her belief that people must remain free to create their own selfhood, rather than have it dictated by debt.

Aage Henriksen, in his article "The Empty Space between Art and the Church," speaks of Dinesen's "desire to recapture the visible, sensual, natural world," which her Christian upbringing taught her to remove from her concept of spirituality (392). Henriksen reads Dinesen's stories as an attempt to heal the dualistic split and see body and spirit "united within" her characters (399). Henriksen believes that Dinesen saw Christian morality and duality as causing people to only live a certain portion of life, in which their natural physical impulses are not being allowed expression. They are disallowed, by the bonds of their strict Christian structure, to act out "the individualization of the impulses," and therefore the sense of self that develops is contrary to the self that would naturally emerge in a state of freedom from religious structure (Henriksen 393). As Henriksen quotes Dinesen herself:

> Has not this exact choice in our Protestant cultures led us, against our very own intentions, straight into the abyss? Has not Christianity excluded the enthusiasm over the gifts and mysteries of this life, renounced and repressed our sexuality? And thereby blocked us out of the spiritual world on the conditions that we have? (392)

Like her stance on the Atonement, this also seems to suggest that what Dinesen is reacting against is Christianity's capacity to unnaturally confine the sense of self of its believers.

As Sara Stambaugh points out, Dinesen was also opposed to the Christian missions which sought to colonize and convert the African people (Stambaugh 69). *Out of Africa* describes the missionaries' treatment of the natives in terms of corruption and castration. In this work, Dinesen suggests that Christianity tried, bit by bit, to take Africa out of the Africans and, in making them Christian, stripped the Africans of their subjectivity and agency. "The Church of England was working hard to put the Natives into European clothes," says Dinesen, and their converts ended up looking like "ungenial Eunuchs" (*OA* 327). The missionaries in *Out of Africa* also interfere in the sacred funeral of an honored African chief (*OA* 326-7) and "monitor" the Kikuyu people's traditional ecstatic dances (*OA* 154-161). The implication here is that the Africans' natural way of being and perceiving themselves had been stunted by the church which, in Dinesen's words, "gave me an impression of blindness, as if it could see nothing but itself" (*OA* 28). The missionaries' attempt had been to extract all sense of natural being, including sensuality, life-affirmation, and a connection with nature, from these new servants of Christ. *Out of Africa* shows the Africans' true sense of self being slowly killed by Christianity, just as the African wildlife --

for which Dinesen also laments -- was being slaughtered by the hunters. It is Dinesen's contention that, as the Africans became inscribed in the Christian church structure, they were placed into the static mold of what they are not. They had to surrender more and more of their true self, and accept that they are entirely defined by their service to God.

Dinesen's belief that a strict adherence to Christianity can bring a kind of death to the true, sensual, dynamic self -- as well as to the joy that self-actualization can bring -- is also made obvious in several of those characters, in her short stories, who are highly religious and have prominent positions within the church. These characters allow themselves to be swayed from self-determination and effectively allow their sense of self to be enclosed and stifled by the Christian structure. They are therefore described in terms of death and stagnancy, and their puritanical self-denial seems to have resulted in a complete lack of a self. To be sure, sensuality is entirely removed from these characters' lives. What becomes clear, however, is that for most of these characters this is not a natural state of being. Their self-sacrifice is a consequence of their voluntary marriage to the Lord, their acceptance of a limited and sacrificial role within the structure of Christianity. I now wish to expose the self-entombment of some specific characters in Dinesen's work.

III

"Peter and Rosa" is the story of a struggle between the impulse to live life freely, according to one's own sense of self, and the pressure to live life as a good puritanical Christian. Not surprisingly, the latter choice is embodied in the character of the parson. This character's selfhood is so firmly enmeshed in the structure of Christianity that even his name has been removed from him;

throughout the story he is only referred to as "the parson." Early in the story it becomes evident that his strict religious interpretations have killed so much inside the parson that everything around him is also shrouded with images of death, graves and gloom. "Within the parson's house, death was kept in view," the narrator says, and "the parson's mind was fixed upon the grave" (*WT* 147, 148).

Like Nietzsche's "Otherworldly man" the parson does not strive for betterment or growth in this world, but fixes all his attention on the next. "Even the daily life of the parsonage was run with a view to the world hereafter; the idea of mortality filled the rooms," and thus, natural growth and change have been restricted (*WT* 148). As the parson sees it, development of the self is superfluous because the self is only supposed to be a servant to God; self-expression would be contrary to the role of the dependent Object. Indeed, the parson so entirely shuts off the potential for growth in this life that he will not even allow his wife to purchase a cow from which to feed the infant child, the new life that has worked its way into the house. His justification is as follows: "How do I know . . . but that the day of judgment and the return of Christ may be nearer than anybody suspects? We should not hoard up treasures in this world" (*WT* 151).

It is also evident that a sense of Christian dualism has disabled the parson's appreciation of the sensual and the physical to the extent where "he distrusted and feared the body" (*WT* 161). Life in the parson's house is not allowed to be lived, let alone enjoyed physically. Moreover, a combination of the parson's belief that sexuality is a sin for a "bride of Christ," and the previously mentioned nineteenth century division of women into "sexual and bad" or "asexual and respectable," causes strain on the parson's relationship

with his present wife. There is a suggestion that the parson had a sexual liaison with this woman -- who was then his housekeeper -- and it is as a result of that affair that she become his wife. That she would have intercourse with him before marriage makes Eline an undesirable woman and the parson "soon repented of his infidelity to the memory of his first wife, who was his own cousin, a dean's daughter and a virgin when he married her" (*WT* 151). Moreover, because of the parson's Christian tendency to deny his own sexual agency, "in his heart he did not recognize the peasant-woman's son" (*WT* 151).

If the parson's religious beliefs have led him to give up self-fulfillment and sexuality, at least he finds some personal benefit to his self-imposed restrictions. Not only is he comforted by the thought that he has given up his own life for an ideal in which he believes, but, as he tells Rosa, he has also learnt that "a prison is a good, a safe place for human beings to be in" and that "he himself still often felt that he might sleep better in a prison than in any other place" (*WT* 165). What this suggests is that, although his Christian beliefs and the religious structure to which he has aligned himself may limit who the parson is allowed to be, once he is at terms with those limitations it is very easy to function within the structure. If one is not able to change or grow then one need not fear change or growth. Likewise, once agency and self-determinacy are taken away, a person does not need to worry about his or her actions. The parson's situation is a voluntary imprisoning of the self, and though it may not make for an exciting or dynamic life, at least it is not a risky one.

The children growing up in the parson's home are expected to accept a marriage to God, and the limitations this will place on their sense of self, just as the parson has accepted his. "Peter wanted to go to the sea, but the parson held him to his books" and in the opening scene Peter sits hunched over a copy

of *Fathers of the Church*, reading by the dim light of a candle (*WT* 147). Similarly, Rosa is not only expected but *informed* by her father that, "you do not want to run away, you will stay with me" (*WT* 165). As Rosa is the parson's daughter she stands to inherit his "Christian" identity, his value system, and his limited sort of selfhood; she must resign herself to the fact that the clergyman's study "belonged to her" and she was destined to become a bride of Christ (*WT* 165).[18] It is therefore understandable that Rosa empathizes with the butterfly, which she assumes is a female, who is trapped in her house. "She felt sorry for the captive" because she too is a prisoner in that home (*WT* 152).

It is truly against the nature of these adolescent children, in the dawn of their adult consciousness and sexuality, to live a life that denies the flesh as well as self-discovery and self-determination. Rosa, for example, is described as being rather sensual and brimming with fresh, nubile life. Her mouth is shaped like "Cupid's bow," her hair will not be tamed, and she has long, seductive eyelashes (*WT* 148). The "ease and gracefulness of her body," the narrator says, gives her a "classical and pathetic majesty" (*WT* 148).[19] As well, Rosa is a dreamer who imagines a life, unlike her own, that is "infinite" and "playful" (*WT* 149). Rosa may have acquiesced to her Christian fate, but some element of her self has not yet been won over and still seeks expression.

Peter too is of an age where he should be celebrating his adult independence and sexuality. As he watches the birds flying freely overhead

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[18]Interestingly, Rosa's two older sisters escaped the prison of their father's home only by marrying and submitting themselves to a different brand of self-denial; they became wives. (*WT* 148).

[19]Dinesen frequently sets up a dichotomy between Christianity and classical mythology, the latter of which she saw as allowing much more expression of the self than the former. Characters who are compared to figures from Greek mythology are generally ill-suited to Christianity. Another example of this is found in the characters of Gertrud, Alkmene and even Jens the parson, in "Alkmene." All of theses figures have yearnings for the sensual and the artistic that do not fit with their chosen Christian lifestyle; these yearnings are therefore consciously repressed.

Peter "felt his limbs ache" with a longing for a life in which he can enact his dreams and desires, both sexual and spiritual (*WT* 147). He longs for life-affirming, life-renewing sensations, and instead he lives in a home where denial of this life and this flesh is demanded. As the narrator says:

> To grow up in the house was to the young people a problem and a struggle, as if fatal influences were dragging them the other way, into the earth, and admonishing them to give up the vain and dangerous task of living. (*WT* 148)

Unfortunately, the limitations imposed on the inhabitants of this religious house are too much for the newborn baby, a weaker self, to fend off. It is as if the baby realizes that his selfhood does not stand a chance of developing naturally in this environment. One cannot grow and embrace one's future when the pervasive belief of the house is that growth and earthly life are worthless. The defeat with which this young life approaches his world is made evident in the following passage:

> In this house, overhung by the shadow of the grave, the other young people strove to keep alive, only the youngest inhabitant, the small, pretty child, seemed to fall in quietly with its doom, to withhold himself from life and to welcome extinction, as if he had only reluctantly consented to come into the world at all. (*WT* 151)

Throughout "Peter and Rosa" allusions are made to winter, the season where there is no life and little movement or change. "Spring," the season of fertility and growth, as the narrator informs the reader in the first line, "was late in Denmark," and it seems to be particularly late to the parson's home (*WT* 146). Peter and Rosa's future appears "icebound, and blind," "without hope or mercy" (*WT* 146). The "dead landscape" surrounding them is described as "winterly

bare and bleak," and when the narrator says -- speaking about the outdoor environment -- that "things had lately been dry and hard, unyielding to the touch, irresponsive to the cry of her [Rosa's] heart," one assumes this passage also describes the self-denying life, removed from the joys of sensuality, that Peter and Rosa are being asked to live (*WT* 146, 150, 167). Obviously, life in this environment is no better than a living death for these children.

It is Peter who first realizes that he is living contrary to the natural human desire for self-expression and development. He wants to let his theology books collect dust or "fall into the hands of dusty people, fit for books" (*WT* 147). He does not want to see himself become one of those dusty, stagnant people. Peter feels that the life he has led with the parson has already made him too "stale and hard" and "ugly" and thus he plans his escape to the sea (*WT* 155). That Peter is the first to see the need for release from the limits of a strictly religious life should not be surprising considering that the parson's home is not truly his own. He is the illegitimate child of the parson's sister, and therefore his nature is based in sexuality and freedom, not social and religious correctness.

Living without freedom or self-expression has begun to embitter Rosa as well. Because she has never known any other way of life, however, she cannot so readily identify her discomfort. What she does know is that she is "not exactly happy," she feels "lonely," and "in her heart she believed that, some time, something terrible would happen to her" (*WT* 148). She "meditated upon death as much as Peter," because that is what she has been taught to do, but she is "not allured by the picture of Paradise with her mother in it" (*WT* 148). In fact, she feels a "grudge against fate" that has placed her where she is and she "had often been so weary of, so angry with, her surroundings that in order to escape and punish them she had wished to die" (*WT* 148). This statement seems to

suggest that, although she feels she cannot escape it, Rosa would almost prefer a real death to the sort of living death of the self that she can see in her future. As with the wives in Chapter One, however, this nagging suspicion that there is more to life will prove to her benefit.

IV

Like Rosa, the two sisters in "Babette's Feast" have grown up in the restrictive environment of a strict Christian home. Their father had also been a religious leader, "a Dean and a prophet, the founder of a pious ecclesiastic party or sect" (*AD* 23), and they too were raised not to look for any kind of self-development past the limits of the "good Christian" persona. Although their names are Martine and Philippa, they are more often referred to as "the sisters," and indeed, they live more like nuns than anything else. Their commitment, like their father's, is strictly to Lutheran ideals, and they serve their God loyally and completely. Indeed, it can be said that these two spinsters married the Lord at an early age and have spent their life sacrificing whatever elements of themselves it was necessary to sacrifice in order to uphold the ideal of that union. As the narrator says, "the fair girls had been brought up to an ideal of heavenly love; they were all filled with it and did not let themselves be touched by the flames of this world" (*AD* 25).

As "Peter and Rosa" makes evident, a marriage to the Lord often demands that the bride sacrifice her sexuality. Certainly the sisters in "Babette's Feast" have "renounced the pleasures of this world" (*AD* 23). Despite the fact that in their youth they had been "extraordinarily pretty" and had been compared to such sensuous images as "flowering fruit trees" (*AD* 24), they choose to repress their natural, sexual side. "The young men of Berlevaag went

to church to watch them walk up the aisle," and several suitors sought their hands in marriage, but Martine and Philippa believed, as their father taught, that "earthly love, and marriage with it, were trivial matters, in themselves nothing but illusions" (*AD* 24- 25). They therefore allow Christian virtue to replace desire in their conception of fulfillment.

Denial of the body extends past denial of sexuality for these brides of Christ. Not only do they refuse to adorn their bodies with articles of fashion, but they also feel that even in the consumption of food they should surrender their own desires and preferences. They inform Babette of their beliefs by saying that "luxurious fare [is] sinful . . . food must be as plain as possible" (*AD* 36). To pay attention to personal tastes, it seems, is to claim more subjectivity than a good servant of the Lord should; these sisters sacrifice their own fulfillment to serve their God and with the money they save by eating plainly, they feed the poor. Indeed, they are so willing to surrender their own subjectivity that, before eating Babette's dinner, they pray that the Lord will "cleanse our tongues of all taste and purify them of all delight or disgust of the senses, keeping and preserving them for higher things of praise and thanksgiving" (*AD* 47).

"Babette's Feast" is set in the small Norwegian town of Berlevaag but, as we are told and continually reminded throughout the work, the capital city of Christiania is close by. The significance of this name for the capital of Norway should not be missed; just as any capital city to some extent dictates the administration of a small town, strict puritanical Christianity to some extent oversees every aspect of life in Berlevaag. It is therefore not surprising that the sisters' surrendering of subjectivity to their Lord seems to extend to everyone in Berlevaag. Death of selfhood and loss of subjectivity are common here, and thus references are frequently made, throughout the work, to deaths and losses.

All of the Dean's followers, for example, are old and getting "harder of hearing" every year (*AD* 26). In fact, one of the Dean's first and most loyal followers, the devout Mrs. Loewenhielm, is not only "stone-deaf" but has also "lost all sense of smell or taste" (*AD* 47). This suggests that the longer one allows Christianity to entirely define one's identity the more difficult it becomes to appreciate the sensual and the bodily. Mrs. Loewenhielm's self is actually, physically, deteriorating.

Strangers also tend to suffer losses of the self upon arrival in the stifling atmosphere of Berlevaag. The first to fall victim to this loss is Lorens Loewenhielm. By his very nature Lorens is a dreamer and a visionary, the inheritor of his family's claim to a spiritual gift of second-sightedness. Spending some time in the Dean's house, however, causes his free spirit to shrink and finally become crushed under the weight of Christian servitude. After each visit to the sisters' home he "seemed to himself to grow smaller and more insignificant and contemptible" until, in place of his open vision of an unlimited life, he feels that "Fate is hard, and that in this world there are things which are impossible" (*AD* 27). The extreme Christian structure in the town has forced this young free spirit to define himself in very limited terms. No longer is he able to explore his "mighty vision of a higher and purer life . . . with no secret, unpleasant pangs of conscience," for he has "let himself be defeated and frustrated by a sect of long-faced sectarians in the bare-floored rooms of an old Dean's house" (*AD* 26-7). Lorens Loewenhielm has allowed himself to be consumed by the religious structure of Berlevaag and has accepted limitation and impossibility into his life; he has given up his true, free sense of self for the suffocating role of the good Christian servant. After this visit to Berlevaag

Lorens begins to be described as a man of "low spirits" who is scared to dream, a man who has "firmly refused the gift of second sight" (*AD* 48, 27, 52).

Even the vivacious, rebellious, free spirit of Babette Hersant suffers a degree of suffocation in Berlevaag. It is interesting to note that, upon her arrival, the sisters are afraid of Babette because she is not Protestant, and they feel that it is their duty to convert their servant with "the example of a good Lutheran life" (*AD* 35-36).[20] This of course recalls Dinesen's discussion of the conversion of the Africans in *Out of Africa*. Just as the missionaries saw a kind of freedom that they could not understand and therefore tried to control in the Africans, the sisters "realized that Babette was deep, and that in the soundings of her being there were passions, there were memories and longings of which they knew nothing at all" and they work at exorcising these passions (*AD* 38). To these women, who have rejected subjective passion and longing, Babette represents something frightening and sinful. Babette has not been defined, as they have, as the objectified wife in a heavenly marriage, and thus her independence and self-determination are interpreted as potentially dangerous. This may explain why, as Stambaugh believes, the sisters see Babette as a kind of witch (Stambaugh 81).

The narrator tells us that "Babette had arrived haggard and wild eyed . . . but in her new, friendly surroundings she soon acquired all the appearance of a respectable and trusted servant" (*AD* 35). The irony here is that the narrator speaks of this change in such positive terms. Babette does indeed become a

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[20]It seems that Dinesen's tolerance of the Roman Catholic contingent of Christianity is much greater than it is for the Protestant. She generally presents Catholics as suffering less limitation of the self, suggesting that Catholicism does not demand such a drastic split between the spirit and the body. Dinesen's decision to make Babette and Achille Papin Catholics, besides being a realistic choice given their French nationality, is interesting. If Babette had been an atheist, even these charitable sisters would likely not have allowed her into their home. At least this way they can feel secure in Babette's devotion to the proper God and can work at altering her *lifestyle* to better serve that God.

servant, but not just to the sisters; she must also adopt the master of her masters, their patriarchal, objectifying God. In so doing, Babette must learn to sacrifice all personal goals and longings and act only as a servant, devoid of independent subjectivity and personal desire. For Babette, of course, this includes a surrendering of her art, her ultimate form of self-expression and an activity which pleases the body and feeds individual longings. Babette's surrendering of her cooking can even be equated with a new wife's surrendering of sexuality; Babette believes in "turning a dinner . . . into a kind of love affair" and her new masters will not have her engage in such affairs (*AD* 58). It is no wonder, therefore, that when Babette decides to allow Berlevaag to be her permanent home, it is called an unforgettable "self-sacrifice" (*AD* 35). To stay is, quite literally, a sacrifice of Babette's independent, subjective selfhood; from then on she must find her restricted, objectified place in the "still life" of Berlevaag (*AD* 35).

Again, as in the last chapter, many more examples of selfhoods that have been limited by strict Christian interpretation could be sighted from Dinesen's work. Again, however, I have chosen these stories for a specific purpose. Like Emilie, Lovisa and Benedetta, some of the characters in "Peter and Rosa" and "Babette's Feast" -- specifically Rosa and Philippa -- will be given a chance to see beyond their limited selfhoods. They too will have an encounter with an individual who can potentially help them release their sense of self into a freer play of meaning.

CHAPTER THREE

Re-conceiving the Self Through Play

I

In the last two chapters I have attempted to illustrate how characters in Isak Dinesen's short stories frequently allow structures within their society to determine their selfhood. Rather than seeing their sense of self as engaged in an ongoing play of meaning, they allow social structures to define and limit them and resign themselves to the fulfillment of a single function or role in their community. Specifically, I have looked at how Dinesen's female characters confine themselves within the role of Wife, and I have suggested that the same sort of limitation occurs when devout Christians, in Dinesen's work, live as the bride of Christ. Both of these types of "wives," I have said, are expected to remain associated with what has traditionally been seen as the feminine; they are passive, dependent, objectified, and stripped of any personal -- particularly sexual -- desire. In sum, then, my argument thus far has been that an objectified individual in Dinesen's short stories -- that is, an individual who has come to accept him or herself as the unprivileged factor in a binary, hierarchical structure like religion or marriage -- can usually be interpreted in terms of the de-sexualized and the "feminine," regardless of that person's gender.

Marilyn Blackwell, in an article entitled "The Transforming Gaze: Identity and Sexuality in the Works of Isak Dinesen," also discusses objectification, sexuality and the concept of "the feminine." Blackwell's is an investigation of "mirror imagery and the motif of the transforming gaze" in Dinesen's stories (50). Through this investigation she hopes to illuminate "exactly what Dinesen sees as constituting human and, more specifically, male and female identity" (50). It

is Blackwell's assumption that when men look into a mirror, they are seeking their own identity, but when women look in mirrors they see themselves only as men see them: as sexual objects. "Even when men are not present," says Blackwell, "women regard themselves in mirrors with a man's eye, with a projected male gaze of sexual desire," and this male gaze "robs these women of their individuality and turns them into sexual objects" (56-7).[21] As Blackwell rightly points out, to be defined in these terms implies "limitation and restriction" of the self, as opposed to the "richness and freedom" given to the sexually independent male (56). "Men, presumably, because they are men, have no sexual destiny to acknowledge or fulfill," and they certainly are not solely defined by their function in procreation (56); as Blackwell says, "men are human beings, women are women" in Dinesen's stories (57).

In its acknowledgment that Dinesen portrays women as limited in their individuality and sexually objectified, Blackwell's reading is not dissimilar to my own. On one major point, however, Blackwell's reading and mine diverge. Whereas I see the use of such portrayals of women as a feminist *exposure* of patriarchal limitations placed on women, Marilyn Blackwell contends that the existence of such characters indicates that Isak Dinesen herself possessed a *sympathy* for patriarchal beliefs. Certainly, Dinesen did set all her short stories in the nineteenth century, and certainly she was historically accurate enough to place many of her female characters within the kind of limiting, patriarchal situations that were pervasive at the time, but I do not believe that this validates Blackwell's comment that "Dinesen's vision of the world is deeply and

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[21]This contention is not strictly accurate. In "The Pearls," for instance, Jensine's gaze into a mirror helps her to define herself, for the first time in the story, as existing completely *apart* from her husband. This not only works against Blackwell's argument that only men find their own identity in a mirror, but it also works against her belief that the only "enrichment" a woman can experience, when she looks in a mirror, "takes the form of an acknowledgment that woman's function is purely sexual" (58).

fundamentally androcentric" (63). To show something the way it was is not to say that things were better off that way.

In my opinion, the subtlety of Dinesen's writing, which is obvious to many of her other critics, seems to have eluded Blackwell. Susan Aiken, for instance, appreciates the "ironic tone" she hears in Dinesen's discussion of women's power and how that power is determined by the degree to which women "allow themselves to be *circumscribed* by marriage, their desire to be bound by the limits of the patriarchal space" (*Tracing* 166). Unlike Aiken, Blackwell does not consider the possibility that Dinesen may have put these situations on display in order to condemn them. Such an oversight is characteristic of Blackwell's essay, however, for in it she seems to take everything too literally. In fact, I believe Blackwell repeatedly confuses the narrative voices in the stories with Dinesen's own voice. I do not believe Blackwell is justified in suggesting that every character or narrator who espouses patriarchal beliefs is acting as a mouthpiece for Isak Dinesen. How, after all, is an author expected to discuss a problem in society without first acknowledging that problem through illustration?[22] While I cannot deny that Dinesen often presents women in "severely delimited" roles, functioning primarily as sexual objects to men, I believe that she does so to demonstrate the *malignancy* of this situation, and not, as Marilyn Blackwell suggests, to endorse it (Blackwell 63).

As I see it, there is yet another problem with Blackwell's belief that "the various scholarly attempts to claim Dinesen for feminism seem rather ill-considered" and that feminist readings are "not supported by the texts" (62). It is

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[22]Perhaps the most obvious of Blackwell's mis-readings arises in her discussion of Dinesen's essay "Daguerreotypes." As previously discussed, in that essay Dinesen exposes the four categories of womanhood that she feels *men* have imposed on women, and she points out that these categories are all based on women's service to men. Dinesen's argument is that these categories are false and limiting, yet somehow Blackwell understands the text to suggest that "*the author herself* contended that all women fall into one of four different categories" (my italics 62-3).

this problem that I wish to discuss at length. I see Blackwell's contention that "in no case, it is [sic] possible for [a woman] to be sexual, independent and powerful" in Dinesen's stories as exaggerated as well as short-sighted (63). Not only is such a statement a great over-generalization -- one which Blackwell herself knows she must justify and attempts to do so by explaining away the freedom of Dinesen's artists and old women -- but it also seems to overlook the fact that many of those same limited and objectified women *are* eventually able to free themselves from these limited roles. I believe Blackwell has overlooked the many subtle opportunities given in Dinesen's stories for the femininized self to free itself from the structures which seek to limit it and, in turn, appropriate a sense of subjectivity, sexuality and independent self-determination. In fact, I even see these opportunities arising in some of the stories that Blackwell condemns as being entirely objectifying and limiting to women.[23] Although Blackwell fails to witness it, I believe that Dinesen allows many of her objectified characters -- be they objectified through marriage and gender constructs or through a certain strict religious interpretation -- to escape the structure that limits them and claim subjectivity and sexual desire. Evidence of such escapes into freedom, and discussion of the theoretical justification of how such a freeing is possible, will comprise the rest of this thesis.

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[23]Blackwell says that "The Ring" and "The Cardinal's First Tale" contain moments in which male gazes define the female protagonists as sexual objects (57-8). It seems to me that Blackwell does not give these women enough credit; Blackwell does not acknowledge the possibility that, in their own *returned* gaze, these women could encounter a trace element of their own self which could counter-act that male gaze and actually provide an opportunity for these women to re-define themselves as sexual *agents*. Blackwell does not see how a woman may come to define herself sexually, and yet not see herself as a sexual object. Blackwell assumes that any sexuality a women possesses must be of an objectified kind, and she does not seems to consider the possibility of a woman possessing sexual *subjectivity*. As I will discuss later, I see these female characters' acceptance of their sexuality as a liberating, not limiting, moment; I see these women as claiming agency and independence through, not despite, their sexuality.

II

Perhaps if one is looking for the means by which one of Dinesen's characters can escape objectivity, one should look at examples of her characters who are not objectified. In "The Transforming Gaze: Identity and Sexuality in the Works of Isak Dinesen," Marilyn Blackwell claims that there are two groups of women in Dinesen's fiction who appear strong, independent and dynamic. The first group consists of female artists and Blackwell cites Pellegrina in "The Dreamers," Babette in "Babette's Feast" and Heloise in "The Heroine" as examples. The second group consists of powerful old women, like Miss Malin in "Deluge at Norderney" and the Prioress in "The Monkey." These women, according to Blackwell, are also "vital and vibrant women, secure in themselves and actively engaged in life" (61).

One notable similarity between all of these characters is that they are all unmarried.[24] This fact not only confirms Blackwell's belief that these women "act with almost total freedom from male influence," but it also suggests that a refusal to submit to the marital structure may enhance a woman's ability to express subjectivity (61). This should hardly be surprising given the limitations that marriage was seen, in Chapter One, to impose on a woman's subjectivity. The suggestion is, therefore, that by avoiding the limiting structure of marriage, women can be free to explore their identity past the limitations of being a "wife"; without this label, and the assumptions about subject/object positions that come with it, the definition of selfhood is left open. Thus, the characters that Blackwell mentions, by remaining single, have removed themselves from the confines of a structure that seeks to limit their selfhood and strip them of subjectivity.

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[24]The only possible point of contention to this statement occurs with the character of Babette, who was once married, but became a widow before the beginning of Dinesen's narrative.

Another intriguing commonalty among the women Blackwell considers to be self-aware is that, despite the nineteenth-century condemnation of extra-marital sexuality, particularly for a woman, all of these unmarried females are quite strongly associated with the sexual. Pellegrina has had many lovers, for example, and Heloise is a nude dancer by trade. Babette's art is frequently associated with erotic love, and Miss Malin, though in reality a virgin, boasts convincingly of her imagined youth of sexual indiscretion. As well, the Prioress is not only essential in orchestrating the sexual life of Boris and Athena, but her alter-ego, the monkey, according to Sibyl James, is symbolic of the animalistic, sexual side of love (James 148-50). In short, these women all possess some form of personal sexuality that exists outside of the marital situation.

Could it be that -- quite contrary to Blackwell's suggestion that women in Dinesen's fiction can only be independent individuals if they have been removed from the sphere of sexuality -- it is these women's sexuality which actually "liberates them and transforms them into free human beings" (Blackwell 61)? Perhaps it is their ability to pursue the sexual, while remaining outside of the limiting sphere of marriage, that allows these women to be dynamic and self-determining; perhaps privileging sexual playfulness over the marital structure frees their sense of self and opens them up to new possibilities of being.

In *On Modern Marriage* Dinesen speaks of the necessity for women to feel free to engage in sexual "play," physical love without marriage.[25] The reason that she felt a woman's sexuality should be released from the restraints of marriage should by now be obvious; Dinesen saw marriage as limiting to the sense of self. Sex outside of marriage, however, Dinesen saw as having the

[25]For this reason Dinesen praises the advent of birth control (*OMM* 84-86).

opposite effect; it can enhance the self. Similar to the New French feminists, who, according to Else Cederborg, "see *jouissance* (sexual rapture or pleasure) as a liberating force" for women, Dinesen seems to view "play" as a way for women to uncover things about their own self that they may not have otherwise known (*OMM* 12).

It seems that the reason Dinesen saw sexuality as a way to gain new insight into one's selfhood resides in the fact that sexuality has the ability to bring opposites -- in this case male and female -- together.[26] As many critics have noted, Dinesen believed that only when opposites join is it possible for anything, including one's sense of self, to grow, change or be newly created. In *Shadows on the Grass*, Dinesen says that "a community of but one sex would be a blind world" (378). Conversely, as she says in "Oration at a Bonfire, Fourteen Years Late," all the greatest human achievements, such as "courageous exploits, poetry, the arts, and the refinement of taste," can be attributed to the sexual interaction between men and women (*Dag* 70):

> I myself look upon *inspiration* as the greatest human blessing. And inspiration always requires two elements. I think that the mutual inspiration of man and woman has been the most powerful force in the history of the race . . . I think that one of the ways in which human beings have elevated themselves above animals is this: human beings mate year round -- a society in which the attraction of the two sexes to one another was limited to a distinct, brief period, must become notably blunted. Yes, I think that the

[26]Dinesen's fascination with the way in which opposites help to define each other and give each other meaning has been noted particularly by Thomas Whissen in "The Magic Circle: The Role of the Prostitute in Isak Dinesen's Gothic Tales" and *Isak Dinesen's Aesthetics*, Janet Handler Burstein in "Two Locked Caskets: Selfhood and 'Otherness' in the Work of Isak Dinesen," and Eric O. Johannesson in the "Aristocracy" chapter of *The World of Isak Dinesen.*

> more strongly the mutual inspiration functions, the richer and more animated a society will develop. (*Dag* 70)

As this quotation suggests, the sexual interplay between men and women is integral as a means to opening up new possibilities of thought and action. When interacting with each other, men and women are "inspired" to look beyond the ordinary; they are expected to create new things and look at old things in a new light. Without this interplay, things would remain uninspired, unaltered, developmentally stunted.

This inspiration not only has an effect on the social level, however, but also on the individual level. Dinesen seems to have believed that "play" with the opposite sex can lead to an "inspired" view of one's own self, and that without play, one's sense of self may remain static, limited and incapable of fulfilling its potential. In "A Consolatory Tale," for example, Dinesen says, that "man and woman are two locked caskets, of which each contains the key to the other" (*WT* 216). The suggestion here is that, when men and women are engaged in play, they uncover a truer self-understanding than would be possible alone. The opposite sex opens up opportunities of being that may otherwise be closed off to a person, and thus the individual's sense of self is liberated from his or her own limited view.[27]

The reason that play, particularly sexual play, can enhance -- or to use Dinesen's word, "inspire" -- one's sense of self and prod it towards a new and more complete expression, can be found in the very nature of play itself. Simply

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[27]Based on this belief in the need for the sexes to intermix, one would think that Dinesen would praise marriage as a perfect opportunity for something new to be created in the self; after all, marriages bring men and women together sexually and relatively permanently. Nevertheless, it is within that very idea of permanence -- that desire to solidify and stabilize -- that Dinesen saw the problem with marriages. Her argument seems to be that nothing new can be created if anything, or anyone, is too tightly locked into any one way of being; one can not create if one is resistant to change, and marriages, she seems to believe, demand that nothing and no one changes.

stated, play can help resist the permanent solidification of meaning; it unsettles -- and can even make ambiguous -- the categories of being. Whereas we have seen that structures demand that categories be definite and an individual's meaning be frozen within one category, play -- although it too is, in some senses, governed by certain rules and structures -- has the ability to allow categories to blur. Thus, in play, an individual's meaning does not limit itself to any one thing. For a thorough explanation of the nature of play, however, I must turn to the works of L.S. Vygotsky and Jessica Benjamin.

III

In *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (1978), psychologist L.S. Vygotsky describes his theories regarding the importance of "play" in a child's development. Like the concept of "jouissance" mentioned earlier, and like Dinesen's own vision of play, Vygotsky interprets play as "a novel form of behavior [that] *liberat[es]* the child from constraints" (96, my italics). Moreover, Vygotsky stresses that "the child satisfies certain needs in play" (93); play, he believes, is a motivated behavior that surfaces out of a certain lack, a desire for more.[28] "Play seems to be invented at the point when the child begins to experience unrealizable tendencies" (93). When the child's desires cannot be gratified immediately, he or she invents "an imaginary, illusory world in which the unrealizable desires can be realized" (93).[29] It seems then, that a need to have more -- or be more -- than one appears to have

[28]While Vygotsky feels that it is "essential" to show the "role of motivation in play," he also admits that the child may not consciously understand the motives giving rise to his or her game (94,93).

[29]This begins to happen, according to Vygotsky, "toward the beginning of pre-school age" when a child is able to free himself or herself from "situational constraints" and can start to "act independently of what he sees" as reality (95,96, 97).

-- or be -- may be what draws people to play; imagination[30] can act as an escape, however temporary, from the otherwise inescapable limitations of reality.[31]

Vygotsky's theory also suggests that play provides the child with an opportunity to re-assess certain categories of meaning. "The child at play," says Vygotsky, "operates with meanings detached from their usual objects" (98), and it is the child's ability to "transfer" these detached meanings that allows him or her to access the inaccessible (99). To have things be what the child wishes they were, the child will "sever meaning" from the desired object and anoint a more accessible object with that meaning (97). A stick can become as horse, a piece of wood becomes a doll, because the child is acting on a cognitive wish about the way things were, and not on external indications of how that object should be defined (96). The initial meaning of the object does not disappear, however. The stick is still a stick, but its meaning has been *expanded* so that it can also be, at least temporarily, a horse. In play, a child will "retain the property of things" but "change their meaning" in order to suit his or her immediate needs or desires (98).[32]

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[30]There are intriguing similarities between Vygotsky's discussion of "imagination" as that which frees a thing from its socially given meaning and Sibyl James' discussion of "imagination" as means by which Dinesen's women characters "achieve freedom from restrictions" (James 152).

[31] It must be noted, however, that Vygotsky acknowledges that "there is no such thing as play without rules"; "the imaginary situation of any form of play," he says, "already contains rules of behavior" (94). In fact, children's play is often an attempt to *establish* what those rules are. When children play certain roles, for instance, they do so not only to escape the rules of their own role but also to analyze the limits of the alternate role. If a child is playing at being a mother, for instance, he or she must "obey the rules of maternal behavior" (94). Therefore, it seems that play is both a pushing of the limits of meaning and an acknowledgment that there *are*, in fact, limits.

[32]Vygotsky does stress that "Goethe's contention that in play any thing can be anything for a child is incorrect" (98). A child does not use "free substitution," nor does he or she make "conscious use of symbols" in play (98). The object onto which meaning is transferred must actually possess certain properties that can be realistically associated with its new meaning. A stick can be a horse, for example, because you can seem to ride on it. Here we see an example of how rules govern play; any "freeing up" of meaning must be relative and more or less believable.

What this suggests is that, in play, a thing need not be limited to a singular and definitive meaning; in play, objects can move in and out of the categories to which they are usually understood to belong. Play provides a "movement in the field of meaning -- which subordinates all real objects and actions to itself" (101). It opens a realm of possibilities where accepted categories of meaning can be suspended; as Vygotsky says, "in play, things lose their determining force" so that a new meaning can be attached to an object and so that the child can respond to an object in a novel way (96). In a situation of play, therefore, there exists a sort of freedom which is rarely possible in a closed structure of meaning; categorical slippage allows one thing to embody more than one meaning.

It seems that this detachment and freeing up of meaning could be applied not only to objects, but also to one's sense of self. Certainly this is suggested in Dinesen's remarks about play having a liberating and inspiring effect on the sense of self. If play is a chance to re-conceive categories of meaning, then individuals who are engaged in play are free to see themselves as something quite other than the labels and roles which usually define them. Just as the child can imagine objects to be what he or she desires them to be, so too can a person involved in play shift his or her meaning in order better to fulfill his or her desire. A person can imaginatively create his or her self as he or she wishes to be, rather than according to how he or she is usually defined. Unlike what happens inside a structure, the person involved in this sort of play will not have to be entombed within a single signifier. No wonder, therefore, Dinesen says that play is "the greatest happiness imaginable from any source" (*OMM* 78); play liberates and frees the self, releasing it into a stream of possibilities. This freedom may be temporary, but this apprehension of what

things *could be* like is the first step towards a more fundamental and permanent alteration of self-concept.[33]

Vygotsky says that it would hard to overestimate the true significance of play; "the influence of play on a child's development is enormous" he contends (96, 97). The ability to perceive meaning beyond sensory reality, the ability to free an object from a single definition is vital for an individual's maturity. This seems particularly true when one considers the kind of play that involves the re-negotiation of one's definition of one's self. Without the ability to appreciate new possibilities of being for the self, that self remains stunted. Vygotsky, however, does not discuss play in terms of a growth of self-definition; it is Jessica Benjamin who is concerned with the way in which a person comes to define himself or herself and how that sense of self matures. Her discussion of play, therefore, does consider its role in the establishment and transgression of categories of being. In particular, Benjamin discusses the ability of play to loosen, in fact even blur, the categories of subject and object.

I have already discussed Jessica Benjamin's Hegelian assumption that every human being, from birth, struggles to be recognized as an independent, autonomous subject. This human need for recognition explains the ironically social aspect of consciousness; to confirm one's individual agency in the world, and be sure of one's independence in that world, one depends on another to recognize and acknowledge one's actions. I have also already looked at

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[33]It is interesting to note, however, that Vygotsky describes the "evolution" of play as a movement from "games with an overt imaginary situation and covert rules to games with overt rules and a covert imaginary situation" (96). This implies that it is the *letting go* of the freedom of definitions, and the *clarifying* of the rules or restraints of definitions, that is the catapult into adulthood. Ironically then, Vygotsky is also saying that, in order for a child to become a fully functioning member of adult society, he or she must learn to privilege rules over playful, imaginary freedom of meaning.

Benjamin's discussion of the infant's attempts at gaining recognition from the mother and how, in the infant's struggle for subjectivity, he or she comes to view the mother merely as the Object to his or her subjectivity, the recognizer of his or her agency. There are moments, however, in the mother/infant relationship, that could be seen as moments of "mutual recognition." At these times the battle for subjectivity is suspended, and the boundary between the categories of subject and object is permeable. The subjectivity of both mother and child is acknowledged, and, simultaneously, both mother and child are acting as the other's recognizing Other.

One such moment, Benjamin suggests, occurs when the mother and child engage in socially motivated play (26). "Play interaction can be as primary a source of feeling of oneness as nursing or being held," says Benjamin, and "in this play, the reciprocity that two subjects can create, or subvert, is crucial" (27, 26). In play, mother and child, through facial and gestural responses, can "begin a dance of interaction in which the partners are so attuned that they move together in unison" (27). "Thus," says Benjamin, "the ultimate gratification of being in attunement with another person can be framed not -- or not only -- in terms of instinctual satisfaction, but of cooperation and recognition" (27). Neither subject is fully in control of the other's actions, nor of his or her own; both experience a feeling of simultaneous dependence on the other and mastery of the other. Here play has brought on, not only the transfer of categories that Vygotsky discusses, but, in fact, a deterioration of categories; both parties are both subject and object, and yet, at the same time neither.[34]

[34]Benjamin realizes that this "ideal of mutuality in which both subjects partake of the contradictory elements of negation and recognition" is, at best, very fleeting (62-3). "Wholeness can only exist by maintaining contradiction," she says, and this contradiction is not easy to maintain (63). Inevitably the "human aspiration to omnipotence" brings about a struggle for sole recognition, and thus "each subject winds up embodying only one side of the tension" (63).

Definite, categorical meaning has been detached from the individuals involved in play.

The "reciprocal attunement to one another's gestures" found in infant play, according to Benjamin, "prefigures adult erotic play as well" (27). Adult eroticism, or sexual play, can therefore be seen as another attempt at mutual recognition, another way to simultaneously experience being recognized and recognizing. Sex is another transgressing of the categories of subject and object. "In erotic union" says Benjamin, "we can experience that form of mutual recognition in which both partners lose themselves in each other without loss of self; they lose self-consciousness without loss of awareness" (29).

As Jessica Benjamin concedes, George Bataille best describes the categorical slippage made possible through eroticism:

> Individual existence for Bataille is a state of separation and isolation: we are as islands, connected yet separated by a sea of death. Eroticism is the perilous crossing of that sea. It opens the way out of isolation by exposing us to 'death . . . the denial of our individual lives.' The body stands for boundaries: discontinuity, individuality, and life. Consequently, the violation of the body is a transgression of boundary between life and death, even as it breaks through our discontinuity from the other. This break, this crossing of boundaries, is for Bataille the secret of *all* eroticism. . . And it is the erotic complementarity that offers a way to simultaneously break through and preserve the boundaries. (Benjamin 63-4)

What this quotation suggests is that sexual play involves a suspension of clear self-definition; it refuses to acknowledge a completely individual, clearly

defined, existence. In ideal sexual play, there is a breakdown of the subject/object, self/other opposition; the entire act is built on an ambiguity of body, as well as of role and function. In sexual play, therefore, the self is not just a stable, unchanging category, but it is engaged in a continuous interchange with its other.[35] The categories of 'self' and 'other' become permeable, and each individual can embody either category. That which defines one individual becomes confused and intermingled with that which defines the other. Each person's sense of who he or she is has been expanded to include that which is supposed to describe the other as well.

Thus, just as Vygotsky describes children's play as a detachment of meaning from an object -- a detachment which allows an object to assume a different and more satisfying meaning -- it seems that adult sexual play is a detachment of meaning from an individual which provides the opportunity for that individual to re-construct his or her own meaning in a way that is more fulfilling and complete. When a person is liberated from the definition he or she has come to accept, it becomes possible for that person to imagine him or her self as being freed from the static quality of binary oppositions, social conventions, traditional roles.

The social element of sexual play suggests that a person can even claim that which was supposed to be in direct opposition to his or her own definition. This is particularly the case when a person's play partner is normally identified in opposition to the person's own nature. It is here that one hears an echo of Isak Dinesen's views of how interacting opposites can provide inspiration to

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[35]Certainly, this ambiguity of categories and of meaning can be frightening, even threatening, to one's sense of who one is. As Benjamin says about the categorical transgressions in sexual play, "when both partners dissolve the boundary, both experience a fundamental sense of breakdown, a kind of primary, existential anxiety; instead of connection to a defined other, there is a terrifying void" (64). While being limited to only one side of a binary opposite may be restrictive, at least it is stable and predictable, and one knows who or what one is.

each other. The locked caskets -- men and women -- find keys to their own truer, freer sense of self within the other, that person who seems to be everything he or she is not. The play situation is thus an opportunity for each partner to discover the other's qualities, roles -- even their sense of subjectivity -- existing within his or her own identity. If the divisions of self and other are vague in play, then all that defines one partner can be claimed by the other. The other can thus act as an example of an alternative mode of being for the self.[36]

Sexuality thus provides an opportunity for the identity of one's opposite to resonate in one's own sense of self; it allows an individual to acknowledge a "trace" of that which he or she is not -- that which belongs to his or her opposite -- as part of his or her own definition. Sexual play opens up new possibilities for the sense of self; it "inspires" individuals to claim that which they did not know they had a right to claim. Instead of just fulfilling one side of a binary opposition then, instead of being locked in to a single limited identity, one can acknowledge both sides to the dialectic as potentially within oneself. Each person sees what the other is as something that he or she can also be.

Perhaps the most fundamental trace that a person could identify in his or her self is that of subjectivity. For this reason, an individual who generally views

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[36]It can be justifiably argued that this is a rather selfish approach to sexuality; it sounds as if each individual is involved with the other person merely to benefit his or her self, without finding any sort of joy in the actual *union* or in the intimacy of sharing. While I must stress that Benjamin does not suggest that personal gain is *all* that is sought for -- or found -- in sex, I cannot entirely free Dinesen from this accusation. In a letter to her brother of August 5, 1926, Dinesen speaks admiringly of Aldous Huxley's idea of the "love of parallels." This is an approach to relationships that demands that each individual continue on his or her own life course, alongside, but never actually intersecting with the other. In Dinesen's words, this kind of love is a "form of passionate sympathy, a mutual love of ideas or ideals rather than a personal devotion to and giving of oneself to each other" (*Letters* 270-71). Further, Dinesen says that this is only possible when each partner works to maintain "his own existence," and she believes that when "one is oneself and striving for one's own distant aim one finds joy in the knowledge of being on parallel courses for all eternity" (*Letters* 271). Hers therefore seems a rather opportunistic approach to love; if it benefits one's self then it is good, and whether or not it benefits the other is entirely the other's concern. Many would argue, therefore, that this is does not even deserve to be called love.

him or her self as an Object would likely find the playful discarding of categorical meaning -- and the adoption of the partner's reality -- rather liberating.[37] When an Other can find, in his or her own identity, a trace of his or her subjective playmate, then he or she can start envisioning himself or herself as a Self, rather than as an Other. Privileging playful transgression of definitions over structural insistence on solid definitions, therefore, can free an objectified individual from his or her objectification; the objectified can claim a subjectivity that otherwise is not seen to be part of his or her definition.[38]

Another way to interpret this "playing" with the limits of identity is to it view it in terms of procreation. When man and woman come together there is an opportunity for creation. Instead of the conception of a child, a new person, however, there is a *re-conception* of an individual's identity. To put it simply, sexual play -- that which we may call sexual *recreation* -- allows for a *re-creation* of the self. When people can "conceive" of their identity as being outside of structural categories, the signifier of the self can be re-interpreted, re-invented, re-born. This metaphor of re-birth is especially effective when applied to the changes in the objectified individual during play. Sexual play allows these individuals to re-conceive who and what they are, outside of a structure, and, momentarily at least, envision themselves as a Subject. The result is the

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[37]An individual who views himself as a strong subject may find the situation of subject/ object ambiguity particularly threatening. As Hegel argued, it is part of the human make-up to crave independent and sole mastery over all things. This urge for sole domination and recognition, combined with the of fear of permanently losing one's selfhood in the ambiguity of play, may result in a "fight for recognition," wherein one subject will attempt to objectify the Other. Such action is an attempt to establish a stable hierarchy, with oneself on top, to assure one's own independent existence and agency. This attempt, it should be noted, is the focus of Benjamin's discussion of the roots of sexual domination.

[38]Janet Handler Burstein believes that "for Dinesen, 'otherness,' despite its dubious implications for individual autonomy, is a vital fragment of human identity that must be acknowledged and accepted before selfhood can be achieved" (615). This supports the thought that a free play of subject/object roles, like the sort found in play, is essential in the establishment of selfhood. Likewise, Else Cederborg believes that Dinesen "saw 'otherness' as a necessary part of one's identity, whether man or woman" (17).

appearance of an inspired, dynamic Self where nothing but an Object existed before; a new sense of self can be conceived in sexual play.

IV

As I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, Marilyn Blackwell sees nothing but a freezing of categories in Dinesen's short stories. Most significantly, Blackwell views Dinesen's female characters as permanently confined to their self-denying "object" role. I also mentioned at the beginning of this chapter that I disagree with Blackwell; I believe that Isak Dinesen allows many of her characters to claim subjectivity and independence, even though they do start out in positions of objectification and selflessness. Where I think Blackwell makes her mistake is in overlooking certain moments of "play" in Dinesen's stories. In these moments, objectified characters are given the opportunity to re-negotiate their sense of self -- outside of the categories imposed by rigid social structures -- and are inspired to re-conceive themselves as an active, self-determining Self. I see many of these characters removing themselves from the confines of structure and engaging in the sort of play that acts as a way out of the confines of a single role or function.

Since Dinesen places such an emphasis in her work on the interaction of opposites -- particularly on the sexual interaction of man and woman -- it seems reasonable that, for Dinesen's characters, this play would be of a sexual nature. When her characters enter a play situation with someone who is their opposite in more ways than gender, they seem to be "inspired" to new possibilities of being. Each partner allows the binary categories which usually define him or her to blur with the other's categories. Each partner thus acts as an alternate identity, an alternate mode of being, for the other. It is therefore through

sexuality, and not, as Marilyn Blackwell believes, apart from it, that the "feminine" characters in Dinesen's work can find self-expression. As Dinesen states in *On Modern Marriage*, "the best part of [one's] nature reveals itself in play," and "love between a man and a woman [can] represent the most beautiful and bold thing in life, its best game" (*OMM* 80, 78).

Unlike Blackwell, I agree with Susan Aiken that all of Dinesen's "greatest texts" set in motion the "'interplay' between 'heterogeneous' elements, inviting thereby a re-conception of the categories of *man* and *woman*'" (xxv). As I see it, in Dinesen's stories sexual play provides opportunities for objectified individuals to re-conceive the categories that limit and define them. Moreover, this play is (re)creational in that it allows for the re-birth of a subjective self; these individuals are able to give birth to themselves as new, independent and subjective individuals. The next chapter, therefore, will be dedicated to a study of some of Dinesen's "greatest texts," and the (re)creational (inter)play that they "set in motion."

CHAPTER FOUR

Rebirths and Miscarriages of the Self

I

In this chapter I wish to look at specific occurrences of sexual play in Isak Dinesen's fiction. I also wish to discuss the effect that this play has on the self-concept of the character in each story who generally accepts the role of object or other.[39] As I have mentioned earlier, these objectified people are those who have either become the bride of a man, or those who have strictly aligned themselves with a puritanical form of Christianity and have thus become the bride of Christ. Most of the "brides" are able, through sexual play, to give birth to a new sense of self; they are placed in a re-creational situation with a member of the opposite sex and given a brief opportunity to re-conceive their identity as that of a self-determining subject in possession of personal desires that reach beyond the agenda of the marriage and beyond that which is expected in a "wife." At least one bride, however, afraid of acknowledging her own subjective longings, miscarries in her attempt at re-birth and slips back into the comfort of structure.[40]

For the purposes of this chapter, my definition of "sexual play" will be: *a sexually charged encounter with a member of the opposite sex who is not a*

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[39]As Dinesen's discussions of interdependence and Benjamin's discussion of mutual recognition make clear, the benefits of play are not one-sided. Each partner equally affects the other and each, in some way, needs the other to complete his or her sense of self. For the purposes of this discussion, however, I am limiting myself to a study of the effect on the character who is usually positioned as an object. Nevertheless, in the footnotes, I will mention changes that occur on the other side of these play encounters, to the sense of self of the character in the position of subject.

[40]I choose the female pronoun here consciously because all the "brides" that I will be discussing are, by chance, women. An example of a male bride can be found, however, in "The Heroine". Frederick is a man who is "married" to church and has allowed his identity to be entirely shaped by that structure. He too is given the opportunity to engage in play and expand his self-definition.

spouse. The reason for the "non-spousal" stipulation in my definition should be evident; I have already discussed how the structure of marriage tends to place limitations on a person's sense of self, and how it thus becomes quite difficult to play with identity or re-create a sense of self within that structure. If one is to privilege re-creational play over structure -- that is, if one is to get clear of the influence of the structure of marriage -- one must perform a kind of adultery.[41]

Perhaps less obvious is my need to expand the definition of sexual play to include any incident involving so much as the *contemplation* of the sexual act. The reason for this is two-fold. First, in the nineteenth century -- the century in which most of Dinesen's stories are set -- extra-marital sex was not commonly a realistic option. Although Dinesen, in *On Modern Marriage,* can advocate free love as a healthy twentieth century alternative to marriage,[42] this is a uniquely modern possibility. Only since the advent of birth control has it been possible for women to feel free enough from biology to engage in extra-marital sexual play. The sexual acts in these stories, therefore, take place on the symbolic level, and can be found only in imagery and metaphorical suggestion. Accomplishing sexual play in this way allows the "conception" to remain purely symbolic, of the mind but not the body.

The second reason that no actual intercourse occurs in these stories is that it is not necessary to go to that extreme. The characters in question are so de-sexualized, and the concept of their own sexual desire is so entirely foreign to them, that mere *contemplation* of the extra-marital sexual act is enough for

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[41]Tony Tanner's discussion of adultery as the transgression of a contract that calls into question the stability of the social structure of marriage should be recalled here (see footnote 3).

[42]Like marriage, free love allows for the sexual interaction between opposites, but because the labels of husband and wife are not adopted, this interchange has the ability to enhance, not limit, the self. Therefore, Dinesen suggests that free love makes a dynamic selfhood much more possible than it is in marriage. In this way, free love is more creative than marriage; it more readily accepts a person's re-conception of who or what he or she is.

them to begin to re-conceive themselves; allowing the thought of their own sexual desire to invade their mind changes them significantly enough to initiate a process of self-discovery. Likewise, contemplating adultery is sufficiently subversive to the marital structure which defines them to enable them to re-create their sense of self outside of the category of "wife."

The sexually charged encounters I will be looking at have many common features that help ensure that "play" and "re-creation" are privileged over "structure" and static identity. First, no lasting bond is ever allowed to form between the partners; re-creational encounters in Dinesen's work begin and end quickly. This brevity is necessary so that no structure can form around the play partners. Were these couples to remain together, some marriage-like structure would likely arise, as would the kind of hierarchization which led to the initial polarization of desire and agency. Subject/ Object boundaries would become fixed, and the oppositions of husband and wife, master and servant, desiring and desired would likely emerge. To privilege "play" over "structure," therefore, the relationship must be fleeting.[43]

It is also important, in these sexually charged moments of re-creational play, that the protagonist's play partner be, in more ways than gender, the protagonist's opposite. This is important because it is the partner's identity that will act as an alternative for the character in question. As we have seen in Chapter Three, when two distinct people with two distinct realities come together, each can allow the other's reality to affect and color his or her own. In

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[43]The idea that an ideal social relationship -- one which benefits the selfhood of both partners -- can only exist if it is fleeting, echoes Benjamin's discussion of mutual recognition; in both cases, hierarchical positioning seems only capable of brief suspension, and structure always triumphs over play if the relationship is long lived. This may also explain Isak Dinesen's statements, in *On Modern Marriage,* that "a pair of lovers can and must discard the last garment because their meetings are purely beautiful, in the mood for love. But even the most enamored couple, who intend to continue their relationship for the rest of their lives ought to . . . retain a minimum of covering," for " long unbroken co-habitation is a dangerous situation in which to practice such truth and intimacy" (*OMM* 73).

order to introduce desire into these women's lives, therefore, their partners must be strong, self-determining individuals who do not personally submit their identities to a marital or religious structure, and who are willing to acknowledge their own desires.

More often than not, the male play partner in these stories is also an artist. In art, as in Vygotsky's discussion of children's play, one may detach an object or situation from its understood meaning and re-attach meaning in a newer, freer, artistic way. Art, then, is a means through which one can re-imagine the world, outside of the structure of usual reality; art seems to be an arena of play. Who could be better than an artist, therefore, to help those with a limited sense of who they are? If a character is seeking someone with whom to play, it seems plausible to turn to someone who truly understands play.

While the protagonist's play partner may outwardly seem very different from the protagonist herself, it is equally important that the protagonist can find some small element of herself in him. Finding a trace of herself in the other not only draws her to him, but it also informs her that who and what she is could be interchangeable with who and what the other is; this one piece of common ground suggests that this other person, who seems so foreign, may actually be rather like the protagonist.[44] Sometimes the two partners share a love of the same particular art form, sometimes they have a common age, but some kind of link between them is necessary to initiate play.

It is a similarity between the two individuals that allows the categories of being to begin to blur, but it is the differences between them that prompt self-re-conception. If the protagonist can not only find part of herself in the other, but

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[44]This idea is reminiscent of the Hegelian idea that a self-conscious subject cannot feel "recognized" until he/she acknowledges his/her recognizer as, in some way, like him or herself (see Benjamin 33).

can also find a trace of the other's nature inside herself, then she is able to re-interpret the categories in which she is usually placed. If she is like him, then she need not limit her self-expression to that which usually defines her; she can also claim, as her own identity, all that he stands for, no matter how unlike her it might seem.

In all successful cases of play, although the encounter itself is fleeting, the effect on the sense of self is lasting. Once these women acknowledge that desire and agency are indeed part of their identities, they can claim subjectivity and sexuality as a permanent part of their realities. Once they have conceived of their selves as embodying the flip side of their usual identity, they can make sure they are never again locked into a limited definition. Of the women mentioned in earlier chapters, Emilie, Lovisa, Benedetta, and Rosa are all able to claim this side of themselves and achieve a freer sense of who they are; Philippa, however, is not.

II

Perhaps the best example of how a sexual play encounter can subvert the structure of marriage and release a women's identity from the limiting label of "wife" occurs in "The Ring." By committing a symbolic form of adultery with a socially-outcast stranger, Lovisa is able to acknowledge her sexuality and her subjective agency; she is able to re-conceive herself as more than simply the unprivileged member of the marital structure. Unfortunately, her expansion of self-definition destroys her sense of ease and idyll; with it she must surrender the belief that "perfect freedom" can be found as Sigismund's wife (*AD* 235).

In Chapter One, I discussed how Lovisa, in her first week of marriage, has come to realize that when she actually *is* a wife -- and not merely

"playing" at the role -- certain limitations are placed on her identity. All that she does, and all that she is, must serve her husband; she is to have no secrets from him, no selfish desires, and her sexuality restricts her to the position of object. When she leaves her husband in the field, however, she contemplates hiding so that, in her absence, he will "realize what a void, what an unendurably sad and horrible place the universe would be when she was no longer in it" (*AD* 240). This seems to suggest that she is desiring recognition as an independent subject who is capable of affecting the world with her presence; she wishes to be viewed as an active, dynamic, and important person. These qualities are contrary to societal expectations of what a wife should be, however, and thus, her husband will not be able to give her the recognition she is seeking; to feel independent and self-determining, she must move outside the marital structure.

While alone and outdoors, Lovisa can embrace a certain level of freedom from societal expectations and the marital structure. For the first time, she finds "a great happiness in being altogether alone," without any pressure to do or be anything (*AD* 238,39). She removes her hat "to feel the summer air on her forehead and hair"[45] and she does not miss her lap dog, who seems less a companion than an accessory to indicate her social standing. As well, from this point in the story, the protagonist's name is dropped from the text. She is no longer called by her husband's pet-name, Lise, nor is she even called Lovisa; she is merely referred to as "she" or "the woman" (*AD* 240). It is as if, to prepare Lovisa for her re-birth, Dinesen strips her of all indications of her society, as well as of her socially-determined identity.

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[45]The reference to the freeing of Lovisa's hair could be interpreted as a freeing of her sexuality, as it seems that hair takes on a rather sexual connotation in Dinesen's work. We see this suggestive releasing of the hair at the end of "Peter and Rosa" as well.

When this woman -- unnamed and unencumbered by societal trappings --steps into her hiding place, "a narrow space like a small alcove with hangings of thick green and golden brocade," she finds the soil moist and the foliage dense (*AD* 239). The lushness of this place is not to be overlooked; it is in these fertile surroundings, a place which Lovisa feels is "full of promise," and "the very heart of her new home," that she will be given an opportunity to open herself up to play and re-conceive her selfhood in a more complete way than she presently envisions (*AD* 239). Yet, despite her feelings of belonging to this place, she enters quietly and covertly, covering her mouth "as if to emphasize the secretness of her course" (*AD* 240). That she views this action as a secret -- something she is not to have from her husband -- suggests that she is breaking some marital contract; she is acting as if she might be going to meet a lover.[46]

In the heart of the shelter, Lovisa encounters the sheep thief. Immediately the differences between the two individuals are obvious. In direct contrast to her flouncy white frock, the thief is "dressed in rags, barefooted, with tatters wound round his naked ankles" and "his face was bruised and scratched" (*AD* 240). Moreover, he is obviously an outlaw, a man who, unlike Lovisa, does not submit to the rules of any social structure. The thief is also an unabashedly sexual creature. Lovisa seems to have sensed this quality in him when she first heard of the "wolf-like" thief.[47] At that time, a "pleasant little thrill" had run down her spine (*AD* 237). The fugitive's suggestive behavior also confirms his sexual nature:

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[46]Sara Stambaugh's interpretation of the location is also helpful. She suggests that it is "the secret heart of her [Lovisa's] own being," a place that "reflects the real woman beneath the artificial trappings of convention" (28).

[47]There seems to be a tendency, in Dinesen's work, for someone who embodies desire to be compared, by those who are repressing their own desire, to a "wild animal" (*AD* 241). This is also the way Jens and Charlie, in "The Dreaming Child," are described.

> He moved his right arm till it hung down straight before him between his legs. Without lifting the hand he bent the wrist and slowly raised the point of the knife till it pointed at her throat. The gesture was mad, unbelievable. He did not smile as he made it, but his nostrils distended, the corners of his mouth quivered a little. (*AD* 242)

Thus the fugitive seems most unlike the person that Lovisa, the wife of Sigismund, is supposed to be. He is poor, self-determining, rejected by society, and blatantly sexual. Yet, despite the bold contrasts between them, the fugitive is "about [Lovisa's] own age" and this seems enough to establish a sort of link between them (*AD* 240). This commonalty is the reason Sara Stambaugh can call this an "encounter with a hidden side of [Lovisa's] own personality," and it is also what makes possible their playing, or blurring, of identity (29).

Like most of the moments of play I will discuss, this one begins with a mutual gaze.[48] "The man and woman looked at each other," the narrator says, and "he was observing her just as she was observing him" (*AD* 241). In the entire four minutes that they share, Lovisa does not "take her eyes off the face before her," and as the two opposite beings gaze at one another, their identities and their natures begin to blur (*AD* 241). They are locked in a sort of erotic union, where the boundary lines between the two individuals dissolve. "He was wondering, trying to know" her, and she begins to see herself through his eyes, not the eyes of a husband, but "the eyes of the wild animal at bay" (*AD* 241).

In perhaps the most obvious symbolic act in the story, Lovisa offers the fugitive her wedding ring. Although the fugitive does reach out and touch her

[48]The idea of the gaze calls to mind Marilyn Blackwell's suggestion that the male gaze transforms the woman into a sexual being. It is important to note, however, Dinesen's gazes are not one-sided (see "The Transforming Gaze" p. 56-57).

hand -- a touch that Lovisa does not shrink from -- the fugitive does not take the ring. The fugitive thus refuses to acknowledge the structure the ring represents, and allows this to remain a moment of play, a moment that will free, not limit, either of them. Lovisa responds to his rejection of the ring by letting it drop to the ground, and "in a hardly perceivable movement he kicked it away" (*AD* 242). With the symbol of marriage thus banished, and Lovisa no longer required to define herself by its structure, the fugitive "again looked into her face" as if to see who this women truly is, unrestricted by social convention (*AD* 242). More importantly, Lovisa, seeing herself through the fugitive's eyes, is also able, at this moment to envision herself free from the marital structure. "They remained like that [each looking into the other's face], she knew not how long, but she felt that during that time something happened, things were changed" (*AD* 242).

The sexuality of this moment of re-conception is re-enforced when the fugitive wraps Lovisa's white handkerchief around the blade of his phallic weapon, and fumbles to stick the knife and the handkerchief into the sheath. "For two or three more seconds his gaze rested on her face," and then, in a motion that hints at orgasmic release, the fugitive tilts his head up and closes his eyes, while a "strange radiance" illuminates his face (*AD* 243). "The movement was definitive and unconditional," the narrator says, and with this motion, "she was free" (*AD* 243); it seems then, that the consummation of their symbolic sexual act has freed Lovisa from the limitations of being a wife. She emerges from the shelter as if she is emerging from the birth canal; she has re-negotiated, re-conceived, her sense of self in this lush environment. Like the fugitive, she now sees herself as a free, self-determining, sexual individual. She has come to see these elements of the fugitive's nature in her own self. She has rejected, as her playmate has, a socially imposed definition.

When Lovisa meets up with her husband, she does not -- as we will see Emilie do in "The Dreaming Child" -- try to impress her change in self-perception on her husband. Nevertheless, Sigismund notices a change in his wife. When he kisses her hand, for instance, he finds it "cold, not quite the same hand as he last kissed" (*AD* 244). When he questions her about her silence, however, she answers him with concealing lies and her only thought is that "all is over" (*AD* 243). She seems to be indicating the end of the naive bliss by which she had earlier interpreted her marital situation. In the alcove she came to see herself as more than a wife, capable of more than fulfillment of a socially acceptable role, and yet her husband believes that "we are husband and wife today too, as much as yesterday" (*AD* 244). She has discovered a more complete and honest self, full of sexuality and self-determinacy, but she cannot express those things within her marriage. She thus realizes that she has wedded herself to some other qualities which the fugitive embodies: "poverty, persecution, total loneliness" (*AD* 244). These qualities seem to be, for Lovisa, the cost of self-knowledge.

III

Like Lovisa, the woman in "The Dreaming Child" is given an opportunity to reach beyond the standard definition of "wife" and claim her own independent selfhood and sexual agency. Emilie's process of re-birth is longer and more involved than Lovisa's, however. In fact, Emilie initially aborts her new sense of self, and only on the second attempt is she able to successfully bring it to birth. When Emilie is finally re-born as a sexual, independent subject, however, she is also able to alter her husband's image of her. Thus, unlike

"The Ring," this story does not end with a woman caught between her own sense of self and the role that her marital situation demands that she fill.

Emilie is first asked to incorporate her own subjective desires into her concept of who she is when she is propositioned by Charlie Dreyer. Like the fugitive's, Charlie's nature is one of independence and open sexuality. He is also a sailor, which suggests that he privileges change and instability over solidity and stagnancy.[49] Charlie thus embodies passion and play, and he invites Emilie to acknowledge the passionate and playful side of her self that her society asks all women to deny. Unfortunately, the conventional definition of the "good woman" has too firm a grip on Emilie's self-concept. She cannot acknowledge desire as part of her identity even though she does sense that it is. As she shuts Charlie out, therefore, she "symbolically locks the gate against her own sexuality," and her first opportunity to re-conceive her selfhood is lost (Stambaugh 85).

After this symbolic rejection of her own sexuality, Emilie finds herself able to assume the role of wife; she is now able to lock her selfhood into the traditional role of the good, de-sexualized housewife. By marrying Jakob, Emilie tries to anchor herself in "fanatical truthfulness and solidity" (*WT* 88), as if the thought of play and the de-stabilizing of standard social definitions are too dangerous to consider. As the narrator says, however, "it is a dangerous thing to shirk danger" (*WT* 88); it is dangerous for the self to avoid play and shut off a part of its identity in order to assume a position within a structure. Robert Langbaum believes that it is "because Emilie strained against her own deepest

[49]Dinesen tends to use sailors and artists as equally valid examples of free, playful, sexual people. Sailors fit under the aegis of the artistic, because they are willing to transgress boundaries and even suspend the laws of nature which determine that men cannot live on the water.

desire, she cannot have children" (172); her sexual, creative nature has been stunted and she cannot conceive of anything new, for herself or for anyone else.

Emilie is given another chance, however, to re-conceive who she is. The second time, the play opportunity comes through a small male child, a far less threatening figure than that of an amorous young man.[50] There are many suggestions, however, that Jens is a kind of re-incarnation of Charlie himself. Interestingly, the child reminds Jakob, not of Charlie, but of Emilie. Jakob senses in the boy "a reserved, as it were, selfless way about him, behind which one guessed great, integrate strength and endurance" (*WT* 90). When Emilie sees him, however, she feels a different similarity; "This child is as lonely in life as I," she thinks (*WT* 92). These similarities are what will allow a playful blurring of Emilie's frozen identity and Jen's freer, and radically opposite, sense of self.

Although Emilie and Jens share a certain hidden strength and loneliness, Jens also represents everything that Emilie is not. In this way Jens is to Emilie what the fugitive is to Lovisa. Like the fugitive, Jens is exceedingly poor. Also like the fugitive, and very unlike Emilie, Jens does not seem to adhere to traditional rules of society. He is a "poet," a "dreamer" and a self-creator (*WT* 97, 94); he lives in a realm of play and imagination where he sees endless possibilities of being. Jens' identity is determined only by what he chooses to claim for it. Like both the fugitive and Charlie, Jens also seems to embody desire. He is compared to "Cupid" and is described as having "a kind of airy love-affair" with everyone from Mamzell Ane to the entire Vandamm household (*WT* 84, 94). "The essence of [Jens'] nature was longing" and so, as Emilie lets this miniature Charlie into her house and into her heart, she can begin to re-conceive herself as a desirous, and even sexual, being (*WT* 97).

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[50]Whereas Charlie was described as an "angry lion," Jens is described as a "small, gentle, wild animal, or a spite" (*WT* 88). Both are described as animals, however, as was the fugitive.

Just as the encounter between Lovisa and the fugitive began with a mutual gaze, "the first thing Emilie noticed about the child was that he did not turn his gaze from hers, but looked her straight in the eyes" (*WT* 93). "For a moment, the two looked at one another" the narrator says, and it is in this instant that a bond is created and the process of categorical blurring begins (*WT* 92).

As George Bataille suggests, moments in which the boundaries of Subject and Object, Self and Other blur are undeniably erotic. In this story the sexuality becomes evident when, "at the sight of her, a great, ecstatic light passed over [Jens'] face," as if a climax of erotic union had been reached (*WT* 93).[51] As well, the first touch between Emilie and Jens is described as highly sexual. The boy "touched the long silky ringlets that fell forward over her neck" and "ran his fingers softly down her shoulder and arm and fumbled over her gloved hand" in a motion reminiscent of the way Charlie "fumbled between [the bars of the gate] for her hands" (*WT* 87). Jens then asks Emilie for a kiss. In this moment, it seems, an incredible change takes place in Emilie.[52]

Ironically, Emilie feels she is "the only person in the house who did not love the child" for he makes her feel "unsafe" (*WT* 96). "Emilie [is] afraid to be alone with him," just as she had been afraid of Charlie Dreyer (*WT* 94). Like Charlie Dreyer, Jens' presence prompts Emilie to look at herself as a sexual subject. Also like Charlie, Jens employs the assistance of the moon, an object which seems, throughout Dinesen's work, to be a symbol of female sexuality.[53]

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[51]It should be recalled that a similar orgasmic glow occurred at the culmination of the symbolically erotic union in "The Ring." It will recur on Rosa's face in "Peter and Rosa" as well.

[52]Emilie herself looks back on this moment later on in the story and seems aware that something changed within it. When she tries to scold him for lying, she realizes that only "up to the moment when . . . she had kissed the child" could she have done so (*WT* 93).

[53]Mention is made of the moon in "Peter and Rosa" as well. Peter mentions the irony of how the moon is "let out to play" in her youth, and is "chased away" when she grows old (*WT* 149).

Whereas Charlie had propositioned Emilie in "moonshine" (*WT* 87), Jens asks Emilie to leave the curtains in her boudoir open so that "the fish might look at the moon" (*WT* 95). Like the fish, Emilie lives safely enclosed in her Copenhagen home, unable to appreciate her own sexuality through the curtains of marriage and of the conventional views of womanhood.

Emilie begins to become "uncertain of herself" (*WT* 93) and "afraid both to be alone with the boy and to let any third person join them" (*WT* 93); she is possessive of Jens, yet still afraid of the kind of feelings he evokes in her. She is especially uncomfortable when her husband is around. She "listened for his [Jakob's] steps on the stair with a kind of alarm" and when she must tell Jens whom she is listening for, she is "embarrassed" (*WT* 94). The fact that Emilie is embarrassed to have a husband when Jens is around suggests that she is both treating Jens as a lover, and is ashamed, in front of such a free soul, to have confined her sense of self so tightly by entering the marital structure.

To avoid being enveloped by the same social structure that limits Emilie's sense of self, Jens must die "a few days before the date that Emilie had fixed to decide his fitness for admission into the house of Vandamm" (*WT* 100).[54] Before he dies, however, he speaks of the marriage of his imagined parents, and says that his papa called his mama "my white rose" (*WT* 100). This image recalls the white rose which Emilie gave to Charlie on the night she rejected him, and thus, as Langbaum says, sets Jens up as Emilie's "dream child, as the offspring of her deepest desire, of her unfulfilled love for Charlie" (172). Thus, through accepting Jens as her child, Emilie must finally acknowledge the

[54]When he dies, Jens' body is laid down "behind a heavy wrought-iron fence," a spot reminiscent of the "heavy iron gate" where Emilie left Charlie (*WT* 101, 87).

desires she repressed, and re-conceive of her selfhood as that of an active, desiring subject.[55]

Images of fertility fill the end of "The Dreaming Child," and thus we can assume that Emilie's re-birth is well underway. As she and her husband enter the "green world" of the forest (*WT* 101), Emilie picks up a broken egg, and tries to put the two pieces of it together (*WT* 102). In so doing, the two sides of her own being are rejoined and re-born; selfhood joins otherness, the sexual joins the wifely, and the "suppleness of her body" is re-united with "the rigidity of her mind" (*WT* 86). In order to insure that this new self will be allowed to express itself, however, she must introduce that new self to her husband. Emilie thus tells Jakob that Jens was her son by Charlie Dreyer.[56] With this statement, she takes herself off the pedestal of idealized womanhood and declares herself a woman in possession of her own desires and agency, a subject rather than an object. Emilie also claims to have "got back [her] sight, and [her] sense of smell, from when [she] was a little girl" (*WT* 105). The indication here is that she is beginning life again, from a point of childhood freedom, and is re-claiming the sensual side which she gave up when she committed herself to being a "wife."

In one definitive moment of pure self-awareness and determinacy she says "I am Emilie. Nothing can alter that either" (*WT* 105). With this she claims her own independence, her own name, and refuses to have that restricted by her marriage to Jakob. She also tells her husband that "it would be better, much better, and easier for both you and me, if you believe me" (*WT* 105);

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[55]There are many indications in "The Dreaming Child" of Jens' need for Emilie, and his feeling of incompleteness without her. For instance, unlike the other children, who all had parents and siblings and seemed "part of a unity," Jens, until he meets Emilie, feels out of place (*WT* 83). He feels like a "vanished and lost child" (*WT* 85) and suffers an "inexplicable isolation in life" (*WT* 84). If Jens does indeed embody the missing element of Emilie, her own sexuality, then it is no wonder that neither Jens nor Emilie is complete without the other.

[56]Again, as in "The Ring," one of the first signs of liberation and change is lying to the husband.

Jakob must not be able to hold on to his ideals about womanhood as objectivity and a lack of sexuality if their marriage is to continue (*WT* 105). Fortunately, Jakob agrees and thus recognizes the new life in his house; his wife has been re-born as a self-determining subject who is in possession of her own desires, even sexually.[57]

IV

"The Cardinal's First Tale" opens with the question, posed to the Cardinal, "Who are you?" The Cardinal's response -- directed at the lady with whom he is, appropriately enough, locked in a mutual gaze -- is that she is "the first . . . who has ever seemed to presume that [he] might have an identity of [his] own to confess to" (*LT* 3). "The Cardinal's First Tale," therefore, is about uncovering more in a self than is initially perceived; it is a story concerned with how "all the unconnected and contradictory" fragments of a person's identity can be "united into a whole . . . not into an idyll" (*LT* 4). It is not, however, merely a story of the Cardinal's identity; perhaps more importantly, it is the story of the Cardinal's mother, Benedetta, and how she answers the question: "who am I?'" (*LT* 4).

In Chapter One I discussed how Benedetta, like Lovisa, begins married life by accepting whatever personal limitations come with the label of "wife." She allows herself to be treated as an object, an other, a child, and an angel, and she willingly surrenders her body, and all her selfish desires, to her marriage. All that remains of her own "personal share" is a "slightly aching echo of a faint little cry" (*LT* 6). When her husband secludes her in a far off villa,

[57]With this ending, Dinesen seems to be demonstrating that selfhood is possible within the structure of marriage, provided both partners are able to mutually acknowledge and accept the other's sexuality and need to function as an independent subject.

however, Benedetta "learn[s] to dream," both about the world and about the kind of individual she could be (*LT* 6). In *Out of Africa,* Dinesen writes: "People who dream . . . know that the real glory of dreams lies in their atmosphere of unlimited freedom . . . the freedom of the artist." It should not be surprising, therefore, that it is art that first paves her path to self-awareness and self-expression; for Benedetta, art presents new, seductive, and subversive possibilities of being that far exceed her role of wife.

The innocent Benedetta is first seduced by the art of literature. Just as Lovisa appears in the alcove in a white muslin frock -- an outfit that betrays her naive ignorance about the limitations being placed upon her selfhood -- the villa's library "becomes the abode of a fresh young being in white muslin, whose rich tresses, as she was reading, tumbled forward and caressed the parchment" (*LT* 6). This is a sensual image and that sensuality is reinforced by the statement that the library "fell in love with her," and also by the comparison of Benedetta to a "fountain nymph" being showered by "the sweet fruits that her heart demanded" (*LT* 6). It seems, therefore, that the library, if she had been allowed to stay there, would have been the site of a re-birth of self. The "volumes of more frivolous thoughts, of longing and levity and words that rhymed" -- that is, poetry, an undeniable form of play which asks people to see beyond their ordinary assumptions about things -- could have planted the seed for the conception of a new woman.

Not surprisingly, Benedetta's husband feels that "such excessive reading . . . might be harmful to his wife's health and mind" (*LT* 6). What the Prince seems to be sensitive to here is the selfishness of Benedetta's act; it is not in the best interest of a marriage for the wife to be anything but selfless, or to entertain a definition other than the one dictated by her familial role. Certainly,

a proper wife should not be pursuing an activity which could be construed as sensually delighting. Thus frightened by the subversive qualities he sees in his wife's reading, the prince, ironically, decides to distract Benedetta with singing lessons.

Benedetta "[gives] herself up to music, as she had given herself up to books" (*LT* 7). This time, however, the draw is not so mysterious or vague; music not only persuades Benedetta to look beyond the way things are understood to be, it also teaches her to how to express the truth of what they are. In music Benedetta discovers "a reasonable human language, within which things could be truthfully expressed" (*LT* 7). Also through music, Benedetta comes to understand the inherent pleasure of subverting imposed structure; she takes a life lesson from the "deceptive cadenza" which "makes every preparation for a perfect finish and then, instead of giving the expected final accord, suddenly breaks off and sounds an unexpected, strange and alarming close" (*LT* 7).

Benedetta encounters her play partner -- the man who will help her re-conceive herself as an active, desirous subject -- when she attends an opera in Venice. This man is a castrato named Marelli.[58] His character is most unlike hers in that he possesses freedom and self-determining agency; he lives a life of passionate artistry and playful limitlessness. As an artist he is not expected to adhere to social structures or conventions, and being castrated releases him specifically from the structure of marriage. What Marelli and Benedetta do share, however, is a love of singing, and this is the link that allows them to see their self in the other; it is the clue that their two opposing senses of self can intermingle.

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[58]Even the narrator has a moment of fun with the fact that it is a castrated man, "once and for all cut off . . . from real life," who prompts this woman to discover a new life inside of her (*LT* 8).

As usual, the moment of play begins with a prolonged mutual gaze; "at the seventh recall, before the last drop of the curtain . . . a pair of blue and a pair of black eyes met across the pit in a long deep silent glance, the first and the last" (*LT* 7-8). This brief encounter -- which the narrator calls a "love affair" and which is said to be fruitful enough to "call life to a young woman's heart" (*LT* 8) -- effects Benedetta instantaneously and dramatically. In no other story here discussed is such a drastic re-birth so explicitly described. That evening, the narrator says:

> [Benedetta's] whole being was transported. It was a birth, the pangs of which were sweet beyond words, a mighty process which needed, and made use of, every particle of her nature, and which, undergoing a total change, she triumphantly become her whole self. (*LT* 7)

By identifying with Marelli, Benedetta is able to claim the freedom and passion of the artist. These are not things which were foreign to her; they were, in fact, part of her nature, but because she has been living according to the rules of the structure of marriage, as well as the patriarchal views of womanhood, this part of her had been repressed. Finding Marelli's nature resonating in her own heart, however, allows her to express "every particle of her nature" and thereby "become her whole self," unrestricted by her role of wife.[59]

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[59] There is considerable suggestion in this story that Benedetta is as important for the re-birth of Marelli as vice versa. The narrator says that when their eyes met, "something happened to the soprano" as well as to the lady (*LT* 8). In short, Benedetta seems to restore the castrato's manhood, and, as a result, "the world famous treble [is] changed" from the voice of an "elegant and graceful doll," to "the voice of a human soul" (*LT* 8). It seems then that what the fecund princess could offer Marelli -- in exchange for the independence and passion she received from his nature -- is a certain natural human element; she allows him to become a real person capable of change, growth and development. This change is also evidenced in the fact that, after the moment of mutual gaze, the narrator feels compelled to inform his audience that the gentleman's name is actually Giovanni Ferrer; "Marelli" was his limiting label, that which held him back from growth, just as "wife" was Benedetta's.

Further evidence that Benedetta has been re-born is found in her "second, third and fourth youths" (*LT* 9). Unlike her first youth -- the one she spent playing the role of the loyal wife -- these youths are full of "lively scandals" and in them Benedetta becomes an "often-embraced lady" (*LT* 9). As well, her "beauty, her talents and her rare gaiety of heart blossomed out" (*LT* 16) and she becomes a "dauntless seeker of happiness" (*LT* 17). To put it simply, after her encounter with Marelli, Benedetta is free to express her truest self: an independent, self-fulfilled subject, aware of her own desires and agency. As the narrator says:

> You had been, till now, a small boat upon great waters of existence, striving only, amongst the great swells and breakers, to keep afloat and on an even keel, and looking to the stars for guidance. Now you set sail and stood out, gallantly making headway against tide and current, a full-rigged sailor. (*LT* 17)

Benedetta's new self-awareness becomes most evident when her husband approaches her sexually. "By now she knew the nature and value of what she was giving into the arms of her husband, and her second bridal night she shed tears different from those of her first" (*LT* 9). She has learnt, in other words, the cost asked of her own true nature, her own sense of self, by the demands of wifehood and motherhood. Perhaps it is for this reason that "Princess Benedetta was less stable" in her sexual devotion after her incident at the opera (*LT* 9). Contrary to the limited and stable definition of "wife," the Princess has not only begun to acknowledge her own desires but she also pursues them to the point of personal satisfaction. Benedetta has begun making her own decisions about how she will live her life; she has found her

own voice, has freed herself from the limits of the "wife" label and acts according to her own true artistic nature, rather than according to her social position.

Much to the shock and surprise of her husband, Benedetta is also determined that her new son should have the opportunity to "proclaim to the world the triumph of beauty and poetry as well as of his own identity," just as she has begun to proclaim her own (*LT* 10). As she explains it to the Prince:

> she had borne the house of her husband one son; now she was free. The child to come was to be the son of his mother, and the godson of the Muses. His name should be Dionysio, in reminiscence of the God of inspired ecstasy. (*LT* 11)

Through her own re-birth, Benedetta has learned the importance of art and play, as well as the importance of self-awareness and self-determinacy. It is this reality that she wants for her son, just as she finally found it for herself.[60]

V

Characters who suffer from a limited sense of self are not always the wife of a man; as I discussed in Chapter Two, one's selfhood can also be defined by a marriage to God. This is the case in both "Peter and Rosa" and "Babette's Feast." The brides of Christ in these stories are just as susceptible to the kind of desexualization and objectification suffered by the other wives I have discussed, but fortunately, they are also equally able to use re-creational play to free their sense of self. By committing a sort of adultery against God, these wives can find true self-expression; through acceptance of their sexual desire, the brides of Christ are given an opportunity to claim their own agency and subjectivity.

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[60]The rest of the story is thus devoted to a discussion of balance in identity and how Benedetta's son comes to acknowledge and integrate the two seemingly contradictory sides of his nature.

In Chapter Two I discussed how Rosa, despite hints that she is inherently sensual, is being raised to be the perfect bride of Christ, devoid of desire. Just as her father has entombed his sense of self inside the label of "Christian," Rosa too is expected to deny her body and disregard self-discovery; she is expected to live only to serve her Lord, as every good nineteenth century wife is expected to serve her husband, wanting nothing for herself personally. Only in her own private dream-world -- a world she sees as being "both infinite and secluded, playful and very grave, safe and dangerous" -- does Rosa have options and agency (*WT* 149). There she is free from limitations and labels, her sense of self is free to play and she can be anything she wants. Only there can she become "the loveliest, mightiest and most dangerous person on earth" (*WT* 149).[61]

The opening of "Peter and Rosa," however, suggests that a great change is about to take place. The environment is "pregnant," full of "hope and joy" and everything is full of "streaming" and "wandering life" (*WT* 146,7). It is the start of a "summer of play and change" and nature is offering "a mighty promise" (*WT* 146). There is also a great deal of sexual energy in the air; the birds are off to "make love" and everything is moist and fertile (*WT* 147). For Rosa, the coming of spring symbolizes her own imminent re-birth; through sexual play with Peter, Rosa will soon be able to re-conceive of herself as a desirous, self-determining, subjective being, even outside of her dream-world. Through his own example, and through his love, Peter will help Rosa to escape the structure that presently defines her.

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[61]The freedom Rosa feels in her imagined world, can be compared to the freedom Benedetta experiences through literature, and later, through music. It is therefore significant that a connection is made between Rosa's world and the "world of music" (*WT* 149). As in "The Cardinal's First Tale," it seems that anything that provides -- through imagination -- a temporary relief from restricted definitions of being can be considered an art form.

Although Peter is Rosa's age, and has shared a common upbringing, he is very different from his cousin. He is in touch with his sensual side, openly acknowledges the deepest desires of his heart, and is unwilling to submit his sense of self to the religious structure that limits his uncle and cousin; he does not feel compelled to play the "bride" of Christ and his heart rebels against such restraint and limitations. Peter is also described as a philosopher and, since he is capable of learning the flute on his own, he seems to be a natural artist (*WT* 149). Peter wants playfulness, passion, and danger to be part of what defines him, and therefore he is planning to run away to sea on a ship that is, appropriately enough, called the *Esperance* (*WT* 154). As Robert Langbaum says, the sea acts as the symbol of desire in this story. It is the "primordial desire" which "unites our deepest desires with our biological and spiritual destiny" (Langbaum 171). For Peter, the sea is a place of endless bounds. It "holds back nothing from you" and does not "close itself up to one" (*WT* 167). In this way the sea seems in direct contrast to the parson's home, where death, limits, and a lack of desire are a way of life.

Despite all his differences from her -- and despite the fact that she views him as little more than a "silly" and "clumsy" boy with "scratched knees" and "dirty hands" -- Rosa occasionally sees traces of her own self in Peter (*WT* 150, 149). His "fancies about the world . . . [ring] strangely in Rosa's mind, like echoes of hers," and when this happens Rosa "fixe[s] her gaze hard on him, seized by deep fear" (*WT* 149). If Peter can articulate the hidden, prohibited desires she allows herself to have in her private world, she thinks that he "might find the 'Sesame' which opened it and encroach upon it" (*WT* 150). He then might betray her secret and thus cut her off from her only opportunity to act as an agent, according to her own desires. What she does not realize, however, is

that it is precisely Peter's ability to see into that world which will allow it to be a reality; when someone who is himself secure in his subjectivity recognizes Rosa as a subject, then her subjectivity will become validated and she can claim it as a reality.[62]

Peter -- although he sometimes sees her as "shallow and silly" -- senses a bond with Rosa, as if the two of them share a secret which allows them to understand one another (*WT* 150). Perhaps this is the reason that "she was the only one in whom he had any confidence" (*WT* 150). He sees more potential in her than she normally claims; he senses that she could be as desirous and self-determining as he wishes to be, and when he sees her in the window, Peter fully acknowledges the trace of himself that he sees in Rosa. "He stared at her [and] she looked back at him," and "for an instant he saw . . . his own soul face to face" (*WT* 153). In this moment of mutual gaze and identity blurring, Peter decides to reveal his dreams to Rosa, for he knows she will understand.

The moment when Peter sees Rosa as, like himself, full of desire, seems to change the children's relationship; from this point in the story, sexual tension permeates every encounter between them. For instance, after lying in bed with Rosa and telling her how he will achieve his heart's desires by running off to sea, Peter leaves Rosa's room in "a state of rapture and bliss" (*WT* 158). It is as if, in sharing his true self with Rosa, "all elements and forces of his being had been swept together into an unsurpassed harmony," a harmony which is experienced sexually (*WT* 158). He even contemplates returning to her bedroom and embracing Rosa. He feels a "desire to give" something to Rosa, and realizes that what he wishes to give is " himself, the essence of his nature"

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[62]It should be noted that when Peter and Rosa see their self in the other -- even though they do not acknowledge the trace of the other simultaneously -- a "stare" or a "gaze" is involved. In Rosa's case the acknowledgment of trace leads to a gaze; usually it is the gaze that occurs first.

(*WT* 158). In fact then, what Peter desires to give Rosa is desire itself. He wants for her what he wants for himself.

Alone in her room, Rosa finds that Peter's confession makes her restless, and it is a restlessness that is only partly due to the sexual energy of their encounter. The fact that Peter would claim his freedom and leave her behind makes her feel angry and abandoned. He has spoken the unexpressed longings of her own heart -- longings for freedom, for self-determination, and for following one's desires, including sexual desires -- and he has asked her to help him realize these things. Meanwhile, she is expected to stay locked inside her limited definition, her limited selfhood. She feels as if her desire has been teased out of her and then discarded.

In her spite, Rosa decides to foil Peter's plans. If she is to be trapped within the structure of her home, unable to realize her desires, she will lock the gate against Peter's freedom as well. If she cannot live according to her true nature, neither will he. Before going to her father to expose Peter's plans, Rosa physically becomes the bride of both her father and Christ; she dresses her hair to resemble her mother, a woman who was considered a good and faithful wife because she lacked personal desire. By betraying Peter, Rosa is reacting entirely against her own nature and entirely in keeping with the definition her father wishes her to assume. When Rosa later reflects on her actions, however, she realizes that with it she has "sold a life" and "closed all the windows in the world on her" (*WT* 164,165).[63] She realizes that, "if Peter was a prisoner, she herself would no more be free" (*WT* 165); since she can see a trace of herself in Peter, the life she has sold has been her own.

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[63]Rosa's act of symbolically closing all the windows on herself directly contrasts Peter's first action in the story, which is to open the window of the parsonage and look out, with longing, at the fresh, new world (*WT* 165, 146).

Rosa is given another chance, however, to re-claim her desire and re-conceive herself as something other than a "bride" of Christ. This occurs when Peter physically removes Rosa from the structure of her father's house. Outside, "Rosa felt the world to be opening up to her" (*WT* 163).[64] Like the sea, the two children are now "free, wandering on according to [their] own lustful heart[s], and embracing all the earth" (*WT* 166). She knows that "all that she had got in the world . . . was this one hour, and their walk to the sea" and that therefore she must "enjoy, experience and suffer to the utmost of her capacity" (*WT* 166).

The spring day offers new birth, new life, and thus sexuality and fertility absolutely envelop this outdoor scene. With "supreme wonder and delight," Rosa finds that "everything was wet," and when *she* gets wet, she feels as if "she herself, and Peter with her, might melt and dissolve into some unknown, salt flow of delight, and become absorbed into the infinite, swaying, wet world" (*WT* 167). Again, as in "The Dreaming Child" and "The Ring," a "radiant," ecstatic glow develops on Rosa's face, and she revels in her first acceptance of her sexuality (*WT* 167). "So now it had come, she thought, what all her life she had feared and waited for" (*WT* 164).

At this point in the story, Rosa is ready to be re-born as a desirous subject but she has not yet completed her transformation. Like the piece of ice that Peter is pretending is a boat, Rosa "is riding at anchor, but she is ready to put to sea" (*WT* 168).[65] She has gotten wet and experienced her sexuality, but she has not yet taken possession of it; it is something that is happening to her, not something she is willing to actively claim and be responsible for. This does not

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[64]This feeling of freedom -- inspired by being where no structures impinge upon one's sense of self -- recalls Lovisa's joy at being alone and outdoors in "The Ring."

[65]References are made elsewhere in the story to Rosa being like a boat. The model boat in Peter's room, for example, is named Rosa, and Peter is unsure "whether this was meant to be a compliment to the ship or to the girl" (*WT* 150).

occur until Peter asks Rosa if he may board the ice ship and she informs him that they will both be going. By deciding to go to sea with Peter, Rosa decides to actively claim her own desire. Peter then takes Rosa's hand, leads her onto the ice, and "within the next moment a great calm came upon her" (*WT* 169).

During this journey Rosa also begins to act as an independent subject, determining her own future. It is she who turns their dangerous voyage into a game, she who decides to board the ice, and she who decides on their imagined destination. Even when she knows they are in danger, she decides not to say anything; she is, for the first time, in control of her destiny. She has found freedom from the restricted life she has led, and she is responsible for who she is and what she will do. In a final, highly symbolic act, Rosa lets Peter take her hair down, out of her mother's hair-do. It is a very sensual image, and not only can it be interpreted as an acceptance of her sexuality, her desire, but also as a final surrendering of those limiting labels that have, until now, defined her, those labels of "woman" and "bride of Christ."

As with the other moments of play I have discussed, this one cannot last. The ice breaks and the children are thrown into the water. "They could have saved themselves then, if they had separated and struggled on to the two sides of the crack but the idea did not occur to either of them" (*WT* 171). They revel both in "having no ground under [them]" and the sexual expression of their togetherness (*WT* 171). Rosa has become the sea, that great embodiment of desire with which Peter wants to join himself. No other re-birth in Dinesen's stories is so profound or results in such romantic tragedy; these children will die in this freedom, so as never to be subsumed by structure again.

VI

Philippa, in "Babette's Feast," is also married to Christ and, like Rosa, she too is given an opportunity to free herself from the limits this marriage places on her sense of who she is. Unlike Rosa, however, Philippa miscarries in her attempt at re-birth. For Philippa, play and change are frightening; she is unwilling to have her identity destablized, and she is unable to include desire and agency in her self-definition. Although her selfhood seems stunted by her "good Christian" definition, Philippa finds comfort in her role as the desireless, servile bride of Christ. She knows what to expect and how she is expected to act in that role, and thus she finds herself clinging to the security of her identity. To allow selfhood more free play would be risky, and thus -- despite the fact that she seems to have an inherently artistic soul -- Philippa chooses to reject the freedom, passion, and self-fulfillment that can accompany re-creational play.

The man who brings Philippa to the brink of re-birth is "the great singer Achille Papin of Paris" (*AD* 28).[66] Like all the play partners I have discussed, Achille has little in common with the woman he encounters. Besides the fact that he is a Roman Catholic, Achille is decidedly a man of the world; he is a well-traveled artist, a man of ambition and self-determination, making a living out of passionate self-expression. He has a "romantic nature," and his "handsome" appearance -- complete with "curly black hair" and a "red mouth" -- suggest an luxurious and innate sexuality (*AD* 29). Achille is also described as being "honest toward himself" (*AD* 29); he is not afraid to acknowledge his desires or strive beyond all limits to achieve his dreams. What he does have in common with this naive Lutheran girl, however, is a love and talent for singing.

[66]Sara Stambaugh suggests that Achille is "allied with feminine values through his profession as singer and his name, that of the Greek hero raised by women" (80). This reading lends credence to Achille's ability to see past traditional definitions of womanhood and, by association, past the definition of religious wifehood, in order to see the truer nature of Philippa.

It will therefore be through music that Philippa will find a trace of her self in this foreigner. [67]

Achille senses a trace of himself in Philippa even before he meets her. The first time he hears her sing he is struck with what the narrator calls "a vision" (*AD* 29); to him she is, like himself, an artist, "a prima donna of the opera" (*AD* 30). Cleverly, Achille realizes that he should not mention this vision to Philippa's father, for the Dean is a man who rails against the same sensual, secular world to which Achille feels Philippa belongs. Instead, Achille convinces the Dean to allow Philippa to be tutored by describing "how beautifully Miss Philippa would sing in church, to the glory of God" (*AD* 30). To reveal what he senses to be her true nature, therefore, Achille decides to work *through* her presently limited identity.

As Achille and Philippa begin singing together, "Achille's expectation [grows] into certainty and his certainty into ecstasy" (*AD* 30). In his eyes, Philippa becomes increasingly less a woman whose selfhood is determined by her religious marriage, and more a woman of the world. At one point -- although admittedly it is in a moment of disappointment and bitterness -- Achille even refers to Philippa as a "hussy" (*AD* 32). Such a term, of course, would never rightly suit the Philippa who lives selflessly, desirelessly, as the bride of Christ.

"After a while" the narrator says, "[Achille] could not keep his dreams to himself, but [tells] Philippa about them" (*AD* 30). He tells her that in Paris she

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[67]Again, in this story, there is a suggestion that Achille needs Philippa as much as she needs him. He comes to her village in a "melancholy" mood, feeling like "an old man at the end of his career," but after working with Philippa for a while he feels revitalized, as if, "in one single moment he knew and understood all" (*AD* 29). When Philippa rejects his teaching, he again feels hopeless, like he has "lost [his] life," and he says that "never again shall I be the divine Papin" (*AD* 32, 31). Later he describes himself as "gray, lonely, forgotten by those who once applauded and adored me" and resigns himself to the solemn fact that "the grave awaits us all" (*AD* 34). It is as if, unable to free Philippa's voice from its confinement, Achille himself is unable to find joy in being alive. If she is to live in death and restriction, he cannot find happiness in life.

will evoke great emotional responses from her audiences and live a life filled with admiration, love and fine cuisine. In short, Achille promises that all the sensual, selfish delights of her heart will be hers to claim, just as he himself has claimed them. For her part, Philippa keeps what Achille promises her a secret from her father and sister, and the narrator informs us that "this was the first time in her life that she had had a secret from them" (*AD* 31). Just as, in "The Ring," Lovisa's keeping a secret from her husband is an indication that she has changed, so too does Philippa's secrecy indicate that something inside her is shifting. Her secrecy also suggests that Philippa feels that she has something about herself that needs to be protected. The side of her self that Achille is awakening is not acceptable in her father's house. Such selfishness would be frowned upon and would condemn Philippa as an unfaithful Christian and disloyal bride of Christ; it implies that Philippa is putting her own desires before those of her master.

Interestingly, there is no moment of prolonged mutual gaze described in any of the meetings between Achille and Philippa.[68] Although the gaze may be missing, however, the sexual tension certainly is not, and this sexuality gains expression through the music the two singers practice together; "the teacher gave the pupil the part of Zerlina in Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni* to study" and he took the part of Zerlina's seducer (*AD* 31). It is during what is referred to as the "seduction duet" that Achille dramatically forces Philippa to confront her sexuality by exposing his own desire to her (*AD* 31). "As the last melting note

[68]The fact that there is no gaze described in this story is all the more interesting when one considers that there is a built-in opportunity for it; Achille and Philippa sing duets and one could assume that, in the course of this singing, a mutual gaze would naturally occur. Certainly the film version of "Babette's Feast," directed by Gabriel Axel, suggests this likelihood. The film version includes a duet scene in which Achille and Philippa are, indeed, locked in a mutual gaze.

died away [Achille] seized Philippa's hands, drew her toward him and kissed her solemnly, as a bridegroom might kiss his bride before the altar" (*AD* 31).

Although Philippa does identify with this sexual urge -- that is to say, although she is able to find a trace of Achille's sexual passion within her own self -- she is not brave enough to accept it. Philippa sees her own identity blurring with Achille's sexually subjective identity, and it frightens her. These passions are things which "a good Christian" is not supposed to possess, and instead of embracing what Achille makes her see inside herself, she retreats in fear from her Catholic play partner.[69] Philippa quits her singing lessons and runs from the man who, like a mirror, made her see her passion. Philippa's sister Martine senses that "the matter [of Philippa's decision to quit singing] was deeper than it looked," but even Martine "did not imagine that her sister might have been surprised and frightened by something in her own nature" (*AD* 32). As Sara Stambaugh says, Philippa "renounce[s] singing out of fear of sexuality" (80).

With Achille sent away, Philippa is able to re-gain her old, secure sense of self. Through most of the rest of "Babette's Feast" she continues to live out her life in extreme selflessness, devoid of personal desires. In Achille's mind, however, Philippa remains a sensuous and passionate artist. In the letter he sends ten years later, he addresses her as "my lost Zerlina" and says that he has "grieved that [Philippa's] voice should never fill the Grand Opera of Paris" (*AD* 34). He knows her not according to the identity in which she has entombed herself -- not as one of "the sisters," the nun-like daughters of the Dean -- but as the passionate maiden of Mozart's opera. Achille also retains the hope that

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[69]The idea that, to Philippa's family, Catholics are not good Christians but rather something to be feared, is voiced in the Dean's response to Achille's presence; "when the Dean asked whether [Achille] was a Roman Catholic [Achille] answered according to the truth, and the old clergyman, who had never seen a live Roman Catholic, grew a little pale" (*AD* 30).

Philippa will eventually find the strength to express her true nature. As he writes:

> In paradise I shall hear your voice again. There you will sing, without fears or scruples, as God meant you to sing. There you will be the great artist that God meant you to be. Ah! how you will enchant the angels. (*AD* 34)

Just as Charlie Dreyer, in "The Dreaming Child," seems to return in the less threatening form of Jens and offer Emilie another chance to claim her sexuality, so too does Achille seem to return in another form to offer Philippa another chance to claim her sensual, artistic passions. Babette Hersant is also an artist, and she challenges both of the sisters to accept sensuality as part of their identity. Babette is not of the opposite gender, however, and she does not initiate re-birth directly through sexual awareness; her medium is food, not sex. Thus, Babette's effect on Philippa does not fall under the umbrella of my discussion.[70] Suffice it to say, however, that by the end of the story, Philippa has achieved enough self-awareness to repeat Achille's words of encouragement to another artist, like herself, who has surrendered her art, and with it her sense of self:

> "I feel, Babette, that this is not the end. In Paradise you will be the great artist that God meant you to be! Ah!" she added, the tears streaming down her cheeks. "Ah how you will enchant the angels!" (*AD* 68)

With these words -- the words of one great and passionate singer spoken from the mouth of another great singer who could not accept her own passion --

[70]Many other critics have discussed Babette's positive effect on the sisters anti-sensual approach to life. Robert Langbaum, Aage Henriksen, Sara Stambaugh, and Sarah Webster Goodwin are just a few of these.

Philippa seems to have, if nothing else, realized what she rejected when she sent Achille away. She may have lived her long life as the desireless bride to Christ, surrendering the true passion of her heart to serve her master, but she comforts herself with the thought that she will be able to express her true self in heaven. Philippa thus learns what Peter, in "Peter and Rosa" knows: it is not right to deny a part of one's self in order to fulfill societal mandates, to play a role in a social structure. As Peter eloquently words it:

> "God has made me, and may have taken some trouble about it, and I ought to do him honour . . . . But I have crossed his plans instead. I have worked against him, just because the people by me, such people as are called your neighbours, have wished me to do so. . . why must we try to please our neighbour? . . . . He does not know what is great, he cannot invent the fine things of the world . . . . And what good can one do to one's neighbour, after all, even if one tries? It is God whom we must serve and please, Rosa" (*WT* 155)

Peter knows that the only way to live properly is to allow expression to all the elements inherent in one's self. Such a thing is not possible when one is locked into a limited self-definition, fulfilling a role for the sake of the stability of an established social structure. As Isak Dinesen seems to point out in all of these stories, each person must be free to express his or her true, unlimited self; man and woman, clergyman and artist must all allow their sense of self to freely play in order that it may find its true expression. Luckily, for those who may have once allowed their neighbor -- their society or their religion -- to shut them off from who they truly are, escape is possible; in these stories escape seems to come through art, imagination, sexuality and play with one's opposite.

CONCLUSION

Isak Dinesen's Own Escape from Structures and Labels

In this thesis I have looked at the way Isak Dinesen's characters can free their sense of self by re-negotiating the categories that appear to define them. Specifically, I have studied those characters who initially define themselves within a specific static social structure as the object, the other. These characters initially allow society to affix a label to them, thus limiting their sense of self to their social role. I suggested, however, that it was possible for these characters to escape such confinement of the self by entering into a play situation. Just as a child can imagine a stick to be a horse, these characters, once they are open to play, can imagine themselves as more than what society dictates. In fact, they can even imagine and accept themselves as freer, more independent and dynamic subjects.

In the stories I studied, the characters have to be prompted to play by the presence of a member of the opposite sex who was usually an artist. Moreover, their self re-conception was somewhat guided by their play partner's selfhood; the objectified characters could envisage the possibilities of freedom and self-determination only because they had the example of such an individual before them. There are characters in Dinesen's work, however, who do not need another person's help or example in order to set their identity in play; these characters seem always open to re-figuring, and are never pinned down within a social structure or by a pre-determined label. These playful characters seem particularly prominent among Dinesen's female characters. As Susan Gubar says, "Dinesen's most highly respected heroines change their identities as easily as they change their clothes" and "with a number of selves at their

disposal, multiple lives to live, such women indulge in the playfulness of impersonation with what seems to be Denesen's [sic] complete approval" (*Blessings* 493).

Pellegrina, in "The Dreamers," is the best example of such a character. It is she who determines that:

> I will not be one person again, . . . I will be always many persons from now. Never again will I have my heart and my whole life bound up with one woman, to suffer so much . . . . I feel, Marcus, -- I am sure -- that all people in the world ought to be, each of them, more than one, and they would all . . . be more easy at heart. They would have a little fun (*SGT* 345-46).

"'Fun is the key concept for Karen Blixen," says Elsa Gress, "or rather the key to herself" (72). Perhaps this is why she chose the name "Isak" to write under, for it is a name that incorporates the idea of laughter (Gress 70). Gress points out, however, the seriousness with which Dinesen seems to have approached the concept of fun and play, especially when considering the determination of one's selfhood. Dinesen seems to have understood that the ability to freely play is essential to keeping an individual dynamic:

> To her [fun] carries a moral weight. As something you both have and are, the word connotes . . . much more than frivolity. It comprises intense awareness, like that of a child playing, and passionate competence, like that of an artist working . . . . It is an attitude to life . . . (Gress 72)

Dinesen admitted -- to her friend and critic Thorkild Bjørnvig -- that Pellegrina is her most autobiographical character.[71] Certainly, in her own life,

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[71]See Bjørnvig's article, "Who Am I? The Story of Isak Dinesen's Identity."

Isak Dinesen, like Pellegrina, resisted being labeled or locked into a single social role and aimed instead at an ambiguity of identity. Arthur Gantzberg and Vivian Greene-Gantzberg claim that "Karen Blixen's dissatisfaction with society's expectations -- which defined the boundaries of her conventional identity -- stemmed from an awareness that the exploration of the inner self constitutes artistic freedom" (164). It is the artist, therefore, who can best avoid falling into the trap -- the same one from which she rescues Lovisa, Emilie, Benedetta and Rosa -- of being "'tied up' in a stable, permanent, unitary identity" (Aiken, *Writing* 119). Thus, like Pellegrina, herself an artist, Dinesen chose to live "a lifelong play" (Aiken, *Writing* 119). As Olga Pelensky states, to work with Dinesen is to encounter "the 'ever-shifting selves and voices' that emerge not only in her character Pellegrina but throughout her tales and life in a kind of engendering of the self" (164).

Much critical attention has been paid to Dinesen's ability to re-invent her selfhood. Dinesen has been called "a mixture of *grande dame* and gypsy woman, who enjoyed startling and mystifying her contemporaries" (Gress 71). She wore costumes,[72] told obvious fictions about herself -- "calling herself things like Lucifer's Daughter or the 3000-year-old witch who dined with Socrates" (Gress 71) -- and answered to many names, pseudonyms and nick-names.[73] Some of these names transgressed the gender boundary, while others -- like Isak -- left her gender vague. Overall, the character of Isak

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[72]Susan Gubar mentions Dinesen's Pierrot costume in "Blessings in Disguise: Cross-dressing as Re-dressing for Female Modernists." Gubar's article is about how women can re-conceive their identity through their dress, and she suggests that such costuming is a way to "call into question the categories of culture, specifically the category of gender upon which female socialization depends" (479). Cross-dressing, Gubar says, "becomes a way of ad-dressing and re-dressing the inequalities of culturally-defined categories of masculinity and femininity" (479).

[73]Judith Thurman thoroughly discusses Dinesen's many names and pseudonyms in *Isak Dinesen: The Life of a Storyteller.* The list, however, includes: Isak Dinesen, Karen Blixen, Pierre Andrezel, Lord Byron, Tania, Titania and Tanne.

Dinesen, as Susan Aiken says, "refuses final placement" and refuses "to be fixed by any single *logos*" (*Writing* 126). She is a "multiple, mobile figure who cannot be encompassed" (Aiken, *Writing* 121). "Wherever one seeks to place Dinesen, she is always elsewhere" (Aiken, *Engendering* xxi).

Geographically and linguistically Dinesen cannot be pinned down either. She was a Danish woman, but she spent what she considered the best years of her life in Kenya. She wrote her stories in English -- initially publishing in America and then re-writing the texts for a British audience -- and then translated them back into her first language, Danish. As Aiken says, Dinesen "mov[ed] between two linguistic worlds, locatable in neither" (*Writing* 115).

Even Dinesen's unique brand of literature resists labeling. Critics try to define her stories by a certain genre -- using such terms as gothic, romantic, folkloric, fantastic, and fin de siècle -- but not only is the range great, the labels do not always stick. As Judith Rosenburg says, "within her tales, [Dinesen] embeds non-conformist texts" and "by resisting traditional categories," both for her stories and her characters, "Dinesen achieves a distinctive new literature" (299-300). Moreover, "just as she blurred the boundaries between names, nationalities, and sexual identities, so Dinesen would put into question traditional generic boundaries separating fiction from fact, story from theory" (Aiken, *Writing* 116). Like Pellegrina, nothing in Dinesen's work or life is just one thing; everything has the possibility to claim many definitions.

With all the masks, carnivals, twins, transvestitisms, pretenders and "Pellegrinas" that fill her stories -- as well as with what Susan Aiken calls Dinesen's own "self-revisions" (*Engendering* xxv) -- it is not surprising that the 1985 international symposium on Dinesen's work was entitled "Karen Blixen/ Isak Dinesen: Tradition, Modernity, and Other Ambiguities" (Pelensky 164).

Ambiguity -- and the freedom from limitations, labels and structure that it allows -- seems to have become Dinesen's signature. It thus becomes apparent why Dinesen felt compelled to give her socially imprisoned characters a chance to free their sense of self; Dinesen seems to have privileged play over structure, freedom over limitations, in both the fictional and the non-fictional world.

As I mentioned in my introduction, some Isak Dinesen scholars -- notably Catherine Stimpson and Susan Hardy Aiken -- interpret Dinesen as a "prophet of post-structuralism and feminism" (Stimpson x). If one were to limit one's definition of post-structuralism to, in Christopher Norris' words, "the task of dismantling a concept of 'structure' that serves to immobilize the play of meaning" and an acknowledgment of "the powerlessness of ready-made concepts to explain" a person or thing, then Aiken and Stimpson's is a valid interpretation. Isak Dinesen, both in her stories and her own selfhood, privileged a lack of closure and a free play of meaning. She dismantled accepted social structures -- particularly the patriarchal structures of marriage and religion -- in an attempt to free the people inside.

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