ISBN: 978-87-7349-818-7

Accessible online: http://ruconf.ruc.dk/index.php/norlit/norlit2011/schedConf/presentations

Ieva Steponavičiūtė
Vilnius University

Politics at the Service of Aesthetics. The Case of Karen Blixen (with focus on her essay "On Modern Marriage and Other Observations")

According to a popular myth, which Karen Blixen had undoubtedly herself helped to create, she was a modern Scheherazade who had one ambition only: "to invent stories, very beautiful stories."[1] In her stories, she indeed avoided contemporary political and social topics, demonstrated her disapproval of the use of social realism in modern literature and of the novel as its dominant form. Nevertheless, although posing and often treated as first and foremost being an aesthete and a romantic, Blixen has not escaped her work (even its fictional part) being studied from historical and ideological perspectives.[2] As far as her non-fictional texts are concerned, they leave no doubt that Blixen was no passive observer of social and political processes that were taking place around her. In her essays and articles such as "Breve fra et Land i Krig" (1940), "En Baaltale med 14 Aars Forsinkelse" (1952), "Fra Lægmand til Lægmand" (1954)[3], she expressed her views on the Nazi propaganda, the feminist movement, laws on vivisection, and other issues, but did it in her own, very peculiar way.

The focus of the present paper lies on the essay "Om Moderne Ægteskab og Andre Betragtninger" (On Modern Marriage and Other Observations), which touches upon some topical and even some disturbing issues of her time – the relationship between the sexes in the modern world, and eugenics. As the present analysis aims at demonstrating, the arguments that Blixen uses in order to explicate her views are controversial and untraditional − both with regard to their contents and the way in which they are presented, which positions the essay on the verge between documentary and fictional writing.

The essay was written by Blixen before her breakthrough as a writer, in 1923–24, after her separation from her husband Bror Blixen and while she was still living in Kenya. It was a reply to her brother Thomas Dinesen in their discussion on issues of sexual morality which they carried out in their letters to each other. The absence of references to their family and of the details of Thomas' or Karen's personal experiences, as well as the volume of the text suggest, however, that the text, although first published after the author's death,[4] could have been intended for a much broader audience than a single addressee.[5]

The main argument in the essay is as follows: the marital institution is in crisis, and has become "an empty shell," the contents of which has been wasted away.[6] This is so, it is argued, because marriage is no longer based on an idea that both partners are happy to serve, for example, God or the family name, as it used to be in the old days. Therefore it often collapses when love is over, and even if it survives, it becomes a routine, a form of "mental cannibalism" [75] in which all individual aspirations are smothered.

Blixen claims that with the old ideals gone, it would be difficult for the most people to define in what way a marriage is different from a free-love affair, except for the legal aspect of it. As love is what both relationships are now initially built on, Blixen

makes it her main protagonist, which she sets, as a modern St. Christopher, on its way to search for an idea − stronger than itself and which it would be glad to serve. This protagonist travels in the essay through times and encounters different forms of man and woman relationship and finally seems to approach the idea which could make a relationship meaningful and which turns out to be nothing less than "the improvement of the race" [92]. This idea is developed in the final chapter of the essay called "The Heavy Child: A Fantasy," in which we hear the echoes of the traditional racist or eugenicist rhetoric: "second-rate specimens" [89]; "those who do not possess full value as human beings, and whom it will not benefit the race to pay full value to" [89]; "undesirable specimens" [91]; "racial consciousness" [91]; "the welfare of the stock" [89]. Such phrases and the claim that eugenics is a major revolution in the history of humanity [85] might be enough to make an enlightened and morally responsible person of today turn away with indignation from this text and maybe the rest of what the writer has written.

Eugenics was one of the main concerns of science in the first decades of the 20th century, and many intellectuals were attracted by it, including Winston Churchill, H. G. Wells, Theodore Roosevelt, George Bernard Shaw, T.S. Eliot, Wirginia Woolf, W. B. Yeats (in Denmark - Thit Jensen). There had been alarming changes in the societies of the Western world, especially in big cities: growing alcoholism, prostitution, murder-rate, increase of mental diseases. These were considered to be indicative of the degeneration of civilization, and eugenics offered its own ways to deal with these issues.[7] Claiming that everything is inherited, even moral and mental properties, and that the environmental influences have little effect, eugenicists "called for increased procreation among the "fit" members of society and decreased procreation among the "unfit"."[8] These measures were proposed in the interest of humanity (which, of course, usually coincided with the interests of "the higher race" or a particular nation) and in greatest seriousness. The idea of the regeneration of the race at the cost of the socially disadvantaged had its roots in the ideology which later was labeled "Social Darwinism." One of its major proponents, Herbert Spencer, advocated the preservation of the laws of natural selection in the British society:

> "it should be hard that a labourer incapacitated by sickness …should have to bear the resulting privations. It seems hard that widows and orphans should be left to struggle for life or death. Nevertheless, when regarded not separately but in connexion with the interests of universal humanity, these harsh fatalities are seen to be full of beneficence.[9]

There seems to be little or nothing that today can justify the idea of eugenics, especially "negative eugenics" (directed against the proliferation of "human weeds"[10]) or "racial hygiene," as it is directly connected in our consciousness with the Nazi ideology and some of the worst crimes committed against humanity. But let us do not hasten to judge Blixen – not only because she was writing some twenty years before the Holocaust, but because she is an author of fiction whose words can seldom be taken at face value. It is worthwhile taking a better look at what ideas might lie beneath the alarming phrasings presented above.

Eugenics is said to be closely related to three major ideologies of discrimination: racialism, sexism and classism.[11] The issue of classism appears to be irrelevant to this essay, except maybe for Blixen's typical contempt for the middle class and its bourgeois

morality that accompanies her discussion of the modern marriage [70-76]. Sexism is also out of question, for in this essay Blixen rejoices in the new possibilities that birth control has given to women, first of all, the possibility of having a lighter, more playful relation to life and the opposite sex [82−83]. As far as racialism is concerned, Blixen seems to demonstrate completely the opposite views. What she means by the word "race" turns out to be "the human race," or "the whole of humanity." This is stated directly [87, 95], but it is also clear from the considerations quoted below that Blixen is not advocating the interests of a race or a nation, but calls for love and responsibility for "all humanity," which, she suggests, might not yet be the limit:

> [L]ove of clan has undoubtedly grown out of love of family and home, love of country out of love for clan, and the idea of the brotherhood of all humanity has arisen the stronger from the fearful flames the love of country burst into.
>
> The human beings of the future, who will not have the slightest difficulty in comprehending the fourth dimension <...> will then perhaps be able enthusiastically to merge into an even higher unity and embrace a larger brotherhood <...>. [95]

Although these words already show the text and its writer in a better light, they do not yet provide an answer to the question what kind of human beings Blixen considers "second-rate specimens" and in which way she thinks "the race" can be "improved." The human properties that according to the essay are worthwhile being selected and passed over to other generations must be moral qualities that can be acquired and inherited (although not physically), as can partly be read in her own words: "Society will come to accept that moral values have moral heirs and are not dependent on the flesh" [91] and partly concluded on the basis of Blixen's sympathy for neo-Lamarckians.[12] Her arguments in the chapter concerned with eugenics (as in the rest of the text, as we will soon see) are presented in a quite confusing way, her discussion being full of digressions and references, both historical (the French revolution and Bolshevism), religious or Biblical (the Church indulgences and the rise of Reformation, St. Christopher, the devil and Uriah) as well as literary (Shakespeare and Sherlock Holmes, Dante's Paolo and Francesca and Lessing's Nathan), which makes her line of argument difficult to follow.[13] Blixen's point with eugenics is scattered throughout the chapter, and if we want to (re)construct it we have to combine together bits of information contained in different sentences − reading them against each other and against what has been said earlier in the text. It is clear, however, that Blixen speaks of the great responsibility that eugenics places on the human beings, as it shows that the well-being of the future generations depends on each couple who meet in a love relationship:

> [E]very young couple would be like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden looking ahead to innumerable generations, knowledgeable in the wisdom of eugenics as Adam and Eve were not, and clear in the realization that they possess the possibility of bringing suffering or joy to thousands for thousands of years. (91)

For the young generation, Blixen asserts, the highest ideals are freedom and beauty that in a love affair express themselves when "the personalities can understand, help, give joy to each other" [87]. These seem to be the qualities that Blixen considers worthwhile being selected and passed over to other generations, as she right away relates eugenics

with love "that collaborates in *this*" [87]. Blixen incites directly the people of the future: "to blend beauty and strength in the life of the race" [94]. Beauty, understood as a possibility to develop freely one's personality within a relationship and to pursue one's highest aspirations,[14] at the same time engaging in a mutual spiritual and intellectual exchange and bringing joy to other people, appears to be Blixen's highest ideal as far as a love relationship is concerned. This is clear, among other things, from her description of the sole criterion according to which a relationship between a man and a woman should in the future be judged by the outside world:

> according to whether they [love relationships] are, for example, the inspiration for ideal works or activities, or form a center for art or science or philanthropy, or merely attractive to their fellows as examples of beautiful and happy relationships <…>. [91]

These words echo closely the accusation, found earlier in the text, towards many modern parents who use their authority to prevent their children from developing freely and striving for beauty:

> You are forgiven at the outset for not having been the mainstay of intellect or art, for not having been hearths where the holy fire could burn, for you were not capable of that. But you are not forgiven for having grudgingly prevented and condemned any striving after those things, because they were outside your domestic sphere and could put you in the shade. [76]

Blixen foresees that in the future there will be the only category of "illegitimate children" describing them, quite ambiguously, as such "that do not posses full value as human beings" and whom it will be criminal to make "part of the stock in trade" [89]. Since beauty, as it has already been pointed out, will be the only legitimate ground for a relationship according to Blixen's "fantasy," it must be the relationships which fail to contribute in any of many possible ways to the promotion of beauty that Blixen considers to be a 'risk group' for producing "undesired specimen" who could 'inherit' and pass over their parents' 'handicap'. Therefore these 'illegitimate' couples, Blixen seems to be saying, should not be allowed, or rather should refrain themselves from bringing forth and up children.[15]

This is negative eugenics turned on its head and driven to absurdity, and Blixen secures herself against those who could take her words too literary by explicitly calling the chapter "A fantasy." However, Blixen's conception of eugenics, although subversive, is directly linked to the earlier discussion in the essay and to what seems to be her main concern: a search for the ideal form of relationship between man and woman. This ideal can, as Blixen tries us to convince, one day become a reality if people really find it attractive: "The rule is always the same: What you wish for, you shall have," and Blixen finds a proof of this in Lamarck's famous example: "The giraffes conceived a desire to eat the new shoots on the treetops and stretched their necks up for many thousands of years until their desire was completely fulfilled" [33-34].

The essence of this ideal must be clear from the earlier discussion, but it is important to add that Blixen defines this alternative to the degenerated modern marriage in terms of a game. This beautiful game, in which women will no longer be men's playthings, but their playmates, has become possible with birth control and thanks to the

hard work of "the emancipated woman" [82-83]. However, Blixen warns her reader, this game (as all good play) will not be easy, as it requires that man and woman renounce completely their claims to own each other and allow one's partner to express himself or herself freely, at the same time mobilizing their own ultimate qualities:

> Much is demanded of those who are to be really proficient at play. Courage and imagination, humor and intelligence, but in particular that blend of unselfishness, generosity, self-control and courtesy that is called *gentilezza*. Alas, there has been so little demand and exercise of this in love affairs. So many excellent men and women have demanded it of themselves in relation to their circles of acquaintances and subordinates, but in their marriages have thought that they had every possible right to be egoistic, uncontrolled, jealous /…/. [83]

In this essay, Blixen comes closest to formulating her own conception of play, which in many ways adumbrates play theories that will be developed later, for example, by Johan Huizinga or H.G. Gadamer. Before Huizinga, who in his *Homo Ludens* (1938) claims that play is an autotelic and voluntary activity separated from "ordinary life," bound by its own space and time, governed by its own rules and performing a socialising function,[16] Blixen characterises ideal play in a very similar, however, much more poetic way:

> [I]t is the kind of game that is sufficient in its real charm or boldness, yet that dissociates itself form earthly life and resembles something generally more associated with a heavenly state, as it is not subject to the strict laws of necessity but its own divinely intelligent ones, and a spirit of goodwill and harmony is assumed among all the participants and through all vicissitudes. [78]

Blixen discussion of the phenomenon of play in this essay is of general interest for the study of Blixen's texts, as play seems to be one of the governing principles of her *oeuvre* manifesting itself on different levels of textuality. Blixen texts challenge literary conventions and juggle elegantly with other texts, establishing their own "intelligent laws." They produce playful narrative structures and defy final interpretations, opening themselves generously to the play of the reader's interpretative ingenuity. Play and games partake in the construction of characters and serve as metaphors that guide us towards Blixen's philosophy of *Weltspiel* in which man's life is subject to chance and choice, severe necessity and humorous paradox.

Having in mind that play is a dominant principal in Blixen we can naturally expect that also in the text which explicitly dwells upon matters of play, play functions on a much broader scale than just being a poetic metaphor that consolidates the idea of unselfish and mutually inspiring relationship. Play is what in this essay connects love and art, as in the chapter called "Intermezzo" Blixen inscribes love as play into a larger context of games and art, grounding the kinship between the latter two in the extensive use of the word *to play* and a similar nature of these activities:

> In old Danish, and most other languages, the same word was used to define playing games and playing, for instance, a musical instrument, or cards, or for acting or dancing, to which all the same laws applied, or in older times for fighting in tournaments, not much less dangerous than war itself and in which there was no less opportunity to show

> bravery and contempt of death, but for which such rules were evolved as the knights themselves could have wished to apply in war and in which no real hatred or enmity was present. [78]

The text provides us with numerous parallels between love as play and art to mention just a few: it speaks of the heavy burdens which have not allowed the humanity "to see love in its life, as it does, for instance, art, as its highest "delight"" [80], it compares those who are unable to play in love with "a musician with no sense for music" [80], and claims that the crusaders have taken from the Arabs "their first ideas of love as a game and an art" [81].

The idea of love as play, which in this text is granted the status of art, and therefore can metonymically represent it, as well as the abundance of references to the world of art, suggest that another semantic level − an aesthetic discourse − might be hidden in this text beneath the discussion of man - woman relationship. Blixen appears to be using love as a pretext to speak about art in a similar way she uses eugenics in order to discuss the lack of the aesthetic dimension in the lives of many families.

The title of the chapter in which Blixen's muses on love as play – "Intermezzo" also suggests the double-coding of the discourse in this essay, as it refers to a piece of entertainment performed between the acts of a play (opera) and originally related to the masque culture. Little by little the reader of the essay begins to suspect that the essay in many ways functions similarly to a fictional text: it is full of indeterminacies that the reader is supposed to resolve, love is made in it into an anthropomorphic protagonist in search for an idea, the discourse of the essay combines together pathos and irony.[17] The fictional character of the essay is further enhanced by the fact that love as play, a notion around which the entire discussion is centered, preserves the status of an ideal throughout the text. It is explicitly stated in the text that this idea has never been carried out in life [79], and we get no assurance either that this will be done in the future. What this text seems to offer its reader is not a sociological forecast or a practical recipe of perfect love, but rather an artistic fantasy − a fiction about love as play. The reader is warned about that already in the very first sentence of the essay which contrasts two different evolution theories: "I was still young when I left Darwin's desert and entered the verdant gardens of Lamarck [32]. Although Lamarck's theory is skeptically viewed by modern science,[18] it is obvious, that in this essay, it is given a much higher status than Darwin's: unlike Darwin's "desert," Lamarck's "gardens" are a place where the trees bear fruits "that human beings have seen in their most felicitous dreams: beauty, knowledge, eternal youth" [32]. This reference to Lamarck is ambivalent and even contradictory. On the one hand, it seems to promise that dreams might come true, and that the idea of love as play can one day become a reality, as came true the giraffes' desire to eat the new shots on the treetops. On the other hand, if we consider Lamarck's theory of "creative evolution" to be a beautiful myth, the reference might suggest the opposite idea: the ideal that the essay is formulating has no empirical value. However, 'on the third hand' might also exist: the reference to Lamarck's theory, which in Blixen's text appears to stand closer to art than science and which promises the possibility of the realisation of ideals, implies that ideas might come true without claiming immediate empirical validity, as it, for example, happens in fiction and art, which can nevertheless serve as an inspiration for people in their real lives.[19]

With the premises for a metaphoric reading of the essay being established, I will now proceed with a more concrete investigation of its 'secondary discourse' – the discussion of aesthetic issues. As all the forms of man and woman relationship are discussed by Blixen with the help of artistic images, it can be useful to analyse how some most prominent of these images relate to the particular model of relationship which they represent and what implications this might have for our understanding of Blixen's aesthetic 'ideology'.

It is easiest to conceptualise the type of art which stands behind the idea of modern marriage and which in the present analysis will be termed 'the art of truth' by analogy with the term "love of truth" [72−73] by which Blixen characterises this relationship. By the word "truth," is meant complete openness between the partners that leads to boredom and intellectual stagnation:

> The person who wishes to be truthful in relationship to another must keep nothing to himself, but must reveal everything as well as demand to know everything. Truth cannot be fully achieved before people know all about each other's childhood love affairs and toothaches in detail. The true friend, son, husband has not a single corner of his soul that he can call his own, no possession that he has not shared out among the commune, and he feels that a secret is not a sweetness in the soul but a weight on his conscience. [72]

The idea of "love of truth" is directly related to the art of conventional realism that flourished in Denmark at the time when the essay was written. Blixen refers to it explicitly, when she illustrates her idea of modern marriage by a painting, or rather a type of paintings that very much like the spouses in her vision of modern marriage demonstrate a lack of imagination. Blixen distances herself from art that copies everyday life situations and demands little creative effort on the spectator's part:

> This type of search for truth is practiced particularly in the home, and Danish art, which on the whole has paid homage to such a form of truth, has glorified it in many hundreds of interiors: the husband reading, with his pipe or his glass of toddy beside him, the elder children at their lessons, drinking milk and tea and eating their bread and butter, the wife nursing the youngest child, all gathered around the same lamp, while the dog, stretched out on the carpet, contributes to the intimate atmosphere of the home. [72]

A more complicated affair is to define in general terms the art that relates to the concept of the feudal marriage. It is, however, obvious that it is the art of the past, as Blixen, when musing on the nature of marital relations in the old days, invites us to a chapel, to "the tomb of the duchesse de Rohan" [66]. We might associate the image of the "imperishable marble" [69] with the art of classical antiquity. Or, most probably, it refers to the Renaissance period that revived the classical heritage and was the time when Maria de Rohan – the only family member explicitly mentioned in the text – lived. Maria's name might also be a reference to the art of Romanticism, as it evokes the title of the opera by Gaetano Donizetti.[20] No matter what chronological implications of this image are, it seems to represent art that has passed the test of time. Unlike 'the art of truth', this art is no mimetic and conventional representation of reality, but rather a translation of it into the language of symbol and myth. This makes the reality behind the work of art not recognisable, but only guessable or imaginable, as it is suggested by the ambivalent story related to the image of the tomb. Though claiming that the ducal couple "remained

together in eternal rest in imperishable marble" [69], Blixen also lets us realise that it is the myth of their perfect marriage that the tomb immortalises and not the historic truth behind it. The duke or the duchess, Blixen writes, "might dream of being reunited with a more beloved spirit in Paradise" [68], thus implying that in reality they could have been two strangers each subject to their own passions. For the sake of convention, this type of art that exhibits authority, intrigues by its power to conceal things and has strong connotations of long passed days will be here termed 'the symbolic classical art.'

The third and the ideal type of love relationship discussed in this essay is related to several concrete images of art which serve as illustrations for different aspects of Blixen's conception of love as play. By opposing Nietzsche's idea of "the playing child," Blixen claims that play no longer needs to be man's prerogative [81], and by referring to Old Scandinavian myths and the image of the Aesir playing after Ragnarok, she makes love a symbol of eternal happiness [77-78]. The idea that love as play makes human suffering easier to bear is expressed by the reference to Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* in which love can make "all human passions ["Labor, and pain, and grief" in Shelley[21]] "sport like tame beasts, none knew how gentle they could be"" [84]. However, there is no central image that could function as a summary of the concept of love as play, conveying its essence in a metaphoric form (as the realist painting or the marble sarcophagus did in respect to modern and feudal marriage). This might be not accidental as play is what for Blixen represents an ideal − some abstract model to be pursued. However, as Blixen draws a clear parallel between love, art and play we can assume that the concept of 'art as play' would naturally incorporate the elements that Blixen declares to be indispensable of any good play and which she claims, as it has been discussed earlier, to be necessary in a love relation: "[c]ourage and imagination, humor and intelligence <…> generosity, self-control and courtesy," as well as "a spirit of goodwill and harmony <…> among all the participants."

If applied to literature, for example, these qualities could easily be translated as originality, bald and unexpected subversion of traditional thinking and conventional literary models, and also generous involvement of the reader as a playing partner. The claim that ideal art requires an active audience finds support in other texts by Blixen, which maintain a similar parallelism of love and art. The storyteller Miss Malin Nat-og-Dag in "The Deluge at Norderney" voices the importance of reception explicitly, when she suggests that art and beauty cannot exist as things in themselves: "Where, my lord is music bred – upon the instrument or within the ear that listens? The loveliness of woman is created in the eye of man."[22]

There is one more quality that Blixen considers to be essential for play and which has not been discussed yet. She calls it "superficiality," and again, she uses the word untraditionally, liberating it from the usual negative connotations:

> Those who love to play are constantly being criticized for being superficial . . . and not least where love is concerned. "Yes," they can reply, "we are superficial in the same way as a ship sailing across the sea. We do not consider it any advantage to reach the bottom, for at best that is what is known as going aground." [84]

It is not difficult to tell what "superficiality" means in respect to a love relationship, especially when Blixen right afterwards quotes Shelley's romantic poetic drama in which love conquers all and lifts those who love above the earthly chores and suffering. In

order to find out what "superficiality" might mean in respect to art as play, we have to look for an answer in Blixen's later production. In the story "The Young Man with The Carnation" (*Winter's Tales,* 1942), which tells about the young writer Charlie Despard, the image of the superficial ship reappears in almost identical wording:

> The ships were superficial and kept to the surface, therein lay their power, to ships the danger is to get to the bottom of things, to run aground."[23]

The image appears after Charlie's meeting with a mysterious "young man with the carnation" who seems to embody romantic sensibility, and in whose room Charlie happens to find himself by mistake. The sight of superficial ships marks a turning point in Charlie's carrier, as it brings him to the insight that he should be heading towards lighter, more superficial art than his first book, which "treated the hard lot of poor children."[24] We follow Charlie's evolution as he creates his "Blue story," which reads as a symbolic recount of Charlie's own search for the perfect form for his art and proves that Charlie has made a great step away from the heavy 'art of truth' of his first book. It is doubtful, however, that his art is already "superficial" enough: God, who declares himself to be the creator of all "floating things"[25] is discontent with Charlie. He reproaches him for running away from the bed of a girl who happened to be the man's with the carnation lover,[26] although Charlie congratulates himself with that he did not lay his "hand on anything that belonged to [his] brother."[27] Only in the last story of the same collection, "A Consolatory Tale," in which we meet Charlie again, he proves to have learned to take "what belonged to [his] brother" and create lighter ('superficial') art − such that is lifted up from the empirical reality which weighted down his first book and is set into new contexts which lacked in his "Blue story." After having listened to a story told by his friend Aeneas, Charlie makes the following conclusion: "Yes, a good tale /…/ No /…/ not very good, really, you know. But it has moments in it that might be worked up, and from which one might construct a fine tale."[28]

It was necessary to make this intertextual excursion in order to bring forth the quality of 'art as play' that we today, no doubt, would identify as intertextuality, or the tendency of playful art to recycle other texts. It makes art superficial and even hollow (as are the ships that Charlie watches) in a paradoxical sense − not deprived of a meaning, but (as Charlie also realises about the ships) "pregnant with possibilities" and with "great depths slaving" for it.[29] Its frame of reference being shifted or rather expanded so that it can incorporate other fictional 'realities', this art is able to float between multiple interpretations and accommodate multiple meanings.

If we read the essay as an expression of Blixen's original typology of art, we will realise that the essay in many respects follows "the laws" of art as play. It is a text that intelligently, baldy and with humour transgresses and renews the conventional model of the essay genre and subjects 'reality' and its topical issues to its own artistic needs. It is a text that expands its meaning by incorporating into itself other texts and other works of art and that generously invites the reader to join-in its play and to assemble itself anew from a different and perhaps untraditional angle.

The analysis just presented did not intend to argue that Blixen's implied manifesto of art as play (if one can be excused for such an oxymoronic expression) has been her ultimate intention with this text. It rather demonstrates that with Blixen, even a text which address social matters directly can rest on aesthetic arguments. This makes it difficult, or

even impossible to decide which of the two discourses – the social or the aesthetic – has the dominant voice in the text. By foregrounding this ambiguity, the essay seems to warn us against such reading of literature which reduces it to its social function − as simple manifestation of an ideology.

NOTES AND REFERENCES:

[1] Quoted from Judith Thurman. *Isak Dinesen: The Life of a Storyteller* (Paperback). Picador, 1995, p. 265.

[2] See, for example, the analyses of "Sorrow Acre" as a narrative of the evolution of historical consciousness by Poul Behrendt (Tekst, historie og samfund i Karen Blixens fortælling ,,Sorg-Agre," in *Kritik*, 41, 1977, 94□126) and Leif Søndegaard (På grænsen mellem liv og død □ en analyse af Karen Blixens "Sorg-Agre," in Clas Zilliacus [et al.] (ed.). *Gränser i nordisk litteratur/Borders in Nordic Literature*. Åbo Akademis förlag, 2008, 521□529); the feminist readings by Mariane Juhl and Bo Hakon Jørgensen (*Dianas hævn. To spor i Karen Blixens forfatterskab*. Odense Universitetsforlag, 1981 (English translation: *Diana's Revenge: Two lines in Isak Dinesen's Authorship*. Trans. Anne Born. Odense University Press, 1985)), Annelies van Hees (*The Ambivalent Venus. Women in Isak Dinesen's Tales* , ser. *The Nordic Roundtable Papers*, 8. Trans. Patty van Rooijen. Center for Nordic Studies, University of Minnesota, 1991), Grethe Rostbøll. *Længslens Vingeslag. Analyser af Karen Blixens fortællinger*. Gyldendal, 1996), or the post-colonial readings by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (Literature and Society, in *Writers in Politics*. Heinemann, 1981), Senorina Wendoh (*Colonial and Postcolonial Representation in Kenyan Writing With Particular Reference to Richard Meinertzhagen, Elspeth Huxley, Karen Blixen, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Meja Mwangi and Rebeka Njau*. University of Leeds, 1997) and Lasse Horne Kjældgaard (En af de farligste bøger, der nogen sinde er skrevet om Afrika? Karen Blixen og kolonialismen, in *TijdSchrift voor Skandinavistiek,* 30/2 (2009)).

[3] Respectively: "Essays from a Land at War," "Oration at a Bonfire, Fourteen Years Late," (both translations were published in *Daguerreotypes*, 1979). The third essay – "From Layman to Layman," has not been translated into English.

[4] In *Blixeniana*, 1977. The text was later included into the collections of Blixen's essays. Its English translation was first published in 1986. For bibliographical information, see Else Cederborg. Notes to "On Moden Marriage and Other Observations," in Isak Dinesen. *On Modern Marriage and Other Observations*. Trans. Anne Born. St. Martin's Press, 1986, p. 97 and Liselotte Henriksen. *Blixikon*. Gyldendal, 1999, pp. 221□222 and 347.

[5] As Frank Egholm Andersen puts it, "the "you" is not intended for the brother, but for the epoch," see his Afterword: "On Modern Marriage" and the Twenties, in: Dinesen *op. cit*., p. 116.

[6] Dinesen *op. cit,* p. 40. All the subsequent citations will refer to the same edition, with page numbers indicated in square brackets.

[7] See William P. Greenslade. *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel: 1880-1940*. Cambridge University Press , 1994, p. 15.

[8] See Laura Doyle. *Bordering on the Body: The Racial Matrix of Modern Fiction and Culture*. Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 11-12.

[9] Herbert Spencer. Social Statistics, Abridged and Revised (1884), in *The Works of Herbert Spencer*, 21 vol. Otto Zeller, 1966, vol. 1, p. 147. Here quoted from Donald J. Childs. *Modernism and*

Eugenics: Woolf, Eliot, Yeats, and the Culture of Degeneration. Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 2-3.

[10] Childs *op cit*., p.3

[11] Ibid., p. 6

[12] Lamarckians were different from Social Darwinists as they did not neglect the importance of "nuture" (the environment) and argued that also acquired characteristics could be inherited (Childs *op. cit*., p. 4). Blixen states directly her preference for Lamarck over Darwin [32], and also refers extensively to Bernard Shaw who was a neo-Lamarckian. For more on neo-Lamarckianism, Social Darwinism and Blixen see Egholm Andersen *op. cit*., pp. 117-127.

[13] Else Cederborg links "the uneveness of the essay, and the often somewhat forced argument" with Blixen's own confusion after the separation which she by all means had tried to avoid: "*On Modern Marriage and Other Observations* somehow resembles an adjuration to the pieces of her life's jigesaw puzzle to fall into their proper places" (see her Introduction: Karen Blixen□Her Life and Writings, in Dinesen *op. cit*., p. 11).

[14] As it is also illustrated by her words "[A] love affair is ideal to the degree that the individuals feel that they are in contact with and are influenced by their highest ideals" [86].

[15] Blixen makes an appeal to people's conscience and calls for the understanding of the great responsibility over the new generations [90-91].

[16] Cf. his definition of play: "Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life as being "not serious," but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means." (Johan Huizinga. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Paladin, 1970, p. 32)

[17] Consider, for example, the comic scene that is supposed to illustrate the sacredness of the feudal marriage: "There is no doubt that the farmer at Hill Farm□as long as respect for the family and the idea of property was deep and unquestioned□went to bed with his wife at Hill Farm with more solemnity and reverence than he could have shown any royal princess who had done him that honor" [69].

[18] Especially his main argument that the living organisms develop characteristics which they need and which can be passed on has been under strong attack. However, despite that for many years his name has been "a term of abuse," his ideas start now to be reevaluated, see Bruce H. Lipton. The Biology of Belief: Unleashing the Power of Consciousness, Matter & Miracles. Hay House, 2008, p. 20.

[19] It is probably not accidental, that Blixen finds inspiration for her neo-Lamarckian ideas in Bernard Shaw (see Andersen *op. cit*., pp. 124□126), for whom Lamarck's theory of "creative evolution" must also have contained poetic significance □ as a metaphor for expressing the importance of will and consciousness for the development of human beings (cf. Julian L. Ross. *Philosophy in Literature*. Syracuse University Press, 1949, p. 209).

[20] *Maria di Rohan*, 1843.

[21] Cf. *Prometheus Unbound*, Act IV.

[22] Isak Dinesen. *Seven Gothic Tales*. Penguin Books, 1963, p. 159.

[23] Isak Dinesen. *Winter's Tales*. Penguin Books, 1983, p. 23.

[24] Ibid., p. 17.

[25] Ibid., p. 34.

[26] Ibid., p. 33.

[27] Ibid., p. 35.

[28] Ibid., p. 218.

[29] Ibid., p. 23.