

the woods, because they wanted to become bears, and they did become bears. In summer they ate berries and mushrooms in the woods; in winter they slept and sucked their thumbs. One day two hunters met them, and killed one of them. The other bear cried and jumped over her sister's body. While she was jumping, she touched her sister with one of her paws and immediately became a beautiful woman again, except for one of her hands—the hand that had touched her sister—which remained a bear's claw. The hunters were surprised. One of them wanted to marry her. She said: "I'll marry you only after you burn my bear hide and find the soul of my sister." The hunters burned the bear hide and went to look for the bear-woman's soul.

A closer examination of these tales will reveal many thematic and artistic characteristics which they have in common with other folk tales; it will also reveal the most striking qualities of these people and their primitive but fascinating literature.

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Hamlet or Timon: Isak Dinesen's "Deluge at Norderney"

Karen Blixen, better known to English-speaking readers as Isak Dinesen, has explained the title of her *Seven Gothic Tales* as an allusion to "tale" in the sense of Shakespeare's late romance, *The Winter's Tale*.¹ She also intends the word "Gothic" to be understood in the special sense of "the Romantic age of Byron . . . the age of the Gothic revival."² In "The Deluge at Norderney," which Robert Langbaum has described as her witty and perhaps her best tale, Dinesen uses allusions to two Shakespearean tragedies as a means of developing the character of Jonathan Maersk and indirectly of commenting on the characteristic fondness of the Romantics for Shakespeare's Hamlet. By contrasting Timon and Hamlet she presents both a critique of the excesses of the romantic imagination and an affirmation of its value.

"The Deluge" relates the past histories of four aristocrats who spend a night on a barn which is sinking in a flood; ironically, they are sacrificing their lives for a family of peasants who earlier in the day sent their cattle to safety rather than go themselves. The story of Jonathan Maersk has been incorrectly interpreted as Dinesen's criticism of the bourgeois or middle-class individual who rejects appearances, masks, masquerades, and grand gestures.³ It is true that Maersk, who believes himself to be the son of a sea captain from a small town outside of Copenhagen, becomes cynical when he learns that he is probably the illegitimate son of Baron Gersdorff. He realizes that Danish society has made him a favorite, not because of his singing, but

¹Robert Langbaum, *The Gayety of Vision: A Study of Isak Dinesen's Art* (New York: Random House, 1965), p. 56.

²Curtis Cate, ed., "Isak Dinesen," *Atlantic Monthly*, 204 (Dec. 1959), p. 153.

³Eric O. Johannesson, *The World of Isak Dinesen* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1961), pp. 74-75.

because of his resemblance to Gersdorff, the social arbiter of Copenhagen. Disheartened by this superficiality, Maersk rejects the fashionable world with its emphasis on appearances and becomes so disillusioned that people call him Timon of Assens. The pun is justified by Jonathan's having been born at a seaport called Assens as well as by his furious misanthropy paralleling that of Shakespeare's Timon of Athens. This explicit allusion to Timon, however, is no more important than Dinesen's less obvious use of allusions to Hamlet.

Although the circumstances are different, Jonathan feels the shock and then melancholy which Hamlet experiences when he discovers that his mother has married his uncle under dubious circumstances. Like Hamlet, Maersk dresses in black, mourning, in his case, his loss of innocence. The Baron, however, finds in this melancholy and later misanthropy further evidence of his relationship to the young man; he insists that Jonathan Maersk will be a man of fashion whether he wishes to or not: "He will not be a man of fashion? But so we all are, we Gersdorffs; so was my father at the courts of the young Empress. Why should not my son be the same? Surely he shall be our heir, the glass of fashion, and the mold of form."⁴ These lines echo Ophelia's lament concerning the changes she perceives in Hamlet after he realizes the corruption in Denmark:

O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!
The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's eye, tongue, sword,
Th' expectation and rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
Th' observ'd of all observers, quite down! (III. i.)

The use of the phrase, "the glass of fashion and the mold of form," not by a lovely and sympathetic young woman, but by a decadent esthete underlines the difference between the tragic world of Hamlet and the superficiality of fashionable society.

Baron Gersdorff has never been able to be himself; even when he was making love to a woman, he has always become Byron or Lovelace. Although his self-absorption compels him to play roles, he is not content with appearances, but wants Jonathan to show him "what a Joachim Gersdorff is in reality" (p. 33). Within the symbolic framework of "The Deluge" acceptance of masks and masquerades, of appearances and grand gestures, is the beginning of wisdom. As the aging spinster Miss Malin points out, God does not need to know the truth about people; he knows it already, and as she further suggests, the Incarnation itself was a masquerade.

Once Jonathan has perceived the emptiness and illusory quality of appearances, he rejects them and changes from a melancholy Hamlet wearing black to a Timon who cannot even commit suicide with dignity because a fashionable young woman in black lace wishes to accompany him. It is impossible for him to recover the lost innocence of his idyllic life in the gardens of Assens, but he does ultimately come to the realization that fashion, appearances, masquerades, grand gestures must be affirmed even if they are illusions. The preservation of such illusions enables one to maintain the symbolic power of the romantic imagination.

When Miss Malin tells the story of Calypso, her young protege, she emphasizes that Calypso has suffered from not being treated as a woman,

⁴Isak Dinesen, *Seven Gothic Tales* (New York: Random House, 1934), p. 36.

from having her appearance ignored. After announcing that Jonathan is the appropriate husband for her, Miss Malin weaves a romantic tale. She tells Calypso that Maersk fell in love with her when he first saw her and that he followed her and decided to stay on the loft because she was there. The girl asks if this is true, and Jonathan replies that it is. Dinesen, however, tells us that it is not and that Jonathan Maersk had not been aware of Calypso's existence. Earlier when he became disillusioned with the superficiality of the fashionable world, he like Timon, retreated from appearances into a melancholy self-absorption. He evaded the tragic necessity of accepting the difference between appearance and reality and of still affirming appearances; he failed to realize as Hamlet does, that "there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so" (II. i.). During the night he spends on the sinking loft, Jonathan learns the power of the imagination to create its own truth. Miss Malin creates his romance with Calypso, forcing him to support her romantic fiction with a lie; even his marriage to the young girl is a masquerade because the Cardinal is not a clergyman but an actor. Yet by the end of the tale, Dinesen describes the two young people as husband and wife: "When he did at last fall asleep, in his sleep he made a sudden movement, thrusting himself forward, so that his head nearly touched the head of the girl, and their hair, upon the pillow of hay, was mingled together. A moment later he sank into the same slumber as had his wife." Through the power of imagination, the romantic illusion has become reality.

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The Kitsch Novel

The word *Kitsch* whose origin has not been conclusively established' could be a deformation of the English word "sketch" or it might have been derived from the German dialect verb *kitschen* which means to stroke, to rub, to smear, or "to scrape up mud from the street."² It has also been suggested that the word *Kitsch* is derived from the Russian word *kishitsa* which means "to pretend to be more than one actually is."³ The English translation of this term as "trash, rubbish, or junk"⁴ is inaccurate, for each of these words overwhelms the connotative meaning of the German term.

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¹Burkhard Busse, *Der deutsche Schlager* (Wiesbaden: Athenaion, 1976), pp. 7-8.

²*Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, II (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1971), II, 1247.

³Jochen Schulte-Sasse, *Die Krise an der Trivilliteratur seit der Aufklärung* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1971), p. 137.

⁴*Langenscheidt's Concise German Dictionary: German-English* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973), p. 313.