

Vera Laski's *The Black Island*: A German-Born Isak Dinesen Discovered?

Marilya Veteto-Conrad, Northern Arizona University

Is Vera Laski a new Isak Dinesen? *The Black Island*, Laski's unpublished autobiographical novel, is based on her time spent in the Caribbean in the 1940s.¹ This paper is an examination of the parallels between the writers Karen Blixen and Vera Laski. Despite fascinating biographical parallels, the primary thrust for answering the question above will be to examine Laski's prose fiction in comparison to that of Isak Dinesen, as Blixen was known in her famous literary incarnation. It will become apparent in the course of this article that the literary parallels are as fascinating as the largely unexamined biographic similarities.

If one accepts a statement by R. W. Langbaum, the authority on Dinesen's fiction, as valid, then the "main technical question of fiction" is the authority of the narrator. Langbaum states that the authority of the writer lies in his (or her) knowing the story and speaking about it in his (or her) own voice. "But to do this, he must speak not as an ordinary, but a mythical person. The voice must have character, so we can discern in it a whole spectrum of memories and values that will give meaning to the story. But it must be larger than life ... individual to the point of strangeness and yet so impersonal that it hardly seemed it could belong to one person."²

By the end of her life under her second literary *nom de plume* (the first, short-lived name under which she wrote was Osceola),³ Isak Dinesen, the Danish author Karen Christentze Dinesen Blixen, was an imposing figure. Despite her small stature, she held sway at her estate in remote Denmark over any visitor's or interviewer's imagination not only by dint of her story-telling prowess, but also by her appearance. Her intense eyes, her sharp aquiline profile, her white hair under the severe turban and her deep-timbred, drawn-out syllables all served to intensify the image of self she had already turned into legend in her semi-autobiographical stories, among them the collection titled *Out of Africa*,⁴

¹ Interested scholars can order a copy of Vera Laski's novel from the author of this article. Direct inquiries to the IFR.

² Robert Woodrow Langbaum, *The Gayety of Vision: A Study of Isak Dinesen's Art* (New York: Random House, 1965) 130-31.

³ Cf. Else Cederborg, *Factsheet Denmark: Karen Blixen and Isak Dinesen* (Copenhagen: Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 9/1983) 3.

⁴ Isak Dinesen, *Out of Africa* (New York: Random House, 1937, 1938).

which chronicles her years among the Kikuyu, Somali, and Masai tribes in Africa.

Dinesen's childhood and youth were marked by her position in the limelight of her family, a position she never ceased craving in spite of her self-imposed solitude both in Africa and later back in Denmark. Like Scheherazade, she was sure of her audience's love and attention. Although her life was filled with amazing adventures, she nonetheless changed, polished, glamorized, romanticized—mythologized—the events in her life to satisfy the story-teller's desire for a well-crafted tale.⁵

Doubtless, there are other women today whose lives have been equally, if not more, amazing than Karen Blixen's. After all, the opportunities open to women are far broader and easier to attain than decades ago. However, the turning into literature of her astounding experiences is what gave Blixen the luster that lives recounted as mere biography lack. Obviously, she preferred the fiction veneer on her biographical data over mere autobiography. Laski, too, accords greater significance to her work than to her biography. She insists that any biographical information be kept to a minimum; her literary output speaks for itself.

Discovering a new literary voice is an honor accorded very few, and to find oneself among those few renders one breathless and eager to share the discovery. The title of this paper tells it in a few words. The similarities to the historical, biographical Blixen are not perfect: Berlin-born Vera Laski is small, like Blixen, but not haughty. Her voice is low and intense, but quick, not affectedly slow and theatrical like Blixen's was. Both Blixen and Laski possess an instinct for staging interviews, yet while the former consciously went to the extreme with make-up, timing, sound and lighting, the latter tends to the minimal: a bright Mexican dress, curling white hair pulled back from the forehead with Navajo silver and turquoise. Like Dinesen, Laski tells a wonderful story, but reluctantly, only after she is sure of her audience, in no way to entice and captivate them in the manner of Blixen. In the past, Laski lectured throughout Europe and the United States on American Indians at museums and professional societies; now she will hold forth at length to visitors interested in that subject, but vouchsafes biographical information very sparingly (the biographical information contained herein is based on interviews conducted with Vera Laski in February and March of 1996). Like Karen Blixen, any "biographer who tried to gather material from [*Out of Africa* or *The Black Island*, respectively] would find that [they] do not answer many questions."⁶

⁵ Cf. Judith Thurman, *Isak Dinesen. The Life of a Story Teller* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982).

⁶ Langbaum 122.

After many years in Africa, Dinesen returned to Denmark and lived on her family estate of Rungstedlund across the Sound from Sweden. Laski has not retired to her land of birth like Blixen did, though she maintains her loyalty to German culture. She became an American citizen shortly after the war and now resides in a trailer in the desert north of Phoenix filled with books and papers.

Laski's similarities to Blixen's literary alter ego (for the purpose of this paper, henceforth I will refer to Blixen only as Isak Dinesen) are so astonishing that they do, indeed, speak for themselves although Laski has not chosen to write under a pseudonym—male or otherwise. Laski, like Dinesen, forefronts the events, not the person who lived them, although both Laski and Dinesen use the first-person narrator.

Dinesen chose a male *nom de plume* to hide her real identity in a world that did not set much store in women literary figures. Thankfully, this fact has changed in the course of the years, but it bears one last interesting biographical parallel to Laski. Just as Dinesen preempted a male role in her literary pseudonym, and by striking out on her own when she left for Africa, Laski, too, traveled all over Europe and North and Central America, including the unnamed "Black Island" (Laski, unlike Dinesen, fictionalizes place names). These travels were remarkable for a young woman of the time.

The autobiographical seems closer to the surface in Laski than in Dinesen merely due to the more densely florid prose style of *Out of Africa*. Like Dinesen, Laski has chosen to make of herself a persona in order to record events in her life during a time spent among the indigenous people of a faraway country, escaping her previous existence in Europe. Both women describe themselves as immigrants. Both authors and their personae are daring and adventurous. Befitting Laski, too, is Elsa Gress's description of Dinesen as possessing "awareness ... passionate competence ... disrespect and bravery, wit and irony, humor, and the power to feel joy, as well as grief deeply and sharply."⁷

The historical or biographical person does not disappear in Dinesen's *Out of Africa* or Laski's *The Black Island*; instead the real-life woman behind both works becomes a persona, despite the fact that both authors keep their own names in the works examined here (Dinesen's real name appears only three times, twice as Karen Blixen and once as Tania—a nickname).⁸ As Langbaum puts it, the transformation of biography into fiction "does not impugn the truthfulness of her account. She has achieved the main aim of romantic autobiography, which, whether in verse or prose, is to pull the ideal of the real, calling in as witness both the authority of traditional myths [and] one's own experience" (122). Laski voices similar sentiments in her preface to *The Black Island*: "You ask me about

⁷ Elsa Gress, "The Witch Who Dined with Socrates," *Danish Literary Journal* (1982): 1-2.

⁸ Cf. Langbaum 121.

the boundaries between reality and fairy tales. I never found such boundaries. I found symbolism in fairy tales; reality in symbolism; and in reality I found the essence of fairy tales: The breakthrough of the extraordinary" (iii).

The breakthrough of the extraordinary is what makes both *The Black Island* and *Out of Africa* "literature and not just another memoir of an interesting life."⁹ The literariness of the works by both authors has proven to be a stumbling block for publishers more amenable to accepting yet another memoir than a new work of autobiographical fiction by a not yet established author. Judith Thurman, Dinesen's biographer, recounts that Dinesen's work was initially criticized as being a "pastiche,"¹⁰ a reproach leveled at Laski's book, too. The same critic accused Dinesen of being merely "a teller of tall tales,"¹¹ and Laski, too, has been told that *The Black Island* is too fantastic.

Both Laski and Dinesen completed writing the works examined here many years after the actual events transpired—Laski even translated her original on-site manuscript from German into English—and both end up seeing the events "in a way she herself could not have seen ... while she was in the midst of the experience and did not know it was to end." Both works depict a young woman "growing up morally," for each probes the dark side of the soul.¹² Dinesen's figures are often dark and brooding, as in her two 1907 stories "The Ploughman" and "The Hermits," in which she deals with the ancient theme of the demon lover.¹³ In *The Black Island*, Laski tells of a bewitching but mentally unstable lover whose near-demonic attempts to attain complete sexual union reveal themselves to be attempts via hypnosis to gain the partner's complete submission. (The chronology is a surprise to the reader; rather than using hypnosis to gain forbidden sexual favors, the lover entices Laski's main character into hypnosis after they have already become sexual partners!) If Dinesen's Africa was her "Paradise Lost," as Langbaum puts it, then the Black Island was Laski's "Inferno Found." Both works depict the maneuvering for domination between individuals, frequently male and female. In Dinesen's case, the protagonists were herself and various men in her life: traitorous husband, capricious lover, enigmatic tribal chief; in Laski's case the protagonists were herself and a fickle lover or emotionally disturbed voodoo priest or village officials.

While Dinesen gives only minimal attention to another set of dynamics—those between white and black—Laski shows her anthropological training by going into great detail in her account of interactions between black people and white people. (After leaving Germany, Laski studied the then-new field under I'

⁹ Langbaum 119.

¹⁰ Judith Thurman 269.

¹¹ Thurman 269.

¹² Langbaum 119, 121.

¹³ Cf. Langbaum 46.

Abbé Jousse; she also studied pre-Columbian culture under Jacques Sounstelle at the Sorbonne.) Each author betrays the zeitgeist of the times: Dinesen alternates between admiration and exasperation, and was erroneously accused of racism, "despite the fact that during her time in Kenya she was considered to be 'pro-native'."¹⁴ A wry mixture of admiration and exasperation is evident in the following quote from *Out of Africa*: "The Native will not give time or thought to the weighing up of guilt or desert ... but he will devote himself, in endless speculations, to the method by which crime or disaster shall be weighed up in sheep or goats."¹⁵ Similarly, Laski recounts an event when she tried to fire her houseboy upon her imminent move to a smaller abode. His wife, with whom he lived under Laski's roof (along with children—*ti moun*—pets and servants of his own), was suddenly afflicted by what was called "the Mysteries," an apparent possession by spirits. The only manner of curing this affliction was directly tied to the woman's husband remaining in Laski's employ.

Laski's account of "the Mysteries" and other elements of life in a community based on voodoo beliefs reveals her own attitude, one that alternates between admiration and humor. Thus, like Dinesen, she makes of her neighbors what Langbaum calls "comedy and poetry" (129). Despite their sometimes harrowing experiences with—and even at the hands of—their non-white neighbors, both women demonstrate an understanding and empathy remarkable for their time and experiences in their new countries. Common to both women is a willingness to live a new life, to gain new insights, and to adopt new manners of thinking. Langbaum's assessment of Dinesen can be applied to Laski, too: "It is amazing how deep her understanding goes and yet how ironical it remains" (134).

The irony in Laski and Dinesen is a literary necessity, for it creates the requisite distance. As in Dinesen's story in *Winter's Tales*,¹⁶ "The Young Man with the Carnation," the creative process elevates the artist to a status "beyond all other human beings" (5). Taken inversely, this statement claims that the artist must be elevated to be able to create.

Yet another element necessary—at least to Dinesen—is the audience, as intimated earlier. Like the two caskets in "A Consolatory Tale" from *Winter's Tales*, each contains the key to the other. Dinesen's need for an audience was self-evident (a tale implicitly includes an audience); Laski's fierce drive to see publication of her work is its counterpart. Even Dinesen herself did not immediately find success. She was finally forced to use a pseudonym and did not publish until the age of forty-nine. Indeed, she initially "did not think of becoming a writer" at all, according to Langbaum (42). Similarly, Laski disavows reading fiction, and her works to date, published and unpublished, have ranged

¹⁴ Cederborg 3.

¹⁵ In Cederborg 100.

¹⁶ Isak Dinesen, *Winter's Tales* (New York: Random House, 1942).

from political treatises, such as her 1939 book on Hitler's rise to power, which was suppressed at her family's wishes and later lost, to anthropological studies to drama. As early as 1930 she had already published a criminal law book on child abuse.

Both Dinesen and Laski conform to Langbaum's definition of narrative authority. Their voices are at once immediately personal and yet so impersonal in assessing their own very odd situations that it seems unlikely a mere mortal could have withstood the moral and religious trials as well as actual physical dangers to which they were subjected.

The immediacy the reader feels in reading both *Out of Africa* and *The Black Island* testifies to the narrative authority; it is obvious that in both texts truth is the basis for the fiction it becomes. Debating the relative value of fact and fiction, biography and literature, however, is not the purpose of this paper, nor is it Langbaum's intent, either, for he appeals for a revision of that dichotic approach. No longer should a writer's work be viewed as an expression of life or even as totally separated as in recent schools of thought, but rather as situated between the two poles.

Whether the works of Laski and Dinesen are read for their biographical content or not, they nonetheless contain similar elements in the "pastiche" effect referred to earlier in this paper. For instance, tales within a tale are typical for Dinesen. Langbaum asserts that these insets are a "kind of dialogue that advances the action" (24). In *The Black Island*, the inset tales are the myths of creation and the voodoo stories to be found in the second half of the novel. This literary device, says Langbaum, is not new: he refers to Ovid, Cervantes, and "the whole romantic tradition" (24). This is the reverse aspect of the above notion that biography should be subjugated to the importance of the fiction. It may indeed be fiction, but the ideal work allows the reader to forget that the work is fiction, and instead to become so engrossed in it that the world of the novel becomes real. Dinesen's inset stories keep the illusion forefronted; Laski's inset legends draw one further into the world she depicts.

This omnipotence of the writer, who can choose to hide or display herself in her work, parallels the idea of the writer as instrument of a higher power: God. In "The Cardinal's First Tale" from Dinesen's 1957 volume *Last Tales*, God speaks to the protagonist, commanding: "You are to write the books ... for it is I who want them written."¹⁷ Humans are often instruments of forces virtually beyond their control both in Dinesen and in Laski. Sometimes this is expressed when humans symbolize something larger, when they themselves become symbols, as in the case of Dinesen herself. She said in *Out of Africa* that the indigenous people were "brass serpentine" her, that is, making a symbol out of her and all

¹⁷ Isak Dinesen, *Last Tales* (New York: Random House, 1957) 5.

Europeans, for “this is the only practical use the Natives have ever had out of us” (106). Dinesen sees the human as symbol, too; her depiction of her servant Esa focuses on her animal-like patience and suffering. This is not the patronizing of which Dinesen might have been considered guilty were it not for her intense love of Africa and its inhabitants. Rather, it is proof that Dinesen’s entire oeuvre used myth and symbol as a means of cloaking, summarizing, molding, and finally of understanding her own experiences. The character Pyhrra, devised for “The Cardinal’s First Tale” in the *Last Tales*, is another symbol: a twin who survives a fire, and the remaining sibling his mother has named Dionysus for the god of fiery red wine. Dinesen turned her own life into myth with her stories.

Though Laski’s fictional oeuvre is less prolific and is as yet virtually unpublished, she too operates in the realm of myth. Her use of myth, however, is less application than observation; despite the occasional anthropology-like observations made about the practices of the Kikuyu in *Out of Africa*, Dinesen’s interest in the indigenous people surrounding her served primarily as a filter for her own understanding of life. For Laski, the native experience was food both for anthropological thought and study as well as for semi-autobiographic fiction. She is not disinclined to using symbolic names, however; the “demon lover’s” name is an excellent example: when read only, the resemblance to the French word for pig is less apparent than when read aloud without its final syllable. It then becomes unmistakable that “Cochinat” is a version of *cochon*.

The character of Cochinat, first irresistible and then detestable, embodies the narrator’s struggle with the forces of religion and black magic on the island. Initially motivated by her need to reclaim personal papers stolen after her rift with Cochinat, the narrator’s resorting to magic exerts an ever-increasing fascination over her that is also mixed with repugnance, but never fear. Laski’s persona delves into the hidden depths of the voodoo belief system, but more out of her own curiosity than by a need to gain control over Cochinat’s attempt or to counteract his machinations against her.

The themes of eroticism, psychology, and religion are intertwined from the start via the character of Cochinat. The fascination he holds for her has some parallel to *Out of Africa*; Dinesen’s narrator loves Finch-Hatton to the point of self-sacrifice in order to keep his affection and attention. It may be argued that the themes of male dominance vs. female self-assertion are incidental and subtle elements, and they are significant in both works. However, this is not the focus of the present article. This said, it is interesting to note that Dinesen was fond of quoting Aldous Huxley’s notion of “love of the parallels,”¹⁸ wherein it is the difference between the sexes, not equality, that is a liberating force for both men and women. Thus, a woman’s goal was not emulation of men, but rather attainment of her own spiritual fulfillment. This sentiment is echoed by Laski in

¹⁸ Thurman 185.

her anecdotal reminiscences about the various relationships she has experienced between men and women; in *The Black Island* it can be found in the struggle of the sorceress and the male boco vying for power over a medium.

The parallel destinies at the foundation of Huxley's concept bear resemblance to yet another similarity between Dinesen and Laski. Both authors address the theme of destiny. Each author's work constitutes a retrospection on the events written about in *Out of Africa* and *The Black Island*, respectively, and each contains a realization of how the events contributed to the overall design of life. The characters in these works, their good or evil natures, are reconciled by the author's understanding of them. In Dinesen's case, the joy and terror Gress attributes to her are mirrored in her reaction to Africa and its nature. For Laski, joy and terror are mirrored in nearly equal part by the imported, partially adopted European Catholicism and its indigenous counterpart, voodooism.

The joint presence of religion and sexuality is typical for Dinesen and for Laski, although this is more evident in Dinesen's story from *Winter's Tales*, "Alkmene," than in *Out of Africa*. In "Alkmene" (whose name evokes the idea of destiny), eroticism is unfulfilled, and religion is the reason sexuality is stifled. In "The Young Man with the Carnation," religion—more precisely God—is the driving force behind creativity. God says: "I will not measure out any more distress than you need to write your book" (27). The distress meted out to Laski in *The Black Island* can be seen as a result of her incursions into the realms of uninhibited sexuality and unfettered religious intensity. In this, she has yet another parallel to Dinesen: Alkmene was once described by the author as her own personality taken to the extremes.¹⁹

The exotic symbolism in Dinesen comes from Greek mythology; the exotic in Vera Laski's book comes from voodoo. The major event in both authors' works, whether cloaked in terms of mythology or anthropology, is the fall from grace as an analogy to understanding of life and the concomitant creation of art. As Langbaum puts it, "life is to be understood as the analogy of art in which everything, even the pain and the evil, is esthetically necessary" (12).

Both authors thus offer an epiphany in their works. Laski ends *The Black Island*'s final chapter with the following scene with an American whom the narrator had met prior to her arrival on the island: "You have been on the Black Island? Don't you regret it?" she asks with apparent compassion, as if to say: "You have lost your mind there, haven't you?" "No, Mrs. Smith, I have no regrets. I have gone through hours, weeks, and months of despair. But—it has been a precious time. I have seen Satan eye to eye, but in the depth of his eyes I could see a reflection of the eyes of God" (E 10). Although Laski does not

¹⁹ Ulla Bruun de Neergaard, "Alkmene," SCA 323/EUS 361: Isak Dinesen/Karen Blixen. University of Texas, Austin, 9 April 1986.

conclude the book here, it is apparent that the closing anthropological chapter is an explanatory addendum—a coda, as Laski puts it—to the larger plot of *The Black Island*. The epiphany is not diminished by this explanatory chapter; it is a revelation too shining and resonant to be lost in anthropological theories, just as the thematic worth of *The Black Island* is not harmed but rather enhanced by its pastiche of semi-autobiography, legends, and musings. The epiphany that results from the fall from grace which Langbaum asserts as part of the overall symbolism of Isak Dinesen's works summarizes this final similarity between the authors Karen Blixen and Vera Laski: "If paradise is remembered by one who has lost it, the fall, too, is remembered by one who has recovered from it" (144).