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Author(s): David H. Richter

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# Covert Plot in Isak Dinesen's "Sorrow-Acre"

*David H. Richter*

Perhaps none of Isak Dinesen's novellas has been more admired, and certainly none has been more widely anthologized, than "Sorrow-Acre," originally published with her *Winter's Tales* in 1942.<sup>1</sup> This lyrically tragic tale, set in Denmark in the 1770s, invokes many of the persistent themes that haunt Dinesen's work: the contrast between the cruel beauty of the *ancien regime* and the more prosaic humanitarian ethos of modern democracy that will inevitably displace it; the inextricable connections between men and the land they live on; the arcane routes by which men seek and find their destiny; the perverse and terrible costs which love exacts. These themes have been sensitively and eloquently elucidated in the published criticism on Dinesen, particularly the studies by Langbaum, Johannesson and Hannah<sup>2</sup>; what these critics, and others, seem to me to have misunderstood about Dinesen's "Sorrow-Acre" is not her themes but her plot. Or her plots, rather. For it is my basic thesis that "Sorrow-Acre" is informed by two interlocking plots, one overt and obvious, which no reader can conceivably miss, the other merely hinted at through foreshadowing allusions which previous commentators have misread or read but in part. The brief essay that follows will concern itself with the covert plot of "Sorrow-Acre," its relation to the more visible plot, and why Dinesen may have adopted the apparently risky strategy she chose of structuring a story around a plot so enciphered that it might easily remain a mystery.

The open or visible plot of "Sorrow-Acre"—which to my mind is the subordinate one of the two—has its source in a Jutland folk-tale collected by Ohrt and retold by Paul la Cour in 1931; Hannah has found the latter, more literary version to have been Dinesen's most direct inspiration.<sup>3</sup> The story, as it appears in "Sorrow-Acre," concerns a widow, Anne-Marie, whose only son Goske has been accused of setting fire to a barn belonging to the "old lord" on whose landed estate they work. Anne-Marie pleads with the old lord to save her son, and the old lord offers her a bargain: if she will mow in one day a rye-field that would be work for three men, he will let her son go; if she fails, the boy will be sent away to be judged and she will never see him again. On the day

set for the ordeal, Anne-Marie begins mowing the field, quickly at first, then ever more slowly as her strength ebbs and as the heat of the day takes its toll. In the presence of a crowd of peasants gathered to commiserate with and encourage her, and in the presence of the son for whom she made the bargain, Anne-Marie finishes the field just at sunset, only to collapse, dead from exhaustion.

While this story occasionally occupies the foreground of Dinesen's narrative, particularly at the denouement, for the most part it forms the backdrop against which a very different figure is traced. This takes the shape of a debate between the old lord and his young nephew, Adam, whom most commentators correctly take to be the focal character of the story. On the day set for the mowing, Adam has just returned to his ancestral estate from England, where he has absorbed the liberal and humanitarian values current there in intellectual circles, and which we today would associate with Jefferson or Rousseau. As he walks to the mansion at the centre of his uncle's feudal estate, Adam experiences a recrudescence of intense love for the soil of his forefathers, which he senses wishes to claim him, body and soul; these feelings are qualified, however, by his awareness of how alien his values have become to the hierarchical structures of autocracy physically implanted in the topography of the manor. As Adam stands listening, in the morning, to the old lord's exposition of the bargain he has made with Anne-Marie, he says nothing to challenge his uncle's decree, but as the day wears on the drama being played out in the rye-field weighs ever heavier upon his conscience, and he is driven to remonstrate with his uncle: "'In the name of God . . . , force not this woman to continue.'"<sup>4</sup> The old man answers Adam calmly and reasonably from within his aristocratic and feudal values: that Anne-Marie chose to accept the ordeal as freely as he chose to offer it; that his word, once given, is to him as sacred as that Word out of which the world was created; that his decree, if cruel as those of the Greek gods, at least allows the woman the beauty of a tragic destiny to which gods themselves cannot aspire; finally, to the prediction of Nemesis foreseen by Adam, the old lord responds with a shrugging "Amen," accepting whatever fate history will bring to him and his class. The old lord is immovable, his fortress of reasons impregnable, and Adam is finally driven to declare that, rather than stay in a land where such brutality must be, he will leave Denmark and go, not to England, where the feudal structures are incompletely eradicated, but to America, in whose fields and forests his more modern ideas reign supreme.

But this is not where Dinesen leaves the matter. In a long passage of interior monologue written with an intensity that marks it as the emotional climax of the story, Adam reverses his decision and decides to stay on his uncle's estate. The passage begins with the old lord's bitter benediction upon Adam's choice to go to America: "'Take service, there, . . . with the power which will give you an easier bargain than this: That with your own life you may buy the life of your son.'"<sup>5</sup> This refers, most obviously, to the bargain the old man had concluded with Anne-Marie, but it also alludes to the uncle's private sorrow

—the death of his only son, who was to inherit the manor. Though the old man has married himself the bride intended for his dead son, and may, Adam thinks, have children by her, Adam sees as he had not before the old man's suffering, and his ever-present dread of "the obliteration of his being" through the failure of his direct line.<sup>6</sup> And as Adam contemplates his uncle with pity and forgiveness, he recognizes that beneath his liberal values was a stronger, universal vision which determines him not to leave but to stay. To make this vision comprehensible it must be quoted at some length:

He saw the ways of life, he thought, as a twined and tangled design, complicated and mazy; it was not given him or any mortal to command or control it. Life and death, happiness and woe, the past and the present, were interlaced within the pattern. Yet to the initiated it might be read as easily as our ciphers—which to the savage must seem confused and incomprehensible—will be read by the schoolboy. And out of the contrasting elements concord arose. All that lived must suffer; the old man, whom he had judged hardly, had suffered, as he had watched his son die, and had dreaded the obliteration of his being. He himself would come to know ache, tears and remorse, and, even through these, the fullness of life. So might now, to the woman in the rye-field, her ordeal be a triumphant procession. For to die for the one you loved was an effort too sweet for words.

As now he thought of it, he knew that all his life he had sought the unity of things. . . . Where other young people, in their pleasures or their amours, had searched for contrast and variety, he himself had yearned only to comprehend in full the oneness of the world. If things had come differently to him, if his young cousin had not died, and the events that followed his death had not brought him to Denmark, his search for understanding and harmony might have taken him to America. . . . Now they have been disclosed to him today, in the place where he had played as a child. As the song is one with the voice that sings it, as the road is one with the goal, as lovers are made one in their embrace, so is man one with his destiny, and he shall love it as himself.<sup>7</sup>

As Adam decides to stay, he feels the hour "consecrated . . . to a surrender to fate and to the will of life," and as he speaks of his altered plans to his uncle a roll of Jovian thunder signals the fateful choice.<sup>8</sup> But Adam is not afraid: he thinks, in his present *amor fati*, that "he had given himself over to the mightier powers of the world. Now what must come must come."<sup>9</sup>

But just what is it that "must come"? What is the fate that Adam has accepted with such gravity? This is what I have called the covert plot of "Sorrow-Acre," for it is not so much told to us as it is enciphered by Dinesen in the loose ends and stray details surrounding the visible story. One common view is that expressed by Robert Langbaum: "It is the destiny of Anne-Marie and the old lord to die, and it is the destiny of Adam to inherit the lord's estate and marry his young wife."<sup>10</sup> Another view is that of Johannesson, who

speculates that Adam will cuckold his uncle; the latter, we are told, "is a comic figure because . . . he will have a son produced for him by his wife and Adam."<sup>11</sup> Now while there is evidence to support elements of both these views, neither is very congruent with the tone Dinesen uses to describe Adam's acceptance of his fate, or Adam's reflection, a little later on, that "Anne-Marie and he were both in the hands of destiny, and destiny would, by different ways, bring each to the designated end."<sup>12</sup> The sombre tone of Adam's vision, and his foresight of a link with Anne-Marie's tragic destiny, suggest a very different fate for Adam than the inheritance of a valuable estate or a sexual romp with his uncle's beautiful young bride. Contemplating either destiny would require little in the way of *amor fati*. I believe, however, that when Dinesen's hints are read as a whole, the story in which one infers Adam will play the role of protagonist would be more like that of Tristan and Isolde<sup>13</sup> than like Chaucer's "Merchant's Tale." There will indeed be a love-affair between Adam and his youthful aunt, a love-affair that will culminate in the birth of a child; but Adam's fate will be to die, at the hands of his uncle or his minions, sacrificing himself to save the woman and their son.

The common ground of all three interpretations is the future connection between Adam and his uncle's seventeen-year-old bride, and indeed this is the element of Dinesen's covert plot that is most difficult to miss. Our inferences are primarily cued by the lengthy digression Dinesen makes from the visible story to portray this girl, who plays no explicit part either in Anne-Marie's tragedy or in Adam's fateful decision. Dinesen's language is somewhat coy here, but the portrait clearly enough indicates her sexual frustration. We are told, somewhat ambiguously, that "she was given an old husband who treated her with punctilious respect because she was to bear him a son. Such was the compact. . . . Her husband, she found, was doing his best to fulfill his part of it, and she herself was loyal by nature and strictly brought up."<sup>14</sup> Such mild hints that the old lord may be impotent are validated by the bride's dreadful "consciousness of an absence" in her life, her longings for "the being who should have been there" in her embrace, "and who had not come."<sup>15</sup> This absence is quite clearly sexual, for it is when examining her nude and lovely body in the looking-glass that she most intensely feels "a horror *vaccui* like a physical pain."<sup>16</sup> That Adam will be the one to fill this vacuum, to complete her inchoate longings, is first hinted at when the bride tears herself from her unpleasant meditation by thinking instead about "her new nephew arrived from England," with whom she plans to "ride out on the land."<sup>17</sup> The activities of Adam and his aunt on the day the narrative is set are chaste enough, of course, but their thoughts about each other, their ride together, and their collaboration in a musical duet as the curtain is drawn upon them symbolize even as they presage the love-affair we can foresee.<sup>18</sup>

That his will be an illicit affair, rather than a more staid romance that will wait upon the death of Adam's uncle, is largely implicit in the sexual urgency

of the bride's physical frustration, taken together with the absence of any suggestion that the old lord is soon to die. But there are other hints as well. The young bride's middle name, for one thing, is Magdalena, traditionally identified with the fallen woman of the seventh chapter of the Gospel according to Luke. For another, there is the prophecy made to Adam back in England: "When at Ranelagh an old gypsy woman looked at his hand and told him that a son of his was to sit in the seat of his fathers."<sup>19</sup> If we take the prophecy seriously, and in the literal way such foreshadowing is generally to be taken in tragedies and folk-tales, it suggests that, while a son of his will possess the manor, Adam himself will *not* be its inheritor. Thus one must reject the Langbaum interpretation, and accept the Johannesson, as far as it goes. But Johannesson's notion that the covert plot of "Sorrow-Acre" is a cuckold comedy is unsatisfactory for quite a number of reasons.

The first and perhaps most unanswerable reason is that already mentioned: that the tone of "Sorrow-Acre" is tragic, not merely in the section devoted to the destiny of Anne-Marie but in that devoted to Adam and his fateful decision to remain on his uncle's manor. Here Adam foresees that "he himself would come to know ache, tears and remorse," which is far from suggesting that his love-affair will be a bedroom farce devoid of serious consequences. Second, Johannesson's formulation is structurally off kilter, for his view takes the old lord to be the protagonist of this comedy, whereas it is clear from the narrative point of view that it must be Adam that is the protagonist of the novella's covert plot. Finally, there are a great many subtle hints within the text that death, rather than birth or love, is the focus of Adam's fate.

First off, there is Adam's name, recalling the Biblical Adam, our once innocent forefather who was betrayed by woman into death. Second, there is Adam's sense, on his first approach to the manor house, that he has been invited there by the dead ("Dead people came towards him and smiled upon him. . . ." <sup>20</sup>). Next, there is the tragedy by Johannes Ewald which Adam brings with him and leaves with his uncle. It is not named in the text, but the conversation it kindles suggests that it must be the 1775 verse drama of *Baldurs Død*, which centers upon a young god who dies, driven by his passion for a mortal woman.<sup>21</sup> Fourth, there is the sinister aspect to the young bride's sexual fantasies, which imply that loving her would be a most dangerous thing:

A sudden, keen itching under her knee took her out of her reveries, and awoke in her the hunting instincts of her breed. She wetted a finger on her tongue, slowly brought it down and quickly slapped it to the spot. She felt the diminutive, sharp body of the insect against the silky skin, pressed the thumb to it, and triumphantly lifted up the small prisoner between her fingertips. She stood quite still, as if meditating upon the fact that a flea was the only creature risking its life for her smoothness and sweet blood.<sup>22</sup>

Fifth, there is the recurrent pair of lines from Gluck's *Alceste*, repeated three times within the novella: "Mourir pour ce qu'on aime, C'est un trop doux effort." These lines about dying for the one you love are not only translated within Adam's interior monologue, they are alluded to as the curtain is discreetly drawn upon him and his aunt, for it is *Alceste's* aria which the two are playing and singing together.<sup>23</sup> They apply, obviously, to Anne-Marie, who sacrifices herself for her son, but in his interior monologue Adam apparently applies them to his own case. Finally, there is Adam's sense, already alluded to, that his fate and that of Anne-Marie are somehow linked, that they are "both in the hands of destiny" which will bring each of them to "the designated end"; in the context this makes even more ominous Dinesen's guarded statement, "Later on he remembered what he had thought that evening."<sup>24</sup>

Archiving over all these details, and marshalling them into perspective, is the reader's desire to make the fullest possible sense of Dinesen's story, to take this "twined and tangled design" and find in it a "pattern," to unify this work of literature and participate in its harmonies in the same way that Adam wants to decipher the hidden unity and harmony of life. It is this aesthetic sense that has dictated Adam's decision to stay, just as it is the old lord's aesthetic sense that has made him stage-manage the tragedy of which Anne-Marie is the protagonist. And I suspect that Dinesen trusted the aesthetic sense of her readers to complete, to stage-manage in their own minds, the tragedy linked to the visible one of which Adam is the protagonist. And, if we have been following her implications correctly, a single denouement, the completion of Anne-Marie's sacrifice and death, will serve as the katharsis for both. Anne-Marie, as a peasant-woman, is the heroine of a tragic folk-tale; Adam, as befits his higher birth and station, will be the hero, not of a folk-tale or a fabliau, but of a variant of the tragic myth of Tristan.

It is in fact a misapplication of Dinesen's aesthetics that led Johannesson and Hannah to posit a cuckold-comedy as the covert plot of "Sorrow-Acre." Their argument is based upon the old lord's view that, just as the omnipotent Greek gods could not be tragic, so too the aristocrats of Denmark "who stand in lieu of the gods" should "leave to our vassals their monopoly of tragedy."<sup>25</sup> But it is only the old lord himself who, in his omnipotence and amorality, like the greek gods, is beyond the reach of the tragic. His nephew is no Zeus; he is more like the Norse gods of Asgaard who, the old lord tells us, "had, at all times, by their sides those darker powers which they named the Jotuns, and who worked the suffering, the disasters, the ruin of our world"<sup>26</sup>; and like the Norse gods, like the Baldur of Ewald's drama, Adam in his limitations possesses the capacity for tragedy. The old lord quite explicitly identifies Adam with Baldur: the new age, which Adam represents "has made to itself a god in its own image, an emotional god. And now you are already writing a tragedy on your god."<sup>27</sup> To put it another way, the old lord, from his Olympian perspective, may indeed view himself as a comic figure, a deceived Vulcan whose Venus has strayed. But from Adam's perspective—

and given the point of view it is his angle that we share—his destiny to love the young bride, to father her son, and to die sacrificing himself for them is indeed a tragic fate, which his uncle characterizes as the highest human privilege.<sup>28</sup>

I have tried to show how the demands of tone, of parallel structure, of point of view, and of details and verbal allusions all collaborate to convey the covert tragic plot of “Sorrow-Acre.” But if we can agree that Dinesen has succeeded in organizing her story in such a way, then we must also paradoxically admit that she has failed. She has failed, at least, to convey her covert story to five sensitive readers whose studies I have cited, and therefore, one suspects, to most of those who have perused her novella. To the initiated, Adam says in his interior monologue, the pattern of life, that complicated and mazy design, “might be read as easily as our ciphers—which to the savage must seem confused and incomprehensible—will be read by the schoolboy.” And yet Dinesen has so enciphered the primary plot of her story that few of her readers are likely to make it out. For those who succeed, the pleasures of tacit collusion with the author are intense and refined indeed; for those who fail—and here is Dinesen’s insurance policy—most will have not sense of what they have missed.

The fact is that Isak Dinesen was an elitist in more ways than one. The reception of *Seven Gothic Tales* had suffered in Denmark, critic Tom Kristensen remarked, from the common readers’ reaction to “their too aristocratic tone, verging on snobbery,”<sup>29</sup> Though Kristensen felt that the *Winter’s Tales* had more “humanity” than the earlier book, it is clear that her defense of the *ancien regime*, her contempt for democratic vistas, are by no means absent from the later collection, which includes “Sorrow-Acre.” And as an elitist, Dinesen was very unlikely to have been averse to reserving some of her work’s secret pleasures for a select group of kindred souls capable of following her indirections and allusions. Like Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, whose meaning is encrypted in thousands of puns in dozens of living and dead languages, like Nabokov’s “The Vane Sisters,” whose hidden denouement is encoded in the initial letters of the last paragraph’s words, and like Dinesen’s own “The Roads Round Pisa,” whose ending requires the reader to decipher an obscure symbolic passage in Dante, “Sorrow-Acre” is a story that is also part puzzle, a reflection of its author’s intellectual snobbery and a challenge, moral as well as intellectual, to the reader’s own.

*Queens College*  
*City University of New York*  
*Flushing, New York*

## NOTES

1. Isak Dinesen, *Winter's Tales* (New York: Random House, 1942), pp. 26-69.
2. Robert Langbaum, *The Gayety of Vision* (New York: Random House, 1965), pp. 31-37; Eric O. Johannesson, *The World of Isak Dinesen* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1961), pp. 99-104; Donald Hannah, "Isak Dinesen" and Karen Blixen: The Mask and the Reality (New York: Random House, 1971), pp. 81-88. The story is also discussed in Janet Lewis, "Isak Dinesen: An Appreciation," *Southern Review*, n.s., 2 (1966), 297-314; and John Davenport, "A Nobel Pride: The Art of Karen Blixen," *The Twentieth Century*, 159 (March, 1956), 264-74.
3. Hannah, p. 82.
4. Dinesen, p. 57.
5. Dinesen, p. 62.
6. Dinesen, p. 63.
7. Dinesen, pp. 63-64.
8. Dinesen, p. 64.
9. Dinesen, p. 65.
10. Langbaum, p. 36. Langbaum is followed in his opinion by Lewis, p. 308.
11. Johannesson, p. 103. Hannah (p. 88) seems to agree with him, but appears rather less certain about the issue.
12. Dinesen, p. 65.
13. Tristan, in many versions, is King Mark's nephew. This and the tragic ending are what I see as the resemblances, which are otherwise slight.
14. Dinesen, p. 46.
15. Dinesen, pp. 46-47.
16. Dinesen, p. 48.
17. Dinesen, p. 49.
18. Adam's willingness to collaborate in a clandestine affair is prefigured on p. 34, which alludes to a romance with a titled English lady.
19. Dinesen, p. 35.
20. Dinesen, p. 33.
21. Hannah, p. 84.
22. Dinesen, p. 48.
23. Dinesen, p. 65.
24. Dinesen, p. 65.

25. Dinesen, p. 53.
26. Dinesen, p. 39.
27. Dinesen, p. 52.
28. Dinesen, p. 52. This may muddy the waters a bit, but there is one small detail that points to an alternative tragic ending—to the death of the bride rather than Adam; this is Adam’s question to his uncle, “will it ever happen to you or me that a woman willingly gives up her life for us?” (p. 59). Most of the other details point directly to Adam’s own death.
29. Review of *Winter’s Tales*, *Politiken*, October 10, 1942, quoted in Langbaum, p. 155.