

OUT OF AFRICA

A STUDY GUIDE

KAREN BLIXEN

Biography

To say that Karen Blixen was an extraordinary woman is an understatement. Born in 1885 in Denmark, she was already widely travelled by the age of 15, having lived in many European countries. By the time she married in 1914 she had already had stories published and had attended the Danish Royal Academy.

Her marriage to Baron Bror Blixen in 1914 and her subsequent life in Kenya form the basis for the film "Out of Africa". Despite the fact that she was part of the rich colonial ruling set, one could hardly describe her life as idyllic. Her marriage ended in divorce, she caught syphilis from her husband, her coffee plantation was a financial disaster and her lover, Denys Finch Hatton died in an air crash. In 1931 she returned to Denmark and began writing about her experiences in Africa under the pen name of Isak Dinnensen. It is this final period of her life that was perhaps for her the most happy, despite having to live in Denmark during the German Occupation in the Second World War. She became an internationally known writer, possibly the most famous Danish author since Hans Christian Anderson. She died in 1962.

Research Tasks

1. Karen Blixen lived a life that was very different from the usual woman's life in the early 20th century. Try and find out as many details as possible about the position of women in England in this period.
2. When you see the film "Out of Africa" you will see that Karen Blixen became involved in the education of the Kikuyu tribe. Find out about the British treatment of this and other African tribes and what the full extent of Blixen's involvement was with the Kikuyu.
3. Ernest Hemingway also wrote about Africa in the same period. Read two or three of his stories about life in Africa and then compare the way that he treats his subject compared to Karen Blixen in her descriptions.
4. As a further way of looking at the way men and women authors treat the same subject it might be interesting to read Daniel Defoe's "Robinson Crusoe" and then Lucy Irvin's "Castaway". Although written in different centuries, their treatment of being "castaway" makes for very different readings when their preoccupations are considered.

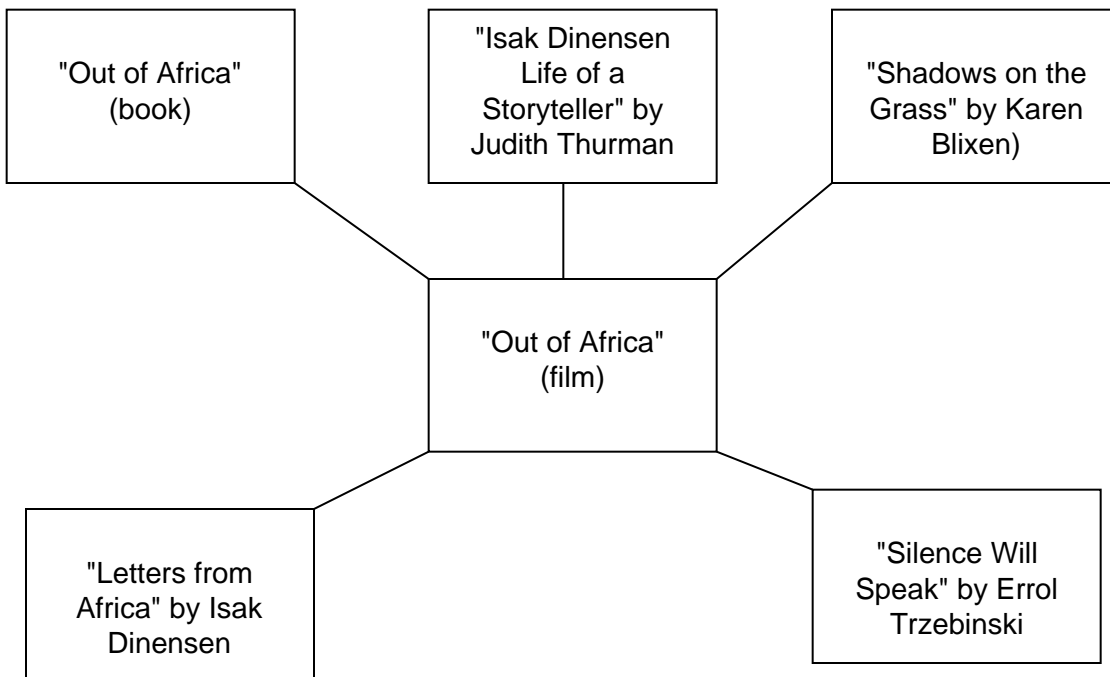
"Out of Africa' has never been an easy picture to solve; there's not much narrative drive. It's a pastorate, a beautifully formed memoir that relied on her prose style, her sense of poetry and her ability to discover large truths in very small, specific details. That's difficult to translate to film."

- Sydney Pollack, Director/Producer "Out of Africa"

Film-makers and audiences seem to be attracted to biographies. The lives of "real" people fascinate us no matter what form they are presented in - biography, auto-biography, newspaper articles, T.V. programmes, magazine pieces, films. Yet why should this be ? Why do we desire information about certain people ? And what type of person has biographies written about them ?

"Out of Africa" has the same name as a book by Karen Blixen. Yet the film is not "the film of the book". It is, rather, a mixture of this particular book, two biographies and a series of sketches that Karen Blixen wrote about Africa. One could say that the film is therefore a new biography, drawing on a variety of sources (see Chart 1).

CHART 1



This filmed biography, then, raises the question of the sources that a biographer can use and also differences of styles within different forms of books that we use to find out about the lives of people.

TASK ONE

In the chart below (Chart 2) are listed the various forms of biography and autobiography that exist. For each one try first of all to describe the styles of each and then the possible advantages and disadvantages that would exist for the reader when looking for details about a person's life.

CHART 2

STYLE ADVANTAGES DISADVANTAGES

The film "Out of Africa" raises two questions we can explore further. Firstly, why make a film about Karen Blixen and secondly what does the film actually tell us about her ?

BIOGRAPHY			
AUTOBIOGRAPHY			
DIARY			
LETTERS			
MEMOIR			
OBITUARY			
MAGAZINE ARTICLE			
FICTIONALISED AUTOBIOGRAPHY			
FILM			

TASK TWO

Write a list of the main details of Karen Blixen's life that are given in the film. Then, from encyclopedias etc., try to find out more information about her life. Why do you think that the incidents shown in the film were chosen for inclusion in the film? Are there other aspects of her life that you have found that could also have been filmed, either as part of "Out of Africa" or as another film?

Having seen the film and found out a little more about Karen Blixen what is it, do you think about her life, that attracted the makers of the film? In the quotation at the beginning of this guide, the director Sydney Pollack, says that it was a difficult film to adapt from the written sources, so why do you think that they undertook the project?

BIOGRAPHY/STORY

The French writer, Albert Camus, wrote that people enjoyed reading biographies because they gave us a sense of unity, or order, in a person's life, an order which is missing in our own. A biography has a definite beginning and end. When we see a film, we also expect such a unity - by the end of the film all questions that will have arisen during it will have been answered.

In starting to read a biographical piece of writing, what questions are normally in our minds? What are we looking for? Try to write down three or four things that you might want to

know from a biographical piece.

Our expectations of a film however, are different. Whereas, in a biography we expect to be informed, in a film we probably expect to be entertained. Also expectations of a film normally arise in the first few minutes of a film.

TASK 3

Write a list of exactly what you saw in the opening few minutes of the film "Out of Africa". What clues did this give you about

- a) What type of film it was?
- b) What type of character Karen Blixen would be?
- c) What other people could be involved in the story?

Whereas a biographer can take many pages giving us details about a person, a film-maker must give details rapidly in order to keep the story moving. Karen's character changes during the film. Look at the images on the next page. How does the director give us ideas about Karen's character in these images, thus suggesting her development as a character?



CHARACTER/PERSON

When we read a biography, we read about the life of a person. A story tells us about a character. When we see a filmed biography, a further level enters - that of the actor/actress playing a role. So, when we understand a filmic character in a biographical film there are three levels of "understanding" in existence (Chart 3).

PERSON (real) ————— CHARACTER (fiction) ————— STAR (real)

How far does the appearance of a star effect the way that we understand a character?
Does it make any difference to our understanding both of the real person and the character?
If we take the two major stars of "Out of Africa", Meryl Streep and Robert Redford, how far is our understanding of the roles that they play coloured by other films that we have seen?



TASK 4

Complete the chart below (Chart 3) which refers to the two stars from "Out of Africa". How far is it possible to say that the presentation of Karen Blixen and Denys Finch Hatton are shaded by the Stars' reputations ?

CHART 3

	Type of role in "Out of Africa"	Type of role normally associated with	Differences/ similarities in roles
MERYL STREEP			
ROBERT REDFORD			

THE PLACE OF THE HEROINE

The voice which begins the film "Out of Africa" is that of the character Karen Blixen. Is the story that is told in the film Karen Blixen's story? Does the character of Karen Blixen fit into the normal mould given to women characters? Write a list of the characteristics that one would normally associate with a hero and then a list of characteristics associated with a heroine. Does the character of Karen Blixen fit easily into either of these?

What is the main function of heroes and heroines within stories ? If, "Out of Africa" were simply biography then one would expect the person of Karen Blixen to take centre stage. Is this true of the film ?

One might assume that a heroine is normally a passive character within a story; does the character of Karen Blixen fit this picture ? List any events in the film where Karen is shown as a positive, active character. How is she shown in relation to the other two main male characters, Bror and Denys. Also, how is she shown in relation to the other women in the film?

WHY KAREN BLIXEN ?

One of the first questions set out in this study guide was what type of person attracted biographers. After having seen the film "Out of Africa" is it possible to say what was interesting about her life; what was special about her as a person? How well does the film convey the special qualities of her as a person?



Further Work

In 1962 Karen Blixen was honoured by the Academy of Arts and Letters in New York. Whilst she was in New York she expressed a desire to meet Marilyn Monroe and the two spent an afternoon together. Write a dialogue of what you think the two might have talked about.

2. The story of "Out of Africa" is told from the point of view of the Colonials. But what would the Kikuyu have thought of what was happening. Try to write about an event in the film from their point of view.

3. Take some examples from the Sunday magazines of "A Life in the Day of" or similar articles. Having studied the style and content of the articles try to write one about yourself and then one either about an imagined character or someone famous.

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