

The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English

Volume 1 | Issue 1


Article 7

1-1-1999

An Hour of Millennium: A Representation of the Communion Ritual in "Babette's Feast"

Pamela Lane
Rollins College Brevard

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor>

 Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English, Anglophone outside British Isles and North America Commons](#), [Literature in English, North America Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lane, Pamela (2001) "An Hour of Millennium: A Representation of the Communion Ritual in "Babette's Feast"," *The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 7.
Available at: <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor/vol1/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact SCHOLARC@mailbox.sc.edu.

An Hour of Millennium: A Representation of the Communion Ritual in "Babette's Feast"

Keywords

Communion Ritual, Danish Literature, Women's Studies



An Hour of Millennium: A Representation of the Communion Ritual in “Babette’s Feast”

Pamela Lane
Rollins College Brevard

American readers were the fortunate recipients of Isak Dinesen’s tale “Babette’s Feast” when it first appeared in *The Ladies Home Journal* in 1950. Biographer Judith Thurman tells of the challenge that inspired Dinesen to write for the American market. Her British friend, Geoffrey Gorer, bet that she she could not write something that would be accepted by *The Saturday Evening Post*. He encouraged her to “write about food . . . Americans are obsessed about food.” The result of the wager was “Babette’s Feast,” which was, by the way, rejected by *The Saturday Evening Post*. *Good Housekeeping* likewise turned it down, and it was only reluctantly published by *The Ladies Home Journal* (329).

Two years later, a Danish booksellers’ organization honored Dinesen for her extremely inexpensive pocket-sized edition of the story, “which she had hoped people would buy and send as a sort of Christmas card” (Thurman 374). This work with a humble beginning became a huge success. It was adapted for film in 1987 by Gabriel Axel and was later honored with an Oscar for best foreign film. Both the story and the film still receive worldwide attention as the tale continues to elucidate a surfeit of significance.

Since Dinesen did not claim to be a Christian, it is interesting that “Babette’s Feast” is so rich in biblical symbolism. Isak Dinesen (pseudonym of Karen Blixen) was raised by Unitarians and claimed to have been mostly affected by Mohammedans, but she had an enormous interest in Christian theology at the time she wrote the story. She organized several “theological dinners,” including among the guests a Catholic priest, a Lutheran pastor, and several other Christian church authorities. Dinesen searched to understand the concept of the faith, but never claimed to have a “real understanding in a connected sense” (qtd. in Thurman 374).

Humor is predominant in Dinesen’s tales. Thurman notes that “Babette’s

Feast" was "one of Isak Dinesen's most deft and exquisite comedies" (329-30). However, the comic element is somewhat unusual in this particular story. According to Dinesen, humor "is an affirmation and acceptance of life in all its forms, the opposite of rebellion." It is a way of saying "yes to life, an acceptance of whatever fate will bring." Dinesen loved humor and considered all tales to have a vein of comic spirit. It allowed her to accept what could not be explained, including the "strange kind of reliance on the grace of God," a concept that she never seemed to embrace (qtd. in Johannesson 51-53).

Nevertheless at her "theological dinners," Dinesen was obviously influenced by the conversation, especially that of the sacramentalist Catholic priest, because "Babette's Feast" is replete with reflections of the sacred meal of the Mass (Beck 213). The tale transcends the tangible and conveys the spiritual through culinary communication, creating a masterful allegory of the Lord's Supper, a precursor of the Wedding Supper of the Lamb as depicted in Revelation 19:9. Dinesen's talent for portraying abstractions lies in her ability to metamorphose weighty concepts into magical tales. In "Babette's Feast," she limns us with a representation of Christ embodied in the person of Babette Hersant.

In the story, Babette finds herself alone as a result of the short, but violent, French Civil War in the late 19th century, her family's involvement with the Commune of Paris having left her widowed and childless. From the beginning, Babette suffers for her position. In her own country, she is a radical who stands up for the Rights of Man and is subsequently persecuted, and in asylum, she resides as an alien. Despite her circumstances, Babette is nevertheless equipped to persevere and obviously destined for a higher purpose. She travels from her home in France to the foreign land of Norway and enlightens the people of Berlevaag who are pious and religious, but abysmally unfamiliar with the nature of the God they claim to serve. Babette's humble arrival at the home of Martine and Philippa, the daughters of the town Dean, parallels Christ's arrival in Jerusalem just prior to His death. As a Christ-type, Babette becomes a savior of people and a catalyst for miraculous mercy.

It is fitting that Babette the savior would double as an artist. In an essay published in 1963, Ann Gossman sees in Dinesen's work a "pattern of destiny against which the individual must search for his identity." Gossman observes that this search is evident in some of Dinesen's earlier stories, a theme that she portrays through sacramental imagery. In search of her identity, the artist Babette longs to find an audience to which she can express her talent. In order to reveal the sacred quality of the relationship between the artist and the audience, Gossman notes that "Dinesen makes use of imagery that suggests the Communion service" (319).

The townspeople of Berlevaag religiously renounce the pleasures of the

world and believe that asceticism is the key to their salvation. Dinesen satirizes what Gossman calls the "ethical blindness" of the townspeople—essentially an "egotism that underlies their charity" (324). In this setting, Dinesen portrays the belief promoted in the New Testament that righteousness is naught unless the Spirit is interjected into the deed. Babette prepares the table at which this realization occurs to her Danish friends. Her winnings in the French lottery enable her to prepare exotic gustatory delights that her peers had repudiated for religious reasons. Through these foods, the people of Berlevaag share in a mystical communion and are transformed by its magic, if only for a short while. Consequently, Babette the artist has found an audience at which her "utmost" can be expressed.

Animal imagery was commonly implemented in the Bible as a semiotic tool to explain the abstract. Dinesen's experiences in Africa created in her a fondness for this technique, and "Babette's Feast" provided an appropriate setting for it to be employed (Johannesson 40).¹ Turtle soup terrifies Babette's dinner guests, in part because they had vowed to adhere to an abstemious diet. But surely it is significant that the turtle, the main ingredient of the soup, was an unclean animal according to Old Testament law. Just as the apostle Paul declares all foods appropriate for consumption in Romans 14:14, Babette presents the turtle to her guests, signifying that their redemption is not connected to their rituals.²

Among Babette's guests, significantly numbering twelve, is General Lorens Loewenhielm. He had been a guest at the table of the Dean many years before, communing with him and his two daughters in their usual meager celebration of piety. Loewenhielm was hopelessly attracted to one of the sisters, but because of his shyness, he failed to win her heart. He consequently "shook the dust" off his riding boots and departed to fulfill great ambitions.³ After many years of traveling the world and feasting at the tables of kings, Loewenhielm realizes that he is incomplete. In a search for a meaning to his life, he returns to his first love, the beautiful Martine.⁴ The General describes his pursuits as pyrrhic victories that had failed to profit his spirit. As he passes a mirror in the two sisters' home, he laments the vain reflection it offers. Likewise Matthew 16:26 warns, "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?"

General Loewenhielm's soul is nourished at Babette's dinner, which is reminiscent of those she prepared at Café Anglais years before in Paris. Dinesen describes Babette's craft as a "love affair of the noble and the romantic category in which one no longer distinguishes between bodily and spiritual appetite or satiety" (Dinesen 166). Each course of her meal further connects her twelve dinner guests to each other and also to the Spirit of God. But most importantly, it is the wine, like the blood of Christ, that causes this connection to occur.

The evening proceeds with the general's prophetic announcement of the

infinite nature of divine grace. Because the people of Berlevaag had remained spiritually immature, they found themselves trapped in a web of disputes. As they are touched by the spirit of the wine, they begin to forgive each other of past transgressions. For the first time, they experience perfect love as described in First Corinthians.⁵ Their anger subsides, and they erase the "record of wrongs" they had noted for so many years. They confess to each other and are forgiven. Through the wine they had forbidden to themselves for so long, "grace [had] chosen to manifest itself" (Dinesen 165).

As the people of Berlevaag are immersed in the Spirit of God, snow baptizes their town. They rejoice in the new life they are given and frolick in the snow, "gamboling like little lambs." With their "sins washed white as wool," they join hands and sing blessings to each other and become a real church, the future bride of Christ (Dinesen 169). Their engagement for the spiritual marriage is consummated with a feast, a communion of bread and wine.

Significant to the sacrificial meal is the host, which Dinesen appropriately chose to represent with quail. During the Israelites' "wandering" through the desert, God miraculously supplied quail from the heavens to the Jewish community to ease their hunger, and noted to Moses that because of the miracle, "Then you will know that I am the Lord your God." When the Israelites saw the quail, they asked Moses what it was. He said to them, "It is the bread the Lord has given you to eat" (Exod. 16:12-15). Bread is also symbolic of Jesus, who called himself "the living bread that came down from heaven" (John 6:51). The well-chosen entrée that Babette presents to her guests was also bread, the host in the form of quail. The "*cailles*" were appropriately prepared "*en sarcophage*." What better way to represent the Eucharist than with a derivative of the word "sarcophagus," which literally means "flesh eater."

It is appropriate that Dinesen chose France as the home of Berlevaag's savior since France was the home of frustration and revolution, where bread was the only thing that stood between life and death. Because bread is a symbol of Christ's sacrifice, the Eucharistic minister who presents it represents Christ. Babette, the Celebrant, is conspicuously absent from the table, but obviously in control of the liturgical action. Like Christ, it is her sacrifice that makes the communion possible. Also paralleling Christ's sacrifice, Babette's guests fail to appreciate the person who gave everything so that they could have life. Heroically in the end, Babette forgives those who had caused her suffering, including the French general who executed her husband and son. All are pardoned, and new life begins as Berlevaag becomes the "New Jerusalem" for which they had longed as they savor "one hour of the millennium" (Dinesen 169).

Karen Blixen herself was no stranger to suffering, and her work reflects her experiences through which she sought to derive answers to philosophical

questions. Blixen expressed in the pages of her writings the issues she pondered, with her work evidencing her great debate. It is ironic that the woman who concluded that Christianity was “a disease caught from the tradition of dualism” (Thurman 338) would reveal so beautifully in “Babette’s Feast” the most salient tenets of the faith.

End Notes

¹ Karen Blixen married Baron Bror Blixen-Finecke and traveled to Africa with him, where she spent nearly twenty years among exotic animals. Her years there are recorded in *Out of Africa*, her memoirs.

² Paul writes, “I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself.”

³ To the Jews of the Old Testament, dust symbolized sorrow. Shaking the dust off their feet represented the decision to move on and put their sorrows behind them. In Matthew 10:14, Jesus advised His disciples: “If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town.”

⁴ In Revelation 2:4, John encourages his readers to return to their first love, the love they had for Christ.

⁵ The apostle Paul writes in I Corinthians 13:4-6, “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.”

Works Cited

- Beck, Ervin. "Dinesen's Babette's Feast." *The Explicator* (1998): 210-13.
- Dinesen, Isak. "Babette's Feast." *A Literary Feast: An Anthology*. Ed. Lilly Golden. New York: Atlantic Monthly, 1993. 146-172.
- Gossman, Ann. "Sacramental Imagery in Two Stories by Isak Dinesen." *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 4 (1963): 319-26.
- Johannesson, Eric O. *The World of Isak Dinesen*. Seattle: U of Washington P, 1961. 40-53.
- The Bible*. New International Version.
- Thurman, Judith. *Isak Dinesen: The Life of a Storyteller*. New York: St. Martin's, 1982. 329-74.