

Karen Blixen, *Out of Africa*

Karen Blixen (1885-1962) was born in Rungsted, Denmark, into a well-to-do family. Her father was a writer and an army officer, and his adventuresome spirit and storytelling talents were to influence deeply Karen's imagination. At early age, Karen showed an artistic inclination. She attended the Royal Academy of Art in Copenhagen, and also studied in England, Switzerland, Italy, and France. In 1907 she made her debut as a writer with several short stories. In 1914, she married her cousin Baron Bror Blixen-Finecke, and went with him to Kenya, where they ran a coffee plantation. After they were divorced in 1921, Blixen struggled with mismanagement, drought, and the falling price of coffee by herself. In those dark days, just before returning to Denmark, she began to write down some of the stories she had told to her friends among the colonists and natives. She wrote in English, the language she used in Africa. Her books usually appeared simultaneously in America, England, and Denmark, written in English and then rewritten in Danish. Among her most successful books are *Seven Gothic Tales* (1934), *Out of Africa* (1937), *Winter's Tales* (1942), and *Last Tales* (1957). Read the following excerpt from *Out of Africa* by the Danish writer Karen Blixen. The book is a lyrical meditation on Blixen's life on her coffee plantation, as well as a tribute to some of the people who touched her life there. It is also a vivid snapshot of African colonial life in the last decades of the British Empire.



Karen Blixen

Living Up in the Air

I had a farm in Africa at the foot of the Ngong Hills. The Equator runs across these highlands, a hundred miles to the north, and the farm lay at an altitude of over six thousand feet. In the day-time you felt that you had got high up; near to the sun, but the early mornings and evenings were limpid and restful¹, and the nights were cold.

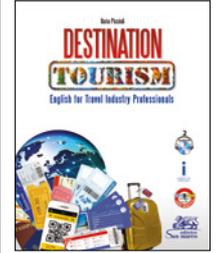
The geographical position and the height of the land combined to create a landscape that had not its like² in all the world. There was no fat on it and no luxuriance³ anywhere; it was Africa distilled up through six thousand feet like the strong and refined essence of a continent. The colours were dry and

GLOSSARY

- 1 peaceful and quiet
- 2 something similar
- 3 the property of being lush and abundant and a pleasure to the senses



Ngong Hills



The Fata Morgana effect



burnt like the colours in pottery. The trees had a light delicate foliage, the structure of which was different from that of the trees in Europe; it did not grow in bows or cupolas⁴, but in horizontal layers, and the formation gave to the tall solitary trees a likeness to the palms, or a heroic and romantic air like full-rigged⁵ ships with their sails furled⁶, and to the edge of a wood a strange appearance as if the whole wood were faintly vibrating. Upon the grass of the great plains the crooked bare old thorn trees were scattered, and the grass was spiced like thyme and bog-myrtles; in some places the scent was so strong that it smarted⁷ in the nostrils. All the flowers that you found on plains, or upon the creepers⁸ and liana in the native forest, were diminutive like flowers of the downs⁹ – only just in the beginning of the long rains a number of big, massive heavy-scented lilies sprang out on the plains. The views were immensely wide. Everything that you saw made for greatness and freedom, and unequalled nobility. The chief¹⁰ feature of the landscape, and of your life in it was the air. Looking back on a sojourn in the African highlands, you are struck by your feeling of having lived for a time up in the air. The sky was rarely more than pale blue or violet, with a profusion of mighty, weightless, ever-changing clouds towering up and sailing on it, but it has a blue vigour in it, and at a short distance it painted the ranges of hills and the woods a fresh deep blue. In the middle of the day the air was alive over the land, like a flame burning; it scintillated, waved and shone like running water, mirrored and doubled all objects, and created great Fata Morgana. Up in this high air you breathed easily, drawing in a vital assurance and lightness of heart. In the highlands you woke up in the morning and thought: Here I am, where I ought to be.

GLOSSARY

- | | |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 4 round structures | 8 plants that grow up trees or walls |
| 5 equipped with sails, ropes, etc. | 9 round hills covered with grass |
| 6 rolled or folded neatly | 10 main |
| 7 hurt with a stinging pain | |

ACTIVITIES

1 Answer the following questions.

- 1 Where is the passage set?
- 2 What kind of narrator is employed?
- 3 Which narrative mode is prevalent, narration, description or dialogue?
- 4 Why is this landscape special according to the narrator?
- 5 Which natural element is highlighted in the text?
- 6 What senses are foregrounded in the description of the landscape?
- 7 How would you define the language used?

2 Explain in your own words the meaning of the following terms.

- | | | | |
|-------------|----------|--------------|--------------|
| 1 Highlands | 3 Wood | 5 Diminutive | 7 Weightless |
| 2 Continent | 4 Plains | 6 Sojourn | 8 Vigour |