

# OUT OF AFRICA

Directed by Sydney Pollack  
Produced by Sydney Pollack  
Distributed by Universal Pictures  
Released in 1985

Could this story of two expatriates and their doomed romance have been told in a different setting to the same effect? Would it have the same emotional weight? What we have here is an intelligent and resourceful woman, drifting out of a loveless marriage, finding her soul mate in a nomadic adventurer with a passion for savoring life to the full. He admires her greatly, particularly because she is so different than the other women he has known, but he will not mate for life—unless it is "one day at a time." She balks, saying she is worth his commitment and that if he will not give all of his life to her, then she will stop giving any of hers to him.

The story of *Out Of Africa* could be told in a variety of contexts, but it works unbelievably well in pre- and post-WWI Kenya because we have the benefit of seeing our heroine tested while her lover laments the change he cannot stop (he is an idealist and seems to eschew the messy realities resulting from human interaction). And on the issue of whether Denys or Karen was justified in his/her respective and conflicting demands, the film manages a delicate ambiguity that is characteristic of great artistic works, which *Out Of Africa*, incidentally, almost is.

We are conflicted. Though we see Denys almost exclusively through Karen's eyes, there is much in him to admire and we are not forced, but eager, to see things from his perspective. He values freedom and decries entangling possessions and relationships. In this he inculcates the traditional male aesthetic. But he is also very good at conversation, can be gentle (sparing the lion, washing Karen's hair) and patient. Similarly, Karen, though sharing with her female counterparts a penchant for security, constancy, and romantic affection, is also outspoken, brave, and immune to physical discomfort. Thus, the two main characters represent their respective sexes in an archetypal way; but they also possess positive character traits traditionally associated with the other sex (which may be the one link between this film and director Sydney Pollack's preceding effort *Tootsie* [1982]).

Thus, with two characters marked by so few flaws our choice between them is difficult. Denys is linked with the Masai, constantly on the move and who, if jailed, die; they only live in the present. Karen, who cannot have children, is linked with the Kikuyu, a tribe she tries to educate and employ. In effect, Denys could be faulted for becoming too African in his ways, and Karen is faulted for not letting the Africans be African (she realizes her error near the film's end when she removes the gloves from her steward).

At the film's conclusion, Karen unites the philosophies of the two main characters, asking God to take back the soul of Denys Finch-Hatton: "He was not ours...he was not mine."

This eloquent statement just maintains the ambiguity of the story's theme, for Karen seems to lament that Denys would not marry her, while also hinting that she was wrong to have demanded it.

Complicating matters further, Denys had told Karen that they (the colonialists) were just passing through, faulting her for her possessiveness ("my Kikuyu, my limoges, my farm"), but in the end, in the empty house, he concedes that she made the farm her own. Hadn't she earned it?

Did she not earn Denys?

We are left with a conundrum. In any relationship there comes a time when one party has to yield. So who can be judged the selfish one? If someone insists on getting his way, is he being selfish, even if the previous ten times he acceded to the other person's wishes? Wouldn't the other person be selfish in not letting the deprived party have his way for once?

Perhaps it's all just a matter of perspective, though it is obvious that the film is demonstrating that even women as strong as Karen need (want?) security in their love. (Additionally the film demonstrates that women can't rightfully be kept down if they can prove the equal of men.) Assigning blame in these matters is almost impossible amidst the tangles of mutual recrimination. And the film deftly discourages us from taking sides. But in considering Karen's obstinacy, pride, or conviction (conviction because we must recognize that Karen, by demanding that she get all of Denys, risks ending up with none of him), we are left with *the* question: which convictions are non-negotiable? When can a demand transcend selfishness and be elevated to a matter of principle? Only when it is based in truth is it so unbeckoned.

So, was Karen right in demanding that Denys, if he were to continue sleeping with her, marry her?

Yes. But *Out Of Africa* would rather raise the question than answer it. Denys dies before we've heard his final decision—he can't seem to let her go and may, indeed, stop her before she sets sail for home.

But if he did live and did marry Karen, we would no longer have a tragedy. And that would, probably, irreparably wound the story, depriving it of its irony, nuance, and mystery.

As always, truth and art are uneasy fellow travelers. And since the great power of art is to leave interpretation up to the audience, ambiguity must have its day. Truth will wait for its own appointed time.