

The Devils of Cultural Conflict in Louise Erdrich's "Saint Marie"

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I examine Louise Erdrich's short story "Saint Marie (1934)" excerpted from her novel Love Medicine. The narrative, told from the perspective of Marie Lazarre, a young woman of mixed Chippewa Native American and "white" Anglo-American heritage, details the events of her time at the Sacred Heart Convent under the strict tutelage of Sister Leopolda where Marie undergoes severe physical and emotional abuse at the hand of the seemingly sadistic nun. I argue that Marie's central conflict with Sister Leopolda, seen through a post-colonial lens, represents the conflict between the Anglo-American (Christian) colonizers' and the Native American, or colonized, ways of life. This is demonstrated by an intermingling of Chippewa and European motifs and symbols, including fairy tale motifs, allusions to Christian practice and iconography, and Chippewa folklore. Specifically, I will show how Marie's embodiment of double consciousness in this story demonstrates this tension between cultures by the contrast and comparison of imagery alluding to the perversion of Christian sacraments and Algonquian legends of Windigo possession.

Louise Erdrich's short story "Saint Marie (1934)," from her novel *Love Medicine*, begins with young Marie Lazarre, a girl of mixed Chippewa Native American and "white" Anglo-American heritage, making her way up the hill to the Sacred Heart Convent where she has decided to become a nun. Because of her mixed background, Marie experiences an internal struggle as she attempts to define her individual and cultural identity, resulting in a longing for a sense of cultural belonging. In an attempt to compensate for this need, Marie casts aside her Chippewa life and embraces her "white" traits, reasoning that, "[the nuns] were not any

lighter than me...because I didn't have that much Indian blood" (Erdrich 3439). To gain acceptance into the community she deems superior—shown by her bestial description of her Chippewa family members who are so anxious to get into town that "we would have walked in on our hands and knees" (3439)—Marie decides to become a nun, as she admires the Sacred Heart's Sister Leopolda, an older, severe Anglo-American woman. Marie states, "I wanted something like [Sister Leopolda] wore. Flowing black cotton. Her face was strapped in white bandages, and a sharp crest of starched white cardboard hung over her forehead like a glaring beak.

If possible, I wanted a bigger, longer, whiter beak than hers” (Erdrich 3442).

As the story progresses, a conflict ensues between Marie and Sister Leopolda which represents an important tension between cultures. Marie shifts from acting in a manner that postcolonial critics define as mimicry, or “imitating the dress, behavior, speech, and lifestyle of the colonizers” to a much more conflicted attitude towards Sister Leopolda. This change signifies her eventual embodiment of double consciousness, which according to Lois Tyson, is “a consciousness or a way of perceiving the world which is divided between two antagonistic cultures: that of the colonizer and that of the indigenous community” (Tyson 421-7). In this way, the central conflict with Sister Leopolda can be seen through a postcolonial lens as a conflict between the Anglo-American (Christian) colonizer and the Native, or colonized, ways of life. This tension is demonstrated by an intermingling of Chippewa and European motifs and symbols, including fairy tale motifs, allusions to Christian practice and iconography, and Chippewa folklore.

With this blending and contrasting of cultural and religious principles, it makes sense that Marie’s narrative would include a fusion of elements from both her Chippewa Native American and Anglo-American backgrounds. This point is stressed by Karla Sanders in her article “A Healthy Balance”:

Erdrich’s effort to offer seemingly dichotomous ideas or planes simultaneously does not mean that her fiction is without purpose or is contradictory. Instead, this inclusiveness, this multiplicity, depicts the complex nature of what it means to be both an American and a Native American, to be schooled in both Catholicism and tribal beliefs. (130)

Consequently, in many ways, Marie’s narrative is much like a distorted Cinderella tale. Searching for her true identity, the heroine enters slave-like conditions of the task-master mother figure. She is made to enter through the back door, sleep behind the stove, and is fed “cornmeal mush” (Erdrich 3444). She

exhibits many of the the conflicted psychological responses of an abused child who is promised love one moment then beaten another:¹ “I wanted Sister Leopolda’s heart. And here was the thing: sometimes I wanted her heart in love and admiration. Sometimes. And sometimes I wanted her heart to roast on a black stick” (3441). In line with the fairy-tale imagery, Marie even attempts to push Sister Leopolda in a Gretel-esque² manner head-long into the stove in a fit of rage. As the symbolic representation of colonized consciousness, Marie’s love/hate relationship with Sister Leopolda mimics the love/hate relationship of the colonized “daughter” and the colonizer “parent.” Part of Marie resents the imposed authority and righteousness of Sister Leopolda, another part feels inferior, and yet another part recognizes that they are similar in their ambitiousness.³

The Christian symbolism in the story, representing the “colonized” part of Marie’s consciousness, is expected in a story of a convent girl. However, this story motif is unexpectedly perverted in order to subvert the traditional moral claims of Christianity. Firstly, Marie’s extravagant dream of becoming sainted exists for all the wrong reasons, as her stubbornness and blind ambition appear stronger than her Christian faith. At the beginning of the text, her lacking conviction is demonstrated through the ancillary nature of her mention of the Church, as if it is an afterthought compared to the excitement of coming into town: “I had the mail-order Catholic soul you get in a girl raised out in the bush, whose only thought is getting into town. For Sunday Mass is the only time my father brought his children in except for school...we

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- 1 In the beginning of the story, Sister Leopolda claims the difference between the devil and herself is that, “He wants you. I give you love” (Erdrich 3441). However, these soothing remarks come after beating Marie over the head with a pole and locking her in a closet. Similarly, Sister Leopolda calls Marie “dear one” with tears in her eyes after holding her down on the ground with her foot and scalding her with boiling water (3444).
 - 2 This incident likens to the 1812 Hansel & Gretel fairytale published by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm (also known as the “Brothers Grimm”) in which Hansel and his sister Gretel get lost in the woods after their parents abandon them due to fear of starvation. They happen upon a witch’s house, disguised as a house made of candy, whereupon they are trapped and almost eaten. However, Gretel tricks the witch into leaning into the oven and pushes her inside, shutting the door and burning her to death (“Hansel and Gretel”).
 - 3 This relationship is further exemplified in Erdrich’s *Tracks*, as Marie is revealed to be Sister Leopolda’s unacknowledged daughter (Winter 48).

just craved going to the store...And of course we went to church” (Erdrich 3439). Instead of a fervent love of God, her daydreams are consumed by an image of herself reborn as a golden statue of the Virgin Mary⁴ with “ruby lips,” “diamond tipped” nipples, and toenails of “little pink ocean shells, which [the nuns] would have to stoop down off their high horse to kiss” (3439). This idolatrous vision is a perversion of traditional Catholic images of sanctity and glorification⁵ and appears in stark contrast to the simple lives of the nuns of the Sacred Heart Convent who do not “get along elsewhere” (Erdrich 3440).

In addition, throughout the text there are several allusions to the holy sacraments, made unholy in their application. Marie compares her “lure” to faith to the “bush Indians who stole the holy black hat of a Jesuit and swallowed little scraps of it to cure their fevers” (Erdrich 3440). However, in this dark parody of a holy communion, instead of receiving the healing power of Christ, the Native Americans discover the hat contains smallpox. This metaphor is representative of Marie’s eventual disillusionment with the Church; she states that she “had confidence” that “the black hem of [Sister Leopolda’s] garment would help me rise,” but later discovers that the Sister’s influence leads her further into a place of doubt rather than a place of accomplished transcendence (3440).

Marie’s initiation in the Christian faith can also be interpreted as a blasphemous baptism. Sister Leopolda tricks Marie into lying on the floor to retrieve a cup lost underneath the stove, holds her still by stepping on the girl’s neck⁶, and repeatedly pours boiling water over Marie’s back. Instead of the traditional

community welcoming ceremony of baptism, Marie is welcomed by abuse at the hands of the Anglo-American Sister. Then, in a seemingly abrupt turn of events, the Sister rubs salve on Marie’s blistered back in an imitation of the use of anointing oils in Christian rites. In her chapter on *Louise Erdrich’s Love Medicine: A Casebook*, Helen Jaskoski maintains that this discrepant treatment of Marie by Sister Leopolda represents the contradictory aims of the Christian colonizer who seeks--“to maintain power over colonized peoples while at the same time claiming to elevate them as ‘brothers [or sisters] of Christ’” (28). While Sister Leopolda claims to “elevate” Marie to the level of the other nuns at the Sacred Heart Convent with this treatment, she is perverting the traditional Christian sacrament by physically abusing Marie and therefore maintaining a physical and mental hold over her.

The references to traditional Chippewa folklore in “Sister Marie” contrast and parallel the Christian allusions; the most prominent of the former is Windigo folklore, which further conveys the principal theme of consumption. According to various Algonquian legends,⁷ the Windigo⁸ is a giant, cannibalistic monster with a heart of ice, symbolic of winter starvation, that can devour whole villages.⁹ Similarly related to this myth is the culture-bound disorder¹⁰ called “Windigo psychosis.” According to legend, a person becomes afflicted with Windigo sickness when he or she is possessed by the monster, causing an irresistible desire to consume human flesh. Individuals who are subject to this possession demonstrate signs of gluttony, marked by an insatiable appetite for fat and

4 Marie’s comparison of herself to the Virgin Mary is not surprising due to the similarity between the names Marie and Mary, a fact which Erdrich was no doubt aware of when choosing the name for her character.

5 From *Revelation*: “And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars. . . . And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron: and her child was caught up onto God, and to his throne” (New King James Version, Rev. 12:1-2, 5).

6 Jaskoski suggests that this pose evokes the “popular representation of the Virgin Mary in which the Madonna is shown standing with her foot on the neck of a serpent representing Satan” (30).

7 The Chippewa, also known as Ojibwe, Native Americans are Anishinaabe-speaking peoples, a branch of the Algonquian language family (Barnouw 120).

8 Also called the Wendigo, Witigo, Windago, and Witiko, among other names.

9 see Waldram, Colombo, and Ross and Lichtenstein.

10 A culture-bound disorder is defined as a combination of mental and physical symptoms that are considered to be a recognizable disease only within a specific society or culture. A list of the most common culture-bound conditions can be found in the fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders or DSM-IV (898-901).

grease (Colombo 121). While the classification of this sickness as a “real” disease is a controversial subject, there has been enough documentation of phenomena similar to that of Windigo psychosis in Algonquian communities to attract interest and in-depth study by outside psychologists and anthropologists.

In many ways, Marie can be interpreted as being afflicted with Windigo psychosis. For one, she certainly exhibits the symptom of a ravenous appetite for fat, lusting after the priest’s cheese in the larder: “It was the cheese that got to me. When I saw it my stomach hollowed. My tongue dripped. I loved that goat-milk cheese better than anything I’d ever ate. I stared at it. The rich curve in the buttery cloth” (Erdrich 3442). Also, Sister Leopolda often refers to Marie as “cold.” Perhaps it is a devil with a heart of ice (the Windigo), not the fiery Satan of Sister Leopolda’s Christian tradition, that is the “Dark One” who Marie feels moving in and out of her heart and who the nun believes wants Marie “most of all” (3440). At one point, Marie comments that Sister Leopolda “knew as much about [the Devil] as my grandma, who called him by other names” (3440). This construal of the Windigo-as-Devil would fit, as the Dark One seems to have a special connection with Marie’s Native American heritage, coming to her in the night with “whispered conversation in the language of the bush,” telling her “things he never told anyone but Indians” (3440). In fact, the earliest known reference to the Windigo occurs in the missionary Paul le Jeun’s 1636 *Relation*, where he associates Windigo cannibalism with demonic possession. Furthermore, in the first English reference to the Windigo, James Isham’s *Observations and Notes 1743-1749*, he offers the definition “the Devil” for the Algonquian term “*Whit te co*” (Colombo 7-9).

Further evidence of Marie’s possession is suggested with the knowledge that one of the most common cures for Windigo possession involves pouring boiling water or tallow on or into the afflicted (Colombo 120). Marie’s scalding takes on new meaning as Leopolda calls to her from above, “You’re cold. There

is a wicked ice forming in your blood...the beast watches me out of your eyes sometimes. Cold.’...[Marie] heard the water as it came... ‘To warm your cold ash heart,’ she said” (Erdrich 3443). The boiling water episode also parallels a number of other Windigo tales, as it is said that moving kettles foreshadow the appearance of the creature (Barnouw 120, 122). In the story, Marie hears “the urgent scrape of metal” from the top of the stove as Sister Leopolda removes the kettle, which the girl recognizes as an ill omen of the pain that is to come (Erdrich 3443). Furthermore, it also mentioned in Algonquian folklore that another method of ridding one of the monster is through severe beating (Teicher 10), not unlike Sister Leopolda’s repetitive cracking of her window-pole over the girl’s head and Marie’s statement that “[the Dark One] was afraid of her sharp pole” (3441).

Interestingly, another symptom commonly associated with Windigo sickness, a paradoxical physical gauntness or anorexia along with the starved cannibalistic hunger (Teicher 6), is ascribed, not to Marie, but to the skeletal and spiritually cannibalistic Sister Leopolda:

Her fingers were like a bundle of broom straws, so thin and dry, but the strength of them was unnatural. I couldn’t have tugged loose if she was leading me into rooms of white-hot coal. Her strength was a kind of perverse miracle, for she got it from fasting herself thin. Because of this hunger practice her lips were a wounded brown and her skin deadly pale. Her eye sockets were two deep lash less hollows in a taut skull. (Erdrich 3442)

Although Sister Leopolda repeatedly calls Marie “cold,” the nun is also described in the narrative as having eyes that are “cold” (3443). The Sister’s spiritual cannibalism manifests itself in her mania for total control of the children she teaches, especially in the case of Marie. Marie also relates Sister Leopolda’s hold on her in terms of a possession, similar to that of the Dark One: “I saw that she had tracked the Dark One to my heart and flushed him out into the open. So now

my heart was an empty nest where she could lurk” (3441). In this way, Sister Leopolda uses a combination of tactics, including fear and promises of love, to control and consume Marie; eventually, Marie feels that she “had no inside voice, nothing to direct [her], no darkness, no Marie” (3444). Instead of receiving the nurturing love and acceptance she desperately desires, Marie undergoes a further loss of self at the hands of the seemingly sadistic Sister Leopolda.

However, it is not until the end of the story that Marie truly experiences total alienation. The climax of Marie and Sister Leopolda’s battle for supremacy occurs when the two engage in a heated physical struggle in front of an oven where, after Marie attempts to push Leopolda into the oven in a fit of rage, the Sister retaliates and stabs Marie through the hand with a bread fork. Later, this wound is falsely labeled by the other nuns as the stigmata, or the physical manifestation of Christ’s wounds. In Marie’s smugness that Sister Leopolda has inadvertently caused her dreams of sainthood to come true, she is suddenly struck with a feeling of overwhelming pity for the Sister, seeing her “kneeling there. Leopolda with her soul like a rubber overboot. With her face of a starved rat. With the

desperate eyes drowning in the deep wells of her wrongness. There would be no one else after me. And I would leave. I saw Leopolda kneeling within the shambles of her love” (Erdrich 3447). Marie realizes in that moment that they are the same, reluctantly understanding Leopolda’s own pathetic need for love is like her own. Like the legend of the Windigo, when the ice is chipped away from the monster and “in the center, there was a regular man,” the battle in front of the furnace reduces Sister Leopolda to a “regular” human underneath the hard exterior in Marie’s eyes (Barnouw 122).

However, Marie is not comforted in this knowledge of mutual humanity. Her ensuing despair stems from her realization that in her quest to “win” she has lost her chance at the acceptance she so desperately desired. By warring with Sister Leopolda, she has actually been warring with the colonizer part of her herself. Now, in her new falsified sainthood, she is even further alienated. This final recognition, combined with the contrasting European and Chippewa elements in the story, symbolize the truth that there is no real victory in the cultural conflict between colonizer and Native— only loss.

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