

THE MOTIF OF ‘DEATH’ IN THE NOVEL “THE PLAGUE OF DOVE”

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Annotation:

Louise Erdrich is widely regarded as one of the most significant and influential voices among Native American authors, making substantial contributions to the second wave of the Renaissance of Native American literature. “The Plague of Doves” by Louise Erdrich, written in 2008, considers the theme of racism prevalent in the twentieth century and its enduring impacts. The following article discusses the dual motifs of death, running in parallel, offering multiple layers of meaning that deepen our understanding and perception of the events unfolding within the story.

Key words: motif, narration, death, US literature, theme, “The Plague of Dove”, native, indigenous, Ojibwa, Louise Erdrich.

Introduction

“The Plague of Doves” by Louise Erdrich, written in 2008, delves into the theme of racism prevalent in the twentieth century and its enduring impacts. The novel is centered around events that transpired in the 1890s in North Dakota. Louise Erdrich took liberties with the actual events, modifying certain details for storytelling purposes.

Literature review

In her article “Reading between Worlds: Narrativity in the Fiction of Louise Erdrich,” Catherine Rainwater highlights that Erdrich is the author of works that recount the lives and fates of ‘displaced characters’ who face cultural, social, and emotional frustrations due to their mixed heritages and marginalized positions. These characters grapple with issues of ‘power and powerlessness’ and ‘advantage and disadvantage’[11]. Louise Erdrich, a bestselling author, skillfully portrays the frustrations experienced by indigenous peoples and their complex relationships with white settlers. She particularly focuses on a significant event where her grandfather and fellow tribe members in the 1950s fiercely resisted their forced removal from their ancestral lands in North Dakota. “The Night Watchman,” a notable novel by Louise Erdrich published in 2020, delves deeply into the circumstances of that era and portrays how her grandfather provided support and inspiration to his community as they fought for their rights. This work is often described as polyphonic, a characteristic shared with many of the author’s novels, and is acclaimed for its majestic storytelling. In this novel, Louise Erdrich

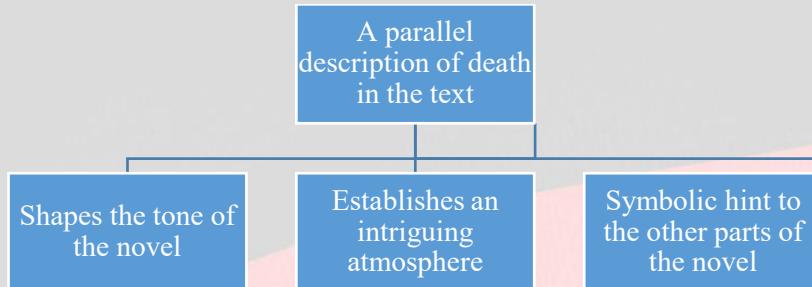
demonstrates her emotional connection to the characters and their world, revealing a profound sympathy for individuals who are fighting for justice but often find themselves 'powerless' in their struggle.

Results

One of the captivating aspects of the novel is the incorporation of animals, prompting readers to contemplate their symbolic significance. In her article "Exploring Religious Animal Symbolism in Louise Erdrich's 'The Plague of Doves,'" Katelyn Mathew delves into the animal motifs employed by the author. She focuses on serpents, doves, and lambs, which are referenced in the novel, and endeavors to elucidate their cultural and religious meanings within both communities.

In her analysis, Katelyn Mathew delves into the concept of 'plague' and its religious connotations, noting the historical presence of plagues in Christianity, with a particular emphasis on the locust plague detailed in the Bible. Additionally, the critic highlights the aftermath of such plagues, suggesting that Louise Erdrich symbolically guides the reader toward the intended message she aims to convey. With this context, the plague of doves over the town of Pluto might symbolize the way the Westerners pressured Native Americans to convert to Western culture, as well as Western religions [10]. In her analysis of the symbolic significance of the 'dove,' Katelyn Mathew acknowledges that in many cultures, including some Native American tribes, it traditionally represents 'peace.' However, she notes that in certain contexts, the dove can also symbolize 'death.' Specifically, among the Ojibwe people, who are part of the Algonquian peoples, there is a belief that doves symbolize death [10]. In this context, it becomes evident that Louise Erdrich deliberately employs a dual portrayal of death: one through direct description and the other symbolically. This technique serves to effectively depict the poignant atmosphere of the time and society within the novel, adding depth to the narrative and highlighting the thematic undercurrents of the story. The opening section of the novel, titled "Solo," spans just fourteen lines. It starkly portrays the massacre of an entire family, culminating in the tragic death of a baby in a crib. Notably, Louise Erdrich avoids explicit terms like 'kill' or 'murder,' choosing instead to conclude this section with the haunting sentence: 'The odor of raw blood was all around him in the closed room' [5]. Louise Erdrich strategically employs key words to convey the intensity of the scene. She describes how the gun jams on the final shot, indicating that the assailant successfully killed all the family members except the baby. The infant's cries in the aftermath of this violence unsettle the perpetrator, leading him to set down the gun and search for a hammer. However, upon spotting a gramophone, he becomes enveloped in the 'flow' of music, using this moment to fix his gun with a clear intent. After ensuring his weapon is in working order, he positions himself above the crib. As the music crescendos, he lifts his gun, and in that climactic moment,

the scent of fresh blood permeates the air, saturating the atmosphere with its raw presence. This poignant and brutal narrative unfolds further in subsequent sections. The second part, primarily narrated by Evelina, delves into the theme of the "plague of doves." As we previously explored, in Ojibwe belief, the 'plague of doves' symbolizes an 'omen of death'. The dual motifs of death, running in parallel, offer multiple layers of meaning that deepen our understanding and perception of the events unfolding within the story.



The diagram above illustrates how Louise Erdrich's parallel narration of death at the beginning of the novel serves several purposes. Initially, this narrative technique establishes the tone of the novel. The somber and dark tone, intertwined with themes of murder, evokes feelings of sadness, poignancy, and depression in the reader. Moreover, the parallel depiction of death helps to bring forth various themes that the author further explores in the novel. These themes include interpersonal conflict, psychological distortion, injustice, tension, the weight of history, and internal struggles.

Another purpose behind Louise Erdrich's use of parallel descriptions of death at the outset of the novel is to captivate the readers' attention. By beginning with the section 'Solo,' readers are instantly intrigued. They are prompted to ask questions such as: Who is the murderer? Who is the victim? What drives the murderer's actions? How does this crime connect to the characters in the novel? Consequently, attentive readers are compelled to immerse themselves in the narrative to uncover these answers. Their objective is to unravel the circumstances surrounding the crime, fostering an air of mystery and suspense at the novel's outset.

The final aim that the author seeks to accomplish through the parallel descriptions of death at the beginning of "The Plague of Doves" is to provide a symbolic prelude to the narrative's progression. The murder case and the presence of the plague of doves serve as foreshadowing elements, hinting at the forthcoming events and themes that the author intends to delve into. These hints offer readers a glimpse into the conflicts that will be explored and the challenges that the characters will confront as the story unfolds. Moreover, the murder acts as a metaphor for societal issues, encompassing themes such as violence, injustice, racial and identity discrimination, and the enduring impact of historical injustices on present-day relationships.

In conclusion, "The Plague of Doves" stands as a powerful and multilayered narrative that explores themes of racism, historical trauma, and cultural identity through symbolic imagery

and emotionally charged storytelling. Louise Erdrich masterfully intertwines personal and collective histories, using motifs like the plague and doves to convey deeper meanings.

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