Exploring Religious Animal Symbolism in Louise Erdrich's The Plague of Doves

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In her 2009 novel *The Plague of Doves*, Louise Erdrich weaves a complex story that demonstrates the attempted erasure of Native American culture and religion through contrasting religious animal motifs. Serpents, doves, and lambs have inherent associations with biblical and some indigenous religions that, together, build a conflict that is reflected by the tension between the occupants of the reservation and by the white characters. For example, the Biblical interpretation of serpents is that they are evil spirited and essentially the embodiment of Satan; however, some religions view serpents as creatures that cast out demons. These contrasting beliefs, along with other examples in the novel, create the religious and spiritual conflict that occurs in the novel as the Native Americans are bombarded with Catholicism and other pressures to abandon their culture. Associating or assigning these animals with religious symbolism to different characters, both white and indigenous, Erdrich enriches the conversation surrounding the conversion of Native Americans to Catholicism and the separation of indigenous peoples with their families and culture by exposing the entitlement and power imbalances present between Native Americans and Westerners.

Religion, especially as it pertains to Catholic conversation and influence on Native Americans, is a hallmark of many of Louise Erdrich's works, including *Tracks* (1988) and *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001). In her 2009 novel *The Plague of Doves*, Erdrich utilizes contrasting religious animal motifs to add to her critical commentary on religion in relation to the conversion of Native American tribes to Catholicism and other Western practices. These motifs build upon religious symbolism to create and demonstrate the colonizer entitlement and power imbalances present between Native Americans and Westerners.

The Plague of Doves is a 2009 novel set in North Dakota in the fictional town of Pluto, which neighbors an Ojibwe reservation. Throughout the novel, white characters and Ojibwe characters collide and interact, intertwining family trees and tragic events from the past, such as the murder of an entire white family excluding their baby daughter which led to the hanging of three innocent men belonging to the Ojibwe tribe. The novel is separated into chapters that are narrated by a range of characters from Pluto.

In each chapter, religion comes into play in some way. In Evalina's first chapter, which is the first chapter of the entire novel, we see Mooshum, her grandfather, interact with Father Cassidy. Along with his brother Shamengwa, Mooshum taunts and mocks the priest, who visits often to encourage their family to attend weekly mass. During one of Father Cassidy's visits where he suggests it is time they return to the church to confess as it has been an extended period of time and they have surely sinned since their last confession, Shamengwa claims that he has not sinned. Mooshum agrees and says, "I, too, completely pure," while his chin "trembled," as if he were holding back laughter (Erdrich 24).

In Evalina's first chapter, we see her struggling with her sexuality as she develops a crush on one of the nuns that teaches in her Catholic school. Catholic schools, or mission schools, were a common way to convert the Native Americans to Catholicism. In "Native Americans on the Path to the Catholic Church: Cultural Criss and Missionary Adaptation,"

Ross Enoch discusses how mission schools were essential to the conversion of Native Americans to Catholicism because they were often boarding schools where Native American children would be cut off from their family's culture for large portions of time (85). There is also non-Catholic religion representation in the novel, particularly in Marn Wolde's perspective as she is the wife to Billy Peace, a cult leader who began as a Catholic priest before forming his own religion based around the "spirit." Even without the animal symbolism in these instances, it is abundantly clear that religion is a major theme in The Plague of Doves. Erdrich weaves the animal symbolism with the religious storylines to enhance the theme and to give it a deeper reading.

Present in both the title itself and throughout the novel—especially in the beginning—doves play a pivotal role in understanding Erdrich's religious motifs and how they contribute to the overarching theme of the desire for power. In Western religions, the dove has multiple meanings including, but not limited to, peace, the Holy Spirit, love, new beginnings, and purity. In her review of the novel, Carole Goldberg reflects on these various meanings in comparison to how Erdrich utilizes the doves and states that they appear in "guises throughout the book: emblem of nature, symbol of the Holy Spirit, harbinger of troubles" (Goldberg, par. 6). In the book of Genesis, after the Great Flood, Noah sent out a dove to test if the water had receded. When the dove returned, it had an olive branch in its beak, implying that there were trees and foliage and not just endless water (*Life Application Study Bible*, Gen. 8.11). The dove with an olive branch has become a widely recognized symbol of peace. The dove seems to only have positive connotations in Western spirituality, which contrasts with the symbolism of doves in Native American religions. While some Native American tribes view doves similarly to Western religions—doves as symbols of peace and new beginning—some view doves as omens of death. The Algonquian peoples, of which the Ojibwe are a part of, is one of these groups (Lewis 1).

In the beginning of the novel, Mooshum tells the story of doves desc-

ending over Pluto in 1896 in what he describes as a plague. The doves decimated crops and tormented the townspeople. Mooshum explains that "one could wring the necks of hundreds or thousands and effect no visible diminishment of their number…The dead only fed the living and each morning when the people woke it was to the scraping and beating of wings, the murmurous susurration, the awful cooing babble, and the sight, to those who still possessed intact windows, of the curious and gentle faces of those creatures" (Erdrich 5–6). During this time, Mooshum was serving as an altar boy in his older brother's church. This church was covered with birds who were knocking each other off the cross on the roof from where they perched. During one of the attacks the doves had on the people of Pluto, the women pulled their skirts up so they could run from the violent birds. Mooshum, young and raised around Catholicism, lusted over the women's legs. However, a dove struck him in the forehead "with such force that it seemed to have been flung directly by God's hand, to smite and blind him before he carried his sin of appreciation any farther" (Erdrich 8). In this scene, where Mooshum is struck in the face with a dove, he looks up and sees his future wife Junesse wiping the blood from his forehead and ear. Evalina narrates her grandfather's telling of the story and describes what she imagines, saying, "The Holy Spirit hovered between them" (Erdrich 12). In Christianity, the Holy Spirit's role is the helper; the Holy Spirit may reveal information or provide peace and comfort. In the book of Luke, the dove is used in a metaphor for the Holy Spirit: "And the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove" (Luke 3.22). Likewise, the Spirit is known to give power: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1.8). In this way, Erdrich's inclusion of the Holy Spirit in the retelling of Mooshum's meeting with his future wife amidst the plague of doves shows how both Mooshum and Junesse gained agency from their interaction on that day. Junesse, who is white, gained enough power to leave her abusive aunt as well as her responsibilities caring for six younger cousins,whereas

Mooshum gained enough power to leave and to avoid becoming a priest like his older brother whose church he was the altar boy for. Had the plague of doves not fallen over the town, the couple's future together might not have been guaranteed.

The word "plague," which is used to describe the doves and their reign of terror over Pluto, has a religious connotation as there have been many plagues depicted in the Bible. One specific plague that is similar to the plague of doves in the novel is the locust plague in the book of Exodus: "If you refuse to let them go, I will bring locusts into your country tomorrow. They will cover the face of the ground so that it cannot be seen. They will devour what little you have left after the hail, including every tree that is growing in your fields" (Exod. 10.4–5). The plague of locusts was the eighth of ten plagues God laid over Egypt to assert His power and force Pharaoh to release the enslaved Israelites. 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. By refusing Western colonization—as Mooshum does, especially when he decides not to follow his brother's footsteps to become a priest and instead runs off with Junesse—the Ojibwe folks, alongside the white residents of Pluto, experience the plague of doves. However, as evidenced by both history and by *The Plague of Doves*, the power and influence of colonizers surpassed the Native Americans' efforts, similar to how God's pressure against Pharoah eventually wore him down to surrender.

It is important to note that while many of the Native American traditions and populations have diminished since the colonization of what is now the United States, these communities are far from extinct. Believing so would fall subject to the trope of the "vanishing Indian," a myth which Harvard University's Pluralism Project describes as "the American imagination that many believe there are no more Native Americans, or at least no more 'real Indians'"("Myth of the 'Vanishing Indian'" par. 4). This is evidenced to be false. Today, there are a recorded 6.79 million Native Am-

ericans from 574 federally recognized tribes living in the United States ("Native American Population by State 2023" par. 3). Members of this population partake in active roles in legislation, in the government, in activism, and in the spreading of awareness of their communities to continue to give their people a voice in a time where the "vanishing Indian" myth is still believed by many. The Pluralism Project states, "Indigenous men and women say plainly that they are here to stay, and that American expansion and American history rests on their stolen land" ("Myth of the 'Vanishing Indian'" par. 4). While it is clear that Westerners did not erase the Native American, they did damage their population and cause changes in some traditions and practices, which will be explained in more depth later in this paper.

Another way to look at the plague of doves decimating the crops and the livelihood of the people of Pluto is to see it as a representation of Western civilization taking steps towards the erasure of Native American land, religion, and culture. As the white population in America moved west, indigenous tribes experienced "some of the most rapid and dramatic cultural changes in history" (Enoch 71), including economic and social changes, which were prominent factors that diminished many traditional Native American religions. This was a result of a multitude of reasons, one of those being the relocation or destruction of indigenous-owned land. In many Native American communities, religious traditions and rituals are linked to specific landmarks or sites. Because they were essentially cut off from these sites, their religions declined, and some seemed to die off completely (Enoch 74). This view on the natural world and land differed from the view Christians hold. Christian worship is not restricted to specific places as the "church" is anywhere where there are at least two Christians gathered in fellowship together (Matt. 18.20). Angela Sparks writes, "Understanding the reciprocity and relational nature of the Ojibwe people's treatment of the environment and its inhabitants is key to recognizing the stark contrast between Indigenous and settler approaches to land use in the early nineteenth century" (Sparks 409). It is possible these differing views

on the religious and general significance of location impacted the manner the United States government seized indigenous-owned land, exerting their power over the indigenous peoples.

This loss of land caused many Native Americans to lose aspects of their religions. Discussing the *Birchbark House* series by Erdrich alongside other Native American works, Roxanne Harde claims, "Erdrich holds up these small migratory animals as the better symbols for the family and their people" (Harde 241). While the "migratory animals" are not doves, Harde does discuss the role of birds in the *Birchbark House* series. In the series, she claims that the birds are symbolic of the Ojibwe people and the dynamics within their specific family. Additionally, the birds are a source of protection and guidance. This is a far different depiction of birds from their symbolism in *The Plague of Doves* because the birds are not described as characters and do not provide any guidance, other than possibly being the reason Mooshum meets Junesse. Even still, the birds wreak havoc and cause harm to the people and the town. The rationalization of colonizing Native land includes bringing the indigenous people to perceived "better" ways of life, despite the harm and genocide committed. Perhaps this believed benefit is reflected in Mooshum's meeting his future wife, and the detrimental colonization of Native land, which expresses the imbalanced power Westerners had over Native peoples.

Taking the Ojibwe's view of doves into consideration, a different interpretation of the plague arises. Rather than relating to the Egyptian plagues, the Holy Spirit, or the Westernization of Native American culture, this interpretation depicts the doves as a bad omen. Because the plague takes place in 1896, it is a precursor to the tragic events that are to follow in 1911: the murder of the white Lochren family, excluding a single family member who is a baby, and the lynching of three innocent Ojibwe men who were wrongfully blamed for the crime.

Along with doves, serpents also emerge as a religious symbol, though it is through Marn Wolde's perspective that we see them. Marn Wolde, a white woman, married Billy Peace, an Ojibwe soldier-turned-preacher.

Many characters in the novel experience conflict between their Native American religious beliefs and the pressure to assimilate into Catholicism—by Father Cassidy and mission schools, for example—and Billy's conflict led him to form his own religion that Marn described as "a religion based on what religion was before it was religion" (Erdrich 158). Because there is little documentation that suggests there was a time where civilization did not believe in one or multiple higher powers, this may allude to the days where Jesus walked the Earth with His original followers. Billy viewed himself highly, especially after getting struck by lightning, so there is a parallel between Billy and his followers and Jesus and His. To spread his religion, Billy and his followers travel. Marn obtains two serpents—a diamondback and a northern copperhead, both venomous—from a family who practiced an unorthodox religion and handled snakes whom she met while traveling alongside Billy and his followers. When the old woman from the snake handler family gives Marn the serpents, she tells her that she will get bit but live because of Marn's power. The woman also tells Marn that the snakes "have judgment in them…[a]nd they have love" (Erdrich 160). After hearing of this, Marn picks the snakes up and willingly lets them bite her. Marn describes this experience as "getting close to spirit" (Erdrich 160), which she did not find in Billy's religion. She goes as far as to call them her "lambs of god" (Erdrich 173). Because the snakes judged and approved of her, and she had the "power," she did not die, just as the woman told her.

As Marn's chapter progresses, Marn grows to hate Billy. While they are intimate one night, Marn takes a needle "filled with the venom of the snake and tipped with the apple of good and evil" and plunges it into Billy's heart, killing him (Erdrich 178). If we read the serpents as a Jesus-like figure, as suggested by the "lamb of god" reference, then the serpents are Jesus and judge Billy, finding him guilty and thus killing him with their venom. However, if we read the serpents as derived from the devil, then perhaps they tempted Marn of sin in the form of her husband's murder. This would line up with Christianity's view on serpents. In the book of

Genesis, the serpent is described as "more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made" (Gen. 3.1). Likewise, in Revelation: "The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or satan, who leads the whole world astray" (Rev. 12.9.). The story of Original Sin also contains a serpent where the devil, in the form of a serpent, tempted Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. This forbidden fruit is referenced in the novel when Marn describes the needle as "tipped with the apple of good and evil." The serpent is the devil in this circumstance, so the serpents Marn possesses hold that connotation. However, the family who handles snakes do so because they believe snakes "cast out devils by handling poisons" (Erdrich 160). This reading is the opposite of what the serpent represents in the Bible, so it creates more of that religious and spiritual conflict that occurs in the novel as the Native Americans are bombarded with Catholicism. Robert Lake-Thom, a descendant of Karuk and Seneca tribes and a traditional Native healer and spiritual teacher, views snakes similarly to the snake handler family: "They can have good power, bad power, or both…used for seeing, healing, and protection" (14). With either interpretation, the serpents held the power that enabled Marn to murder Billy.

While it can be interpreted that the murder of Billy is another case of a white character killing a Native American in an act that further erases the Native American population just as the settlers who settled on the Americas enacted on the indigenous peoples since the beginning of colonization in the United States and perpetuates the myth of the vanishing Indian, Deborah L. Madsen complicates this idea. In "Discontinuous Narrative, Ojibwe Sovereignty, and the Wiindigoo Logic of Settler Colonialism: Louise Erdrich's Marn Wolde," Madsen argues that Marn's narration is unreliable, and that her actions and delusions reflect a colonizer's perspective. Madsen writes, "Marn Wolde's narration achieves the displacement of the indigenous into the category of the monstrous and of the political into the sphere of the private by portraying herself as the spousal victim of Billy Peace's overwhelming appetite for power of all kinds" (Madsen 26).

Madsen describes Marn's "appetite for power of all kinds" as "settler land hunger" (Madsen 24) because Marn would inherit their jointly possessed money and land after Billy's death, taking away the power he had built for himself. Marn's implicit "appetite for power" is heightened and enabled through the snakes, which are a vessel of power for her. Like how many white people rationalize the relocation and westernization of Native Americans, Marn rationalizes the killing of her Ojibwe husband. She believes that because the snakes judged her highly and judged Billy to be less worthy, and that the land under their name belonged to her, that killing Billy was a reasonable means to that end.

Furthermore, Billy posed a threat to Marn's power because he subverted the roles of conquered and conqueror, as Rachel Bonini claims in "Constructing the Past: Places, Histories, and Identities in Louise Erdrich's *The Plague of Doves*." She writes, "Billy contorts his agency into a vicious form of domineering power, in a sense reversing the roles" (Bonini 104). Although Billy takes back the land that had been stolen from his people, Erdrich does not paint him as a hero in the scenario. Once he obtains power, he abuses it, just as Marn abuses her power that she uses to get the land back. In an analysis of *Tracks*, Erdrich's novel from 1988, Gheytasi and Hanif allege that Erdrich does not play into positioning people opposite of each other with a black and white perspective. They write that Erdrich "avoids giving priority to one cultural code over another; her literary and cultural hybridization intends to deconstruct binaries like the Europeans versus the Natives" (Gheytasi and Hanif 151). While this is written about *Tracks*, it is true to the way Erdrich writes Billy and Marn as well. Neither are given favor as both abuse power in their own ways. This manipulation of "traditional narrative convention" (Gheytasi and Hanif 1-52) also translates to the other decisions she made while writing *The Plague of Doves*, including "time, truth, narration, and reliability" (Gheytasi and Hanif 152). Using Marn's perspective, as she experiences living as a cult leader's wife and gets bitten by poisonous serpents, allows the narrative unreliability to come through and challenges the idea that Marn

is a helpless, victimized wife of Billy, which Madsen claims is a common interpretation (Madsen 23). Billy peace took the religion he learned from the white settlers and mixed it with other religions—both from Native American culture and from his own mind—but his religion, whether or not it was harmful, was taken from him by Marn's snakes. Her power—symbolized by the serpents—stole his religion, reflecting the way colonizers historically stole Native American religions.

Erdrich utilizes a couple other animals as symbols throughout the novel, though snakes and doves are the most prominent. Three of these animals are salamanders and lambs. The salamander is only discussed in the first chapter, which is told from Evelina's perspective. Siblings Evelina and Joseph observe the behaviors and physical attributes of black salamanders because Joseph expresses an interest in observing their life cycle throughout the year. Mooshum informs them that nuns believed the salamanders were "emissaries from the unholy dead, sent up by the devil, and hell was full of them" (Erdrich 29). Likewise, Father Cassidy tells the siblings, "There are some who believe those creatures represent the devil" (Erdrich 36), though he does not believe it himself. However, Joseph and Evelina—as well as their grandfather and most of their family—do not subscribe to the Catholic faith that the mission school and Father Cassidy encourage, and they do not view the salamanders as from the devil. Instead, they show them kindness by saving them from the schoolboys who would've stomped on them had the siblings not gotten to them first.

At one point, when Joseph grows impatient observing the elusive amphibians, he dissects a live salamander using his father's equipment. Witnessing the salamander's exposed insides and guts reflects a discussion between Father Cassidy, Mooshum, and Shamengwa not long after the di ssection. It's a brief moment, but they mention God creating each of them, "down to the details" (Erdrich 33). This discussion—being created with precision and detail—correlates with the dissection of the salamander because the procedure allows Joseph and Evelina to see a creature that God made from within. The dissection, as well as the rest of Joseph's observat-

ion, also demonstrates a power imbalance because he is able to do what he wants with the salamanders. The salamander he dissected alive had tried to crawl away during the night, but died at the windowsill with its insides—which Joseph examined and pinned in place—unraveled and stretched (Erdrich 30). In an analysis of animals and metaphors in Native American literature, Gerald Vizenor writes, "We learned as hunters, and later as authors, never to let a wounded animal suffer. Wounded animals were put out of their miseries, at heart our miseries of the animal other in literature" (666). While the salamander is put out of its misery, it is not by Joseph's doing. He dissects the salamander while it was still living, unintentionally allowing it to suffer, and then left it cut open and alive while he slept. Despite not maliciously dissecting the salamander, Joseph's position allows him to ignore the suffering of the salamander. Once it dies, he buries it with Evalina, but the death does not affect him deeply because he begins dissecting them again a month later. His previous kindness for them was overcome by the power he held over them, which allowed him the distance from their suffering. Similarly, the transportation of the salamanders from their original habitat to a fabricated one for Joseph to observe them more closely also reflects his exercise of his power over them. It also parallels the forced removal and constriction of Native Americans from their native land to reservations. However, as the salamanders never remain in their relocated habitat, many Native Americans make efforts towards restoring their stolen land and traditions.

Used in Marn Wolde's chapter, another animal Erdrich uses that has connotations of religious symbolism to contribute to the effect of power demonstrations in the novel is the lamb. More specifically, the "Lamb of God." Marn describes the snakes as such to Billy while in bed with both him and the snakes. While Billy is disgusted and wary of the snakes, Marn feels comfortable around them, if not empowered and lustful. The term "Lamb of God" comes directly from the Bible and is the title of Jesus. Claiming the snakes as her lambs of god gives the snakes the role of Jesus, the Son of God the Father, which would assign Marn the position of God

the Father. The Holy Trinity is then made whole: Marn, as God the Father, the snakes as God the Son, and their connection as God the Spirit. Jesus is called the "Lamb of God" because lambs were often used for sacrifices, and Jesus was the ultimate sacrifice to pay for everyone's sins. The Bible reads, "the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us all from sin" (1 John 1.7). The serpent's venom parallels Jesus's blood because it "saves" or sets Marn "free" from Billy. In Marn's greedy delusion, she must believe that Billy is the ultimate evil. It is interesting that the snakes are described as lambs, though, considering the practice of sacrificing lambs and the crucifixion death of Jesus. This would assume that Marn would kill them, too, as she killed Billy. However, this does not happen. Marn's connection with the snakes is severed when she is no longer on Wolde land (which was once reservation land). The Holy Spirit binds people with God, so the disconnection assumes a distance from the Spirit as well. After killing Billy, when Marn is in the restaurant with her children, she loses her title as God the Father—as well as her power—because she is no longer a part of the Trinity that gave her the power. Her connection with the land could possibly reflect the connection between Native Americans and their land, especially their religious sites that have been stolen from them either in relocation or destruction.

The Ojibwe religious traditions respect the manidoog, or the "spirits" ("Anishinaabe Ojibwe Ways" par. 2). These spirits are likely what Billy Peace based some of his religion from, considering he stripped the figures of God and Satan from the Catholic religion he once preached and he is from the Ojibwe tribe. Marn narrates, "There was only spirit…There was spirit, and that was vast, vast, vast, so vast we had to shut out the enormousness of it" (Erdrich 159). The spirits in Ojibwe traditions are most commonly symbolized by animal spirits. ("Anishinaabe Ojibwe Ways" par. 2). This is likely because of the "interdependent relationship between animals and people" (Enoch 72) of many Native American religions. As Sparks explains, "In contrast to the settlers who separated spirit and nature, the Ojibwe are portrayed by Erdrich as people who believe that spirit

and nature are inseparable" (407). By having a white woman find "spirit" while with the snakes, and then using them to rationalize and enable her to kill an Ojibwe man for her own personal gain, Marn steals more from the people her ancestors have historically stolen from. In many Native American cultures, animals are regarded as "sustenance, as spiritual helper and guide, and as a symbol of the ability to respond to, adapt, and even thrive in drastically changing circumstances" (Harde 231). Bonini contributes to this idea and asserts that the plague of doves represents the history of humans overtaking untouched wilderness, or white Americans overtaking Native American communities, and relates that to the main characters of the story (Bonini 103). This overtaking involves religious conversion, of course, but Bonini's point about the plague representing humans overtaking untouched wilderness adds to the conversation because of the strong ties between Native American religion and nature.

Many Native American economies, which relied on hunting and farming, were interconnected with religious rituals. By continuing to participate in these farming and hunting practices, their religions persisted. However, as a result of white overhunting and the formation of reservations, many tribes had to abandon these practices. These practices not only broke down their traditional economies and ties to sacred sites, but they also broke down their religion and overall culture (Enoch 75). With the breakdown of their culture, it became easier to convince them to adopt the Catholic ways. Taking one's power displays the power of the taker, or conqueror; in this scenario, that would be settlers. This is one of the hallmarks of Madsen's "appetite for power of all kinds." Not only do they want power, but they are also incentivized to strip it from others to create a steeper imbalance. With the metaphoric nature and treatment of the animals in Erdrich's novel, they serve as allusion and symbol to expose the ways in which religion is handled throughout the book: as complicated power dynamics and imbalances, particularly in relation to the Westernization of Native American peoples and culture that sought to erase their religion.

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