# Fleur Study Guide

## Fleur by Louise Erdrich

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# Introduction

One of the most important Native American authors writing in the United States as of 2005, Louise Erdrich is famous for her unique storytelling technique that draws from her knowledge of Chippewa (or Ojibwa) life and legend. Although Erdrich is a poet and nonfiction writer as well, her most prominent work involves episodes from the lives of several Chippewa families whose roots are in the Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota. These richly drawn characters, whose lives intertwine across generations, have filled five novels and many short stories. In her individual style that alternates between a variety of first-person narrative voices, Erdrich captures the essence of these characters and their viewpoints as they tell the stories of their lives.

Erdrich draws much of her material from the stories of her Chippewa mother, and one of the first characters she developed out of these childhood tales was Fleur Pillager, the subject of Erdrich's 1986 short story "Fleur." In this story about sexuality and female power, a seemingly timid and insecure narrator describes the time Fleur spends in the small town of Argus, North Dakota. After Fleur is raped by the men who work with her in a butcher's shop, she is avenged by their mysterious deaths inside a frozen meat locker. Although "Fleur" was adapted and included as the second chapter of Erdrich's 1988 novel *Tracks*, the subject of this entry is the original short story, as published in *Esquire* magazine in August of 1986. As of 2005, it was available in short story collections, including *Esquire's Big Book of Fiction* (2002), edited by Adrienne Miller.

# Author Biography

Born in 1954 in Little Falls, Minnesota, Louise Erdrich was the eldest of seven children. Her mother, a Native American of the Chippewa tribe, was the daughter of Turtle Mountain Reservation Tribal Chairman Patrick Gourneau, and her father was of German descent. Both of her parents taught at the Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding school in Wahpeton, North Dakota, near the Turtle Mountain Reservation. Erdrich grew up in Wahpeton, and in 1972 she entered the first co-educational class of Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, on scholarship.

The year Erdrich began at Dartmouth, her future husband and collaborator Michael Dorris was appointed head of the Native American studies department. Erdrich began to write short stories and poems and held a variety of minimum-wage jobs, and after graduation she taught in the North Dakota Arts Council's Poetry in the Schools program. Erdrich earned a master's degree in creative writing at Johns Hopkins University and then edited a Boston Indian Council newspaper before returning to Dartmouth as a writer-in-residence in 1981. Marrying Dorris shortly after she began to teach there, Erdrich became the mother of his three adopted children and had three more children with him. Dorris assisted Erdrich greatly in the writing and promotion of *Love Medicine* (1984); in fact, all of their works during the years of their marriage were collaborative efforts. After the success of her first novel, Erdrich received a Guggenheim fellowship and continued to publish short stories, including "Fleur," which originated in a long manuscript of her mother's stories that Erdrich wrote during her student days.

"Fleur" was incorporated into Erdrich's 1988 novel *Tracks*, the third work in her saga dealing with twentieth-century Chippewa life. Erdrich continued to publish writings throughout the 1990s, including prominent and successful novels and short stories, a nonfictional account of her experience as a mother, some children's literature, and poetry. Although she co-wrote fictional and nonfictional works with Dorris through the early 1990s, Erdrich began to have serious family problems, including a son's death, and she separated from her husband in 1995. Two years later, Dorris killed himself, an event that likely influenced Erdrich's 1999 novel *The Antelope Wife*. In the early 2000s, Erdrich published many works of fiction, including *Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001), *Range Eternal* (2002, for children), *The Master Butchers Singing Club* (2002), *The Game of Silence* (2002), *Four Souls* (2004), and *The Painted Dream* (2005).

# Plot Summary

"Fleur" begins by stating that Fleur Pillager was only a girl when she drowned in Lake Turcot, which is located in Native American reservation in North Dakota. Two men dive in and save her and, not long afterward, both disappear. Fleur falls in the lake again when she is twenty, but no one is willing to touch her. One man bends towards her when she washes onshore, and Fleur curses him, telling him that he will die instead of her. He drowns shortly thereafter in a bathtub. Men stay away from Fleur, believing that she is dangerous and that the water monster Misshepeshu wants her for himself.

Because she practices what the narrator calls "evil" ways, Fleur is unpopular on the reservation, and some gather to throw her out. In the summer of 1920, she leaves on her own accord for the town of Argus. Noticing a steeple, she walks straight to the church and asks the priest for work. He sends her to a butcher shop where Fleur works with the owner's wife Fritzie, hauling packages of meat to a locker. Fleur gives the men a new topic of conversation, particularly when she begins playing cards with them.

Pulling up a chair without being invited, she asks if she can join their game of cards. Fleur borrows eight cents from the narrator Pauline and begins to win. The men unsuccessfully try to rattle her, and Tor discovers that she is unable to bluff, but Fleur continues to win. Fleur finally picks up Pauline, who is hiding in the walls, and puts her to bed. The game continues night after night, and each time Fleur wins exactly one dollar. The men are soon "lit with suspense" and ask Pete to join the game. Lily is confounded by Fleur and suspects that she may be cheating for low stakes.

In August, when Fleur has won thirty dollars, Pete and Fritzie leave for Minnesota. With Pete out of the way, Lily raises the stakes in an attempt to shake Fleur. After a long night of going up and down, Fleur wins the entire pot and then leaves the game. The men begin drinking whiskey straight from the bottle and go outside to hide in wait for Fleur. Lily attempts to grab her, but she douses him with a bucket of hog slops and runs into the yard. Lily falls into the sow's pen, and the sow attacks him. He beats its head against a post and eventually escapes to chase Fleur to the smokehouse with the other men. They catch Fleur, who cries out Pauline's name, but Pauline cannot bring herself to help.

The next morning, the weather begins to turn into a violent storm and the men take shelter in the meat locker. Pauline goes to the doors and slams down the iron bar to lock them inside. The winds pick up and send Pauline flying through the air, and Argus is thoroughly wrecked by the storm. Because everyone is occupied with digging out from the storm, days pass before the townspeople notice that three men are missing. Kozka's Meats has been nearly destroyed, although Fritzie and Pete come home to find that the back rooms where they live are undisturbed. They dig out the meat locker to discover the three men and Lily's dog frozen to death.

Pauline says as a kind of summary, from an unspecified period of time in the future, that "Power travels in bloodlines, handed out before birth," which implies that Fleur was

responsible for the deaths of the men. She says that now she is about the only one who visits Fleur, who lives on Lake Turcot and may have married the water spirit Misshepeshu or taken up with white men or "windigos" (evil demons), unless she has "killed them all." Fleur has had a child, but no one knows for sure who fathered it. Pauline emphasizes that old men talk about the story over and over but, in the end, "only know that they don't know anything."

# Characters

## Tor Grunewald

One of the men who works at Kozka's Meats, Tor is involved in the card games with Fleur and dies in the meat locker with Lily and Dutch. He a "short and scrappy" man married to a woman that does not appear in the story except to say that she received a blow to the head during the storm.

## Jean Hat

Jean is run over by a cart after saving Fleur from drowning in Lake Turcot.

## Dutch James

Pauline's stepfather, Dutch works at Kozka's Meats and dies in the meat locker the night after he rapes Fleur with Tor and Lily. He brings Pauline's mother from the reservation and marries her, but she dies after a year, and he forces Pauline to drop out of school in order to take her mother's place in the butcher shop. He smokes cigars and, when he gets angry, veins bulge in his forehead.

## Fritzie Kozka

Pete's wife, Fritzie is "a string-thin blonde who chain-smoked and handled the razor-sharp knives with nerveless precision." She works with Fleur but is not as strong as she, so Fleur is responsible for much of the heavy lifting. Fritzie keeps close tabs on her husband, refusing to tolerate any talking behind her back. A practical business owner, she refuses to let the town break through the meat locker in order to discover whether the men are inside because it would spoil the frozen meats, her and Pete's major investment.

## Pete Kozka

The owner of the butcher shop, Pete is a soft spoken man who keeps his thoughts to himself because of his wife's influence. The only book he reads is the New Testament, and he always carries the lens of a cow's eye for good luck. Pete hires Fleur because of her strength and seems to bear no ill will towards her, which is why, Pauline implies, his and Fritzie's living space is spared by the storm.

## George Many Women

George Many Women bends over to look at Fleur when she washes up on the shore of Lake Turcot. Fleur curses him, saying he will take her place, so he refuses to go outside, but Fleur's magic seems to work nevertheless because he soon drowns in a bathtub.

## Misshepeshu

The "waterman, the monster" Misshepeshu is a "love-hungry" devil that lives in Lake Turcot and yearns for young girls like Fleur. Chippewa mothers warn their daughters that he may appear handsome to them, with "green eyes, copper skin, a mouth tender as a child's," but when they fall in his arms "he sprouts horns, fangs, claws, fins." Once he changes shape, he appears somewhat like a merman, with joined feet and brass scales, until he pulls the girls under, at which point he "takes the body of a lion or a fat brown worm." Erdrich implies in "Fleur," and makes more explicit during Eli Kashpaw's courting of Fleur in *Tracks*, that the form-shifting, magical Misshepeshu is associated with Fleur's sexuality and sexual power.

## Pauline

Pauline is Dutch's stepdaughter and the narrator of the story. She blends into the walls, or "melt[s] back to nothing" as though she is a part of the furniture, and she knows about everything that goes on at Kozka's Meats, including Fleur's rape. A "skinny, big-nosed girl with staring eyes," Pauline is captivated by Fleur but has mixed feelings about her, ranging from fear to admiration to disdain. She is also somewhat jealous of Fleur's good looks and powers because by contrast Pauline is quite homely, with a dress that hangs loose and a curved back like an old woman's. A timid and insecure girl, she cannot bring herself to come to Fleur's aid when she is raped, and she seems to feel somewhat regretful about this. It may be a reason why she locks the men inside the meat locker during the storm, murdering them, although Pauline seems to imply that she felt compelled to do this because of Fleur's magic.

Whether to believe Pauline about this motive is one of the cruxes of the story. Erdrich's novel *Tracks* suggests much more explicitly that Pauline is not a reliable narrator. She is eager to stress that she has a minimal impact on the story, but she is the one who actually locks the men in the meat locker. Regardless of whether Pauline murdered the men of her own volition or whether she is a reliable narrator, she retains a close connection with Fleur after the storm in Argus, as though she is drawn to her and repelled by her at the same time.

## Fleur Pillager

The intriguing subject of Erdrich's story, the daring Fleur Pillager is a Chippewa woman with magical powers. Chippewa men are attracted to her good looks, but they fear her because she has power from spirits and natural forces. She has "wide and flat" cheeks and a strong, muscular upper body, but her hips are "fishlike, slippery, narrow" and she has "sly brown eyes." She wears a green dress that, during the August night at the climax of the story, looks like a transparent "skin of lakeweed." The men at Kozka's Meats do not notice her very white, "strong and curved" teeth nor the fact that her fifth toes are missing, and they vastly underestimate her.

Fleur's reasons for moving to Argus are unclear; she may simply want a change from her home on Lake Turcot, or she may fear that people on the reservation will try to get rid of her. In any case, she works hard and with great strength, and she is able to cheat the men at cards (possibly using some kind of supernatural powers). The men, particularly Lily, are infuriated by her confidence and boldness, perhaps more than by the possibility that she cheats at cards. The women seem to respect Fleur, and Fleur takes to Pauline and appears to protect her. Pauline, however, has complex feelings about Fleur that must be deciphered in the subtext of what Pauline says.

Pauline claims that Fleur is "haywire, out of control," and that she "messed with evil, laughed at the old women's advice, and dressed like a man." She goes on to claim that Fleur practices ancient Chippewa medicine and charms, and she emphasizes that Fleur is responsible for summoning the storm that kills the three men who raped her. Pauline also suggests that Fleur magically compelled her to lock the men in the meat locker. It is not clear that all of these things are true or that Fleur is single-handedly responsible for all that happens. In one sense, Fleur is a victim who is raped by three brutal men. In any case, as she is presented by the narrator, Fleur possesses magical power related to her femininity, which no one fully understands.

## Lily Veddar

Lily is a fat man "with snake's cold pale eyes and precious skin, smooth and lily-white, which is how he got his name." He works at Kozka's Meats and likes to play cards with his "stumpy mean little bull" dog on his lap. The main actor in the rape and the events leading up to it, Lily attempts to bait Fleur by raising the stakes in the card game. During the chase, Lily falls into the sow's pen and has a dirty and vicious fight with it in which he crawls around in the mud and is bitten in the shoulder. Erdrich implies during this description that Lily is a pig himself.

# Social Sensitivity

With the publication in 2001 of The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse, Louise Erdrich has fleshed out the story of Fleur Pillager and made it satisfyingly whole. As a character, Fleur first appeared in Erdrich's work in 1986 in the short story "Fleur" (from Esquire, reprinted first in O. Henry Prize Stories, 1987, and later in the 1995 About These Stones: Fiction for Fiction Writers and Readers, edited by David Huddle, Ghita Orth, and Allen Shepherd). In 1988, a slightly different version was published as the first chapter of the novel, Tracks (New York: Henry Holt and Company). Erdrich created the character of Fleur Pillager in these and later stories in which she appears to be basing them on a solid foundation of social issues that emerged as the Ojibwe (also known as Chippewa but known to themselves as Anishinabe, Anishinaabeg, or Neshnabek, meaning The People) were subjected to the overwhelming Euro-American conquest. As the French, the English, and other Europeans pressed against the Native Americans, they assaulted them not only with superior technology, especially firearms, but also with successive waves of European microbes (most destructively measles, smallpox, and influenza).

As a result, the Ojibwe and most other Native American tribes lost their lands (and, often, their identity). The loss of their lands often led to mass starvation and the destruction of their tribal structures and tribal culture. The physical survivors were driven into the ever smaller physical spaces of reservations. These reservations were, in turn, essentially destroyed by the General Allotment Act of 1887, which divided Indian lands into individual holdings of a quarter section (or smaller units), ostensibly to promote the assimilation of Native Americans into the general society of the country by deliberately destroying tribal relations. (See the web site of historian E. A. Schwartz athttp://www.csusm.edu/nadp/ for documents and analysis of this Act of Congress). Historians, such as Brian W. Dippie and Leonard A. Carlson, have agreed with the assessment of John Collier, the "New Deal" Commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, that the 1887 Act was, in fact, one more nail in the coffin of all Native cultures. It was, as he put it, the "principal tool" of the old policy of destruction of tribal life and the cause of "poverty bordering on starvation in many areas, a 30 percent illiteracy rate, a death rate twice that of the white population, and the loss of more than 90 million acres of Indian land" (see Dippie, The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S.Indian Policy, 1982) because it starved the Indians and forced the sale of their lands. These are some of the social issues and concerns that help frame "Fleur."

Like D'Arcy McNickle (1904-1977), a mixed-blood enrolled member of the SalishKootenai tribes and the first Native American to write successfully about the consequences of the European conquest, Louise Erdrich is a mixed-blood enrolled member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Ojibwe.

Much of her work, like that of McNickle, focuses on the First Americans at the level of individual, family, and tribe and their responses to the Conquest. At the heart of the work of both writers, but foregrounded to a greater extent in Erdrich's writing, is the power and beauty of the traditional lore of The People, particularly the oral traditions of story-

telling and singing, but also the traditions of native medicine, hunting, family structures, and belief. In both writers, the effects of the European Roman Catholic Church as administered by missionaries, priests, and nuns emerge as mixed "blessings" at best. Finally, however, both writers portray the Catholic Church ultimately as the agent of colonial exploitation and destroyer of Native peoples and their cultures.

A number of other significant social issues emerge in "Fleur" in the details of plot, character, and setting, some subtle, some not. For instance, Erdrich reveals the exploitation of poor women□White, Native, and mixed blood□ in the characters of Fritzie Kozka, Fleur Pillager, and Pauline Puyat, who labor in Koska's Meats, a butcher shop in the town of Argus, North Dakota.

The work is hot, dangerous, unrelenting, physically challenging, and poorly paid. In addition, each of these women is subject to physical abuse of one sort or another. These abuses are so deeply within the background of the story that the reader may not recognize the pattern until the terrible and violent assault on Fleur by the three men in the pig pen that culminates in Fleur's rape "off stage" in the smokehouse. The story may then be seen as a skillful attack on the treatment of women by men, especially Euro-American men.

Another related theme explores the ideas of responsibility and justice. Some readers of the first three paragraphs misread the narrative as saying that Fleur is responsible for the deaths of three men owing to their interfering with or witnessing her drowning. To accept that reading one would have to accept as literal fact the folk belief in Fleur's supernatural powers. In addition, one would be forced to conclude that the injustices that Native American women and other women suffered in male-dominated communities of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America were the fault of the victims. Is Erdrich's intention to 'blame the victim' for injustice? Hardly. Indeed, the only recourse available in Erdrich's economical story for unjust actions seems to be possible only through folklore, especially legends and other traditional stories, as well as beliefs in "the old ways." Legend is always a powerful form of cultural expression. In "Fleur" Pauline, the narrator, recounts how much damage Fleur did to Argus□the "white" town nearest the reservation□in the summer when she left the reservation, when "things happened. She almost destroyed that town." The powerlessness of Fleur and the other women, Native and Euro-American, to respond effectively to local injustices, let alone to the overwhelming consequences of the Conquest, leads in Erdrich's fiction to novel and effective ways of retribution. For instance, according to local legend, anytime a man "saves" Fleur Pillager from drowning or other catastrophe, he dies, an apparent cause and effect relationship suggested in the first paragraph of the story. "It went to show, my grandma said. It figured to her, all right.

By saving Fleur Pillager, those two men had lost themselves." Later, after Lily Veddar, Tor Grunewald, and Dutch James assault and rape Fleur, a violent tornado swoops down on Argus, destroying Koska's meat packing plant except for the living quarters of Pete and Fritzie. The three men seek shelter in the meat plant's locker building, where the meat is kept frozen by the great blocks of ice harvested from Lake Turcot every

winter. Pauline hears a voice in the wind telling her to "slam down the great iron bar that fit across the hasp and lock" of the lockers leaving the men with no way out.

In the aftermath of the tornado, when everyone discovers that no business had been too seriously hurt, except for Koska's Meats, no one misses the three men for days; when they are finally dug out, the men are discovered frozen solid, despite the bearskins they had taken down and wrapped themselves in. Earlier in the story, we learn that Fleur Pillager is a shapeshifter whose tracks change from her own to those of a bear. At the end of the story, the narrator, Pauline, reveals that Fleur is a member of the bear clan and that Fleur gives birth to a baby girl□perhaps as a result of the rape, perhaps fathered by "a man with brass scales or by the lake"□ "whose green eyes and skin the color of an old penny made more talk," the story coming up different each time. The legends about Fleur continue and provide a kind of power that adheres to her and her people.

# Techniques

Erdrich is first and foremost a sensuous and feminist poet. She adroitly uses the techniques of imagery and symbolism to advance her themes and reveal her characters. She commands the full range of linguistic resources of all levels of English from "literary" English to the more colloquial and common language spoken by the drunken men. The scene of the "dance" of Lily and the old sow, through its setting in the dark and mire of the pig pen, make a powerful indictment of the bestial response of the three drunken men to Fleur and her card playing. Day after day, week after week, she has bested the men in the symbolic combat of poker, winning exactly a dollar each time, no more, no less. Infuriated by their inability to beat "the squaw," they drink and plan their attack, revealing their true bestial natures.

Another of her techniques glimpsed here in this short story and revealed more fully in her novels is the use of recurring characters, settings, and themes. As she puts it in an "Atlantic Unbound" interview (January 17, 2001), "I'm working on one big continuous novel anyway. All of the books are part of it." In "Fleur," Fleur Pillager and Pauline [Puyat] are two Native characters who have left the reservation to come to Argus. Fleur has been, the story suggests, driven from the reservation by tribal in-fighting. Pauline had come down from the reservation with her mother, the wife of Dutch James, the year before. When Pauline's mother died, Dutch took Pauline out of school to take the mother's place. Pauline is the narrator of the story, carefully placed and conceived so that she knows the tribal lore concerning the Pillagers generally and Fleur specifically. She is also "invisible" as a skinny girl, nothing like Fleur and, as Pauline says, the men "were blinded [by Fleur's sexuality], they were stupid, they only saw her in the flesh." Pauline is also a mystic.

After the storm, they both return to the reservation because "the blood draws us back, as if it runs through a vein of earth."

Pauline goes to Fleur's cabin on Lake Turcot to help when Fleur bears the child (whom Father Damien will baptize as Lulu in The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse).

Erdrich's narrative strategy in this short story is relatively straight-forward, opening with a six-paragraph history of Fleur presented in terms of the local gossip and legends attached to her "story" by the community. Then the narrative focuses on the summer of 1920 when Fleur went down to Argus, a village of three hundred people, two stores, two grain elevators, three churches, and a train depot to get a handout and a job.

The balance of the story focuses with increasing sharpness and tightness on the events that take place in the butcher shop, the card games, the dark night attack, and the heavenly retribution visited upon the town in the form of a tornado. The final seven paragraphs narrate the discovery of the fate of the three men and bring the reader back to tribal lore about Fleur, the belief in the power of the blood lines, and the on-going story-telling by which the tribal community creates and recreates itself.

Erdrich describes with selective but powerful and specific detail the settings of the village of Argus, Koska's butcher shop, and the powerful mythic tornado. The very name of the town, "Argus," suggests "Argus of the Hundred Eyes," the watchdog of Homeric epic, who had been set to guard the chastity of Io. But the name is ironic of course because no one sees what is happening to Fleur and by extension to Native women who are in the general societal context of racism and conquest without defense.

Erdrich's physical descriptions of Fleur and Pauline and of the men, especially Lily Veddar possess intense evocative power and allude to their mythic natures. As Pauline tells the story, Fleur Pillager lures men to their destruction with her beauty and her special powers that travel "in the bloodlines, handed out before birth." Her power is revealed in her hands with "their sensitive fingertips good at dealing cards" and "through her eyes, too, belligerent, darkest brown, the eyes of those in the bear clan."

Thus, Erdrich subtly weaves together Homeric myth and Ojibwe legend creating an atmosphere of mystery and power that makes this short story reverberate with suggestion and insinuation so that people will wonder, and the old men will talk "turning the story over" and getting it wrong, knowing only that they "don't know anything."

# Themes

## Female Power

One of the most important themes in Erdrich's story is that of female power. The situation at Kozka's Meats is somewhat like a battle between the sexes, in which Fleur, Pauline, and Fritzie have their own methods of dealing with a brutish, dangerous group of men. Daring and fearless Fleur is the most overt wielder of female power, as Pauline emphasizes throughout the story. Fleur seems to draw this power from ancient Chippewa spirits, medicines, and charms, as well as her sexuality. This may be a reason why the men rape her, to maintain what they perceive as their rightful control over her, because they are sexist and masochistic. In the end, they realize they cannot understand or control her.

The fact that Pauline locks the three men in the meat locker indicates that she too has power, the ability to remain out of sight and then take revenge at the right moment. Unlike Fleur, Pauline is meek and insecure, unable to stand up for herself or for Fleur at the crucial time. Nevertheless, Fleur and Pauline connect, both in Argus and after Fleur leaves Argus. They have two different kinds of female power, one direct and confrontational, the other indirect and secretive. Fritzie, able to control her husband and censor him effectively, illustrates a third kind of female power, which is that of a wife over her husband.

Except for Pete, who is under Fritzie's strict control to the point where he can talk about nothing but agriculture, the male workers attempt to make a show of their own power. They disdain women then find themselves outwitted by Fleur and rape her to prove their dominance over her. Erdrich strongly suggests, however, that women have the real power at the same time that they can be abused by men (raped like Fleur, forced to keep out of sight within the walls like Pauline, or overworked like Fritzie). In fact, despite the fact that they are butchers, the men are continually compared to the meat and livestock, while the women are the ones sharpening knives, carrying packets, and boiling heads. The long passage describing Lily's fight with the sow makes it clear that he is like a pig himself, and the final image of the men frozen in the meat locker suggests that these men have been reduced to the level of carcasses.

## Sexuality

Erdrich frequently refers to Fleur's sexuality and her good looks, beginning with her description of Fleur's drowning. Fleur's interactions with the waterman/spirit can be understood, in part, as a metaphor for her sexual development; Misshepeshu is a "love-hungry," sexual creature connected to Fleur's own sexual powers. Fleur is characterized as androgynous and fishlike: "her hands large, chapped, muscular, Fleur's shoulders were broad as beams, her hips fishlike, slippery, narrow." Fleur's daring personality, which fascinates and infuriates the men at the butcher shop, exudes from her sexuality,

particularly during the night when she is raped. She wears a tight, transparent dress and gives the men a "wolfish" grin when she wins the card game; in response the men try to convince themselves of their power over her by violating her sexually. Fleur returns to Lake Turcot where she has a child and is visited only by Pauline (although, apparently, some say she has relations with white men or Chippewa spirits). Though she has a child, she is not married, and she lives independently, apart from male control. The men who attempt to take possession of her, either by saving her or raping her, die.

## Racism and Sexism

The men at Kozka's Meats resent Fleur because she is capable, strong, beats them at cards (thus spoiling their chief source of pleasure), and because she is a Native American. Tor calls her a "squaw," or a Native American woman, as an insult, and the men believe that they should be superior to her intellectually and physically simply because of their male gender. Erdrich's story dramatizes white racism and male sexist beliefs, especially as these apply to Great Plains Native Americans. "Fleur" enacts the racism and sexism common in the 1920s that resulted in severe abuse and injustice.

# Style

## Magic Realism

Pioneered by post—World War II Latin American writers such as Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel García Márquez, magic realism is a literary technique in which supernatural elements appear within an otherwise realistic narrative. Magic, spiritual powers, and inexplicable paranormal events all may be elements in a story employing this technique, which tends to challenge the reader's perception of ordinary reality.

Erdrich uses magic realism when she implies that Fleur has special powers that enable her to swim with the water spirit Misshepeshu, drown and still live, and summon a storm to kill men who attack her. Events that can be explained logically, the narrator invests with magical interpretation. Fleur is infused with magical power from the spiritual world. In this story that takes on the quality of myth, Erdrich is able to locate the essence of Fleur's significance in the ambiguity of her sexuality, in male attraction to and fear of female power. Erdrich presents the magical as real, without restricting herself to verisimilitude.

## First-Person Narrative Perspective

Observant, unobtrusive Pauline is a mysterious person, who tells this story filtered by the lens of superstition and myth. She deliberately shapes the story as she reports it, on the one hand saying she sees more than others because she is "invisible," and on the other, admitting that there are some things one cannot say. For example, Pauline states that Fleur studied evil ways "we shouldn't talk about," which implies that Pauline censors or alters as she narrates.

Pauline's bias in favor of Fleur becomes particularly important as the story comes to its climax, when she stresses that Fleur is responsible for the deaths of the three men. In fact, the events of the story suggest that Pauline herself is responsible for their deaths. By the end of the story, when Pauline states that the old men chattering about the story "don't know anything" about what really happened, the reader senses that Pauline knows what happened herself and that she chooses not to tell all of it. Erdrich's use of such a first-person limited perspective allows her to add intrigue and mystery to the story and question whether it is ever possible to really know what happened in such a situation.

# Historical Context

## North Dakota in the Early Twentieth Century

West of Minnesota, on the southern border of Canada, and within the large area of the central United States known as the Great Plains, North Dakota has an arid climate with extreme temperatures and a rural economy. Sparsely populated until the late-nineteenth century, the state has a history of groups of Native Americans and immigrants competing for land. Anglo-American and Canadian settlers moved to North Dakota in the mid-nineteenth century to farm and participate in the fur trade, but many moved away in the late-nineteenth century, and Norwegian and German-Russian immigrants began to replace them. By 1910 North Dakota had an uncommonly large percentage of foreign-born residents, and its two main immigrant groups tended not to mix.

North Dakota experienced a population boom between 1898 and 1915, when railroads had been completed, connecting the region with the West. In politics, Republican Progressives instituted reforms and made a number of businesses public enterprises in order to stand up to the Minneapolis-St. Paul grain traders. They were accused of mismanagement, pro-German sympathies, and socialism, however, and they were removed from office in the recall election of 1921. In 1913, the year the events of "Fleur" take place, people were beginning to suffer in small towns, farms, and on Native American reservations, which were particularly hard-hit by disease, drought, and lack of food. Sioux, Chippewa, and other tribal lands had been greatly reduced by this time, to some of the least fertile areas of the state, and Native Americans continued to die after the disappearance of buffalo herds and the onset of disease and malnutrition in the late nineteenth century.

## Chippewa

The Chippewa, otherwise known as Ojibwa or Anishinabe, first came in contact with French colonial fur traders in the sixteenth century, in the Great Lakes region. Traditional Chippewa lifestyles varied according to region, but most Chippewa were hunters and not farmers, a tradition that continued into the twentieth century. Many Chippewa became involved in the French fur trade after contact with Europeans, which led to alliances with the French. Like other Plains Native Americans, they were gradually driven off their indigenous land by westward expanding Americans of European descent. In addition to killing Chippewa in conflicts such as the French and Indian War and the War of 1812, these Americans forced Chippewa tribes into undesirable areas, depleted the plains of animals for them to hunt, and spread disease. Chippewa tribes were also involved in a series of disputes with the Sioux, whom they drove south as they made their way to Minnesota, North Dakota, and Ontario.

After the buffalo were nearly exterminated and many Native Americans faced malnutrition, the American government passed the Dawes Severalty Act of 1887.

Forcing Native Americans to give up tribal lands for individual land grants, this policy led to the transfer of nearly sixty percent of Native American land to whites by the time it was repealed in 1934. Because of disease, inadequate hunting space, malnutrition, and the loss of land to whites, the suffering of the North Dakota Chippewa persisted into the early twentieth century. Untold numbers died, lived in poverty, and/or suffered from depression as they were forced to change their way of life.

# Critical Overview

Louise Erdrich has been a popular novelist and a critical success since the publication of her first novel *Love Medicine* in 1984. "Fleur," which was in draft form during Erdrich's college days, gained early praise from Erdrich's professor and future husband Michael Dorris. As Ruth Rosenberg quotes Dorris in her entry on Erdrich for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 152: "['Fleur'] was alternately hilarious and terribly sad, a building swirl of impressions that clung to the imagination with incredible power." Critics tended to agree; the story was selected by editor Sharon Ravenel as a distinguished short story of the year, and in 1987 it was a first-place winner in the O. Henry Awards. The story was then incorporated into Erdrich's successful 1988 novel *Tracks*.

In her essay "The Short Stories of Louise Erdrich's Novels," Suzanne Ferguson compares the original story version of "Fleur" to chapter 2 of *Tracks*, writing that the story version "explicates and foregrounds the conflict between masculine/white and feminine/Indian forces." Ferguson goes on to assert that the central focus of the story is not Fleur but Pauline, who, she argues, is actually responsible for allowing Fleur to be raped "out of weakness□and possibly envy of Fleur's strength and attractiveness," and then avenges her "on behalf, perhaps, of women in general." Other critics discuss the characters of Fleur and Pauline across the entire novel *Tracks*, focusing on various themes, including feminism, displacement, Native American history, and the issue of narration. Barbara Hoffert in her *Library Journal* review of the novel calls it a "splendid" work by a writer "whose prose is as sharp, glittering, and to the point as cut glass."

# Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

# Critical Essay #1

*Trudell is an independent scholar with a bachelor's degree in English literature. In the following essay, Trudell discusses female relationships, female sexuality, and female power in Erdrich's work, focusing on her short story "Fleur."*

Fleur Pillager is a symbol of female sexuality and mystique throughout Erdrich's Chippewa saga. She draws the great practitioner of old Chippewa ways, Eli Kashpaw, to court her; she is rumored to have sexual relations with the water spirit Misshepeshu; she retains some form of magical and sexual power from the spirits; and her daughter Lulu becomes a great matriarch of the Turtle Mountain Reservation, having eight children all by different fathers. Fleur's sexuality refuses to conform to white American notions of an attractive woman. Even her name, which combines the French word for "flower" with the English word that means taking spoils by force, seems to be a contradiction within early twentieth-century American society, incorporating both the male model of ruthlessness with the female model of beauty and frailty.

"Fleur," a story that had been in Erdrich's mind and in draft form on paper for many years, is the first chronological appearance of this fascinating and nonconformist character. It describes Fleur's connection to traditional Chippewa ideas about sexuality, it suggests that she wields a magical power over men, and it explores the nature of her strengths and vulnerabilities. One purpose of this essay, therefore, is to explore ideas about femininity that Fleur expresses and represents as they are developed in this story that introduces her.

As much as it is about Fleur and her Chippewa sexuality, however, "Fleur" is also about the narrator Pauline, who becomes another of Erdrich's most important figures in the Chippewa saga. After giving birth to the other matriarch of the Turtle Mountain Reservation, Marie Lazarre Kashpaw, Pauline abandons her and transforms into a sadistic, half-crazy nun. Later (as related in *Love Medicine*), she becomes locked in a vicious battle with her daughter, although Marie does not know that Pauline, now Sister Leopolda, is actually her mother. Like Fleur, the development of Pauline's guilt-ridden, timid, obsessively Christian sexuality (or repression of her sexuality) has its roots in the story of her experience in Argus, where she is shown to be almost the direct opposite of Fleur at the same time as the two young women share a mysterious bond. This essay highlights Pauline's role in the story and in some of the central themes of Erdrich's saga, therefore, paying particular attention to the relationship between Fleur and Pauline.

Because it tells of the beginning of this relationship, "Fleur" is, in a way, an origin or source of Erdrich's profound and longstanding exploration of competing ideas of female power and sexuality. In *Tracks*, Pauline and Fleur fight a kind of battle between Christianity and Chippewa mysticism that is full of sexual overtones. In *Love Medicine*, the daughters of Pauline and Fleur carry on an intense, lifelong conflict that is as much about their own sexualities and sources of power as it is about the fact that they are in love with the same man. In the end, however, they have a reconciliation of sorts that

emphasizes the feminine bond between the nagging, jealous, industrious Marie and the sensual, manipulative, and seductive Lulu.

This bond can perhaps best be described as a bond of power. Despite the rampant sexism and violence against them, by both white and Native American men, it is important to note that, in "Fleur" and throughout Erdrich's saga, the women actually run the show. Although men rape Fleur and demean Pauline, the two Chippewa women (and both are Chippewa despite Pauline's later denial of her half-Chippewa heritage) laugh last in Argus. Their victory over the men, in which they reduce Lily to a pig in the mud and freeze all three men in the meat locker like the animals they are, is best understood as a triumph of female power. Even Fritzie participates in this drama, bringing Pete away from the struggle just like she brings him away from the lewd masochistic table talk: by her wifely control over his speech and actions. Fritzie also reveals herself to have power over men by refusing to allow the meat locker to be broken open in the search for Tor, Lily, and Dutch. Indeed, it is significant that Fritzie, not Pete, makes the decision that protecting their "investment" is more important than the possibility (if a very small one) of saving the men's lives.

Each of these three women has developed her own avenue to power, and for all of them this power is somehow related to sexuality. For Fritzie, her power is a function of her exclusive control over her husband as a sexual object; he is not allowed to discuss other women or even read anything but the Bible. Accordingly, she sees the frozen, locked up meats□an overt metaphor for men and male sexuality since they are being punished for their rape of Fleur□as her investment and postpones the opening of the locker that has become their grave.

The fact that Fleur's power is sexual is even more overt, beginning with her association of Misshepeshu, Fleur's water spirit and possible husband. Fleur's mysterious communion with the waterman is developed throughout *Tracks*, but it begins in the first paragraphs of "Fleur," when Misshepeshu is described as a "devil . . . love-hungry with desire and maddened for the touch of young girls, the strong and daring especially, the ones like Fleur." This sexual creature is associated with Fleur's magical powers and "ways we shouldn't talk about," and he is subtly invoked again at the height of Fleur's sexual desirability, on the night the men rape her. That night, described as "drenched" in a tight-fitting green dress that "wrapped her like a transparent sheet," a "skin of lakeweed," Fleur stands in steam and paddles skulls in a vat, her sexual power drawn from wetness, the lake, and Misshepeshu. Fleur's power does not seem to diminish because the men rape her; even if she has nothing to do with their deaths, she escapes with their money and, as is clear from the subsequent events in *Tracks*, continues to wield power over men, including Eli Kashpaw.

Pauline, on the other hand, at first seems to have no power at all, let alone sexual power. She is completely ignored by men and observes them while being invisible to them. She disappears by becoming "part of the walls" of Kozka's Meats. Unlike Fleur's dress, Pauline's "dress hung loose," her "back was already curved, an old woman's," and the men "never saw [her]." Pauline's only power seems to be that she "knew everything, what the men said when no one was around, and what they did to Fleur,"

and it is from this knowledge that she gains the power to kill the men, including her stepfather.

There are two key aspects to Pauline's character and her revenge over the three men that are crucial to understanding the nature of her power over others. First, there is the fact that Pauline is an almost omniscient narrator. Pauline is able to manipulate the reader's understanding of Fleur and of the story by framing the events to make it appear that Fleur has killed the men with her magical or spiritual powers, when in fact Pauline is the one who locks them in the meat locker. Because she is able to lurk at the periphery without drawing the attention, interest, or violence of the men that Pauline is able to maintain control over the narrative and discover how to kill the men.

Second, the power Pauline assumes is based on her feelings for Fleur and these feelings seem, at least in part, sexual. Pauline gains the courage and motivation to kill the men because she wants to avenge Fleur's rape and because she feels very strongly about Fleur herself. Pauline feels a complex host of emotions towards Fleur, from guilt that she did not help Fleur when she was raped, to admiration for her boldness, to jealousy of her charms and powers, to sexual attraction to her. Pauline's emphasis on Fleur's good looks, intrigue with the stories of Fleur's connection to Chippewa spirits that she has denied in herself, and fascination with Fleur's great powers to the point that Pauline blames her for the deaths of the men she has killed herself, all suggest her attraction to Fleur, though she would never admit this to herself.

In "Fleur," therefore, Erdrich develops one of the central points that will resonate throughout her saga: that women establish their power by using their sexuality and communion with other women. Pauline's mix of jealousy, fear, and attraction to Fleur, like their daughters' intense lifelong battle, culminates in a kind of reconciliation and mutual understanding. While the rest of her family dislikes and despises Pauline, Fleur retains a certain closeness towards her that, as Erdrich reveals in "Fleur," comes from their bond of female power. Whether it is Fleur's aggressive and outward sexual power or Pauline's introverted and repressed homosexual desire, this communal female power, a formidable force that underlies Erdrich's entire saga of Chippewa life, is drawn from female sexuality.

**Source:** Scott Trudell, Critical Essay on "Fleur," in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

# Topics for Further Study

Research Native American history in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. What did Native American communities go through in the adjustment to reservation life? How did U.S. government policy towards Native Americans change, and what were the effects of these policies? How did the experience of Chippewa tribes in North Dakota fare in comparison to other tribes across the country?

Fleur and Pauline appear in a variety of Erdrich's works, as do their relatives and descendents. Assign a group of classmates to each read a novel from Erdrich's saga that begins with *Love Medicine* (1984) and continues through *The Painted Dream* (2005). Then, have a group discussion about what happens to these characters, how they relate to one another, and how "Fleur" is important to Erdrich's saga as a whole.

Research the history of violence against women in the early twentieth century. How was violence against women reported and documented? What organized attempts were there to combat it? What was the status of the Women's Rights Movement? How would you characterize male attitudes towards women during this period?

Research the history of North Dakota and the Great Plains, paying particular attention to Chippewa history. What kinds of immigrant groups came to this part of the country during the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries? Where did the Chippewa migrate, when did they do so, and how were reservation boundaries chosen? How did the disappearance of the buffalo affect life on the Great Plains? What is life like now on North Dakotan Chippewa reservations such as Turtle Mountain?

# Compare and Contrast

**1910s:** Chippewa cope with poverty, lack of adequate hunting space, depression, and loss of land. There is little or no organized resistance to the American government, although Chippewa leaders and activists interact with government agents from the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

**1980s:** The militant American Indian Movement, founded by three Chippewa in 1968 to address disenfranchisement, poverty, and treaty rights of Native Americans, continues to carry out some activism, including taking over a camp in the Black Hills of South Dakota between 1981 and 1984. The movement is in decline, however, due to Federal Bureau of Investigation actions against it and the Indian Self-Determination and Educational Assistance Act of 1975, which helps to alleviate many of its concerns.

**Today:** Chippewa continue to struggle with poverty. Most have only the minimum education, and nearly fifty percent are unemployed, for a variety of reasons. The Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota has experienced a longstanding plague of corruption in the tribal council, and the effects of a casino it operates on its land have not been altogether positive.

**1910s:** North Dakota reaches the end of a population boom as poverty, low farm prices, and bank failures loom on the horizon.

**1980s:** The North Dakotan economy suffers from a rise in oil prices and a severe drought beginning in 1987.

**Today:** Although the North Dakotan economy has picked up since the 1980s, much of the state continues to be plagued by drought.

**1910s:** German-Russian and Norwegian immigrants and white-owned businesses buy up Chippewa land.

**1980s:** Reservation boundaries are stable, although many consider Turtle Mountain Reservation crowded.

**Today:** The Turtle Mountain Reservation continues to be crowded, and some land has been developed for a hotel and casino.

# What Do I Read Next?

Erdrich's *Tracks* (1988), which focuses on the lives of the Nanapush and Kashpaw families between 1912 and 1924, is the ideal work to read after "Fleur." In it, the reader will discover what happens to Fleur and how the story of her experience in Argus fits into her life on the Turtle Mountain Reservation.

*A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* (1987), by Erdrich's estranged and late husband Michael Dorris, is a compelling novel about three generations of Native American women.

*Harpers Anthology of 20th Century Native American Poetry* (1988), edited by Duane Niatum, is an excellent collection of Native American poetry.

Erdrich's *Four Souls* (2004) is the sequel to *Tracks*, following Fleur Pillager's dramatic quest for justice after she leaves the Turtle Mountain Reservation for Minneapolis in 1919.

# Key Questions

"Fleur" provides an excellent introduction to the body of Erdrich's work. But it is such a tightly focused work that it also rewards rereading and analysis. One of its narrative strategies, the choice of Pauline as the sole voice in the story and through whose eyes the action is made known, could serve as the starting point for discussing the story.

1. How do we learn about Fleur? What is the source of our information? What are the implications for a reader's knowledge of character and action of Erdrich's choice of point of view?

2. List all of the specific details that relate to the setting of the story. What is the consequence of such a dense layering of facts about the physical and cultural context of the story?

3. Fleur and Pauline are both Ojibwe. In what ways does Erdrich raise the issues of ethnic prejudice and its consequences?

4. What elements of the setting and action reveal theme most significantly?

5. Research the history of the Ojibwe (also known as Chippewa) from the time of first contact with Europeans to the time of the story.

6. As a class project, form groups of 4 to 6 persons, write a script for the story, select actors to play the parts, find or create locations, memorize your parts, and shoot the video. Write an analysis of what you are trying to accomplish with a video adaptation of the short story and assess the results of your work. Share your video with the rest of your class.

7. As an individual or class project, develop adaptations of "Fleur" in other media, e.g., performance media such as dance, opera, or musical.

8. Create an interpretation of "Fleur" in drawing, painting, or sculpting. Write an analysis of your experiences and what you learned from the process.

9. Research traditional Ojibwe tribal arts such as quill work, bead work, or dance. Prepare a report that relates the results of your research to your work with the text of the story.

10. "Fleur" is one small part of Erdrich's "saga" of the Ojibwe community in the upper Midwest. Like William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, Erdrich's Ozhibi'iganan or the reservation depicted in her work is a fairly large and diverse community separate from yet connected in various ways to the larger community (e.g., the metropolitan centers of Minneapolis-St. Paul or Fargo, North Dakota). Read her other works and prepare a map of the reservation and its surrounding community.

Prepare family trees for Erdrich's characters and schematically represent their interconnectedness. What does such an exercise contribute to your understanding of her art?

# Literary Precedents

Having grown up in Wahpeton, North Dakota, Erdrich absorbed much of the traditional lore and story-telling habits of the Ojibwe people when she visited her grandparents on the nearby Turtle Mountain Reservation. Even though she did not learn her tribe's language, Ojibwemowin, until the age of thirty so that she could get the jokes, she absorbed the stories and traditional oral lore of her Ojibwe ancestry as a young child listening to the flow of stories in the conversation of her family. This early experience provided a significant resource for her work both in its content and its technique. Her creation of strong and self-contained rural and village settings inhabited with several families of characters who continue through her novels as well as her reliance on multiple narrators strongly resembles the work of William Faulkner. The fiction and ethnographic works of the Salish-Cree mixed-blood writer, D'Arcy McNickle (1904-1977), especially The Surrounded and Wind from an Enemy Sky may have also been available to her.

# Further Study

Peterson, Nancy, "History, Postmodernism, and Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*," in *PMLA*, Vol. 109, No. 5, October 1994, pp. 982—94.

Discussing *Tracks* from the standpoint of postmodern theory, Peterson argues that Erdrich has difficulty bringing Native American history into an epoch in which history and narrative are self-referential and not representational.

Stookey, Lorena Laura, *Louise Erdrich: A Critical Companion*, Greenwood Press, 1999.

Stookey's useful companion to Erdrich's novels clarifies and analyzes the relationships and characters in the author's fictional world.

Williams, Terry Tempest, "Facing the World without Land to Call Home: *Tracks* by Louise Erdrich," in *Los Angeles Times*, September 11, 1988, Book Review Section, p. 2.

Williams's review praises the detail of Erdrich's novel.

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Ferguson, Suzanne, "The Short Stories of Louise Erdrich's Novels," in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 33, No. 4, Fall 1996, pp. 541—55.

Hoffert, Barbara, Review of *Tracks*, in *Library Journal*, Vol. 113, No. 14, September 1, 1988, p. 192.

Rosenberg, Ruth, "Louise Erdrich," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 152, *American Novelists Since World War II, Fourth Series*, edited by James Giles and Wanda Giles, Gale Research, 1995, pp. 42—50.