

Saint Marie Short Guide

Saint Marie by Louise Erdrich

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Characters

The main character, fourteen-year-old Marie Lazarre, narrates the tale of her near transformation to Catholicism and sainthood fifty years after the event. Resisting her Native-American ancestry, Marie considers her skin "white" and seeks to escape her seemingly ill-fated life on the reservation through inclusion in the Sacred Heart Convent. In classes taught Old Testament style by Sister Leopolda, who later sponsors Marie at the convent, the nun recognizes Marie's desire for acceptance. She names her propensity for daydreaming as the work of the "Dark One," thus inspiring Marie to accept her (and Christ's) teachings.

In her efforts to reject the familiar, Marie begins to see her heritage as inherently tainted. Her layering of Native-American tradition with evil impels her to purge herself of both to achieve sainthood. As a result, Sister Leopolda acts as both mentor and enemy for Marie, and the young girl continues to struggle between her love and hatred for Leopolda, paralleling her struggle between acceptance by the Anglo-American community and resistance to its traditions.

Sister Leopolda's power over Marie takes a dramatic turn when Leopolda oversteps the boundaries of instruction and falls prey to motives of malice and revenge. After burning Marie with boiling water, hitting her head with a poker, and stabbing her hand with a bread fork, Sister Leopolda lies to the sisters about the events leading to Marie's loss of consciousness. The nun attributes the stab wound to the work of God, claiming the mark to be stigmata, a miracle.

Thus, when Marie wakes up and sees the sisters kneeling before her, she believes that she has achieved sainthood, and her first order of business is to settle the score with Sister Leopolda. Yet, when Marie looks into Leopolda's eyes, she sees a pitiful and weak person, and despite her revulsion of these feelings, Marie forgives the nun.

Marie sees hypocrisy in both Leopolda's and her own actions in their attempts to manipulate power. At the same time, this "miracle" of the stigmata underscores the difference between the belief systems of Native Americans and Catholics. As a "saint," Marie knows that she is neither divine nor pure, but merely human—made of "dust."

Consequently, Marie rejects the convent.

Her final message to herself to "Rise up and walk" echoes Christ's transforming power while it speaks to her rejection of Christian tradition.

Social Concerns

Touted as being one of the country's best Native American writers, Louise Erdrich explores social concerns important to Native Americans in twentieth century America in her short story, "Saint Marie ." Setting alone stresses the stratification of society in this North Dakota community. The sisters of the Sacred Heart Convent live "on top of the highest hill, so that from its windows," they can look down on members of the Chippewa tribe. Though the convent is poor, it gleams white and enjoys the advantage of being in town, away from the bush.

The setting illustrates the limitations presented to Native-American women in early twentieth-century America, as Sister Leopolda expresses, "You have two choices. One, you can marry a no-good Indian, bear his brats, die like a dog. Or two, you can give yourself to God." Faced with such a decision, Marie Lazarre tries to assimilate into the dominant culture at the convent, only to find that her submission will not change the prejudiced minds of those in charge.

Techniques

Though "Saint Marie" is a story told largely in chronological order, it is simultaneously told through a flashback. An older Marie Kaspaw outlines the events that took place during her fourteenth year as Marie Lazarre, a young girl wishing to enter a local convent. As narrator, Marie provides subtle clues that the event is a disastrous one yet withholds enough information to keep readers interested in plot development. Through use of realism and evocative visual imagery, Erdrich captures the contemporary audience.

Themes

In "Saint Marie," Erdrich explores such themes as racism and prejudice. For instance, she examines the various ways Sister Leopolda discriminates against Native Americans, while pushing her audience to understand why it is important to question such behavior. Faced with an ambitious Marie who seeks sainthood and to "inherit [her] keys," Sister Leopolda senses implicit animosity from forces outside her order, both literal and metaphorical. Leopolda's behavior indicates how racism can stem from fear of displacement.

Yet despite their different ages and backgrounds, Marie and Leopolda understand one another. Each recognizes the soul of the other, and each knows the extent to which the other will go to manipulate the power granted through institutionalized religion.

The potential to transcend cultural differences is within reach. That Marie and Leopolda are not able to do so suggests that religious and cultural barriers can be very difficult to break.

Perhaps the overriding theme concerns Christian ideals, for despite her personal and/or cultural distaste for Native Americans, Sister Leopolda is a Christian, bound by church law to serve God through serving others. Yet, her violent behavior in the name of teaching only contradicts her service to humanity. Additionally, she deceives, manipulates, and seeks vengeance to further serve her own purposes and ambitions. Thorough analysis of her character may reveal the role hypocrisy can play in those purportedly dedicated to Christian ideals but who seek power in a secular world.

Key Questions

Louise Erdrich, born of maternal Ojibwa descent and of paternal German-American descent, was a storyteller at an early age.

Her knowledge of and interest in the diverse traditions of her heritage provide Erdrich with a wealth of powerful images.

1. Identify Marie's understanding of sainthood. Is it indicative of her age or cultural upbringing? In what ways does her understanding of sainthood shift in the story?
2. Discuss the fish and/or fishing imagery used in the story. In what ways does Erdrich capitalize upon its connection to Catholicism and to the Native American community?
3. Discuss the use of lightness and darkness in the story. How do color differences suggest division in this community?
4. Discuss Sister Leopolda in conjunction with the various types of dust imagery used to represent her.
5. Compare the plots of "Saint Marie" and "Flesh and Blood" (also in *Love Medicine*, and set in 1957). Describe how Marie's final visit to a dying Sister Leopolda provides a resolution to the conflicts established in "Saint Marie".
6. Compare the roles of Sister Leopolda and Nurse Ratched from Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. How do their actions in their jobs as caretaker/guardian undermine the nature of those roles? Also consider similarities between Big Chief and Marie, especially regarding the power resulting from their refusal to reveal all that they know. Discuss imagery of deafness and dumbness.

Literary Precedents

Critics drawn to Erdrich's writing compare her work to that of Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty in its development of place and character. As O'Connor and Welty did with southern characters, Erdrich creates intriguing characters who interact with and are partly developed by setting.

Critics also find echoes of William Faulkner in Erdrich's use of various and reoccurring narrators and in her experimentation with nonlinear narrative structure. Erdrich herself has voiced admiration for O'Connor, Faulkner, and Toni Morrison in interviews.

Related Titles

After "Saint Marie" was first published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Erdrich incorporated it into an expanded version of her first novel entitled *Love Medicine* (first published in 1984; expanded in 1993). The novel offers episodic chapters that trace the intertwined lives of two families on and surrounding a fictional reservation in Argus, North Dakota, between the years of 1934 and 1984. "Saint Marie," set in 1934, introduces Marie Lazarre prior to marriage and motherhood, events that take place in subsequent chapters of the novel. The short story that follows this tale, "Wild Geese," describes Marie's flight from the convent and subsequent sexual encounter with Nector Kashpaw, who later becomes her husband.

Love Medicine appeared first in a series of four novels, tracing the lives of many of the same characters in the community they share with white Americans and with those of mixed heritage. *The Beet Queen* (1986), *Tracks* (1988), *The Bingo Palace* (1994), and *Tales of Burning Love* (1996) follow and explore similar themes of Native American identity and spirituality and the characters' attempts to reconcile their culture with that of dominant Anglo-American culture. *Tracks* reveals a more extensive history of Marie Lazarre Kashpaw through Pauline Puyat, who later becomes Sister Leopolda and is Marie's birth mother.

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