

## The Functions of Family Stories in Louise Erdrich's Novel “The Plague of Doves”

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**Abstract:** The article deals with the analysis of the stories employed in the novel “The Plague of Doves” written by a modern American writer Louise Erdrich. The use of stories in this novel presents the protagonists’ identity and their family histories. Characters in the novel tell their family stories to demonstrate their identity and themselves. The ideas of family systems theory and narrative therapy are the methods used in exploring the functions of character stories in the novel.

**Keywords:** family, story, identity, Native American, culture, history, trauma, narrative therapy, family systems.

### Introduction

In modern American literature Louise Erdrich plays an important role with her novels in which she demonstrates her creative writing ability. In her novels, Louise Erdrich depicts the life history and struggles of modern Native American people. The writer’s creative ability is presented through the narrative stories of various Ojibwe characters in which there are scenes of the trials of disease, hunger, government interference, and missionary zeal encountered by Native Americans. The stories of her characters tell about their family histories and concerns of their identity in modern American society. The main reasons of why the characters are interested in telling their stories deal with sharing the secrets of their family histories, to understand themselves, or to pass on these histories to a new generation and other family members who are not aware of them. The issue of identity and familiarizing the world with their family history opens the doors to the unknown world of Native American culture and history. Louise Erdrich’s characters are narrators who by telling their stories demonstrate sense of their lives and families.

In her novel “The Plague of Doves” (2008) Louise Erdrich describes a female character, Evelina, with her family stories that disturb her very much. As a result of her attempts to understand them, those family stories change her views of her family and herself as an adult person. Evelina inherited those family narratives and thus her duty was to redefine her family, community and herself. The writer emphasizes the power of the family stories and how the use of family narratives has an impact on family and individual identity by offering the ways in employing stories to avoid the disruptive functions of troublesome families.

### Materials and Methods

The presented article used the ideas of family systems theory and narrative therapy in order to explore the characters’ stories in the novel “The Plague of Doves” by Louise Erdrich. In their study of Louise Erdrich’s novels, literary critics successfully applied family systems theory and narrative therapy in order to explore the ideas of identity in native American communities. As Louise Erdrich’s novels question family issues and identity, the applied theories present certain views about the struggles of the novel protagonists. Literary critic John V. Knapp states that family systems theory can explain and provide reasons for the behaviors and emotions of the

protagonists<sup>1</sup>. This article will apply the ideas of Murray Bowen, the founder of family systems theory, to explore how the use of family narratives raises the protagonists' awareness of their native American identity.

## Research

According to Murray Bowen's family systems theory, individuals are part of a family system and that these systems operate as an emotional unit<sup>2</sup>. M.Bowen claims that as all systems take up all external stresses and adapt to them, families, also, function this way by reacting to anxieties and stresses in predictable ways. M.Bowen's theory provide details on families that chain the anxiety in order to achieve equal balance. The critic highlights "that the family system's patterns of behavior reflect an interplay between two counterbalancing life-forces—individuality and togetherness"<sup>3</sup>.

In the theory of family system "individuals must differentiate themselves from their family members, but their attempts to do so are hampered or facilitated by patterns of behavior in the family system"<sup>4</sup>. M.Bowen points out that "individuals must understand their family systems in order to "become more of a self in [their] family and other relationship systems"<sup>5</sup>. Another literary critic S.Minuchin desclares about the role of stories in the study of family system in his research. S.Minuchin mentions, "Humans are storytellers, myth-makers, and framers of reality"<sup>6</sup>. It is believed that families are shaped according to the stories or myths that people tell each other. Thus S.Minuchin maintains "every family...stamps upon its members the unique shape that identifies them as belonging to that family"<sup>7</sup>. For critic S.Minuchin these stamps limit people and they are biased, and he confirms the role of the therapist is to "convince the family members that reality as they have mapped it can be expanded or modified"<sup>8</sup>. The characters in L.Erdrich's novel "The Plague of Doves" are involved in a discovery of their identity in their family history and enhancing their world. The writer's characters tell stories to present themselves who they are and to explain their family systems. The narrative therapy, that explains the reasons of why novel protagonists use stories, may explain their storytelling behavior.

Literary critics Michael White and David Epston, theorists of narrative therapy, state "how the social sciences have relied on different analogies to explain human behavior"<sup>9</sup>. Following the explanations of how machines function provided by the physical sciences, social sciences also started explaining individual and social behavior by comparing them to the machines. Later on the studies in social sciences have recognized that human experience cannot be compared to mechanical analogies and that there are other analogies that focus on the human experience. The proposed analogies are the game theory analogy (seeing behaviors as moves in a game), the drama analogy (seeing behavior as performance), the ritual analogy (seeing behavior in terms of rituals or rites of passage), and the text analogy (seeing experience in terms of stories)<sup>10</sup>. As M.White and D.Epston claim that all those analogies have their validity and interpretive potential. Based on text analogy, both critics assert that experiences must be collected so that they give meaning to

<sup>1</sup> Knapp, John V. "Family Systems Psychotherapy, Literary Character, and Literature: An Introduction." *Style* 31.2 (1997): 223-54.

<sup>2</sup> Kerr, Michael E., and Murray Bowen. *Family Evaluation: An Approach Based on Bowen Theory*. NY: Norton, 1988. Pp.viii

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.59

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 96-7

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 107

<sup>6</sup> Minuchin, S. *Families and Family Therapy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1974. Pp.73

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 73

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 76

<sup>9</sup> White, M. and Epston, D. *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*. NY: Norton, 1990. Pp.4

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.5- 9

narrators in their life: *In striving to make sense of life, persons face the task of arranging their experiences of events in sequences across time in such a way as to arrive at a coherent account of themselves and the world around them*<sup>11</sup>.

## Discussions

In “The Plague of Doves” the protagonists tell stories about themselves that illustrate the origins of their family, community and society. Evelina, the novel character, tells the story of her family. Her family narratives are retold by a talented storyteller, Seraph Milk in the novel. Seraph skillfully tells the events in the family stories by paying attention to the specific details to Evelina and her brother, Joseph, who give their full attention. Seraph’s stories have a dramatic impact on listeners. The narratives change Evelina’s understanding of the storytellers, of herself and her families. Thus by using stories in the novel “The Plague of Doves”, the writer demonstrates the common process of families shaping their members. Literary critic S.Minuchin mentions that “In all cultures, the family imprints its members with selfhood”<sup>12</sup>. Modern American writer Leslie Marmon Silko emphasizes that Pueblo peoples tell family stories, both positive and negative, so that “an individual’s identity will extend from the identity constructed around the family...”<sup>13</sup>. Literary critic William Lowell Randall claims that “family stories exert the deepest influence on individuals, for these stories ingrain “patterns of interpreting relationships and events””<sup>14</sup>.

In the novel readers observe how Seraph’s family stories shape the family members who listen to them, but at the same time Seraph’s narratives raise the concerns in the characters’ sense of identity. When telling their narratives, the storytellers are under the power of stories and “they become “dominant narratives” which subjugate the identities of all family members”<sup>15</sup>. While Seraph tell the stories, he feels the influence of his descendants and he assumes that Evelina’s duty is take up the stories and make sense of them.

At the beginning of the novel “The Plague of Doves” Evelina narrates her story and we hear Seraph’s voice, her grandfather, in her story. The grandfather’s story describes how Seraph meets his wife, Junesse, during a plague of doves. In his stories Seraph tells about their escape, their torment abroad, and how they returned to their reservation. Seraph’s grandchildren keep asking him to tell stories. For Evelina, her grandfather is a masterful storyteller whose narratives have entertainment value on TV and thus Seraph tailors his performance to TV audience. Seraph depicts the events of the stories with specific details related to the death of several doves that amuse and entertain his audience. Moreover, Seraph acts out events, pauses for effect, and lets scenes play out mentally for his listeners<sup>16</sup>. Though the stories are of entertaining nature, they also give a lesson to the listeners. Evelina discovers that her family members are inclined to romantic feelings. While telling Seraph’s stories, she adds to the story episodes romantic feelings of her family members. By creating romantic stories of her family, Evelina learns to interpret the events of her family’s history through the family story. According W.Randall this process learning is called as the “family genre”<sup>17</sup>. Furthermore, Evelina learns to interpret her own life in terms of the story, too. Evelina believes that she and her brother “listened to Mooshum not only from suspense but for instructions on how to behave when our moment of recognition, or perhaps our romantic trial, should arrive”<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> White, M. and Epston, D. *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*. NY: Norton, 1990. Pp.10

<sup>12</sup> Minuchin, S. *Families and Family Therapy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1974. Pp.47

<sup>13</sup> Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today*. NY: Simon, 1996. Pp.52

<sup>14</sup> Randall, William Lowell. *The Stories We Are: An Essay on Self-Creation*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1995. Pp.292

<sup>15</sup> White, M. and Epston, D. *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*. NY: Norton, 1990. Pp.15

<sup>16</sup> Erdrich, Louise. *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*. NY: Harper, 2002. Pp 8-12

<sup>17</sup> Randall, William Lowell. *The Stories We Are: An Essay on Self-Creation*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1995. Pp.295

<sup>18</sup> Erdrich, Louise. *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*. NY: Harper, 2002. Pp.9

Seraph's story of his love and romantic trials teaches Evelina how to recognize romance in her life and how to anticipate its trials. Her grandfather's stories serve her as a guidance in her life, though they are incomplete. Seraph's family story stops before the crucial event of the hanging in the story. The grandchildren never heard of this sad event. Evelina had to explain the peril Seraph faces when a mob of angry whites comes after Seraph and Junesse: *This was western North Dakota at the turn of the last century. Even years later, when an entire family was murdered outside Pluto, four Indians including a boy called Holy Track were blamed and caught by a mob. In Mooshum's story, there was another foul murder.....*<sup>19</sup>

The story of the four Indians was familiar to Evelina, but she never could predict that Seraph was one of those Indians and that their story was a part of her family's story. Her grandfather preferred to stay silent in the moment when he had to describe the event in order not to reveal that he was involved in it. He did what he could do to change the tragedy of a family story, into a romantic one. When telling the tragic story of the family, Seraph is supported by his Clemence, as she objects after he finishes telling the narrative and his brother Shamengwa criticizes him. All family members are willing to hide the truth from Evelina and Joseph, however, without the tragic event of the story, it is impossible to understand their family and themselves. When Seraph tell his involvement in the event of the family story, his voice and manner of telling the story changes slowly. Evelina helps her grandfather in telling the story by mentioning the name of her teacher, who is considered to be one of the descendants of one of the members of the mob. His audience gets curious in the event and get closer to him. But he remains silent: "His mouth fell slack and then his face seized up; he scratched his jaw and glared at us"<sup>20</sup>. The proficient storyteller, Seraph, cannot not find strength to tell this part of the family story. When Seraph does speak, Evelina notices how his manner and voice of telling has changed: *"It wasn't like he was talking to us, though, or even using his usual storytelling voice. He wasn't drawing us in, or gesturing. This was different. Now it was like he was stuck in some way, on some track, like he couldn't stop the story from forcing its way out"*<sup>21</sup>.

Seraph's changed manner and voice in telling the story demonstrates how the family story moves into tragedy, at the same time it also reveals change in the balance of power. Before storytelling begins, we observe that Seraph knows what he is telling about by pulling in his audience and exaggerating details for effect. But now, we can see how the narrator is under the control of the story. Unwillingly, Seraph tells the tragic event he was involved in by describing how he and "Cuthbert Peace met Asiginak and Holy Track on the road, how they found the murdered Lochren family, how Cuthbert rescued the infant, and how Cuthbert, Asiginak, and Holy Track were blamed for the murder, rounded up, and hanged"<sup>22</sup>.

The dark event in the family story of Seraph presents trauma in his life and it explains why he has avoided telling this part in it. The role of trauma in narrative theory supports Seraph's behavior of omitting the dark episodes in the family story. According to M.White "the experience of trauma is irreconcilable with themes about life that are cherished, and with preferred accounts of one's identity"<sup>23</sup>. Seraph's experience is very contradictory to the theme of justice, for he introduces the story by saying "there is no justice here on earth"<sup>24</sup>. This experience influences his identity negatively as he could not support his friends and caused their death. Literary critic M.White's

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., pp.17

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp.56

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp.68

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 89

<sup>23</sup> White, Michael. Maps of Narrative Practice. NY: Norton, 2007. Pp.132

<sup>24</sup> Erdrich, Louise. The Plague of Doves. NY: Harper Perennial, 2008.

studies of trauma victims reveal that “Seraph’s “sense of ‘self’ within the context of traumatic experience” is discontinuous with the identity he has created in the rest of the family narrative, so he has chosen not to tell the story until this moment”<sup>25</sup>. In an article on trauma theory critic Connie Jacobs notes, “If untreated, the initial trauma keeps coming back, unsolicited, and manifests itself behaviorally in unhealthy patterns that get passed down inter-generationally”<sup>26</sup>. The story’s episode of the hanging supports C. Jacobs’s description of trauma. Seraph prefers to tell the story with no dark events, however, Evelina “charges” the story with the details, and the story is reconstructed as it is. Still, we see Seraph in the role of a controller, who omits his full role in the hanging. Now “Evelina must learn from her mother that Seraph and their entire family are connected through Junesse to the perpetrators of the crime”<sup>27</sup>. “And she must learn from her teacher, Sister Mary Anita, that Seraph betrayed his friends to the perpetrators”<sup>28</sup>. When Evelina discovers the truth about Seraph’s involvement in hanging, she shows him the boots of Holy Track, and Seraph laments, “...now you killed me some, too. I am sick to look on these old boots and think of Holy Track”<sup>29</sup>. For Seraph his identity and his story cannot match the reality of the traumatic events. The omitted dark episodes of his family story makes him suffer, and the truth kills a part of him. Seraph is a skilled storyteller, but he is unable to add his experience into his narrative of self and family. Rather, his trauma is inherited by his granddaughter, and Evelina should process and incorporate this dark experience into her narrative of self.

### Conclusion

Family narratives told by Seraph to his young family members give them an opportunity to explore their identity, themselves and history. Seraph tells stories of emotional pain though he has an inborn ability of telling the stories. However, his family narratives do not make him free from trauma he received in his life. Seraph is unable to tell about the traumatic event and prefers to leave it to his granddaughter. Evelina is equipped with the duty of integrating the omitted trauma into the family stories to identify her self-story.

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<sup>25</sup> White, M. *Maps of Narrative Practice*. NY: Norton, 2007. Pp.133

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<sup>27</sup> Erdrich, Louise. *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*. NY: Harper, 2002. Pp.85

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.250

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.253

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