

The Role of Native American Mythology in Children's Books of Louise Erdrich

Liu Hui

1. Introduction

Louise Erdrich is one of the most important contemporary writers of novels, poetry, and children's books featuring Native American characters and cultures. In addition to themes such as identity, life, and family, Erdrich also focuses on Native American mythology in her novels. Her adult novel *The Antelope Wife* (1998) has many magical elements like Native American myths and folktales. Erdrich also writes Native American mythology in her children's books, and this paper will demonstrate the vital role it plays in The Birchbark House series.

Daniel Hahn explains "Myths" in *The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature* (1984) as "Collections of (often ancient) stories belonging to a given civilization, nation, or community, which sometimes serve to explain origins, the natural world, or cultural traditions; they are regularly retold in books for children" (409). What Hahn says is right, but I would like to add the hero, because hero figures like Jesus Christ or Buddha are important in world mythologies.

2. Storytelling

Native American mythology has its own cultural flavor and meaning, enabling people to understand Native American ways of thinking, as well as their ancient wisdom, which contains universal elements such as the creator, supernatural beings, monsters, and heroes. By reading any mythology, we can understand more about human nature in general. For example, as in Greek mythology, where Zeus, the king of the gods, is not only wise and powerful, but also unfaithful and cruel, Ojibwe supernatural beings are like humans, with desires, likes, and dislikes. The trickster god Nanabozho plays a significant role in Ojibwe mythology, especially in the creation of the world, but he also has negative aspects of human nature such as greed and stupidity.

Ojibwe do not only tell stories about trickster figures, but also about supernatural beings such as the little people and the monster Wiindigoo. Nokomis tells the story to her family about how she meets her spirit guide the little people. In book three of the series, *The Porcupine Year*, when Omakayas and Pinch are almost drowned in a river, a little person also appears and saves their lives. Both stories happen when Nokomis, Omakayas and Pinch are in their childhoods, because children can see what adults can not see. The difference between the two cases of little people helping humans is that Nokomis is telling a story about what happened when she was a girl (a story in a story), while Omakayas and Pinch meet the little person in their real lives in the third book. That is, the former case has Nokomis teaching and entertaining her family with a story, while the latter case is "real" fantasy or mythology really happening in the main story of the novel. They have different levels of "reality" and thus, perhaps complement each other and make the mythology feel more real.

In addition to the little people who help humans, the other type of supernatural being story is about the monster Wiindigoo, who is scary and horrible, as in the story "The Little Girl and the Wiindigoo." In the story a Wiindigoo approaches the little girl's village, and only the little girl successfully smokes the pipe without a match that kills the Wiindigoo.

Unlike the scary monster figure who threatens people, then, there is also the kind and good heroine figure. The legend stories like those about bear girls provide role models for young people and foster a sense of pride and connection to the past. Ojibwe didn't have a written language, so they passed their histories and stories to the next generations by oral tradition. So oral tradition plays a significant role in Native American culture. It is a good way of educating the next generation, as by passing on traditions.

In the third book in the series, Nokomis tells Omakayas a story called "The Bear Girl Makoons" to distract her from her sorrow. Through the Makoons' story, children, especially girls, will get a sense of pride in seeing such a great heroine in their mythology, and maybe it will shape them to be kind, loving, and helpful people. Such Native American mythological stories are a wonderful resource which opens children's minds and creates imaginative thoughts with vivid spiritual experiences, along with happiness, fear, success, and enlightenment throughout the eras.

3. Spiritual Beliefs (Rituals and Customs)

Besides Native American mythological stories, rituals and customs include spiritual beliefs that appear through dreams and tobacco. They are a crucial part of Native American ceremonies. Native Americans traditionally do not worship a specific God, but they believe in spirits in the natural world like animals, plants, or their deceased ancestors' spirits. They religiously do ceremonies, because they connect them to the spirit world. Through these activities, Native Americans ask for guidance and healing from the spirits.

Dreams play a significant role in Native American rituals. When Ojibwe children reach a certain age, they will go on their dream fast for several days until they find their spirit guide. In the second novel in the series, *The Game of Silence*, Omakayas has her dream fast and she dreams of a bear spirit woman. A traditional Native American story called "Opichi" (collected in Joseph Bruchac's *Flying with the Eagle, Racing the Great Bear* [1993]) tells the origin of the dream fast. By interpreting dreams, Native Americans may predict potential danger and face challenges, and the knowledge and wisdom they gain from these ceremonies are highly valued and shape their future lives.

In return for help from the spirits, Ojibwe in Erdrich's stories offer tobacco to the spirits to express gratitude. It is the Native American's way to balance human beings and the spiritual world. They also offer tobacco to nature, because their traditional worldview is to live a harmonious life with nature. They respect plants, animals, and all living creatures. At the beginning of the first book in the *Birchbark* series, Nokomis and Omakayas are peeling the bark off a birchbark tree to use for their lodge, and Nokomis calls the tree "sister" and offers tobacco to it.

4. Conclusion

By writing Ojibwe mythological elements into her works like *The Birchbark House* series, Erdrich teaches her readers about Native American cultures and traditions, universal themes about gods, heroes, and supernatural beings, as well as the uniquely Native American worldview which connects with nature. It is a way for Erdrich to keep and disseminate her Ojibwe culture. The mythological stories are also interesting and entertaining in and of themselves. The presence in Erdrich's works of mythological elements makes them more meaningful and makes Omakayas and her family who live in realistic lives more mythological themselves.

Works Cited

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