

FAMILY NARRATIVES AND SELF-CREATION IN LOUISE ERDRICH'S
THE PLAGUE OF DOVES AND SHADOW TAG

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FAMILY NARRATIVES AND SELF-CREATION IN LOUISE ERDRICH'S
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For my son, Arav

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vi
CHAPTER	
ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
1. The Narrators of Louise Erdrich’s Fiction	1
2. Therapeutic Practice and Fiction	2
3. Family Systems Theory	2
4. Narrative Therapy and Literature.....	4
5. Outline of the Examination.....	9
TWO: THE FAMILY STORIES OF SERAPH MILK AND IRENE AMERICA	11
1. Seraph Milk.....	12
2. Irene America.....	16
3. Conclusion	20
THREE: THE FAMILY STORIES AND SELF-STORIES OF EVELINA AND RIEL.....	22
1. Evelina	24
2. Riel.....	32
3. Conclusion	39
FOUR: THE FAMILY STORIES AND SELF-STORIES OF MINOR CHARACTERS	41
1. Florian’s Scientific Self-Construction	41
2. Billy Peace and the Power of Language	45
3. Marn Wolde and the Role of Imagination	49
4. Judge Coutts, Cordelia Lochren, and the Acceptance of History	52
5. Conclusion	57
FIVE: CONCLUSION	59
1. The Context of Edrich’s Fiction	59

2. The Contexts of Native Culture and Fiction	61
3. Final Considerations	65
WORKS CITED	67

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1. The Narrators of Louise Erdrich's Fiction

Louise Erdrich's novels powerfully depict the struggles of modern Native Americans as they encounter the trials of disease, hunger, government interference, and missionary zeal. Erdrich weaves together the narrative perspectives of various Ojibwe and European-American characters to depict generations of Native American history. But though politics form the backdrop of the novels, Erdrich's works are not purely, or even primarily, political. The stories of her characters revolve around the more immediate concerns of identity and family. These characters tell their stories in order to uncover the secrets of their family histories, to understand themselves, or to pass on these histories to family members. Their quests for identity and their explorations of family history have relevance for all readers. Erdrich's first-person narrators self-consciously construct their stories, and in doing so, they reveal the ways in which individuals use stories to make sense of their lives and their families.

In *The Plague of Doves* and *Shadow Tag*, Erdrich presents two female protagonists who inherit disturbing family narratives which transform their understanding of their families and themselves. These protagonists, Evelina and Riel, must process their inherited narratives, re-envision their families and communities, and redefine themselves. Through the narratives of these female storytellers and the characters around them,

Erdrich depicts the power of narrative to influence family and individual identity, and she suggests the ways in which individuals can use narratives to escape destructive cycles of family dysfunction.

2. Therapeutic Practice and Fiction

In order to explore these characters' stories, I will use the ideas of family systems theory and narrative therapy. Critics have successfully and interestingly applied postcolonial and feminist critical theories to the works of Erdrich, but because the concerns of Erdrich's novels center on family and identity, the ideas that inform modern therapy provide a perspective on the struggles of her characters which other literary theories cannot. In appealing to therapy, I follow the suggestion of John V. Knapp, who observes that the theories of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis which literary critics often apply to the study of literature have long since been discarded in therapeutic practice (223). Knapp argues that modern therapeutic theories, particularly family systems theory, can shed light on the behaviors and emotions of literary characters. Critics Gary Storhoff, Allan Chavkin, and Nancy Feyl Chavkin have used the ideas of Murray Bowen, the founder of family systems theory, to explore the characters in some of Erdrich's novels, including *The Beet Queen* and *Tracks*. I hope to build on their work in this thesis.

3. Family Systems Theory

Murray Bowen's family systems theory assumes that individuals are part of a family system and that these systems operate as an emotional unit (Kerr and Bowen viii). Just as all systems absorb external stresses and adapt to them, families, too, respond to anxieties and stresses in predictable ways. Bowen's theory details the methods by which

families “bind” anxiety in an attempt to achieve equilibrium. Bowen further argues that the family system’s patterns of behavior “reflect an interplay between two counterbalancing life-forces—*individuality* and *togetherness*” (emphasis original) (59). Individuals in the family system 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 (96-7). In Bowen’s view, then, individuals must understand their family systems in order to “become more of a self in [their] family and other relationship systems” (107).

Salvador Minuchin suggests the role of stories in the family system. Minuchin writes, “Humans are storytellers, myth-makers, and framers of reality” (73). The stories or myths humans tell, though, are shaped by their families. Minuchin adds that “every family...stamps upon its members the unique shape that identifies them as belonging to that family” (73). Minuchin sees these stamps as necessarily biased and limiting, and he believes the role of the therapist is to “convince the family members that reality as they have mapped it can be expanded or modified” (76).

Erdrich’s characters are engaged in a process of self-definition within family, as Bowen describes, and a broadening of their reality, as Minuchin describes. These characters, though, are engaged in a particularly narrative mode of self-discovery, and family systems theories do not pay special attention to the ways in which family members use stories to understand themselves and their family systems. The field of narrative therapy, which focuses on the attempts of individuals to process experience through stories, may explain their storytelling behavior.

4. Narrative Therapy and Literature

Michael White and David Epston, two pioneering theorists of narrative therapy, recount how the social sciences have relied on different analogies to explain human behavior (4). Taking their cue from the physical sciences, social sciences began by explaining individual and social behavior in terms of machines or organisms. But in the second half of the twentieth centuries, social sciences began to recognize that less mechanical analogies more appropriately explained human experience. Among these 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) (5-9). White and Epston recognize the validity and interpretive potential of these other analogies, but they theorize from the text analogy. They suggest that “experience must be ‘storied’” in order for individuals to give meaning to it:

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. (10)

White and Epston refer to this account as a “self-narrative,” and they explain that this story is “constitutive—shaping lives and relationships” (12). Like Bowen and Minuchin, White and Epston see individuals as linked to those around them, and thus individuals’ efforts to create meaning for themselves have consequences for the entire system.

White and Epston’s concept of a self-narrative emphasizes the power of individuals to shape their lives and relationships, in contrast to mechanical or determinist models of human behavior, but this narrative power has limitations. They note, “A

narrative can never encompass the full richness of our lived experience” (11). The process of telling a story requires selection—some experiences must be left out in order to form a coherent narrative. More than time and aesthetics dictate the selection, though. Edward Bruner observes that experiences may be left out “either because the experiences are not storyable, or because we lack the performative and narrative resources, or because the vocabulary is lacking” (Introduction 6-7). The omissions of these un-“storyable” experiences prevent any self-narrative from containing or conveying the entire experience of an individual. Bruner best expresses the power and limitation of stories:

Stories give meaning to the present and enable us to see that present as part of a set of relationships involving a constituted past and a future. But narratives change, all stories are partial, all meanings incomplete.

(“Ethnography” 153)

Storytellers are limited by the medium of stories and by their own capacities, as Bruner describes, and they are limited also by their motivation. William Lowell Randall suggests that stories are not innocent and the passion for self-expression is not always the passion for self-knowledge (107, 232). In describing interpersonal conflicts, Winslade and Monk argue that even when individuals are capable of framing experiences in a coherent story, they may still rely on “stock narrative elements” or “background scripts” in the composition of their story (5). This reliance, they suggest, is not due to a lack of narrative resources but is rather a tactic to garner support for their versions of the conflict. Depicting opponents as stock villains, for example, may make their stories more sympathetic. Even when storytellers do not have such overt agendas, they may inadvertently use stories to gain power over others. Winslade and Monk refer to this

process as “discursive positioning” (20). They explain the automatic nature of this process:

When individuals make an utterance, they call into place a form of relation through their very choice of words. They set things up in a certain way and thus implicitly call the other person(s) in the conversation into position in a relation of some kind. (21)

Consciously or unconsciously, storytellers may distort their stories in order to position themselves in relation to the audience.

Though individuals may distort their own stories, their stories are also influenced by those around them. Randall observes, “I do not story my life in a narrative vacuum” (193). Randall notes that individuals compose self-stories within the larger stories of family, community, and society. He describes the influence of the family story on the individual: “Moreover, part of how I see myself, how I read my own story, is tied to what I perceive is the version of it held not by mother or brother individually, but by my family as a whole” (195). Randall’s observation suggests a connection between narrative therapy and family systems theory, for the family story seems to exert influence over family members in the same way that the family system of emotional behavior does. As Minuchin observed of the family stamp, family stories pose problems for family members when those stories contradict the experience of the individual members.

For several reasons, then, individuals may find themselves trapped in self-stories that do not adequately convey their life experiences or that prevent them from becoming fully differentiated individuals within the family. White and Epston describe the effect of these inaccurate or confining narratives:

...persons experience problems, for which they frequently seek therapy, when the narratives in which they are 'storying' their experience, and/or in which they are having their experience 'storied' by others, do not sufficiently represent their lived experience, and...in these circumstances, there will be significant aspects of their lived experience that contradict these dominant narratives. (14-5)

This contradiction, they argue, forces individuals to "subject themselves and others to the [dominant narrative's] specifications for personhood and relationships" (28).

Thus, narratives empower individuals to shape their lives, but they present a number of perils for individuals, too. Randall writes, "Our story is to our existence...as a pearl is to an oyster: both irritant and prize, albatross and achievement" (16). Narrative therapy offers a solution for those who are caught in oppressive stories, though. White and Epston argue that individuals must externalize "the dominant 'problem-saturated' description or story" (16). Individuals can then search their experiences for instances which do not conform to the dominant story. Out of these instances, individuals can begin to reconstruct their self-narratives and to redefine themselves and their relationships with others (16-7). In creating these stories and performing them, individuals reclaim "aspects of lived experience that would have gone unstoried" (17).

Randall suggests a similar process, which he refers to as "intentional re-storying" (239). According to Randall, individuals begin to control their self-stories when they suspect that their "self-world-story is too small" or "that it is not [their] own" (239). In order to broaden the story, Randall argues, individuals must seek broader stories in education, religion, therapy, or personal mythology (240).

The new stories which result from these techniques are more inclusive and more empowering, but they are never complete. White explains that the techniques of narrative therapy “invite people to continue to develop and tell stories about their lives” (*Maps* 61). Randall likewise sees re-storying as a continual process of development. He cites Mezirow’s definition of maturity as the goal of re-storying: “movement through the adult years toward meaning and perspectives that are progressively more inclusive, more discriminating, and more integrative of experience” (268).

Erdrich’s narrators move through processes like those described by White, Eptson, and Randall. Evelina, Riel, and their family members construct their stories in response to family stories, and they succeed or fail as they attempt to externalize the problems in the stories and to recreate their self-stories. The concepts of narrative therapy illuminate some of the problems their family stories and self-stories pose for them, and they suggest why some characters are successful in achieving “more inclusive” self-stories. Erdrich’s characters can shed light on narrative therapy, too. The complex characters and narratives of Erdrich’s fiction provide insights into family stories and self-stories which case studies and theoretical texts do not.

Of course, there is a danger in applying therapeutic ideas to fictional characters. Narrators and characters are literary devices, not real individuals. David Treuer argues that the many narrators of Erdrich’s *Love Medicine* are not even distinct storytellers. He argues that they “*seem* to speak and think differently” (emphasis original) but that they are “guided by the same consciousness” and “function” in “the same way” (43). Treuer is arguing that the work should not be read as a representation of Native culture, but his point casts doubt on any project which views Erdrich’s narrators as realistic

representations. Fortunately, though, Treuer's argument leads him to conclude that *Love Medicine* is "more a book about language than it is about, or of, culture" (43), and it is this observation which allows an investigation of narratives in Erdrich's fiction. Treuer is right in asserting that Erdrich is creating and controlling the narrators, but if her concern is language, then even these literary constructs still have relevance for an investigation of narrative. Erdrich's artistic choices simply add another layer of complexity, for her use of language lies behind the narrators' use of language to construct self-stories and family stories. Though not the same as life, this literary setup is perhaps analogous to life, for Randall suggests that every individual is simultaneously author, character, and audience. Thus, the artificial levels of Erdrich's narratives may still illuminate the levels of narrative in life.

5. Outline of the Examination

The following chapter will focus on the origins of the family stories and on the family members who pass these stories down to Evelina and Riel. In *The Plague of Doves*, the focus will be on the character of Seraph Milk, or Mooshum, and in *Shadow Tag*, on Irene America. This chapter will demonstrate how the stories these two characters tell are shaped both by their experiences with their families and by the "large-scale narratives" which pervade their communities.

The third chapter will focus on the characters of Evelina and Riel and their attempts to process family narratives and to incorporate them into her self-narratives. This chapter will examine Evelina's and Riel's changing perceptions of community, family, and self through the lens of family narratives, and it will compare their methods of story-creation.

The fourth chapter will focus on the attempts of other characters in the novels to process and retell their family stories. These characters, including Judge Antone Bazil Coutts and Doctor Cordelia Lochren in *The Plague of Doves* and Stoney and Florian in *Shadow Tag*, either succeed through similar narrative strategies or fail to properly process their family stories. The successes and limitations of these other characters emphasize the necessity and the limitations of processing experience through narrative.

The final chapter will present the broader contexts of narratives in *The Plague of Doves* and *Shadow Tag*. This chapter will explore the connections of these novels to Erdrich's other novels and to Native culture and literature. Drawing on criticism of Erdrich's works, this chapter will also examine the ways Erdrich's narratives involve the reader in processing and retelling (or at least re-envisioning) the stories told. Finally, this chapter will suggest some limitations of a narrative view of self.

CHAPTER TWO

THE FAMILY STORIES OF SERAPH MILK AND IRENE AMERICA

The stories that individuals tell themselves begin with the larger narratives of family, community, or society. The stories of Evelina and Riel begin with their family stories. These family stories are passed down by two gifted storytellers, Seraph Milk in *The Plague of Doves* and Irene America in *Shadow Tag*. Seraph dramatically narrates episodes from the family story to Evelina and her brother, Joseph. Irene writes down the family story, though this is not her original intention, and passes these stories onto her daughter, Riel. Both stories have enormous influence on their audiences; they alter Evelina and Riel's perceptions of themselves, the storytellers, and their families.

Though these family stories are exceptionally powerful, they represent the common process of families shaping their members. Salvador Minuchin writes, "In all cultures, the family imprints its members with selfhood" (47). Leslie Marmon Silko writes 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..." (52). William Lowell Randall suggests that family stories exert the deepest influence on individuals, for these stories ingrain "patterns of interpreting relationships and events" (294).

The family stories of Seraph and Irene do indeed shape the family members who receive them, but these stories also unsettle the characters' sense of identity. In fact, the stories exert power over the storytellers. They become "dominant narratives" which subjugate the identities of all family members (White and Epston 15). In telling these stories, Seraph and Irene fall under their power, and their descendants, Evelina and Riel, must eventually take up the stories and make sense of them.

1. Seraph Milk

The Plague of Doves begins with the narration of Evelina, but her narration is filled with the voice of her grandfather, Seraph. He recounts for his grandchildren the family story. The story centers on his meeting of his wife, Junesse, during a plague of doves. Seraph tells of their elopement, their persecution abroad, and their return to the reservation. The grandchildren request Seraph to tell the story, and Evelina describes her grandfather as second only to TV in entertainment value (6). Seraph is a masterful storyteller, and he tailors his performance to his audience. He dwells in particular detail on the "outhouse drama" of the death of several doves, the unsavory details of which delight his young listeners (6). Seraph acts out events, pauses for effect, and lets scenes play out mentally for his audience (8-12).

Though the stories entertain, they are also instructional. Evelina learns that members of her family are prone to "deathless romantic encounters" (8). She adds to Seraph's story the romantic episodes of her parents, aunts, and uncles. Evelina learns to interpret the events of her family's history through the family story. Randall calls this process learning the "family genre" (295). Evelina learns to interpret her own life in terms of the story, too. She suspects 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” (9). Through Seraph’s story of his love and romantic trials, Evelina learns how to recognize romance in her life and how to anticipate its trials.

The story from which Evelina draws her guidance, though, is incomplete. Seraph’s version of the family story stops before the crucial event of the hanging. The grandchildren evidently know a little about this event because Evelina refers to it 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..... (17)

Evelina knows enough about the story of the four Indians to compare their plight to Seraph’s, but she does not know that Seraph was also one of those four Indians and that their story is part of her family’s story. Seraph has either remained silent about the event, or he has carefully hidden his involvement in it. He has tried to frame the family story as a romance, but it is also a tragedy. Seraph is not alone in hiding the story, though. When he does finally tell this part of the family story, his daughter Clemence objects (59), and after he has told it, his brother Shamengwa reprimands him (82). The entire family is trying to protect Evelina and Joseph from the truth, but without this crucial part of the story, they cannot accurately understand their family or themselves.

When Seraph tells this part of the story, he changes his mode of storytelling. He is prompted to tell the story when Evelina mentions the name of her teacher, a descendent of one of the members of the mob, but he is reluctant to speak. The children pull up a pair of stools to listen, but he remains silent: “His mouth fell slack and then his face seized up; he scratched his jaw and glared at us” (56). Seraph, the consummate storyteller, cannot summon the words or the will to tell this part of the family story. When Seraph does speak, Evelina notes how his 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. (68)

Seraph's changed voice and manner suggest the change in the family story as it moves into tragedy, but they also suggest a change in the balance of power. Prior to this storytelling session, Seraph is in control of the narrative, pulling in his audience and exaggerating details for effect. Now, though, the story takes control of the storyteller, “forcing its way out.” Reluctantly, Seraph tells 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.

To understand Seraph's omission of this dark episode in the family story, as well as its eventual emergence, we have to look at the role of trauma in narrative therapy. Seraph's omission is not owing to the inherent problems of narrative, a lack of “narrative resources” or to the inability of language to convey the experience (Bruner 6-7). Rather,

Seraph has chosen to omit this part of the story from the family history. Michael White explains why individuals may choose to leave traumatic events out of narratives of self: “The experience of trauma is irreconcilable with themes about life that are cherished, and with preferred accounts of one’s identity” (*Narrative Practice* 132). Seraph’s experience is certainly irreconcilable with the theme of justice, for he introduces the story by saying “there is no justice here on eart” (sic) (55). And the experience also has negative implications for his identity since he betrayed his friends and caused their death, though he will hide this fact in his retelling of the episode. As White observes of trauma victims, 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 (133).

Though Seraph may try to leave the story untold, it surfaces anyway. In an article on trauma theory and its connection to Erdrich’s novel *Tracks*, Connie Jacobs observes, “If untreated, the initial trauma keeps coming back, unsolicited, and manifests itself behaviorally in unhealthy patterns that get passed down inter-generationally” (34). The emergence of the story of the hanging fits Jacobs’s description of trauma. Seraph tries to suppress the story, but when Evelina provides the trigger, the story emerges.

Seraph, though, still attempts to control the story through his omission of his full role in the hanging. Evelina must learn from her mother that Seraph and their entire family are connected through Junesse to the perpetrators of the crime (85). And she must learn from her teacher, Sister Mary Anita, that Seraph betrayed his friends to the perpetrators (250). When Evelina confronts Seraph with the truth of his involvement and shows him the boots of Holy Track, Seraph laments, “...now you killed me some, too. I

am sick to look on these old boots and think of Holy Track” (253). Seraph is still unable to reconcile his identity and his story to the reality of the traumatic events. His partial telling of the story pains him, and the revelation of the entire truth kills a part of him. Though he is a skilled storyteller, he is unable to honestly incorporate this experience into his narrative of self and family. Instead, he passes down this trauma to his granddaughter, and Evelina must process and incorporate the experience into her narrative of self.

2. Irene America

Like Evelina in *The Plague of Doves*, Riel in *Shadow Tag* inherits a traumatic family story and faces the challenge of making sense of it. Riel receives her family story from her mother, Irene, but Irene is not consciously writing a family story nor is she writing to or for Riel. Instead, Irene keeps a set of diaries, a red diary and a blue notebook, which together tell the story of her relationship with her husband, Gil, and their family life together. Because Irene realizes that Gil is reading her red diary, she manipulates the story in order to exact her revenge on him. Her blue notebook becomes the record of her actual emotions. But Irene finds that this manipulation of the story affects her as well as Gil, and both diaries record the downfall of their relationship and the family.

Irene may not intend to record a family story, but her diaries are linked to family life from the outset. She explains in the first entry of her blue notebook that she began keeping diaries with the birth of her oldest child, Florian, and that she has been writing them since that time (2). Though she intentionally records family life from her perspective, she has no intention of sharing her story with an audience. Instead, she hides the diaries to keep them private. She chooses to hide her current diary in a file with “old

bank statements, checks left over from defunct accounts, the sorts of things we both vow to shred every year but end up stuffing into files” (2). Perhaps this file is simply a good hiding place, but the association of the diary with unwanted paperwork suggests that this record, too, contains memories and stories that should perhaps be discarded. But Irene does not discard her diaries, and so she preserves a record of the family.

The diaries would not be a family story without an audience, but Irene’s latest diary does have an audience in Gil. Irene learns that Gil is reading her diary, but she does not stop writing or change her hiding place. Instead, she chooses to write for Gil, as the narrator explains: “If Gil didn’t know that she knew about him reading her diary, she could write things there to manipulate him. Even hurt him” (27). In fact, she writes in the blue notebook that she always knew Gil would read her diary (17). Perhaps, then, he has always been the intended audience. The blue notebook, which Irene keeps locked in a safety deposit box, is also addressed to Gil. And, of course, Irene will eventually pass both diaries on to her daughter, Riel. Irene has always written with her family in mind, and so her story becomes the family story.

As a storyteller, Irene, like Seraph, realizes she can manipulate her audience, and she alters the story to do so. Irene decides to “hook” Gil by writing that she “stopped loving [him] abruptly before Stoney was born” because of a momentary action that “suddenly reveal[ed] everything about him” (27, 29). This event, of course, is a fabrication. She explains the lie to Gil in her blue notebook:

You will read what I wrote about the moment you suddenly revealed everything, the moment that I stopped loving you, the moment I

understood who you really are. But there was no moment. You should know that. (47-8)

This fabrication plays on Gil's belief in defining moments (48), and it works, for Gil believes that he knows "exactly what he'd done" (51). Irene further tortures Gil with the cryptic statement that she is "faithful to Gil for the obvious reasons" (100). Gil is relieved momentarily until he wonders what those "obvious reasons" are. Finally, Irene dives into the fictional accounts of her children with other men (152-4, 173-83). She invents characters, settings, and elaborate stories about their encounters. She claims that these men are the fathers of her three children, and she tortures Gil with the details of their love-making.

Though Irene overtly manipulates Gil with the story, she inadvertently reveals truths, too. In the blue notebook, she explains that though there is no one moment "that changes everything," there has been "a final moment" when she realized the relationship was over (48). Even the fictional moment she describes to manipulate Gil recalls the real event of Stoney's birth and Gil's unsupportive behavior. The narrator suggests that there is truth in the stories of her affairs. The narrator describes Irene's affair with Germaine, a friend of Gil's (104-5), and Irene writes in the red diary that Riel is "a gift, but from a man Gil knows very well and considers a friend" (153). The narrator further suggests that there is a different kind of truth to the story of her affair with Stoney's father. Irene writes that she sleeps with a man and returns to Gil, who also sleeps with her after he is aroused subconsciously by "the scent of the [other] man" (183). The narrator says that Irene considers ripping out these pages until she realizes that indeed "Gil wanted me in relation

to another man's desire" (183). Even in the fictional episodes of the story, then, Irene still reveals truths about the nature of the family relationships.

Like Seraph, Irene attempts to control the family story through her invention, but she, too, finds that the story has a power of its own. The narrator suggests that Irene becomes caught up in the story:

Irene could not stop thinking about the imaginary man who had followed her into the café in Paris. She couldn't stop sentences, phrases, descriptions, from entering her mind. Instead of reading herself to sleep, she crept downstairs and continued writing. (178)

Trauma and guilt draw the story out of Seraph, but the pure enjoyment of language and fiction draw the story out of Irene. Later, though, desperation seems to drive Irene to write. When she finds that Gil has read about the affairs and left the diary out in the open, she picks it up and writes again to Gil, asking him to let her and the children go, though she knows he will not read it (198). And after Gil attempts suicide, Irene writes the story of the death of Stoney's guinea pig in order to plead with Gil to live on (229-38). Irene's decision to write these pleas in the red diary, rather than the blue notebook, suggests that she and Gil are both caught up in the story she has created. In this last entry, she attempts to use the story to save Gil, rather than to hurt him, but she cannot. Gil commits suicide anyway, and Irene sacrifices her life trying to save him.

Through her writing and particularly through her inventions, Irene seems to be engaged in "discursive positioning," the process by which individuals use language to gain power over others (Winslade and Monk 20). Irene's use of language is conscious and unconventional, but she does gain power over Gil through her writing. In gaining

power over others, though, individuals also change their own understanding of themselves, as Winslade and Monk explain:

A particular view of the self is implicit in the theory of positioning. It lies in the suggestion that people are made up of a series of positions in a multitude of conversations and that they come to understand themselves through being positioned by many others and then through their choices of ways to respond. (48)

This view of the self has particular relevance for Irene, who has been positioned literally and metaphorically by Gil. Gil's paintings of Irene have defined her for others, and these depictions threaten to affect her own understanding of herself. Irene explains Gil's control of her identity:

By remaining still, in one position or another, for her husband, she had released a double into the world. It was impossible, now, to withdraw that reflection. Gil owned it. He had stepped on her shadow. (39)

Irene's attempts to manipulate Gil are an attempt to regain her identity by controlling her self-image and gaining power over Gil. But as Winslade and Monk explain, this process affects her, too, and she does not recover an original self. Instead, she molds a new one which is a product of her fabrications as well as her truths. This self, moreover, is still dependent on Gil. Though Irene gains power, she is not able to free herself or Gil from their conflict-laden relationship.

3. Conclusion

Seraph and Irene both tell stories of emotional pain, but despite their narrative gifts, they are unable to heal themselves or achieve reconciliation through their stories.

Instead, they pass this pain to their descendants, who must use their narrative skills to integrate these family stories into their self-stories.

CHAPTER THREE

THE FAMILY STORIES AND SELF-STORIES OF EVELINA AND RIEL

Seraph and Irene pass on their family stories to Evelina and Riel, and these stories become for Evelina and Riel what Minuchin and Fishman call “framings of reality” (73-4). The stories suggest to them themes about life and implications for their sense of identity (White, *Narrative Practice* 5). In order to avoid becoming trapped by these themes and “identity conclusions,” Evelina and Riel must confront the revelations of the family stories and incorporate them into broader stories of self and family.

Murray Bowen’s concept of “a multigenerational emotional process” suggests how these family stories pass on emotional burdens to Evelina and Riel (Kerr and Bowen 220). According to Kerr and Bowen, families transmit “patterns of emotional functioning” to subsequent generations. The ways in which parents or grandparents cope with (or fail to cope with) anxiety affects their relationships with children and grandchildren, who then carry the family patterns into the new families they create. Individuals who do not adequately understand their families’ patterns of emotional functioning are unable to change their behaviors or to properly differentiate themselves as individuals. They become “imprisoned” in a mindset of blaming their families for their problems (254). Kerr and Bowen explain how individuals must change their way of thinking in order to escape this trap:

Getting beyond blame does not mean exonerating people from the part they play or played in the creation of a problem. It means seeing the total picture, acquiring a balanced view—not feeling compelled to either approve or disapprove of the nature of one’s own and other people’s families. (255)

For Evelina and Riel, the dysfunctional patterns of emotional functioning are embodied in the family stories, and they must learn to move beyond blaming their forebears and to see “the total picture” of their family history and their part in it.

Michael White describes how individuals can escape “problem-saturated stories” through narrative therapy (*Narrative Practice* 5). According to White, individuals must unpack these stories and deconstruct the negative identity conclusions associated with them. They must then consider events which are left out of the dominant story and attribute significance to them, a process he calls “reauthoring.” White describes this process in a therapeutic context:

In these reauthoring conversations, people are invited to attach significance to some of these previously neglected events, and they are encouraged to link these together with other events of their lives in sequences that unfold through time according to alternative themes.... (5-6)

Evelina and Riel must reinterpret their family stories and their self-stories without the help of a narrative therapist. Confronting the stories and honestly assessing their implications for their own identities will require great courage and insight. Creating new self-stories out of those family stories will require great narrative skill.

1. Evelina

In *The Plague of Doves*, Evelina interweaves the story of her family and the story of her search for self throughout her narration. She relies on the family story to create her own story of identity. But challenges to her understanding of her family and herself emerge in the revelations of her family's history and in the events of her life.

Evelina's narration begins with the story of her grandfather, Seraph, and his wife, Junesse. From this story, Evelina learns to interpret her family and herself. To Seraph's romantic story, Evelina adds the stories of her aunt, Geraldine; her mother's cousin, Agathe; her uncle, Whitey; and her own mother and father. Evelina sees her own experience as a natural outgrowth of this romantic family saga, and as she listens to her grandfather, she begins processing her own experience of love:

In truth, I thought mine [my romantic trial] probably had occurred early, for even as I sat there listening to Mooshum my fingers obsessively wrote the name of my beloved up and down my arm or in my hand or on my knee. (9)

Her grandfather's story triggers Evelina's thoughts of her love for Corwin Peace, and she begins to fit this childhood experience into the genre of the family story. By writing her love's name, though, Evelina begins to depart from the family story. Though this act is almost unconscious, she seems to be experimenting with the power of the written word. Evelina continues creating her story through another act of writing. She and Corwin are too shy to communicate their love directly, so they rely on classmates to pass love messages. Evelina copies "a series of these secondhand love statements into [her] tiny leopard-print diary" (10). Evelina is inventing her own symbolism and her own method

of storytelling, and she will need this narrative creativity later in order to process the trauma of the family story.

Evelina returns to the family story when she needs guidance in her new relationship. She describes how her family history prepares her to meet the challenge of Corwin taunting her on the playground: “Because of family history, though, I rallied myself to the challenge. Included in the romantic tales were episodes of reversals” (13). Drawing strength from her family history, Evelina is emboldened to make a dramatic, public gesture, which gains her the sympathy of her classmates and, eventually, the love of Corwin (14). While waiting for Corwin to return her love, Evelina invents a new strategy for dealing with this romantic trial: “During that time, I had decided to begin erasing Corwin’s name from my body by writing it backwards a million times, ecaepniwroc” (14). Evelina has inscribed the story of her love on her body and now she erases it in order to move on. Of course, this episode is only the beginning of Evelina’s story, but it demonstrates her reliance on the family story and on her own narrative strategies in creating a story of self.

Evelina’s early experiences with stories suggest to her the power of stories. She intuitively, for instance, that her grandfather is fabricating parts of his story—she observes that it “could have been true” (19)—but she dismisses the importance of factual truth, presumably in favor of moral truth: “But if there was embellishment, it only had to do with the facts.” She even compares her belief in her grandfather’s story with St. Joseph’s belief in the Immaculate Conception and thus connects family stories with religious narratives. For Evelina, all levels of life can be understood through stories. Evelina becomes painfully aware of the power of story in her own life after kissing Corwin:

I had expected to feel joy but instead felt the confusion of sorrow, or maybe fear, for it seemed that my life was a hungry story and I its source, and with this kiss I had now begun to deliver myself into the words. (20)

Evelina's kiss leads her to the conscious beginning of her self-story, and the result is sorrow and fear, rather than liberation or empowerment. Evelina's image of childbirth conveys the pain and fear of this process. Evelina is no longer safely contained in the family story. She is now solely responsible for creating her own story.

Evelina enters new narrative territory when she realizes that she is not in love with Corwin but with her new teacher, Sister Mary Anita. This new, unexpected love has no precedent in the family story. Unconsciously, though, Evelina has a familiar response. She describes the moment in which the encounter with Sister Mary Anita begins:

It was that moment, I think, that it happened. I couldn't lift my head. My throat filled. I traced the initials carved into the desktop, my initials. (45)

After speaking to Sister Mary Anita, Evelina runs out of the schoolroom and becomes aware of her new feelings of love for another woman:

As I walked I realized that my body still fought itself. My lungs filled with air like two bags, but every time they did so, a place underneath them squeezed so painfully the truth suddenly came clear.

"I love *her* now," I blurted out. I stopped on a crack in the earth, stepping on it, then stamped down hard, sickened. "Oh God, I am *in love*."

(47)

Though her love of Sister Mary Anita is unexpected, Evelina's reaction is familiar. Her tracing of her initials recalls her writing of Corwin's name. Perhaps by tracing her own

initials, rather than those of her beloved, Evelina is beginning to symbolically write her own self-story. But as with her previous realization, Evelina again feels anxiety. Evelina is beginning to understand her life as a story, but she feels helpless in its creation.

Her grandfather's telling of the hanging episode further complicates Evelina's attempt to create a self-story. Because of the events of the story, Evelina views everyone around her differently: "The story Mooshum told us had its repercussions—the first being that I could not look at anyone in quite the same way anymore" (86). Her new love, Sister Mary Anita, descends from a family involved in the hanging. In fact, many people in the community descend from families involved in the hanging. Evelina tries as best she can to sort out the tangle of relationships, as if defining lines of descent will allow her to assign guilt and blame and then to move on from the story. Despite her efforts to chart family relationships, she cannot untangle guilt and innocence in the community. Her mother reveals that even Evelina's family shares in the guilt, for one of Junesse's relatives participated in the hanging. Evelina cannot reconcile this new family story to her understanding of herself or her community. She feels as if she had "stepped into a clear stream and silt had billowed up around [her] feet" (86).

Evelina faces another challenge when she leaves her family and her community to attend college. As she moves in, she becomes aware of her difference from the other students, who bring Janis posters and Dylan albums, while she brings keepsakes which connect her to her family (221). As her parents prepare to leave, she feels "too miserable to cry." She is not ready to part with her family, nor is she ready to begin a new identity outside of the family. In retrospect, though, she realizes that it is her connection to her family which will allow her to survive this new, disorienting experience (222).

Evelina faces the larger world around her, and she perhaps suspects, as Randall phrases it, that her “self-world-story is too small” (239). Evelina must look to new narrative models to incorporate this broader world into her story of self and family. Evelina turns to writers and poets, particularly those “darkly inspired” (222). Evelina finds particular comfort and inspiration in the writings of Anaïs Nin: “Only one survivor of edgeless experience interested me, and she became my muse, my model, my everything, Anaïs Nin” (222). Nin is a fitting choice for Evelina. In the preface to the first volume of Nin’s diaries, Gunther Stuhlmann explains that Nin’s writings reflect her search for self:

The diary is the log of her journey through the labyrinth of the self, of her effort to find, and to define, the woman Anaïs, the real and the symbolic one who balances “between” action and contemplation, involvement and self-preservation, emotion and intellect, dreams and reality, and who sometimes despairs of ever reconciling these disparate elements. (vii)

Evelina imitates Nin’s method in her search for identity. She writes diaries and letters in Nin’s style and practices observing life as if through Nin’s eyes. Evelina even steals Nin’s diaries from the library in order to keep them with her during her visit home. When Evelina decides to experiment with acid, she rationalizes her decision by appealing to Nin: “She tried everything, Anaïs; she would have tried this!” (225). Evelina’s experimentation, though, unsettles her and leaves her barely holding on to her sanity. But rather than discard Nin as her role model, Evelina clings all the more to her: “Only, I had determined that I did not somehow belong with the careless well of the world anymore. I

belonged with... Anaïs” (226). Evelina withdraws from the world, taking an internship in a mental hospital. Here she withdraws deeper into what she perceives as Nin’s storyline.

In the hospital, Evelina meets Nonette, a young, attractive patient who enjoys confessing her sexual history. When their relationship becomes romantic, Evelina realizes she has drastically departed from her family story:

There was nothing in the many stories of reversal and romance among my aunts and uncles to guide me here. A kiss from another girl set me outside the narrative. None of the family stories could touch me. I was in Anaïs’s story now. A dangerous love that could destroy. (235)

Evelina considers that her experience is a departure from her story, though she has already loved Sister Mary Anita. Evelina has suppressed this experience or she has left it out of her conscious story. As a result, she cannot integrate this experience into her story of self or her family story. Evelina relies instead on her imagination:

... I begin to imagine how things really are. I invent her story. My thoughts take off. (235)

This invented story, though, is familiar—a story of love and romantic trial. Evelina imagines that she and Nonette escape the hospital and society, much like Seraph and Junesse as they escape the reservation and then the persecution of the outside world. Evelina does not make the connection, but this invented story is doomed to fail anyway because it is disconnected from reality. Nonette shares none of Evelina’s fantasies, and when Evelina hints at their future, Nonette does not even understand Evelina’s question (238-9). Nonette returns home, and Evelina is so distraught that her supervisor places her in the patient ward. At her lowest point, Evelina realizes that her attempts to follow Nin’s

story have failed. Evelina abandons her narrative model: “I do not read Anaïs Nin—she cannot possibly help me now” (241).

Free of a narrative which does not fit her life, Evelina can return to her family story and begin again her story of self. She consciously tries to “work it out,” and she decides to begin with family (241). But Evelina cannot yet resolve the problems in her family story or self-story. She gives up, concluding that she is “just a nothing, half-crazy, half-drugged, half-Chippewa” (244). Her thoughts do, however, lead her back to Sister Mary Anita, and though Evelina does not realize it, Sister Mary Anita can help her understand her family story and herself.

Evelina first needs help escaping her depression and leaving the mental hospital. Her parents and brother visit her, but these visits lead to nothing but crying. Corwin’s visit, however, finally draws her out of her seclusion. Corwin draws her out with music, and this music brings Evelina a vision of life which transcends self, family, and community:

The music understands, and it will be there whether we stay in pain or gain our sanity, which is also painful. I am small. I am whole. Nothing matters. Things are startling and immense. (246)

Evelina feels anxiety, but she also feels a sense of wholeness, and this sense will allow her to finally take control of her own story.

Evelina begins this process by leaving behind the hospital and the diaries of Anaïs Nin and by speaking openly, for the first time, about her possible homosexuality (246-7). But to proceed further, Evelina must return to the traumatic events of the family story. Sister Mary Anita bridges Evelina’s personal story and family story, for she is both the

object of Evelina's first homosexual crush and a descendant of a member of the hanging party. Evelina visits her, and their conversation revolves around family history and present life. Evelina asks Sister Mary Anita if she became a nun in order to atone for the hanging, and the nun responds that she could not live a "life atoning for another person's sin" but adds that the hanging undoubtedly influenced her life (250). Like Sister Mary Anita, Evelina must learn to accept the influence of her family story without letting it determine her life.

Sister Mary Anita also reveals to Evelina that her grandfather was not only present at the hanging but also partially to blame for it, and this revelation forces Evelina to deal with her family story. After confronting her grandfather with the whole truth of the story, he attempts to make peace with the events, and he includes Evelina. They return to the site of the hanging, and there Seraph throws the boots of the boy victim, Holy Tracks, over the limb of the hanging tree. Evelina mocks his gesture of remembrance, saying, "This is sentiment instead of justice" (253). Evelina, though, admits that she has been planning to say this all along (254). Evelina's response is thus ambiguous. The comment is dismissive, but her admission suggests that she appreciates the meaning of her grandfather's gesture and feels guilty for dismissing it. Her grandfather's silence also suggests that the story has passed to Evelina. Though she feels ambivalent about her grandfather's scene of closure, they have addressed the traumatic events of the family story, and Evelina is coming closer to a broader, more inclusive story of herself.

Having addressed the family story, Evelina returns to her story of self. After a failed romantic encounter with Corwin, Evelina realizes and definitively says that she is a

lesbian (262). Evelina's realization even seems to reconcile her to her grandfather. On the way home from this encounter she and Corwin pass her grandfather, and Evelina stops to help him. She convinces Corwin to take him to the house of Seraph's love interest, and she colludes with her grandfather to leave him alone with her aunt. Evelina may not be able to articulate everything that she feels about the hanging and its effect on her life, but by reconciling herself to her sexuality and to her grandfather, she reconciles herself to her self-story and to her family story. At the wedding of her aunt, Evelina describes her acceptance of her story and her role as its storyteller:

When we are young, the words are scattered all around us. As they are assembled by experience, so also are we, sentence by sentence, until the story takes shape. (268)

Evelina believes her story will take a shape of its own. Though it will be influenced by her family story, she does not need to fit her story into the family genre. And she does not need to look to poets or authors as her models, for the words are around her, in her relationships with family and community.

2. Riel

Like Evelina, Riel inherits a story of traumatic family experiences, a story which she must reconcile to her stories of family and self. Unlike Evelina, however, Riel is also a witness to the events of the story. As a child, she witnesses her father's abuse of her mother, and she witnesses also her father's suicide and her mother's subsequent death. In order to understand these experiences and her feelings about them, Riel undergoes "a great deal of therapy" (250). But the trauma of the family story resurfaces when Riel inherits her mother's diaries, which contain new revelations about the family. Riel's

encounter with the story and the narrative strategies she uses to retell it provide insight into how individuals can deal with troubling family stories and create self-stories out of them.

In Riel's depiction of herself as a child, she reveals some of the nascent narrative habits and skills which will eventually allow her to construct the entire story. She reveals her interest in narrative—a trait she shares with her mother—in her attempt to read “an indecipherable writing” in the lines on the ice of a lake (38). Riel says, “It seems like we should be able to read this....” She, like her mother, is fascinated not only by the “cuneiform marks” but also by the place “where the writing stopped, where the ice was clear and dark all the way down, like a window to another world” (38). This scene suggests Riel is searching for meaning in the world through language, but it suggests also that Riel is aware of the limitations of language in conveying meaning.

Riel's memory chart represents her first attempt at creating a family story and self-story. She records details about herself and her family members in order to preserve them. Through this writing, Riel gains an understanding of herself, becoming “aware of herself as an Indian, an American Indian, a Native person” (59). This awareness leads Riel to other narratives. In order to better understand her Native roots, Riel takes her mother's books on Native history and begins “to read them every chance she got” (60). Through her reading, she decides to become “a person of example” and to “take away his [her father's] power” (62). Riel further measures herself and her success in becoming a person of example by rereading her “compilations of memory” (117). In these early encounters with reading and writing, Riel is already beginning to form a story of self and to transform herself through that story.

Despite Riel's developing narrative skill, she is still too young to process the emotional trauma of the family experience. Even Irene's diaries and narrative inventions do not save her from her relationship with her abusive husband, so it is not surprising that Riel is too emotionally immature to cope with the family trauma through narrative. Riel does manage to act as a person of example and to physically attack her father, but her brief feeling of victory quickly gives way to fear. Riel the narrator explains her childhood fear: "If she had succeeded, if she had taken away his power, then she was very much alone and responsible for everyone" (211). Riel pleads with her mother not to divorce Gil (214). Like Irene, she cannot separate herself from Gil. She will require years of therapy and growth before she can fully process the family story.

Narrative therapist Michael White explains the difficulty individuals like Riel face in escaping problematic stories:

The changes that are required of people in successfully addressing their predicaments are usually quite significant. And changing significant aspects of one's life is a sophisticated achievement. This is an achievement that requires people to (1) traverse the space between what is known and familiar about their lives to what is possible for them to know and to do (a space that often presents as a chasm), and to (2) derive an enhanced sense of personal agency. (*Narrative Practice* 78)

White's explanation seems applicable to Riel. She is unable to cross the chasm into a possible life without Gil, and though she has begun to develop a sense of personal agency, she cannot yet take full responsibility for her actions.

The traumatic family story returns to Riel's consciousness with the inheritance of her mother's diaries. Now that she has reached the age of adulthood, Riel must finally take control of her family story in order to move on with her adult life. Riel reads the diaries that her mother passes down, and she also imaginatively enters them, placing herself in the positions of her mother and father (251). As a child, Riel separates "real stories" from "unreal thoughts" (102), but as an adult, she must combine memory, history, and imagination to construct the complete story of her family.

Once Riel reveals that she is "the third person in the writing" (251), her narrative strategies in the construction of the story become clear. Irene's diary entries only occupy a few pages of the novel, but Riel's voice fills the novel, narrating the events and thoughts surrounding the diaries' entries. Riel's imaginative power is particularly apparent in her descriptions of Irene's feelings about Gil's paintings. Irene writes in her diary that Gil has painted her for nearly fifteen years, but Riel explores the implications of this statement. She describes Irene's need to be "alone with her nakedness," safe from the complex demands of her husband and the need of her children (20). Riel writes,

She had to shed the weight of Gil's eyes. Exist unobserved. That way she could gradually soothe the ache of self-awareness. (21)

This painful self-awareness is not in the diaries, and it is difficult to imagine that Riel would have learned of such an intimate feeling from her interviews with those who knew her mother. Riel must imagine her mother's pain. Riel even invents a scene in which Irene looks closely at a catalog of Gil's paintings and reacts physically to them (30-1). Finally, Riel articulates her mother's realization of Gil's power over her:

By remaining still, in one position or another, for her husband, she had released a double into the world. It was impossible, now, to withdraw that reflection. Gil owned it. He had stepped on her shadow. (39)

This articulation of Irene's feelings draws on family history as well as imagination. Riel records with this description the stories told to Irene by her mother, Winnie Jane, about the power of shadows and their connection to souls (40). Riel has integrated her family story into the larger contexts of her mother's family and of Native culture and beliefs.

Riel delves also into Gil's psyche and family history. She imagines Gil "seeing and rejecting compositions" and then being drawn into a memory of his mother (23). Riel explores Gil's memory of his home, his childhood painting, and his mother's love of his drawings (24-5). Irene only generalizes about her childhood and Gil's childhood in her diaries, but Riel either invents or records specific memories, and in doing so, she creates a multigenerational family story out of her parents' story.

Through imagination and research, Riel is even able to explain her parents' unspoken, unconscious beliefs. She describes her mother's habit of watching the children's school bus depart out of sight: "She did this out of an unexamined belief that her vigilance would keep them safe all day" (27). Riel also interprets Gil's unconscious motivation for being suspicious of Irene:

It did not yet occur to him to wonder whether his suspicions about Irene were also a method of pushing her away from him, so that he could feel her absence, and in turn feel an aching desire out of which he could make his art. (81)

Riel extends her insights into Irene's motivation for writing the diary entries. She imagines her mother writing, inventing, and hesitating. Riel describes the moment at which Irene realizes she can manipulate Gil through her diary and suggests that Irene is at least partially motivated by the desire to hurt Gil (27), though Irene never admits this in the blue notebook. Riel further depicts the way in which her mother becomes drawn in to her creation of the story. Riel interrupts an entry in the red diary to describe Irene's reaction to her own writing: "Irene threw down her pen, laughing" (153). In Riel's telling, Irene is enjoying her own invention, even her choice of the phrase "marital bed" (154). Riel narrates Irene's change in tone as she continues the entry "more thoughtfully." Riel follows this diary entry with two scenes between Gil and Irene. In the first scene, Irene tells Gil that he is the father of their children and considers tearing out the pages she has written about her affairs (155). In the next scene, Gil confesses his need of Irene and his desire to have his ashes mixed with hers, and Irene decides to leave the pages (156). She describes also how the story begins to control her parents. According to Riel, her mother cannot stop thinking about the lover she has invented (178), and Gil cannot stop thinking about Irene's words (21).

By interpreting Irene's motives and narrating how her parents become trapped in a destructive story, Riel takes control of the story and escapes its power. She is aided by her own narrative skills and by the support of the large family that has adopted her, the family of May and Bobbi. Riel has embraced a new identity for herself in this larger family, and with this new identity, she is able to openly and honestly confront the difficult memories and revelations of the family story.

In order to finish the story, though, Riel must also confront and retell her parents' death. Riel narrates this final scene first through Gil's perspective. After her parents' death, she shifts to her own perspective. This transition of narrative perspectives represents the process by which Riel has integrated the family story into her own story of self.

Riel accepts the family story as part of her identity, and she also accepts the ambiguity of the story. She suggests this ambiguity by making clear her role in the invention of the story. This is just one possible telling of the family story. The ambiguity is also apparent in her judgment of her mother's final act:

She died because she could not let go of him. But she should have let go, for us.

Yet I also know she thought she could save anyone, which makes it a stupid accident. So then I want to think she saw in our father's heart an unwavering light. Through all the shitstorms, a steady flame. (250)

Riel is insightful enough to pinpoint her mother's weakness, but she is also charitable enough to see another, nobler motivation for her mother's act. Riel's conclusion is also ambiguous. She flashes back to the day her parents' died and describes the scene as she and her siblings wait for help:

And now as I remember it, I see it was midday, the sun right over us that day, and the pavement was hot on our feet, stinging hot, and it felt good, and it was noon and there were no shadows under us, or anywhere around us, it was all bright, flat, dazzling, and then the sirens began to rise and fall and grow louder in their rising and falling until they were here. (253)

The ambiguity lies in the absence of shadows. This might refer to the end of the family trouble, symbolized by the game of shadow tag. Alternatively, this description might allude to Winnie Jane's story of the warrior killed at noon, when his shadow and power were absent. Through her ending, which also pairs emotional devastation with physical comfort, Riel suggests that the children are both free and powerless.

Riel's decision to leave these events in the story open to interpretation suggests that she has a broader, more mature vision of the story than either her mother or father. Her retelling of the story and her acceptance of its ambiguity allow her to integrate the story of her family into her story of self. And by submitting this story as her master's thesis, she shows that she is ready to move on with her life.

3. Conclusion

Unlike their predecessors, Evelina and Riel successfully process their family stories and integrate them into new stories of self. Their ability to confront the difficult truths of these stories allows them to obtain a broader view of the world and themselves and to prepare for the uncertainties of life. Randall argues that the success individuals have in re-storying their lives depends on the kind of openness Evelina and Riel demonstrate:

Overall, this openness is a function of our willingness to examine our lives, to reflect on the many meanings and possible interpretations of particular events within them, and to critique the influence upon these interpretations of the various larger stories in which we are embedded. It is a function of our willingness to *read* the stories we are. [emphasis original] (333)

In addition to openness, Evelina and Riel demonstrate narrative skill as they create complex family and self-stories. White and Epston explain that effective self-stories contain a diversity of perspectives and ambiguity (78), both of which are present in Evelina's and Riel's stories. White and Epston further explain,

The narrative mode leads, not to certainties, but to varying perspectives. In this world of narrative, the subjunctive mood prevails rather than the indicative mood.

By leaving the interpretation of events and the conclusions of their stories open, both Evelina and Riel embrace the subjunctive mood.

Because of their openness and their narrative skill, Evelina and Riel are able to successfully form their individual identities, but they do not separate themselves from their families. Both characters reintegrate themselves into their families and become "more of a self" in them (Kerr and Bowen 107).

CHAPTER FOUR

THE FAMILY STORIES AND SELF-STORIES OF MINOR CHARACTERS

The stories of Evelina and Riel are the primary narratives in *The Plague of Doves* and *Shadow Tag*, respectively, but Erdrich also presents other characters who attempt to make sense of their families and themselves. The successes and failures of these characters highlight the characteristics that make Evelina and Riel successful in their creation of self-stories. Through their diverse experiences, Erdrich also provides a broader perspective on the role of stories in life.

1. Florian's Scientific Self-Construction

In *Shadow Tag*, Riel's older brother, Florian, presents an alternative to Riel's narrative method for understanding the family. While Riel is searching for understanding in Native histories and in her own writing, Florian appeals to concepts in physics to explain the family members and their dynamics. Florian describes Gil as a neutron star and Irene as the light which cannot escape Gil's gravitational field. Florian explains this dynamic to Riel when they discuss the possibility of their parents' divorce:

I think they will. I think they hate each other. Mom's light, though.

Dad's a neutron star.

What's that again?

You know, a collapsing star spins faster. Becoming dense, pulling everything in. (189)

Florian's analogy suggests Gil's power and self-destruction, but it presents a more ambiguous interpretation of Irene. In literature, identifying Irene as light might suggest her goodness or innocence, but such a positive connotation is not inherent in a scientific description of light. In fact, Florian opens this conversation by discussing the dual nature of light:

Light's odd, said Florian, there's nothing to it, no mass, yet it is bent by gravity. It acts like a wave. It acts like a particle. Understanding the two as one is humanly ungraspable. (188)

Florian's description of Irene as a particle with no mass suggests her weakness. In Florian's view, Irene is powerless to leave Gil or to protect her children. After Gil bruises Florian's forehead, for instance, Irene takes a photo of the injury but hesitates to use the photo. She instead encourages Florian to obey his father (111). Florian notes, though, that light is complex and elusive, so he suggests the complexity of Irene's character, too. The dual nature of light might reflect Irene's dual nature as a real person and the subject of Gil's paintings or her dual roles as wife and mother. And the "ungraspable" nature of light suggests Irene is incomprehensible or inaccessible. The complexity of Florian's analogy suggests any or all of these possible interpretations of Irene.

Florian extends his scientific analogies to his siblings and himself. In contrast to the neutron star of Gil, though, Florian describes the children as subatomic particles. The difference in scale conveys the powerlessness of the children. Florian playfully identifies Stoney as Charm Quark and Riel as Top Quark, but he has a harder time identifying himself. He considers for himself various hypothetical, unobserved particles and eventually settles on a WIMP, a weakly interacting massive particle (190-2). Florian's

metaphor for himself suggests more than powerlessness—it suggests disconnection, certainly from family life and perhaps even from life itself. As a WIMP, he is unable to interact with others or to influence them. Florian transfers this metaphor to his mother with a slight twist, dubbing her a “weakly interacting mom person” (197). Florian’s designation connects his powerlessness to his mother’s, and by bringing her down to the subatomic level, he places her with the children under the overwhelming power of Gil. In Florian’s system, there seems to be little room for hope.

Florian’s scientific descriptions reveal his insights into his family’s relationships and patterns of behavior, but they do not allow him to escape these patterns. Like his mother, Florian instead attempts to escape the trauma through substance abuse. Even as an adolescent, he jokingly refers to himself as a Wino particle (192), and after his parents’ deaths, Riel says he “became addicted to everything he tried—booze, grass, cocaine, meth” (248). Florian does begin to recover by the end of the novel, but he explains that he has “fried a few too many neurons” (248). He turns again to science for a solution, but when Riel asks what exactly he is trying to solve, he cannot or will not answer. Florian’s system remains undeveloped, and it fails to explain his family history or his identity.

Florian’s failure may be partly due to his particular relationships with Gil and Irene. He receives frequent and violent abuse from Gil, and perhaps because of that, he voices the strongest criticism of his mother. Having suffered more than his siblings, he has more difficulty in accepting his parents’ acts or reconciling himself to the family history.

But Florian's failure is also due to flaws in his method of explaining his family and himself. Though his scientific analogies are clever, they do not allow him the flexibility to shape his view of himself and his family positively. White and Epston explain the limitations of a system like Florian's in their discussion of the "logico-scientific mode of thought" (77). Building on Jerome Bruner's distinction between the scientific and narrative mode of thought, White and Epston write that the logico-scientific mode is concerned with "reified constructs, classes of events, systems of classification and diagnoses" at the expense of "the particulars of lived experience" (80). Florian chooses complex scientific concepts for his description of the family, but they limit his ability to deal with any particular experiences that do not fit his analogies. Florian's use of scientific terms also limits the power of each family member to shape the family dynamics. White and Epston write that the logico-scientific mode of thought "represents personhood as a passive arena that is reactive to impersonal forces, drives, impacts, energy transfers, etc." (82). Florian, for instance, describes an encounter between Irene and Gil as an object in space approaching the Schwarzschild radius, the distance at which it cannot escape the gravitational pull of a black hole (163-4). This description fits the scene, but it grants Irene no active role in the encounter. She does not decide to stay with Gil; she simply succumbs to the laws of physics. In Florian's view, each of the family members, even Gil, is a passive reactant, so it would be difficult for Florian to account for any real change in the dynamics, much less to bring about any change in the family. The narrative mode of thought, by contrast, "locates a person as the protagonist or participant in his/her world" (White and Epston 82). The narrative mode's emphasis on

the active role of a person allows a storyteller to shape the world and the self, which Evelina and Riel accomplish through their stories of self.

Florian's scientific system may be limited, but he does attempt to understand his family and himself, like Evelina and Riel, so Erdrich leaves room for hope that Florian may find an explanation or solution that will reconcile him to his family history. If he sticks to a scientific method, though, he must find concepts which will allow him greater flexibility in interpreting individual experience and which will empower him to change himself and others. If Florian represents the danger of passivity, though, the story of Billy Peace suggests that empowerment poses dangers, too.

2. Billy Peace and the Power of Language

Billy Peace of *The Plague of Doves* uses spiritual language to understand himself and the world around him. Like Evelina and Riel, he uses language to construct a new self, but instead of reconciling himself to his past and to those around him, Billy uses the power of his language and vision to distance himself from his past, to subjugate others, and to alter their perceptions of reality. Billy's self-construction thus becomes the kind of "dominant narrative" which Evelina and Riel escape (White and Epston 28). Through this dominant narrative, Billy inflicts suffering on others and brings about his own destruction. Billy's story reveals the power of dominant narratives and their danger to those who use them.

At the outset of Billy's story, he is neither powerful nor controlling. He is a "nervous-looking" and "artistic" boy (119), and he is fiercely devoted to his sister Maggie, who raised him after their mother's death (122). After Maggie becomes pregnant, Billy confronts John Wildstrand, her lover, but Billy poses no real threat to

John. Instead, John proposes a kidnapping scheme to provide money for Maggie and the baby (123). Billy participates in the kidnapping, but he merely follows John's lead. His meekness is apparent in the "strangled yelp" he gives at the suggestion of the plan (123). When his victim, Neve Harp, later identifies Billy, he joins the army to evade arrest, and he is sent to war (129). Billy's life thus far is determined by the actions of others. Rather than constructing a view of himself and directing the course of his life, Billy reacts.

The kidnapping and its aftermath change Billy, though. Neve reveals that Billy slept with her during the kidnapping and that he was "insatiable" in his desire for her (305). In the army, Billy begins to change even more dramatically:

Billy was in danger and wrote weekly letters about his visions.

Apparently, he was being contacted by powerful spirits who saved him time after time, and who promised to direct his life. (131)

Billy's newfound spirituality transforms him, and when he returns from the war, he is no longer a meek follower. He is a gifted preacher whose language and vision mesmerize his listeners.

When he appears on Marn's farm, he is a confident preacher barely resembling the nervous kid who appeared at John Wildstrand's door. He uses a few rhetorical tricks and his charisma to lure Marn to a meeting, but his full power becomes apparent at that meeting, as Marn describes:

You don't know preaching until you've heard Billy Peace. You don't know god loss, a barbed wire ripped from your grasp, until you've heard it from Billy Peace. You don't know subjection, the killing happiness of

letting go. You don't know how light and comforted you feel, how cherished.

I was too young to stand against it. (142)

Billy's rhetorical power wins converts who liquidate their assets and follow him wherever he goes. Billy's power changes him so much that he is unrecognizable to Marn:

I don't know who I married anymore. It's like he's supernatural. He is horribly tireless, exhausting everyone so much that we have to take shifts to keep up with him. (154)

His power affects his beliefs, too. Billy begins to depart from other religious doctrines, and develops a new religion through his preaching (158). Billy extends his power over others by controlling their language. He defines the terms of his religion in the Manual of Discipline (159), and he bans the use of children's names and the word 'mother' (167, 174). Billy's power becomes so great that his followers fear his disapproval even when they are not disobeying any rule (165). Billy creates a new vision of himself and the world, and he forces that vision on those around him.

Billy pays a high price for this power, though. In oppressing others, he gains power, but he loses his connection to his past self and his family. Billy tries to recover this connection through Marn's visions. Billy asks Marn to show him Milwaukee, the city where he and his family lived before his parents died (160). Billy seeks escape through these visions, but he makes Marn stop the visions before she can come to any of the pain in his childhood. Marn only hints at Billy's unresolved childhood problems:

He could feel it coming though I avoided it. I steered away from the burning welts, the scissors, pinched nerves, the dead eye, the strap, the

belt, the spike-heeled shoe, the razor, the boiling hot spilled tapioca, the shards of glass, the knives, the chinked armor, the sister, the sister, the basement, anything underground. (161)

It is perhaps this pain which makes Billy's preaching so effective and his religious vision so convincing, but neither of these allow Billy to cope with the pain. Despite his power, Billy is a broken man, and he inflicts the abuse he suffered in childhood on his wife, children, and followers. He shares Evelina and Riel's narrative gifts, but he is unable to use them to form a story of family and self that would allow him to escape his family trauma.

Billy's control of others suggests the power of language, whether in the form of a religious discourse or narrative. Following the ideas of Michel Foucault, White and Epston describe how individuals "subject themselves and others to the specifications for personhood and relationship that are carried in these 'truth' discourses" (28). White and Epston, along with Foucault, are referring to cultural discourses, but Billy's discourse has the same effect on his followers, who alter their identities, language, and thoughts to fit Billy's vision. In adopting Billy's language and vision, they forfeit their ability to direct their own lives, as Randall describes:

Some are less inclined to compose their own life-plot than to adopt one of the prepackaged ones proffered them by their family or clan, profession or culture, religion or cult. (229)

The power works on Billy, too, and Billy subjects himself to the terms of his discourse. Billy's case resembles White's description of men who commit violence. White argues that these men are not the authors of their "techniques of power" or their "constructions

of identity” (*Narrative Practice* 100). The perpetrators of violence adopt these techniques and constructions from the dominant cultural discourses. They are “accomplices and recruits of domination.” Likewise, Billy adopts his techniques and his identity from his family history of abuse and from the larger discourses of power, gender, and religion.

Though Billy’s dominant discourse represents an extreme case, its power suggests that the family stories Evelina and Riel inherit and the self-stories they create have the same potential to control their lives and the lives of others. Unlike Billy, though, Evelina and Riel can escape the power of the family stories by honestly confronting them, and they are able to keep their stories from exerting power over others by allowing for ambiguity and multiple perspectives.

Billy’s story also suggests that the process of creating a story of self, family, or reality can be carried too far. Randall asks, “Is it possible to seek a self-story, or a world-story, that is too big, that tries to take in too much, and so risks tottering under its own width and weight?” (255). Billy’s “world-story” attempts to subjugate all other stories and views of reality under his own, and such a sweeping project must fail. His need for escape, his sexual desire, and his abusive behavior clash with his religion of “only spirit” (159), and these discrepancies suggest that his vision is doomed to fail.

3. Marn Wolde and the Role of Imagination

Billy’s grand vision leads to his downfall, but Marn’s pictures allow her to reshape her life and to escape Billy’s authoritarian power. Marn’s ability to change through these pictures suggests that imagination plays a significant role in the creation and revision of a story of self.

As a child, Marn uses her images to escape reality. She explains how images save her from the terror of being involved in her parents' fights:

Then I would be somewhere in no-man's-land, between them, and that was the unsafest place in the world. Except for the gaze grip of my uncle.

So I would leave it. I would go limp and enter my pictures. (146)

Marn loses her ability to escape as Billy controls her life. She first adopts his spiritual vision, but as she suffers under him, she loses his sense of spirituality and her own visions:

And all this time, all this time, I don't speak in tongues or feel very much when I pray. I don't get my pictures back. All of that's gone. (154)

Billy has radically altered her understanding of herself and the world, and Marn cannot return to her former view of herself. She has been changed by Billy and her life experiences with him. She must shape a new view of herself, and she begins to do this with a new vision. This vision comes unexpectedly:

Its wings are spread inside of me and I am filled with fluttering words I cannot yet pronounce or decipher. Some other voice is speaking now, a constant murmur in my head. Something foreign that I will hide from Billy until I understand its power. I'll hide it from everyone, I think, because it's rich and disturbing and something about it reminds me of my uncle and I wonder if his rage is catching. (151)

This vision is not an escape into the past or into fantasy but a vision which empowers Marn. She is not yet able, though, to understand her vision or to shape it into a vision of a new self.

She begins to shape the vision when she is bitten by her snake. She envisions the poison and the change that takes place inside of her:

I let the poison bloom in me. Let the sickness boil up, and the questions, and the fruit of the tree of power. I let the knowing take hold of me. The understanding of serpents. My heart went black and rock hard. It stopped once, then started again. When the life flooded back in I knew that I was stronger. I knew that I'd absorbed the poison. As it worked in me, I knew that I *was* the poison and I was the power. (162)

Following this bite, Marn rides a train into a tunnel in the Cascades, and she envisions herself as “a darkness blacker than these mountains” (163). This vision of herself as powerful and dark allows her to envision her escape from Billy. She envisions taking her children to a diner, ordering for them, and eating with them (166). When she suffers a punishment according to Billy's manual, she envisions her serpents speaking to her and telling her how to murder him:

I saw how I'd hold my prince rattler's head to the cloth, and how I'd carefully milk the venom from his fangs into the small spice jar I'd cleaned and washed. I'd use three snakes more that way until I had enough venom to fill the syringe I'd taken out of Bliss's medical cabinet.... (177)

Finally, Marn is able to act on her visions. She murders Billy, and as she watches him die, she has one more vision of the aftermath of Billy's death, of her children “holding [her] with quiet hands,” and of escaping with them Billy's power forever (178-9).

Marn's visions allow her to enact real changes in her life, and her story suggests the imaginative capacity required to create a new self-story. White and Epston explain

that imagination is a crucial component in identifying and giving meaning to “unique outcomes,” the aspects of an individual’s life which do not conform to the dominant story (61). Marn visualizes characteristics and actions which depart radically from Billy’s vision of her as his possession and from her own vision of herself as “weak-willed, a follower” (160), and through them she becomes the strong woman she envisions. Evelina and Riel use this same imaginative power in reinterpreting their family stories and their stories of self, and they end their stories with visions like Marn’s. Evelina envisions the words around her assembling themselves into her story (*Plague of Doves* 268), and Riel envisions the absence of shadows as she and her siblings stand on the pier after her parents’ death (*Shadow Tag* 253). The concluding visions of all three women reflect their ability to interpret and shape their lives, and they reflect their acceptance of events and forces beyond their control. They find a balance between Florian’s passive interpretation of the world and Billy’s dominating vision.

4. Judge Coutts, Cordelia Lochren, and the Acceptance of History

Riel’s vision concludes *Shadow Tag*, but Evelina’s vision in *The Plague of Doves* is followed by the stories of two other narrators, Judge Antone Bazil Coutts and Dr. Cordelia Lochren. Like Evelina and Riel, Judge Coutts and Cordelia must rethink their stories of self and family when they discover new information about their pasts. Their stories follow the same pattern of Evelina’s and Riel’s, so they echo the importance of the process of narrating stories of self and family. But these two stories also frame the stories of Evelina and Riel in a larger context. From the vantage points of their age and positions in society, Judge Coutts and Cordelia view family history and personal history in the larger contexts of Native history and human experience.

Judge Coutts is drawn back into his family history through his courtship with Geraldine Milk, Evelina's aunt. On their first date, they discuss the town's history, including the hanging of the innocent Native men and their connection to that history. But Geraldine's personal history surfaces when she is reminded of her dead lover, and this reminder ends their date (93-4). Judge Coutts reads this turn of events as fitting for both of their family histories. Of Geraldine, he says, "With this sign from the past, my courtship might be delayed another ten years. By now, I knew how the Milk romantic streak could turn fatalistic" (94). Of himself, he says, "Losing women is a trait inherited by Coutts men" (94). Judge Coutts's romantic defeat leads him back to his grandfather's story and to the identity he inherited from him and from his father: "So there I was, here I am, the clichéd mixed-blood with a wolf by the ear" (114).

Along with a tendency to romantic failure, Judge Coutts also inherits an interest in law. And his role as judge allows him a broader view of his personal and family history. He explains how his family history influences his view of his professional duty:

It is my job to maintain the sovereignty of tribal law on tribal land, but even as I do so, I think of my grandfather's phrase for the land disease, town fever, and how he nearly died of greed, its main symptom. (115)

Through his mixed ancestry, Judge Coutts understands the importance of land and the danger of greed for it. He adds, "The earth swallows and absorbs even those who manage to form a country, a reservation." Judge Coutts's professional experience allows him to frame his understanding of himself, his family, and his tribe in the context of history.

Judge Coutts's view of family and human history seems fatalistic until he works with Corwin Peace. Through Corwin, Judge Coutts sees the power of history to transform

individuals. He watches Corwin change as he learns to play the violin, an act which connects him to his ancestors, Henri and Lafayette Peace, and Judge Coutts begins “to consider the possibility that history is sometimes on our side” (209-10). After the death of Shamengwa, Corwin’s teacher, Judge Coutts discovers that the violin Corwin has learned to play, the violin which a vision sent to Shamengwa in his youth, is the same violin Corwin’s ancestors played (216). Judge Coutts and Geraldine are awestruck by the workings of history, and the judge gains a greater appreciation for his role in the larger history around him:

I do my work. I do my best to make the small decisions well, and I try not to hunger for the great things, for the deeper explanations. For I am sentenced to keep watch over this small patch of earth, to judge its miseries and tell its stories. That’s who I am. Mii’sago iw. (217)

The judge still must face one part of his personal history, his relationship with Cordelia. The judge has sealed off this part of his experience, and he and Geraldine, who knows of Cordelia, do not speak of her. The memory of Cordelia and his “doomed first love” is present, though (273). After his marriage to Geraldine, Judge Coutts considers how her family has accepted him though they must know of his “long involvement with a married woman off the reservation” (273). And on the night of the honeymoon, Judge Coutts thinks again of Cordelia:

But the crumbs in our bed and the honey in our tea reminded me of other times, and a different bed. I do not think it was disloyal of me to lie next to Geraldine and recall that history, so sad in many ways. (273)

The memory cannot remain private forever, though. Judge Coutts and Geraldine finally speak of Cordelia when her name arises in a conversation, and Geraldine reveals to him that Cordelia has always refused to treat Indians (291). Judge Coutts, who was treated, healed, and loved by Cordelia, now realizes that he was Cordelia's "one exception" or "her absolution" (292). Judge Coutts finally confronts the whole truth of his past and integrates this part of his story with the history of his tribe and the history of the town. Like Evelina, he realizes that the town's infamous hanging, the vengeance wrongly exacted for the murder of Cordelia's family, has shaped his own story. By accepting the truth about Cordelia, he is able to incorporate his story into the story of the town and to accept that he is part of the connections of blood which bind the town and the tribe.

From the judge's story, the novel switches to the story of Cordelia. Cordelia's narrative is a fitting conclusion to the novel because the murder of her family incites the hanging which influences the family histories of the other characters. She, too, is shaped by the murder and the hanging. She grows up knowing of the murder, but she considers herself to have been loved and pampered. Cordelia thinks that her family history affects her only in her refusal to treat Native patients because of the "unsteady weakness" she feels in their presence (298). She considers this reaction to be "beyond her control," as is her love of Antone Coutts, the future Judge Coutts. Judge Coutts and Geraldine understand why her fear of Native peoples would lead her to seek absolution in her love of Antone, but Cordelia can only explain her love as "a mad lapse" (298).

Cordelia gains perspective on her own history through her position as town historian. She describes her role:

Our highway had never been improved, so we began to steadily diminish, and as we did, I became the repository of many untold stories such as people will finally tell when they know there is no use in keeping secrets, or when they see that all that's left of a place will one day reside in documents, and they want those to reflect the truth. (296)

This position allows her to see the importance of telling stories of self and stories of family even when they contain painful truths. The family story of Neve, her close friend and the only other remaining member of the historical society, draws Cordelia into a contemplation of her own family story. She examines her family's belongings, and she wonders "if the sounds of fear and anguish, the thunder of the shotgun, is hidden from me somewhere in my brain" (sic) (307). She wonders also at the emotions these family objects call up in her:

So why when I stroke my sister's valentine against the side of my face, and why when I touch the folded linen of her vest, and when I reach for my brothers' overalls and the apron my mother died in on that day, and bundle these things with my father's ancient, laundered, hay-smelling clothes to my stomach, and press, and why, when I gather my family into my arms, do I catch my breath at the wild upsurge, as if a wind had lifted me, a black wing of air? (308)

She realizes that her family history affects her profoundly, and because she understands the importance of telling secrets, she decides to tell the true story of her family's murder. She considers the impending demise of the town of Pluto, and she asks herself, "What shall I have said? How shall I have depicted the truth?" (308). Cordelia tells how she

treated Warren Wolde, who was horror-stricken at her presence. She realizes that Warren is the murderer of her family, and she accepts this truth. She also integrates her story into the town's story:

My last act as the president of Pluto's historical society is this: I would like to declare a town holiday to commemorate the year I saved the life of my family's murderer. (311)

Cordelia understands her story in the context of her family story and the town's story. She affirms her connection to her community, even to the man who murdered her family. Like Judge Coutts, Cordelia considers her life in the scope of human history. She sees the inevitable death which awaits her and the town:

The wind will blow. The devils rise. All who celebrate shall be ghosts. And there will be nothing but eternal dancing, dust on dust, everywhere you look. (311)

She accepts this inevitability, just as she accepts her own story, and so she concludes the novel at peace.

5. Conclusion

The stories of Florian, Billy, and Marn highlight the qualities that make Evelina and Riel successful in creating stories of self out of their family histories, but the stories of Judge Coutts and Cordelia suggest that Evelina and Riel are not finished with their pasts. As Evelina and Riel age and confront their mortality, they will need to return to their family stories and self-stories and continue to revise them. William Lowell Randall, citing the ideas of R. G. Collingwood, explains that "the past is never simply there, unchangeable and complete. It is constructed, composed, by being plotted in the present"

(131). The stories of all of these characters testify to this presence and importance of the past. Only the characters who integrate their pasts into their current lives can move on and see their lives in the scope of human history.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have examined the stories in *The Plague of Doves* and *Shadow Tag* through the lens of narrative therapy, but these stories should also be considered in the broader contexts of Erdrich's fiction and Native American literature. Though a thorough exploration of these contexts is beyond the scope of this thesis, the following brief discussions of contexts will suggest how Erdrich's novels engage readers, how they arise out of Native culture, and how they compare with other Native fiction.

1. The Context of Erdrich's Fiction

The family stories and self-stories in *The Plague of Doves* and *Shadow Tag* illustrate the importance of narrative in understanding family and self, and many of Erdrich's novels are about finding identity through narrative. The narrators of *Love Medicine* self-consciously create their identities through their stories of family and personal experiences. Albertine and Lipsha particularly resemble Evelina and Riel in their attempts to understand their identities through family and to narrate that identity. Pauline fabricates and rationalizes a new identity through her narration in *Tracks*, and Father Damien in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* explores her changing identity by telling her story in letters addressed to the Pope. Through stories these characters broaden or refashion their understanding of themselves.

Erdrich's novels are concerned not only with individual storytellers but with the connections between them. The narratives threaded through her novels intersect and retell events from different perspectives, and through this interplay, Erdrich suggests how every self-story is embedded in a larger context of stories. Faye Travers of *The Painted Drum* attempts to understand this kind of network of connections in her community, and she describes the lifelong nature of such an attempt:

The story surfaces here, snarls there, as people live their disorder to its completion. My mother, Elsie, and I try to tack life down with observation. But if it takes a lifetime to see things clearly, and a lifetime beyond, even, perhaps only the religious dead have a true picture of our road.... As for the living, we're trapped in scene after scene. We haven't the overview that the dead have attained. Still, I try to at least record connections. (4-5)

Many of Erdrich's narrators attempt, like Faye, to "tack life down" and to "record connections." They record events and connections in their novels and in related novels. Taken together, these connected novels represent the life-long process of revisiting history, taking in new experiences, and creating larger, more inclusive stories of self.

Erdrich does not simply represent the process of narrative understanding, though. She draws the reader into this process. Allan Chavkin explains how the complexity of one novel, *Love Medicine*, draws on readers' narrative abilities: "This experimental novel challenges its readers to see connections and patterns in its intricate text where much is implied but rarely made explicit" ("Vision" 86). Erdrich's narrative strategies force readers to make connections and thus participate in the process of story-creation. Readers

must fashion a cohesive story out of the multiple narratives of her novels, just as her characters must fashion stories of self out of their family stories and their experiences.

Erdrich's stories also ask readers to reflect on the role of stories in the construction of identity. Summer Harrison argues that Erdrich's use of metafiction encourages the reader to see that "narratives, like identities, are mutable constructions that can be self-consciously shaped" (n.p.). Catherine Rainwater sees Erdrich's works as integrally linking stories and life:

The reader must consider a possibility forcefully posited in all of Erdrich's works (as well as in those of other contemporary Native Americans): the world takes on the shape of the stories we tell. Exposure to radically different stories as ways of structuring the world brings the reader to see what Lipsha Morrissey understands when he says, "You see how instantly the ground can shift you thought was solid.... You see how all the everyday things you counted on was just a dream you had been having by which you run your whole life.... So I had perspective on it all" (*LM*, pp. 209, 211). (422)

Erdrich's works suggest a narrative view of self and reality, and they engage readers in the process of shaping narratives which will enable them to understand her characters and themselves.

2. The Contexts of Native Culture and Fiction

Thus far, this examination has treated Erdrich's stories as representations of universal human nature, but these stories also arise out of Native culture and literature. Chavkin notes that "Erdrich has become the country's most prominent writer of

American Indian heritage...” and he suggests that this “heritage is at the foundation of her literary art” (Introduction 2).

The power of stories to shape lives, a central idea in Erdrich’s works, is also a central concept of Native cultures. Speaking of the Kiowa oral tradition, N. Scott Momaday writes, “Stories are realities lived and believed” (3). Paula Gunn Allen expands on the role of stories, along with other forms of traditional literature, in Native cultures:

The purpose of traditional American Indian literature is never simply pure self-expression.... The tribes seek—through song, ceremony, legend, sacred stories (myths), and tales—to embody, articulate, and share reality, to bring the isolated, private self into harmony and balance with this reality, to verbalize the sense of majesty and reverent mystery of all things, and to actualize, in language, those truths that give to humanity its greatest significance and dignity. (55)

Allen refers to sacred stories, but the personal and family stories in Erdrich’s fiction reflect the same power of stories to bring harmony to the self and to actualize human truths.

Leslie Marmon Silko describes the influence of clan and family stories in Pueblo culture. She explains how these stories are passed down and individuals use these stories to form their identities:

There is no definite, preset pattern for the way one will hear the stories of one’s own family, but it is a very critical part of one’s childhood, and the storytelling continues throughout one’s life. One will hear stories of importance to the family—sometimes wonderful stories—stories about the

time a maternal uncle got the biggest deer that was ever seen and brought it back from the mountains. And so an individual's identity will extend from the identity constructed around the family—"I am from the family of my uncle who brought in this wonderful deer, and it was a wonderful hunt." (51-2)

Erdrich's characters may not always be so purposeful or instructive in their passing down of family stories, but characters like Seraph and Irene, as well as Nanapush, pass down similar family stories so that their descendants will know who they are. And the inheritors of these stories also form their identities in the same way Silko describes, though the process for Erdrich's characters is more difficult.

Erdrich's narrative strategies of engaging the reader in the story-creation process are also prefigured in Native cultures. Silko explains the role of storyteller and listener in the creation of a story: "In fact, a great deal of the story is believed to be inside the listener; the storyteller's role is to draw the story out of the listeners" (50). Erdrich's relationship to readers may not be as intimate as in an oral storytelling, but Erdrich does suggest the importance of the listener by having her characters tell their stories from the first-person perspective and by asking the reader to draw connections and synthesize stories and timelines.

In drawing on Native concepts and traditions, Erdrich's works fit in the context of modern Native American fiction. Erdrich's characters participate in the "recovering or rearticulation of identity," which Louis Owens argues "is at the center of American Indian fiction" (5). As in the Native fiction Owens describes, many of Erdrich's

characters find themselves through “a rediscovered sense of place as well as community” (5).

Erdrich’s engagement of the reader is also typical of modern Native fiction. Joseph L. Coulombe explains that “much contemporary Native fiction guides readers to new ways of thinking about the world and their roles in it” (6). Of Silko’s *Ceremony*, Coulombe writes that the “narrative enlists readers in an intellectual and imaginative performance, making them all ‘authors’ of change and healing” (62). And of Gerald Vizenor’s *Bearheart*, Coulombe writes, “Readers must struggle through a demanding novel that very purposefully challenges them to re-create the world and themselves” (79). Though Silko’s and Vizenor’s narrative strategies differ from Erdrich’s, all of these authors ask readers to transform their understanding of themselves through participation in the process of reading a story.

Though Erdrich’s works arise out of a Native context, their ideas are applicable to all cultures. John Purdy explains the universal nature of Erdrich’s fiction:

The questions her characters ask, as they fumble through their lives attempting to understand the ‘true’ meaning of events and plot out a future, are the questions all humankind has asked and will continue to ask.

They are, therefore, a point of convergence for all cultures.... (32)

Purdy argues that her characters’ questions resonate universally, and so, too, do the narrative strategies they use. Erdrich’s characters, through their stories of self, family, community, and Native culture, suggest how all individuals can use narratives to process their particular experiences and to shape their identities.

3. Final Considerations

As Erdrich suggests, narratives can be powerful tools for shaping perspectives and lives. Narrative therapists use the power and flexibility of stories to enable individuals to arrive at views of themselves which are liberating and empowering. But there are limitations to the application of narratives to life. White and Epston point out that narratives are only an analogy for experience, and this analogy is only one among many (5). Randall, too, notes the idea of life as story is only a metaphor and subject to the limitations of any metaphor (345). Philosopher Galen Strawson even argues that not all individuals experience their lives as narratives (86), and he further suggests that an individual with a non-narrative concept of self can live a life that is as “richly moral and emotional” as an individual with a narrative understanding of self (115).

These limitations should inform any understanding of narratives, but they do not disqualify the power of narratives for many individuals. Even for Strawson’s non-narrative individuals, novels like Erdrich’s provide insight into the inner lives of others. Clifford Geertz explains the importance of listening to the stories of others:

We cannot live other people’s lives, and it is a piece of bad faith to try. We can but listen to what, in words, in images, in actions, they say about their lives. (373)

Erdrich’s fiction provides readers with the opportunity to listen to such self-expressions and, through them, to gain a greater understanding of self and world. As Ursula Le Guin writes, “We read books to find out who we are” (qtd. in Randall 206). The many narratives in Erdrich’s novels suggest that individuals are part of a network of narratives

of self, family, community, society, and humanity, and they allow individuals to understand themselves and take control of their narratives and their identities.

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