THE OUTSIDER PERSPECTIVE IN THE NATIVE AMERICAN FICTION

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Abstract: The present paper aims at exploring the theme of the outsider, what is strange, weird, what makes us consider certain elements of life to be off and branded as on the "outside" of what we think to be normal. By looking at a series of characters, Klaus, Rozin, Cally and Cecille, some of them having played a bigger role in the story than the others, we are able to draw some peculiarities that make us understand what led where and why. This study aims at providing a better understanding of the themes of the novel entitled "The Antelope Wife" by Louise Erdrich aiding us to understand the fate and context of each of the previously mentioned characters.

Keywords: outsider, fate, tradition, continuity, suffering, to stand out.

In the Native American culture and literature, there are used multifarious perspectives. Among these, it is worth to mention the outsider perspective: "The outsider perspective is when a person is retelling a story about the Native American culture and they are not a part of that culture" (Innes, 2009:440). According to Innes, there is a binary opposition between outsiders and insiders: outsiders consider that they are better endowed to offer "objective accounts of the stories", but insiders believe that this might lead to"faulty recounts of the stories".

While much of the Native American fiction focuses on the outsider, the prevalence of this type of character in literature is far from being a strictly Native American phenomenon. Indeed, the study of the "outsider" or the individual who, sometimes willfully or otherwise, stands apart from the dominant society is a primary dynamic aspect in the American fiction, if not in the entire literature.

The Antelope Wife can be considered Louise Erdrich's "most cryptic and unfathomable book thus far" (Beidler & Barton, 2006:3). Erdrich grew up in a family of storytellers and "thus learned very early to appreciate the world of possibilities invoked by a storyteller's voice" (Stooker, 1999:1).

The characters of *The Antelope Wife* are certainly no exception. With her divulgences into the world of characters beloging to several different families, Erdrich portrays more than a few of her characters as outsiders. We see this aspect in characters, such as: Klaus Shawano, Rozin Whiteheart Beads, her daughter, Cally, and last but not least, in Cecille.

We will take a look at the outsider as someone who breaks tradition; outsiders are those who choose to isolate themselves via their own choices and actions, some who ended up outside of the loop without even realising it and through someone whose existence defies other's views of the normal and thus can be considered an "outsider".

As we have already established, the outsider is a recurring theme everywhere and Klaus Shawano is a character from Louise Erdrich's novel entitled *The Antelope Wife*. Klaus embodies this notion perfectly. Throughout the book, Klaus's character is woven into the narrative as an enigmatic figure, often existing on the periphery of the story, yet exerting a profound influence on the characters and events that unfold.

One of the primary characteristics that defines Klaus as an outsider is his ambiguous cultural identity. As a German Native American hybrid, Klaus straddles two distinct cultural heritages, making him an outsider in both the Native American and European American societies. This liminal existence is greatly reflected in his surname, Shawano, which is derived from the Algonquian language, further underscoring his status as a cultural outsider.

Klaus's mixed ancestry sets him apart from the dominant cultural narratives, rendering him an outsider in his own family and community.

His turning point into truly becoming what can be considered foreign is when he decides to kidnap a woman away from her children in order to satisfy his own desires of a twisted form of love. In this scene, despite a warning, he follows through with his plan and so, his downward spiral begins to unravel. "'You're shiftly like all those woods Indians,' Jimmy Badger said. 'I see that trader's deception. If you're thinking about those women, don't do it,' he said" (Erdrich, 2002:29).

The next spike is seen in the conflict that brews between him and the head of the Whiteheart Beads family, the husband of Rozin Whiteheart Beads, Richard. Klaus gets himself set up in an elaborate scheme orchestrated by Richard who sends him on a vacation seemingly for no good reason, only for the authorities to pin down Klaus for Richard's fraudulent activities. "Maybe I know then, and maybe I'm just starting to understand, that life will always be like this around Richard Whiteheart. One minute high in Maui and the next minute yanked from bliss. I'm heading back now to tell my story before the judge, and I don't even know what my story is" (Erdrich, 2002:50).

From here on, following the failed marriage of Richard, Klaus joins him in a sort of festival of the downtrodden as they both waltz their way around town drunk beyond recognition, destroying themselves by gulping down more and more alcohol. Here Klaus's state of mind is that of one who has completely thrown all caution to the side, only looking forward to whatever presents itself in front of him, a scene which perfectly incapsulates this can be seen when the pair is by a river, running out of cigarettes and wine, wondering what has left to be drunk. "'That's Prairie Island nuclear water,' Richard yelled. Klaus kept drinking. 'He can't hear me', Richard said to himself. 'Besides, that plant is down the stream farther'. Richard lit a cigarette, took a drink of wine. 'Some beaver might have pissed up near Itasca'. Klaus kept drinking and drinking" (Erdrich, 2002:97).

This could be considered his lowest point in the story, as from here on he goes to join his brother, Frank Shawano, who will take care of Klaus for a while seeing as the condition he is in does not allow Klaus to perform the most basic actions such as drinking a cup of water or staying awake on while sitting down on a chair.

The journey seen so far from Klaus encapsulates that of punishment dealt by fate, for his actions of robbing one of their own life, he is also robbed of everything he had, going down from a roadside trader to an alcoholic mess who will only go lower and lower. Though not all is lost, seeing as later in the book, in the wedding scene, after Richard's failed first attempt at suicide, Klaus strikes him down in order to protect Rozin from him. Towards the end of the story, he decides to set the one he kidnapped free, he walks Sweetheart Calico until she simply begins to walk by herself, thus giving a band aid conclusion to this member of the Shawano family.

Rozin and Cally have seen much suffering, suffering that is almost entirely undeserved. Rozin begins her departure from the normal once she breaks away from her first husband, Richard. This leads her down to marry another man, one mentioned earlier by the name of Frank Shawano. If he is to adopt a view like before, we could say that it is simply the sum of her actions, all the suffering merely being something that follows what she does, be it the divorce, be it the death of one of her daughters, be it her ruined second wedding. At one point in the book there is a small hint given to us, that perhaps all this could have been actually brought on by something which might have seemed insignificant when it happened. "I broke more continuity, and they suffered for it, too. Should have kept the protection. Should have kept the names that gave the protection. Should have kept the old ways just as much as I could, and the tradition that guarded us" (Erdrich, 2002:35).

The fact that she gave her daughters names that were seen as non-traditional is pointed as being the catalyst for Rozin's misfortunes and sadness. This bad luck can be seen in her daughter's life especially, who grew to be alienated from the world around her simply because of everything that happened around her. Following her mother's divorce and the death of her sister, Cally is forced to move in with Frank, and here she lives in the city, no longer close to nature, no longer close to everything she knew. Furthermore, at this point in the story, she does not live with her mother either, just with people who she is not that familiar with. In these moments, she has a monologue which perfectly encapsulates this part of her story. "In spite of how I want to curl up in my city corner, I picture everything back home. On the wall of my room up north, there hangs a bundle of sage and Grandma Roy's singing drum. On the opposite wall, I taped up a poster of dogs, photos of Jimi Hendrix and the Indigo Girls, this boyfriend I had once and don't have anymore, bears, and Indigenous, my favorite band, another of a rainbow and buffalo trudging underneath" (Erdrich, 2002:103).

Rozin, however, seems to escape the continuation of this misery when she manages to procure the blue beads that Sweetheart Calico has, beads that her grandmother gambled for which hold the very life essence of a woman who earlier in the story had her luck fail her in front of Cally's grandmother. "'You have your life', she said gently,' and ones inside of you as well. Would you bet me three lives in return for my blue beads?' I didn't even think twice but answered her eyes – can you believe that? Three lives for that blueness. That madness. I bet easily" (...) "'Now', she said, 'you have the only possession important to me. Now you have my beads called northwest trader blue. The only other thing I own of value are my names, Other Side of the Earth, Blue Prairie Woman before that. You have put your life up. I'll put my names. Let us gamble again to see who keeps the beads'" (Erdrich, 2002:216-217).

Thus, with both the beads and the name of Blue Prairie Woman being passed down onto Cally, she perhaps won her gamble with fate, like her grandmother before her, this time though she merely had to wait for the right person to hand it to her, instead of having to bet something worth of three whole lives.

Cecille is another interesting character. "Cecille, small, preternaturally and pridefully slender, with stiff, newly colored red-streaked yellow hair and very pink lips, was a contrast. She was a frightening egoist who absorbed every conversational tidbit instantaneously with an experience of her own. She never reacted, she eclipsed. She did not appreciate, she upended, overthrew, and dominated everyone around her by the simple and obdurant means of aggressive non-listening..." (Erdrich, 2002:161).

Cecille is someone who is completely made out to be something which sticks out when being observed. From her first interaction with Cally, we can denote that she is something straight out weird, she does not follow any of the conventions the others of the cast do, she is outgoing, has her life mostly in order, dresses and behaves in a very flamboyant way. Her appearances in the story are quite few and far in between, but every time she appears she helps either speed events up or quite possibly slow them down, this can be seen when she helps Cally attempt to track down her grandmother once she hears the news that she might actually be in town, and on the other hand, her ramblings at the wedding that seem to draw on and on and the suspense builds up in the background as we, the readers, await the climax of the wedding and the unexpected arrival of Richard.

She is quite possibly spared from the agony that the rest of the cast suffers, but this in itself makes her stand out, once again being able to be a part of the outsiders that we so far have discussed.

In order to wrap this paper up, we will be going over the main point of the present study, starting from Cecille this time around and ending with Klaus. To make matters

simpler, we can deduce two sorts of outsiders within the framework of the novel, those like Cecille which make themselves prominent by simply existing in the context of the story, their essence popping out as something we are not so accustomed to seeing; or those like the Whitehearts or the Shawanos, punishment dealt perhaps a bit too hard according to their actions, of course some more grave than others in the case of Klaus Shawano, who after a long series of transgressions manages to turn himself around and actually ending on possibly quite a neutral note, or those like Rozin and Cally who end up on the much brighter side of life, one having concluded their side of the story by being united with their half, her husband Frank and the other one having concluded their side of the story by being united with her spiritual half, the beads that contain the very essence of her life through the name that was given and inherited from her grandmother.

Here lastly we can also see Daashkikaa, the concept of being torn apart, something perhaps to relate to all the dualities seen throughout the book. ”All that followed, all that happened, all is as I have told. Did these occurrences have a paradigm in the settlement of the old scores and pains and betrayals that went back in time? Or are we working out the minor details of a strictly random pattern? Who is beading us? Who is setting flower upon flower and cut-glass vine? Who are you and who am, the beader or the bit of colored glass sewn onto the fabric of this earth?” (Erdrich, 2002:240). In the closing paragraph of the novel, the narrator tries to understand whether there is a pattern in the beadwork of human existence.

Erdrich’s father, Gourneau, was ”a beader and powwow dancer, was also a fine storyteller” (Stookey, 1999:2). Louise Erdrich turns the beadwork into a recurrent motif in her novel. While telling the story she pays attention to a wide range of rituals and ceremonies.

Erdrich does not offer us clear answers to so many questions. She considers that her readers are sometimes confused and this is the outcome of the human condition in a state of confusion and disorganization as well as it is also due to the complexity of writer’s style searching for new meanings in life.

According to Laurence Yep, ”good writers have an enormous appetite for learning about the world, and its cultures are part of the menu. Travel is broadening because, upon our return, we look at America from a different perspective. The same thing happens whenever we learn about other cultures” (Yep, 2006:52). In fact, by using multifarious perspectives, we see a repatterning of the Native American culture and literature with new eyes.

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