EXPLORING MYTHS EMBEDDED IN THE NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURE AND LITERATURE

Oana-Andreea GHIŢĂ-PÎRNUŢĂ
Senior Lecturer, Ph.D., "Transilvania" University of Brasov

Abstract: The present study aims at exploring myths in Louise Erdrich's "The Antelope Wife" highlighting some of the most well known Native American myths that are often portrayed in all kinds of western media these days, no matter if we talk about cinema, games or books. The novel takes great focus on the myth of the windigo, in correlation with periods of starvation, used as a tool to further emphasize the hard times Natives Americans faced, but also showing their connection to nature, their relationship with animals, how the passing of knowledge is made and also the power of the spirit names in the Ojibwa culture.

Keywords: myth, sacred, Native American, windigo, knowledge, spirit, culture, nature, animals, literature.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Native American oral tradition starts with the word, which used to be uttered, spoken, sung or even danced. The Native American stories demonstrate "the reliance on the spirits, and the immense powers that characterized our people in the old days. It might also inspire people to treat their ceremonies with more respect and to seek out the great powers that are always available to people who look first to their spirits and then to their own resources" (Philip J. Deloria quoted by Vine Deloria Jr.,2006:XVI).

Myths have been with humanity from the earliest days of our species. They were there when man first tamed fire and when the first cave dwellers discovered the wheel. Myths are an organic part of the human society that evolved together with us and is shaped by our current worldview. Peoples' myths define who they are. Such myths are deeply embedded in culture and the cultural heritage makes us who we are.

Myths are more than simple tales, they have deep meanings in culture. For instance, Sister Bernard Coleman recorded stories, which tell about the use of certain rituals: "Don't be afraid. Elect two men …have them make a strawman…they must wear moccasins, paint their faces, and wear feathers on their heads. Let them shoot until the strawman burns to ashes" (Coleman, 1962:21). Such tales used to be told and such ceremonies continued to be practiced even in industrial social settings.

Myths are sacred explaining the world and the role of man as well as his experience. Myths are important for us, the modern people, to understand the world and to be able to answer important questions, timeless questions. Myths were important for the ancient people, as well.

Myths have been a way for mankind not only to connect to the world we live in, but also to give reason and meaning to natural phenomena, which at the time could not be explained with the current level of knowledge, such as: floods, volcano eruptions and

even thunders often associated with mythical figures, gods, monsters and omnipresent supernatural beings.

Myths represent a common trait shared by all cultures in the world, no matter how old or new they are. Even the ancient Babylonians had their own myths and legends. And today we might refer to the quite new, but all the same mythologized views of the American citizens.

2. THE MYTH OF THE WINDIGO

It is normal for a rich cultural Native American heritage to be represented by myths, rituals and ceremonies. Myths, in general, as they are connected with our sense of self and identity, are bound to be present in a superabundance of different media, no matter if we talk about games, movies or the good novels.

Louise Erdrich's novel, perhaps her best known work entitled *The Antelope Wife,* is no exception from this as in order to better illustrate and paint the Native American culture and generally tell a better story, it employs a rather wide range of myths in the narrative pattern of the book.

One of the first and most notable myths has surfaced more and more interest from the general public lately as it appeared in a great deal of movies, influential TV shows but also games. Furthermore, this myth can be directly correlated to the hardships suffered by the Native Americans under the US government. As to better understand the true scope and meaning of this myth, one must first delve into history to find some answers. This particular myth is that of the windigo, also known by many as the werewolf of Northern American and Native American folklore.

The myth of the windigo describes an evil spirit that in times of great hardships, usually by wintertime, would possess men, women and children alike making them turn into cannibalistic monsters devouring victims. But an end to his hunger cannot be put as if one consumed human flesh, he would eventually be fully taken over by the spirit, his limbs would grow slender and his skin would turn pale with giant meat ripping claws bursting out of his hands as well as great fangs meant for biting and the limbs of his victims would grow out his mouth.

This myth is very popular among all Algonquin speaking Native American cultural groups. Even the protagonist of the book, the Ojibwa tribe, is connected to it. Of course, the description of the windigo varies from tribe to tribe and in certain instances the evil spirit is able even to take the form of humans but what stands always in common is cannibalism, the insatiable hunger and their seeming weakness to fire.

Now to put it into a better context, in its essence, the myth of the windigo is a cautionary tale. According to it, in times of great famine one should not lose his humanity and indulge into consumption without limits. Something very similar to this is described exactly in the novel, in the 12th chapter, with a small addition of the author's trademark humor: "Sent back this dog in her place. Windigo. Bad spirit of hunger and not just normal hunger but out-of-control hunger. Hunger of impossible devouring. Utter animal hunger that did not care whether you were sober or brave or had your hard-won GED certificate let alone degree" (Erdrich, 2002:127).

Although in the pre-colonization age, these times of need were fewer, after the arrival of the Europeans many Native Americans especially in the times of their forced removal into the reservations faced starvation on an unprecedented level making the legends of windigos much more relative than before and more day to day, which is shown in the following paragraph: "Windigos, they ate a husband. Oh, too bad, one or the other died and was buried the month before. Tough luck, I missed her" (Erdrich, 2002:109).

This sprinkled in with some cinicism also gives a strong sense that these events of sudden death and cannibalism might have been much more prevalent due to the starvation experienced on the reservations. This mythification of hunger is prevalent in the text especially with the obvious windigo monster parts like the following: "Rozin has already decided she can't possibly go live with him, not until she meets the windigo full on. Not until she feeds these spirits so they will stop circling her, hungry" (Erdrich, 2002:189-190).

It is easy to miss references like "She married one of the Shawano brothers, even though that family was said to be descended of windigos" (Erdrich, 2002:57), but perhaps the following quote is one of the most obvious instances where it becomes clear just how hunger and scarcity influenced the Ojibwa people : "It worried people to see that she was always eating, always hungry, but never full" (Erdrich, 2002:55).

It is usual to see people who lived in great times of need have this sense of always having to fill their stomachs, sometimes even overeating to a frightening level due to their trauma of having gone through so much starvation and suffering. This is something similar to many escaped prisoners of war who after escaping, used to eat too much and even die due to the fact that their bodies were not used to the plentiful food.

The novel also uses the myth of the windigo not only in the classical way as a parallel to hunger, but also as something to justify lust and even sexual intercourse between two persons. The author uses this element to further bring a sense of great passion when describing these scenes which separate them from love as to differentiate bodily pleasure from actual love making a commentary on current trends in order to find the theme of the myth that is the lack of moderation and the giving over of one's control to almost animal bodily cravings with no moderation in sight consuming even the soul of the person in question in the end.

3. MYTHIFICATION OF ANIMALS

Many ways of spiritual expression have been shared by the Native American cultural groups which practiced multifarious rituals, such as: the sun dance, the vision quest, the spirit lodge and many other ceremonies which have their roots in the past. "Certain birds and animals offered their help to people with some degree of uniformity. The bear, wolf, eagle, buffalo, and snake lent their powers to people of many tribes, although their functions, such as healing, making prophecies, or offering protection against dangers, were often similar" (Deloria Jr., 2006: XXIII-XXIV).

Part Two of Erdrich's novel starts as follows: "The blue beads are colored with fish blood, the reds with powdered heart. The beads collect in borders of mercy. The

yellows are dyed with the ocher of silence. There is no telling which twin will fall asleep first, allowing the other's colors to dominate, for how long. The design grows, the overlay deepens. The beaders have no other order at the heart of their being. Do you know that the beads are sewn onto the fabric of the earth with endless strands of human muscle, human sinew, human hair? We are as crucial to this making as other animals. No more and no less important than the deer" (Erdrich, 2002:73).

Native Americans always had an important connection to the land that surrounded them, they thought of themselves as being part of the same ecosystem and unlike the Europeans, they did not see nature as there to exploit but rather as a benevolent force that needs to be respected in order for man to live in it. Many Native American tribes had at the core of their religious and cultural practices a strong association with nature and all that was part of it including the animals.

In the above quote it is to be mentioned that this wide association with nature can be spotted quite easily with the parallel between humans and animals being easily shown as the text compares the deer with humans and explains in plain sight that none is more important than the other. Life and nature are to be respected and treated equally. With mankind this worldview varies from the view the Europeans had with man at the center of the universe everything being created to facilitate the prosperity of man no matter what happens with nature.

There are many myths and stories where the Native Americans are passed down knowledge from nature generally this coming from animals, but also sometimes trees and other plants. This becomes even clearer as one delves into accounts of medicine men of Native tribes when they are describing the source of their power and knowledge as being revealed to them by the actions of a moose, beaver, elk and bear.

Furthermore, the Native Americans are the heroes of many legends associated and impersonated with an animal form as such the following quote makes very much sense in the wider context of things: "Medicine ways I learned from my elders, and want to pass on now to my relatives. You. So listen up, animoshug. You're only going to get this knowledge from the real dog's mouth once" (Erdrich, 2002:75).

In the above quote, it is easy to pinpoint the actual source of the power of the medicine as the dog, this information perhaps strange from our European point of view, but very much common and well explained to understand from the perspective of a Native American. From a historical standpoint this attributing of a medicine man's power and source of knowledge to the animals is actually not as hard to believe as one might think as humans are known to have observed the behavior of various animals throughout history and eventually learning from them, using this new acquired information for the betterment of their own lives as well as the lives of their fellow humans and community.

With the Natives' close relation to nature this mythical narrative of animals passing down their knowledge only comes as natural as their belief that everything in nature is equal and their close relation to animals even goes as far as to attributing each individual of the tribe an animal equivalent of sorts in the form of the spirit animals, this being very much in line with their worldview.

Furthermore, in the context of the novel, one might understand the importance of depicting the Natives in a very much culturally appropriate and as acute way as possible, using this to show the Native worldview, but also to further develop the characters of the novel and give them depth by making them feel real and as authentic as possible.

4. THE MYTH OF THE SPIRIT WORLD AND SPIRIT NAMES

In order to understand the spiritual journey of the Native American elders, we must understand their quest which brought them the epiphany of the sense and true meaning of their world. "By observing the behavior and growth of other organic forms of life, they could see that a benign personal energy flowed through everything and undergirded the physical world. They understood that their task was to fit into the physical world in the most constructive manner and to establish relationships with the higher power that created and sustained the universe" (Deloria Jr., 2006: XXV).

Each and every Native American cultural group has a spiritual heritage, which distinguishes them from the other people. The ancestors possessed great spiritual powers. The art of naming was sacred. Naming goes a long way in the Ojibwa culture. Names can provide protection.

Next to the spirit animals that most of the Natives associated themselves with, there was also the question of the spirit name, a name which could give great power and wisdom to the person having it but also shape his personality and life as well. Such pondering about the name comes up when Cally takes a few moments to wonder about her spirit name: "All my life so far I've wondered about the meaning of my spirit name but nobody's told it, seen it, got ahold of my history flying past" (Erdrich, 2002:102).

Spirit names bore a strong meaning both to a person's individual identity and collective identity within a tribe as well this all having in common and building upon the myth of the spirit world that basically sums up in the existence of paranormal spirits and a whole world parallel to our own inhabited by the spirits of the ancestors. These spirits being sometimes of great help to the Natives guided them in times of crisis and offered them important items of advice that helped whole tribes survive in times of need.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, myths play an important part in the shaping of cultures' identity. They came in many different shapes and forms in all kinds of media, no matter if we talk about movies, games or even books such as Louise Erdrich's *The Antelope Wife*.

The novel delves deep and explores numerous Native American myths in order to give meaning to the story or better characterize the protagonists all this while giving it a somewhat very authentic flare in the process. The novel uses many well-known Native American myths with perhaps the most notable being the windigo myth followed closely by the mythification of animals and the spirit names.

By the use of these myths embedded sometimes with a distinct spark of humor, the author manages to give the novel a well needed sense of authenticity and mysticism. It also gives homage to the Native American culture making the novel feel distinctively Native.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Coleman, Sister Bernard (1962) *Ojibwa Myths and Legends.* Minneapolis: Ross & Haines, Inc.
Deloria Jr., Vine (2006) *The World We Used to Live In*. Golden, Colorado: Fulcrum Publishing
Erdrich, Louise (2002) *The Antelope Wife*. Flamingo Harper Collins Publishers