

Forbidden fruit: how zitkála-Šá condemns christianity in american indian stories



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In Genesis III of the Bible, a serpent approaches Eve, the original woman, in the Garden of Eden. The sly serpent asks Eve if she has eaten from every tree in the garden, and she replies that she has eaten from all but one. There is a tree in the middle of the garden that has remained untouched by Eve and her companion, Adam. The Lord God stated that if they ate or even touched the banned fruit, widely believed to be apples, the act would result in their deaths. However, the serpent urges Eve to pick from the tree by saying, “Ye shall not surely die: for God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.”[1] Eve is convinced by the serpent, and she easily persuades her husband to follow her. Once they eat the fruit, they suddenly realize that they are naked, and the Lord God appears. The Lord God finds out from Adam what the two have done, and he curses them both, saying that he will “multiply thy sorrow.”[2] In Christian tradition, it is the eating of the fruit that ultimately leads to all of the misery that humanity has to endure, and it is this powerful imagery that Zitkála-Šá uses as an act of rebellion against Christianity in her collection of short stories, *American Indian Stories*. By doing so, Zitkála-Šá appropriates the religious lessons that she was forced to learn as a young girl, and uses them to fight back against the oppressive system that ensnared her.

Zitkála-Šá's *American Indian Stories*, originally published between 1900 and 1907, is a collection of semiautobiographical stories narrated by a Native American girl about her tumultuous upbringing. In the Introduction to *American Indian Stories, Legends, and Other Writings*, historical scholar Cathy N. Davidson discusses how Zitkála-Šá, born Gertrude Simmons in

1876, was taken from her South Dakota Yankton Reservation by white missionaries to attend White's Manual Labor Institute, a Quaker boarding school in Indiana. This was not an uncommon practice. In the mid to late 1800s, missionaries, directed by government policies regulating assimilation, recruited children to take to Christian boarding schools.[1] In *In God is Red: A Native View of Religion*, author Vine Deloria argues that "some Christian missionaries successfully bridged the cultural gap and became more important to the tribes than most of their own members," but most failed to build strong, mutually beneficial relationships with the Native American people.[2] Deloria even says that after centuries of religious imperialism, several tribal religions disappeared completely.

When attending the Christian boarding school, the narrator of Zitkála-Šá's semi-autobiographical stories was forced to change her identity in many ways. She was forced to cut her long, black hair, and banned from speaking her native language. These were typical regulations at the boarding schools. Deloria writes that "Anglo-Saxon customs were made the norm for Indian people; their efforts to maintain their own practices were frowned on, and stern measures were taken to discourage them from continuing tribal customs." [3] According to Davidson, Zitkála-Šá resisted this restrictive regime in many ways. One act of resistance was "vandalizing the school's Bible." [4] This rebellious action foreshadows her later feelings regarding Christianity.

In "The Great Spirit," originally published in 1902 as "Why I Am a Pagan," Zitkála-Šá justifies her dismissal of Christianity. She writes that preachers tried to make Native Americans "follow as a shadow." [5] In the story, the <https://assignbuster.com/forbidden-fruit-how-zitkla-condemns-christianity-in-american-indian-stories/>

narrator is met by a native preacher who gives her a short sermon on God, hell, and evil. Even though the narrator is being condescended to, she listens with respect, because she acknowledges that the preacher is God's creature just as she is. The run-in with the preacher reminds her of a missionary's critical response to an article she wrote. The narrator says that while the two of them have different ideas on "Infinite Love," she prefers "excursions into the natural gardens where the voice of the Great Spirit is heard in the twittering of birds, the rippling of mighty waters, and the sweet breathing of flowers." [6] She then says that if this sentiment describes Paganism, then she considers herself to be a Pagan.

Zitkála-Šá received a lot of criticism for this piece. When writing to her future husband, Carlos Montezuma, in 1902, Zitkála-Šá told her husband that The Atlantic Monthly was planning on publishing her short story. She told her husband that she expected the school she was teaching at, Carlisle Indian Industrial School, to disparage the piece. Her prediction was correct. The conservative founder and superintendent of the school, General Richard Pratt, labeled the story as "trash," and said that Zitkála-Šá was "worse than a pagan." [7] However, Zitkála-Šá seemed to be little affected by this insidious comment. In another letter to Carlos Montezuma, she wrote, "What do I care - I knew that all the world could not take a liberal view of my work - But in spite of other varied opinions I am bound to live my own life." [8] Zitkála-Šá maintained this attitude throughout her professional life. While she knew that her audience was primarily educated, middle-to-upper class white people, she stayed true to her beliefs. In a collection of Zitkála-Šá's belongings, which currently resides at Brigham Young University, there is a

note on which a quote is written over and over again. The quote, said by President Abraham Lincoln, is as follows: “ I must stand with anybody that stands right; stand with him while he is right and part with him when he goes wrong.”[9] Even though Zitkála-Šá was aware of how her writing could be negatively perceived by her white audience, she believed that it was her duty to call out the many injustices of the world. This is best seen in her story where she critiques the sentiment at the very center of the early 20th century white civilization: Christianity.

The allegory of Adam and Eve is seen in the story titled “ The Big Red Apples,” where the young narrator learns from her playmates that two white missionaries are in her village to recruit children to take East. She tells her mother that her friend, Judéwin, is leaving with the missionaries, and that she desperately wants to go with them. The narrator says, “ Judéwin had told me of the great tree where grew red, red apples; and how we could reach out our hands and pick all the red apples we could eat. I had never seen apple trees. I had never tasted more than a dozen red apples in my life; and when I heard of the orchards of the East, I was eager to roam among them.”[10] The apples spark a fascination for the narrator, and when the missionaries visit, she asks if she will be able to eat all the apples she desires if she goes with them. The missionary tempts her by saying that the apples are for whoever picks them.

In this case, the missionaries are similar to the serpent, and the young narrator resembles Eve. Eve and the narrator both share a desire for something that is limited in their lives. The serpent persuades Eve to eat the apple in Genesis III with very little struggle, because it is something that she <https://assignbuster.com/forbidden-fruit-how-zitkla-condemns-christianity-in-american-indian-stories/>

already wants. The serpent promises her that their “ eyes shall be opened,” and that they “ shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.”[11] Even though the Lord God has banned her and Adam from eating the fruit, she craves the knowledge that the serpent promises her. Likewise, in American Indian Stories, the narrator’s mother discourages her interest about the East. She warns her daughter that the missionaries’ “ deeds are bitter,” and that the narrator will cry for her mother.[12] However, the apples are enchanting to her the way knowledge is to Eve. The narrator has eaten very few apples in her life, and when Judéwin promises her that she will be able to pick as many as she can, the offer is far too tempting to reject. In both situations, a protector ushers the women from chasing the thing that they long for, but their desires ultimately lead them into a world where they are punished for being themselves.

As soon as Eve eats the fruit, she realizes that she is naked. Although, she physically remained the same after she ate the fruit, her mind was altered to see herself a different way. She no longer felt comfortable with her natural state, and her and Adam both sewed fig leaves to cover themselves. The narrator of American Indian Stories also makes a change in appearance after she experiences a mental transformation. As seen in “ The Cutting of My Long Hair,” the narrator is violently forced to cut her hair, and wear “ tightly fitting clothes.”[13] Like Eve she is offered wisdom, but in turn, must change parts of her physical appearance. The Lord God also punishes Eve by telling her that her husband “ shall rule over thee.”[14] Eve was once free to do as she liked, only monitored by God, but after her sinful act, she was to be supervised by her husband. Likewise, the young narrator in American Indian

Stories has to give up some of her autonomy after starting her new education. Not only does she exchange being watched by her mother and tribe for being supervised by strict, white missionaries, but she also gives up a much more unrestricted lifestyle in which she could mentally and physically connect with the land around her.

The apples are also a symbol of what the narrator will become: red on the outside, white on the inside. There are certain physical attributes that she will always possess such as the color of her skin, eyes, and hair, but her innermost thoughts and feelings are shaped by the white missionaries who look over her. While the narrator consistently fights to keep a sense of individualism, there is no doubt that her overseers cause her mental strife. Zitkála-Šá experienced many aspects of this oppressive system in her real childhood. Because of her rigorous schooling on Christianity, she was well equipped to form her own opinions on the matter by the time she reached adulthood. However, her thoughts on Christianity were most likely not what her teachers wanted them to be. Whether it was the relaxed way she was raised or the tough schooling she endured, something made Zitkála-Šá turn away from her Christian education. Her use of apples in reference to Adam and Eve in Genesis III was a brilliant way to condemn those lessons. In using a story from their most worshipped text to point out their hypocrisy, Zitkála-Šá showed the white missionaries that in her eyes, they were the ones bringing evil into the world. While some might argue that Zitkála-Šá's allusion to a Christian story proves that she was responsive to her early education, it is clear by her damning tone and adoption of Paganism that the missionaries caused her more pain than salvation.

- [1] Zitkala-Sa. American Indian Stories, Legends, and Other Writings. (Penguin Classics, 2003), XV.[2] Vine Deloria. God Is Red: A Native View of Religion. (Fulcrum Publishing, 2003), 239.[3] Vine Deloria, 240.[4] Zitkala-Sa. American Indian Stories, Legends, and Other Writings, XVI.[5] Zitkala-Sa. American Indian Stories. (Hayworth Publishing House, 1921), 104-105.[6] Zitkala-Sa. American Indian Stories, 107.[7] Zitkala-Sa. American Indian Stories, Legends, and Other Writings, XIX.[8] Zitkala-Sa. American Indian Stories, Legends, and Other Writings, XIX.
- [9] Zitkala-Sa. American Indian Stories, Legends, and Other Writings, XXIV.
- [10] Zitkala-Sa, American Indian Stories, 41-42.[11] Carroll, 9.[12] Zitkala-Sa. American Indian Stories, 41.[13] Zitkala-Sa. American Indian Stories, 53.[14] Carrol, 10.