

How history haunts
the present in Louise
Erdrich's *Plague of
Doves* and love
medic...



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Louise Erdrich's novels *Love Medicine* and *Plague of Doves* are filled with a multitude of characters. These characters are different from one another with their own struggles and problems but are connected, not just by blood but by their shared cultural history. This cultural history is filled with oppression and hardships which undoubtedly affect all generations, including the current generations. Some of these issues include acculturation and assimilation, poor mental health, alcoholism and domestic violence which are all major issues that Native Americans face today and they're all issues that Louise Erdrich touches on in her novels *Love Medicine* and *The Plague of Doves*. By looking at the history of these issues, there can be a better, fuller understanding of the source of these issues and the harmful effects Europeans had on Native Americans, namely the Chippewa tribe. Exploring the history of Europeans and Native Americans starting with their first encounters is important because it is the beginning of the Chippewa's complicated relationship with Europeans and therefore, the complicated relationship with themselves.

According to Encyclopedia Britannica " The Ojibwa constituted one of the largest indigenous North American groups in the early 21st century". It was 1640 when the Jesuits and French traders first contacted the Chippewa tribe. The Chippewa tribe previously traded amongst each other and other surrounding tribes such as the Mandan and Hidatsa tribes. The Chippewas had to depend on the French fur traders because their resources were growing scarce. This was the beginning of acculturation for the Chippewa tribe. " The fur trade deepened the relationships between the Ojibway and Cree, and French traders, resulting in marriages between them" (Britannica).

Over time, the offspring of Chippewa and Cree people became known as “ Métis” or “ Metchif” which is another way to say “ mixed American Indian and Euro-American.

Louise Erdrich herself was born to a European father and partly Chippewa mother. She had already experienced the blending of cultures at a young age and grew up to go to college at both Dartmouth college and Johns Hopkins university. This awareness of white society definitely lends to the credibility of the issue of acculturation in Louise Erdrich’s novels.

Acculturation is defined by (Britannica) as “ the processes of change in artifacts, customs, and beliefs that result from the contact of two or more cultures. The term is also used to refer to the results of such changes. Two major types of acculturation, incorporation and directed change, may be distinguished on the basis of the conditions under which cultural contact and change take place.” Acculturation is portrayed this way in Love Medicine through the stories and characters. For instance, the chapter “ The Tomahawk Factory” in Love Medicine. In this chapter, there is a clear clash of Native American culture and European society’s ideology. Lulu even accuses her son Lyman of selling out. The Tomahawk Factory is a factory that sells Native American trinkets. The acculturation is evident here because there is a devaluing of Native American culture in favor of making a quick buck by means of mass production. In fact, the creator or “ father” of the American factory system was indeed an Anglo-American man named Samuel Slater. This is also an example of assimilation which is defined as “ the process whereby individuals or groups of differing ethnic heritage are absorbed into the dominant culture of a society” (Britannica). In this instance, Lyman had <https://assignbuster.com/how-history-haunts-the-present-in-louise-erdrichs-plague-of-doves-and-love-medicine/>

to absorb the capitalist culture of Anglo-American society in order to improve his financial situation.

In *Love Medicine* and in *The Plague of Doves* we see assimilation to the extreme. In the beginning of *The Plague of Doves* we are told that “ His human flock had taken up the plow and farmed among German and Norwegian settlers. Those people, unlike the French who mingled with my ancestors, took little interest in the women native to the land and did not intermarry. In fact, the Norwegians disregarded everybody but themselves and were quite clannish. But the doves ate their crops the same”. In *Love Medicine* it is the Chippewa people that leave home and assimilate to Anglo culture. In fact, Albertine doesn't just leave home, she runs away. She lives as a nursing student, studying modern medicine as opposed to Native American “ medicine”. The distance she has put between herself and her Chippewa culture is especially evident in her relationships. “ Our relationship was like a file we sharpened on, and necessary in that way” Albertine says about her mother. This shows Albertine's disconnection with her heritage. It seems as though she views going home as an obligation as opposed to a positive thing that many other Native Americans do, as seen in stories with a “ homing” plot.

“ The acceptance of the French fur trader had a social and psychological impact on the culture of the Ojibway” (Britannica). Studies as recent as 2015 conclude that “ Mental illness plays a role in almost 90 percent of suicides, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, and such conditions are often treatable. In the case of the AIAN (American Indian and Alaska Native) community, mental health resources are in short supply and don't always <https://assignbuster.com/how-history-haunts-the-present-in-louise-erdrichs-plague-of-doves-and-love-medicine/>

reach them” (Huffpost). Simply put, there are limited resources for Native Americans suffering from mental health. Many times, these mental health issues are brought on by Anglo-American society. One issue that can cause a great deal of depression and other mental health issues would be the fact that “ compared to the total U. S. population, more than twice as many Native Americans live in poverty” (mental health America). Most Native Americans are impoverished.

Native Americans suffer from PTSD and many times, drug and alcohol abuse. Many mental health issues such as PTSD can be attributed to historical trauma. “ Historical trauma response (HTR) theory is based on the hypothesis that when people were victims of cultural trauma, the aftereffects can be passed down through the generations”. Often, there is no help or treatment for Native Americans as far as mental health is concerned. This leads to addictions and other issues, and even death.

In *Love Medicine*, we see three mentally ill or unwell people die and two of them take their own lives. Henry Lamartine Jr. commits suicide by jumping into the river and drowning and Gordie Kashpaw commits suicide, although unintentionally, by drinking Lysol when he had ran out of alcohol. “ He was sick, sick again, blindly sick, knocking into shelves and pulling down the flour bin, throwing himself toward the door” (259). Addiction is a mental illness and it’s one that if not treated, could be passed down. Gordie’s son King is also an alcoholic. “ Among the behavioral traits parents can pass on to their children is a predisposition toward alcohol abuse and addiction. Among those abusing alcohol, people who are genetically predisposed to alcoholism have a higher risk of becoming addicted” (Addiction Center). The first time that <https://assignbuster.com/how-history-haunts-the-present-in-louise-erdrichs-plague-of-doves-and-love-medicine/>

alcoholism grew from the pain of their reality, they increased the chance that their offspring would also become addicted. Alcohol and other drugs are coping mechanisms. Native Americans have experienced a lot of trauma. “ Rates of all types of addiction — not just alcohol — are elevated in aboriginal peoples around the world, not only in America. It’s unlikely that these scattered groups randomly happen to share more vulnerability genes for addiction than any other similarly dispersed people. But what they clearly do have in common is an ongoing multi-generational experience of trauma” (The Verge).

In *The Plague of Doves*, Billy Peace becomes the leader of a cult. Various religions such as Catholicism cannot be proven or disproven due to a lack of tangible “ evidence”. Therefore, one cannot say emphatically that Billy Peace is automatically mentally ill because he sees spirits but we do have to question his mental state. Like Harry Lamartine Jr., Billy has been in battle. More than likely, Billy would have post-traumatic stress disorder. We also have to consider the fact that he has created a following. The word “ cult” or the idea of a cult has negative connotations in our society and that’s because we see the followers of cults as being brainwashed sheep. If we look at Billy’s cult in that way, then most likely Billy himself is delusional and he’s imagining things. Perhaps he’s schizophrenic. Either that or his ego is so inflated that he needs to have followers. This in itself is a sign of mental illness and could also be a symptom of oppression. After being told that you and your people aren’t worthy, that you don’t matter, it wouldn’t be out of the realm of possibilities to assume that he would thrive on attention from

those that paint him as a hero as opposed to a villain as so many Anglo-Americans do.

Native Americans, namely those of the Chippewa tribe struggle immensely due to the influence of the Anglos. This is something that we see in the books *Love Medicine* and *The Plague of Doves*. Erdrich herself is a result of these two cultures mixing and uses this perspective to reveal the ugly truths about the oppression of the Chippewa tribe. They struggle with alcohol and drug addiction, assimilation and acculturation as well as mental health and a slew of other issues brought on by the English.