

**Essay: Tracks by Louise Erdrich**

"The beasts that survived grew strange and unusual. They lost their minds. They bucked, screamed and stamped, tossed the carcasses and grazed on flesh. They tried their best to cripple one another, to fall or die. . . they tried to do away with their young" (140). Old Nanapush says this of the buffalo herds that were being slaughtered into extinction. He says that the animals "knew they were going, saw their end." Pauline Puyat also sees the extinction of the Indian people, and she does everything she can to hasten their end.

Pauline's family is mixed-bloods, part Indian and part Canadian. As a child, she wanted to be like her mother "who showed her half-white" (14), and to be like her grandfather, who was pure Canadian. She says, "I saw that to stand back was to perish. I saw through the eyes of the world outside of us" (14). She refused to speak their native language and asked to be sent to Argus, a white town. She tried to deny her Indian heritage.

As Pauline matures into puberty, she becomes more and more homely. Because of her homeliness, she develops an obsession about being what she calls "invisible." She feels that because she's not attractive no one pays attention to her. She can easily blend in with the walls and become "invisible" to those around her. This obsession with her lack of beauty, this "invisibility," leads her to religious perversion, and ultimately to insanity. Nanapush says of her:

Because she was unnoticeable, homely if it must be said, Pauline schemed to gain attention by telling odd tales that created damage. There was some question if she wasn't afflicted, touched in the mind. Her Aunt Regina [said she] saw things that weren't in the room (39).

While in Argus Pauline's obsessions grew. She met Fleur Pillager and, within a short time, she became obsessed with her. For the next decade, Pauline purposely intertwined her life with Fleur's. She eventually made it her mission to destroy Fleur and those around her.

Pauline left Argus after Fleur's rape and went to live with a woman named Bernadette Morrisey. Bernadette took her along when she sat with the sick and dying. On one of these visits, Pauline witnessed the death of a young girl her own age. She discovered then a perverse joy in watching people die. She liked assisting them to die and to handle their bodies afterwards. After preparing bodies for burial, she liked touching the living and preparing their bread with unwashed hands because she liked "pass[ing] death on" (69).

Over the next decade, she not only sat with the dying and prepared their bodies after death for burial, she was also responsible for or contributed to the death of a several of people. In Argus she dropped the bar in the lock of the freezer where three men (who raped Fleur) were seeking refuge from the storm. She contributed to the death of Fleur's premature baby by not helping her; and finally, she murdered Napoleon in a mad religious fit.

Religion in the hands of a psychopath can be dangerous. There can be no doubt that Pauline was a psychopath. She had delusions of grandeur about herself and hallucinations. She blamed others, in particular, God and Jesus, for her actions. Psychopathic people hold themselves blameless. She also described herself with "eyes that [don't] blink" (74). Not blinking is a very peculiar trait of psychopaths.

Pauline's conversion to Christianity gave her the reason she needed to hasten the end of the Indian people. At the convent, she said that God appeared to her and told her she was not "one speck Indian" (137), and that she "was chosen to serve" (137).

He had an important plan for me, for which I must prepare, that I should find out the habits and hiding places of His enemy. . . I should not turn my back on Indians. I should go out among them, be still, and listen. There was a devil in the land. . . there was no room for Him to dwell in so much as a crevice of their minds. (137)

She was convinced that God had chosen her as the salvation of the Indian people. However, she saw Fleur as the one person who stood in the way. Fleur had the power over the monster in the lake, and therefore, over the people:

She [Fleur] was the one who closed the door or swung it open. Between the people and the gold-eyed creature in the lake. . . Fleur was the hinge. . . There would have to come a turning, a gathering, another door. And it would be Pauline who opened it. . . Not Fleur Pillager (139).

She waited for Him to tell her what she "should do about Fleur" (137). Pauline clearly wanted Fleur to die. She made visits to Fleur's to see if they were suffering: "He gave me the mission to name and baptize, to gather souls. . . I made my way to the Pillager cabin. From the outside, I could not tell if they suffered" (141). Although she knew they were near starvation, she boldly asked for food: "You wouldn't have a little scrap to eat. . ." (142). She then ate the meager stew they offered, without hesitation.

During one of Pauline's visits, Fleur began to miscarry. Pauline did nothing to help her until Fleur asked her to retrieve medicine from the shed. She fumbled around and dropped things so that she never prepared anything which Fleur could take. She actually wanted to watch Fleur die: "Her [Fleur's] face was drained of color. I knew this look and I was fascinated, rapt, as at other death- and sickbeds" (156). She watched Fleur from across the room as the baby slid from her, while she cut the cord, and while she bundled the baby up. She watched her gather strength, struggle up, go out to the shed to get medicine, return and prepare it, and then sit on the floor again to drink the medicine. At no time did she try to help Fleur. In fact, she watched her and said, "I saw that she was dying, despite the medicines, despite all that I could do, all the prayers I had lifted" (158). She also wanted the baby to die because she believed it was fathered by the monster in the lake (163).

Pauline's psychopathic behavior reflects the story Nanapush tells about the dying buffalo herds. She saw this same fate occurring among the Indians but attributed it to "God's purpose." She believed that He was destroying them because they were pagans. The irony is that what she couldn't see was that the insanity among the dying was herself. She felt that she would survive because she was "chosen." But she didn't see that she was the beast that grew strange and unusual, and lost its mind. It was she who grazed on flesh and tried her best to cripple others, and to do away with their young.