A Lacanian Psychoanalytic Feminist Interpretation of Marie in Louise Erdrich’s Love Medicine

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Abstract

This thesis is an analysis of Marie’s struggle for empowerment within a patriarchal system in Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine*. The main focus of this thesis is the untangling of Marie’s desire: why does she choose the path that she has taken in life and why is she seemingly unable to feel content? Marie’s life takes place within a patriarchal framework and this paper utilizes feminist theory to delineate this framework and demonstrate its oppressiveness. In order to untangle Marie’s desire, this paper also employs a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective. The object of Marie’s desire seems to be to become empowered within patriarchal society, but she is socially castrated by its gatekeeper, Leopolda. Even though Marie attempts a different path to empowerment, she is unable to be satisfied until she confronts Leopolda once more. In typical Lacanian fashion the object of her desire keeps returning until its form becomes clear: the object of her social castration, that is, the “phallic” spoon.
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Introduction

This paper explores the character Marie and her attempt to ‘find herself’ in Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine*. Marie’s journey of self-exploration is not easy, but it is ambiguous and complex; there is no clear reasoning that can easily explain her actions throughout Erdrich’s novel. This essay aims to untangle this ambiguity by utilizing a feminist and psychoanalytical perspective, while also taking into consideration the intersectional aspects that must be present in a character stuck between cultures. It is not without difficulty to embark on such a task however, as there is much tension between the different theoretical perspectives (White) feminists have been exceptionally cautious of commenting about Native American literature because, for one, it may be argued that feminists should have no voice due to their “whiteness”. Kathleen Donovan gives an example of how Native American women can sometimes think of feminist literary critique of their culture as a “representation of a system that had displaced and exploited her land and her people” (Donovan 7). Furthermore, Donovan continues by saying that “many white feminist literary theorists have omitted discussion of Native American women from their work for fear of being accused of appropriation” (7). It is therefore important to thread carefully when discussing foreign cultures and, when analyzing them, to also account for aspects other than gender, such as cultural belonging and race. However, as this paper also argues, Donovan believes that there are many parallels between Native American literature and feminist literary and cultural theories and that both of those theories can co-exist and facilitate each other’s understandings of certain issues (7).

As soon as the potential adversity of Native American literature and feminist theory is resolved, the issue of compatibility of psychoanalytic theory and feminism emerges. This essay relies on a Lacanian psychoanalytical theory in order to attempt to give a plausible explanation for some of the actions Marie takes and some of the paths that she walks. This
theory, as will be explored more thoroughly in the next section, relies mostly on the phallus as the ‘objet petit a’, or the unattainable object of desire, which will be argued aids in explaining Marie’s actions throughout the novel. However, feminism possesses a varied and highly developed body of feminist readings and appropriations of Freudian theory (Moi 29), where the final stance on the usefulness of Freudian psychology is highly contentious. This adversity will soon be returned to in the next section, but in general, this essay will attempt to show that, according to Lacan, the phallus is not its physical object (Gallop 136) and that as such, not only is psychoanalytical theory compatible with feminist theory, but it can also contribute to feminist readings.

Theoretical background

This section will outline the concepts that are used in the interpretation of the novel. Since this paper does not have an unlimited scope, some theoretical positions and arguments have to be left out by necessity. This section first outlines the feminist theoretical concepts of interests and then delves into some prominent feminists’ opinion on Freud and psychology. The section then continues by allowing psychoanalytic theory to respond and clear up some common misconceptions of it. It also outlines and defines the key psychoanalytical terminology. Finally, there are some comments on the intersectional aspects mandatory to the current reading of Love Medicine.

Perhaps the most central concept to feminist theory is that of the patriarchy. In order for feminism to be relevant, one must first recognize the marginalized position of women in relation to men. The next step is to recognize the structures enabling that repression, which is commonly referred to as the patriarchy. The continuants of patriarchy are, by its very nature, unfortunately not entirely without difficulty to define. One way to think about it is as Kate Millett, an influential and prominent feminist, she believes that the patriarchy is a conscious
plot against women by a well-organized male conspiracy (Moi 28-29). Claiming this position Millett rejects Freud, both because she does not believe in the unconscious in a Freudian sense, and because of her distaste for Freud’s theories of penis envy, female narcissism and female masochism. This position does, however, not account for “the fact that not all misogyny is conscious, and that even women may unconsciously internalize sexist attitudes and desires” (Moi 28). Hélène Cixous takes on a more Derridean approach centered around the concept of ‘différance’ (Moi 108). Although slightly contradictory, she refuses to theorize about femininity but acknowledges the usefulness of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory as she outlines “feminine writing and the mother as source and origin of the voice heard in female texts” (Moi 113-114). She elaborates by explaining that it is “in short, the Voice of the Mother, that omnipotent figure that dominates the fantasies of the pre-Oedipal baby: ‘The Voice, a song before the Law, before the breath [le souffle] was split by the symbolic’” (Moi 114). Cixous theory, or parts of her theory, is not only compatible with, but it is based on Lacan’s psychoanalytical theory. As it becomes clear that psychoanalytic theory can be a great ally to feminists, the question that remains to be answered is then: ‘what is the patriarchy?’ According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary it is (paraphrasing): “control by men of a disproportionally large share of power” (“patriarchy”). In order to supply one interpretation of how it functions, however, it is necessary to delve deeper into psychoanalytic theory.

Both Irigaray and Kristeva extensively discuss feminism in relation to Freud. In order to contextualize the most important aspect of that discussion for this paper though, a brief reiteration of the fundamental part of Lacan’s theory is necessary. For Lacan, unlike Freud, the pre-Oedipal state is called the imaginary and the state subsequent to the child’s oedipal crisis is called the symbolic. In its imaginary state the child identifies with the mother (or her breast), and it has no distinct self. It is part of the mother. The child then experiences its
Oedipal crisis as the father forcibly separates the child from its mother, and this phase marks the child’s entry into the symbolic order, because it is the father that separates the child from its mother and causes its crisis of identity. The phallus, representing the Law of the Father (or the threat of castration), comes to signify separation and loss to the child. This loss, or lack, that the child suffers is the loss of its access to the maternal body and is the birth of desire, because the child desires to regain its loss or lack. Because the child cannot have what it desires, its desire has to be repressed; this is called the primary repression (Moi 99). So, because of this, the Imaginary has no primary repression and for that reason there is also no desire in the imaginary. It is when the child enters into the symbolic order that the primary repression happens, and desire is born. Therefore, the unconscious is desire (Moi 101).

Furthermore, “To enter into the Symbolic Order means to accept the phallus as the representation of the Law of the Father. All human culture and all life in society is dominated by the Symbolic Order, and thus by the phallus as the sign of lack” (Moi 100). Returning to Kristeva’s view on the patriarchy, she believes that the subject is “always already inserted into the symbolic order” and “there is no other space from which we can speak: if we are able to speak at all, it will have to be within the framework of symbolic language” (Moi 170). In essence this means that, since women (and men) can only express themselves through the symbolic order, patriarchy is the all-encompassing, already established and inescapable Law of the Father. There are ways, however, to disturb this patriarchal order, one of which being mimicry. Toril Moi writes on the theory of Luce Irigaray that “if as a woman under patriarchy, Irigaray has, according to her own analysis, no language of her own but can only (at best) imitate male discourse, her own writing must inevitably be marked by this” (140). Here, Irigaray is mimicking the mimicking imposed on women, which becomes a sort of bizarre parody of the role prescribed to women by patriarchy: if women can do nothing but use the language of men, then Irigaray “intends to undo the effects of phallocentric discourse
simply by *overdoing* them” (Moi 140). Psychoanalytic theory seems to put feminism in an inescapable position, but by delving even deeper it is actually able to rescue feminism from that very same pessimistic position in which it has put it.

There is very clear evidence in gender studies that language is sexist, whether it is names of professions or the third person pronoun. However, even as signs of sexism can be found in language, is it necessary to go as far as to say that the patriarchy is language? Lacan never says that the symbolic is language; what he does say is that the symbolic is *like a language*. Thus, whether one agrees with Kristeva’s view on language and women or not, it must be clear that even though she relies on Lacan’s theory, this view of language is her view, and Lacan does not authorize it. In fact, the constant return of desire, the quest for the phallus, is quite egalitarian in its nature since Lacan says that everyone is (socially) castrated, which means that men do not have the phallus any more than women do (Gallop 112). There is a distinction to be made between what the “real phallus” is, as in the phallus linked to the physical penis, and what is the symbolic phallus. The “real phallus” seems to only appear in Lacan’s reading of Freud (Gallop 142) and when the child enters into the symbolic: “This ordeal of the desire of the Other, clinical experience shows us that it is not decisive inasmuch as the subject there learns whether he himself [or she herself] has or does not have a real phallus, but inasmuch as he [or she] learns that the mother does not have it” (Gallop 143). In all other cases, Lacan clearly states that “The phallus in Freudian doctrine is not a fantasy…. Nor is it as much an object….It is even less the organ, penis or clitoris, which it symbolizes” (Gallop 136). It seems that Lacan says that the “real phallus” is only relevant in either its symbolic relation to the organ, or any metonymic reference to it, when explaining the child’s entrance into the symbolic order. In any other situation, we cannot know what the phallus is, except that it is the Urverdrängung – the primary repressed, that which we cannot have, but is forever quilted to our return of desire.
Even if language is not the patriarchy, it has certainly been, in a historical sense, the realm of men. Because language has been the realm of men, the dominant literary images of femaleness have also been defined by men, and women, consequentially, are denied the ability to define their own femaleness (Moi 57). This historical, traditional image of femaleness is, unsurprisingly, one that seems to exist for the sake of men. This woman is symbolically speaking the image of an angel, in which women are portrayed as “passive, docile and above all selfless” (Moi 58). If women do not subscribe to this prescribed image, she instead becomes the unwanted monster and is thus denied her voice. This woman is the woman who refuses to be selfless, who has agency and who has a story to tell. She is “in short, a woman who rejects the submissive role patriarchy has reserved for her” (Moi 58).

Female authors are able to side-step the patriarchy by utilizing the imagery of the angel, monster and the mad-woman which can be used as an anti-patriarchal strategy (Moi 61). Moi writes about how female authors are able to express their own, often controversial views, on gender and still be popular novelists by veiling their ideas in these mad/demonic characters. Since the patriarchy accepts these views as long as they remain veiled, it is plausible to think that, from the patriarchy’s viewpoint, any character or person holding these views would appear demonic or mad. This essay will return to this concept and exemplify a possible interpretation of Leopolda being a kind of gatekeeper utilizing this patriarchal gaze in order to decide who is allowed into the warmth of privileged society.

Having established the usefulness of psychoanalytic theory in a feminist interpretation, it is still necessary to comment further on the intersectional aspects of Marie’s character. Marie is a White Native American, which puts her in a position where she is not fully part of either community (the white majority or the Native American minority). It is arguable, plausible even, to think that race (and class) are contributing factors to Marie’s relentless attempts to pursue her desire or ‘objet petit a’; Marie is uprooted, she exists within both the White and
Native American societies at once, meanwhile being a part of neither of them. Class is important as well: Marie is a Lazarre, whom are considered to be about as low class as you can get within the Native American community in the novel. Because of this, it is likely that these circumstances induce Marie’s willingness to pursue her desire. Cecilia Lindström writes in her essay about prejudice and acculturation in Native American communities that Marie denies her Native American heritage as a child (4) and that she has been “fully acculturated” because she is not a full-blood (7). Lindström is making the argument that it is because of Marie’s displaced racial position that she is putting such an emphasis on her family’s low status (7), and, by extension, it is likely the origin of her extraordinary need to better herself. This essay agrees with Lindström’s position on this part of Marie’s character, but Lindström then goes on to quite one-dimensionally claim that Marie’s search for identity and power is only about her Whiteness.

Her aspiration to become a nun or a saint appears to be about power because even though she looks “white” she lives with and is treated equally to other Native Americans. By joining the convent she believes she will be equal to white people and hence be granted the same power and superiority (Lindström 8).

In this essay, however, Marie’s character is interpreted as multi-faceted and it is argued that the requirement to untangle her actions is to understand that her character consist of gender, race and psychology. This is in line with Ellen Rooney, who argues that feminist theory is often intersectional by nature. “Feminist literary theories are the collective conversations – often contradictory, sometimes heated – of feminist readers concerning the meaning and practice of reading, the intersections of subject formations such as race, class, sexuality and gender and the work of literature” (Rooney 17). Here it is perhaps required to pause and remind the reader that the goal of this essay is to demonstrate the usefulness of applying a
psychoanalytic perspective to a feminist reading of Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine* in order to explain and untangle some of the ambiguity that the narrative otherwise leaves unresolved.

In order to unify these theoretical perspectives and to conclude the theoretical section, it is required that we return to the psychoanalytic concept of the ‘objet petit a’. As previously alluded to, in Lacanian theory, much like in linguistic theory, the signifier and the signified are only tied to each other by the very relation of being the signifier and the signified. There is no link between the ‘objet petit a’ and the object of desire, and therefore, it is impossible to get what you *actually* desire. Fortunately, attaining the ‘objet petit a’ is not important. It is more important, according to Lacan, “that a desire pursue the correct path –that is, its own path—to fulfillment than that it be fulfilled” (Gallop 104). It is impossible to know, per definition, what the ‘objet petit a’ is, but we do know that it will return in various forms until recognized. In Marie’s case, it is possible to argue that we don’t know her ‘objet petit a’, but since we do know that she pursues a position of power and is unable satisfy her desire even as she attains it, we can deduce that it is connected to her social castration.

Although it has been established that the ‘objet petit a’ is unknowable and located somewhere in Marie’s unconscious, this essay agrees with Lindström’s point of view that it is plausible that Marie’s whiteness and displaced racial position likely intensifies or acts as a trigger for Marie’s desire. Marie, being a female Native American character, has the disadvantage of being unable to realize her perceived goal within the Native American community. It is perhaps not only because of her race, as Lindström argues, but also because of her gender that she decides to distance herself from the Native American community. Donovan argues that the 1951 Indian act that classified indigenous people into different groups were less advantageous for women as depending on the choice of marriage partner, the status of the women would either disappear or be reinforced (Donovan 19-20). Ellen Rooney agrees that colonization played a role in the gender inequalities in the Native American
community. She describes the belief that the spiritual realm was left intact by colonialism and that the spiritual realm came to be identified with women because of incidental Native American nationalism. “What resulted from this nationalist reasoning was a firm association of women with the spiritual, cultural and private realms. Indian nationalists deftly invoked prevalent patriarchal gender inequalities to resist colonial interference in the intimate reaches of “native” lives” (Rooney 222). Because of this postcolonial position of the association of the female with the private sphere, Marie is unable to realize her desire of claiming a high status position within the Native American community. Having recognized and demonstrated that these three theoretical perspectives are not mutually exclusive and are not only compatible but often necessary (as Rooney stated) and add to the critical reading of a novel rather than detract from it, it is now time to get into the analysis of the novel.

Analysis

This section will consist of the analysis of Marie’s character which is divided into the sections of ‘Saint Marie’ and ‘Marie Kashpaw’. The ‘Saint Marie’ section is named after the chapter with the same name and analyses the part of the story where Marie aspires to become a saint, the ‘Marie Kashpaw’ section analyses the part of the story after Marie marries Nector Kashpaw. Before diving into that analysis it is probably beneficial to reiterate the most essential theoretical terminology. Race is one of them, as this paper acknowledges the likely contribution and amplifying effect that race has on Marie’s actions. The other theoretical terminology that will appear is ‘the phallus’ as a metaphor of the ‘objet petit a’ or desire, the patriarchy as the primary force that hinders Marie because of her gender, and the demon/angel dichotomy as an example of the “phallic gaze”.

Marie’s journey starts out as she wishes to leave the reservations behind and discover herself in a different way. As mentioned before, Lindström argues that the reason why Marie
does this is because of her race (4, 7), and there is support for that in the novel as Marie claims that: “There was no use in trying to ignore me any longer. I was going up there on the hill with the black robe women. They were not any lighter than me. I was going up there to pray as good as they could” (Erdrich 43). This passage implies that she wants to become one with white society and prove that she can be as good as any of the people in the white majority culture because she too is white. However, if Marie’s whiteness was the reason why she could not be a part of the Native American culture, then marrying a Native American man (which she later does) should grant her the status that she aspired to within the Native Indian community (Rooney 222). It is not the case either, that she believes that because of her whiteness she is not able to marry a Native American man. On the contrary she believes it to be a boon to her as she believes she has a greater chance when it comes to finding a partner because of her lighter skin tone and claims that she can choose any man on the reservation because of this (8). Marie’s acculturation can therefore not be the only reason why Marie decided to become a nun, but since she chooses to pursue that path anyway, it is reasonable to conclude that her goal is not marriage, and therefore not to assimilate into the Native American community either, but rather power. Marie not only aspires to become a nun, but a saint (Erdrich 43). In conclusion, then, perhaps race is just an amplifying factor which increases her desire to reach an empowered position in society, but is not the origin of that desire. As for what the actual origin is, it is unknowable; it is something in her unconscious, in the ‘objet petit a’. But we do know it is significant; Marie is neither satisfied with becoming a nun, nor with becoming a Kashpaw, or a mother, which we will return to later. She always wants more, and that is perhaps partly because she is white and because she is female.

If Marie’s goal is power, then she is unable to reach that power as a female within the Native American community, as females are bound to serve in the domestic sphere. Perhaps
that is why she starts her journey up the hill to become a saint, to find a different path to that power, but she soon realizes the naivety of her decision (Erdrich 43). The church acts as a bastion of patriarchal power, as it is one of its oldest institutions and it is hierarchal by nature. To climb that hierarchy must be very satisfying and appealing to Marie, but patriarchy is cunning and allows no-one to climb its hierarchy unless they submit to its values. This is very much reminiscent of the Demon/Angel/Mad Woman symbolism, which was discussed in the theoretical background section, where a woman is unable to express herself because any ideas that are not in agreement with patriarchy’s view of women are immediately invalidated. In this sense, the church and patriarchal society work nearly exactly the same: to try to rise in rank as a woman is looked upon unfavorably, as women are supposed to be submissive and supportive by nature. Only as a submissive woman is a woman able to rise in rank, only by becoming the angel, can she be accepted. It is under this pretext that Sister Leopolda, the gatekeeper of patriarchy, wants Marie to join the church so that she can inspect her and make sure that she is an Angel. “You ever see a walleye strike so bad the lure is practically out its back end before you reel it in? That is what they done with me. … It’s the same attempt as Sister Leoplda made to get me in her clutch” (Erdrich 44). Marie takes the bait to join the church, but immediately, Leopolda is there to inspect her with her phallic gaze. Marie wonders where Leopolda comes from, and she thinks to herself “perhaps she was just sent around to test her Sister’s faith, here and there, like the spot-checker in a factory” (Erdrich 45). Leopolda’s role is exactly that. She has internalized patriarchy, and she is able to keep her position of power and act out almost with impunity under the premise that she acts as the gatekeeper for patriarchy, ensuring that no woman gets to rise in position unless they are first socially castrated (they become submissive and docile). Angels are accepted, Demons and Mad Women are not.

A slight tangent here is that it may be necessary to acknowledge the possibility of the
alternative reading of ‘the dark one’, which is what Leopolda expresses that she sees in Marie, with that of traditional Native American culture. Nina Behr, in her interpretation of Marie and of *Love Medicine* comments on how the reader is “cued to think that the story will unfold within a biblical framework, easily connecting it to ‘Saint Mary.’ However, as with many other chapters, the biblical material is juxtaposed with encoded data from the American Indian shamanic tradition” (3).

Leopolda sees Satan in Marie (Erdrich 45), which is, according to this interpretation, a metaphor for Marie’s desire. Leopolda, in her role as gatekeeper, recognizes Marie’s desire, that which women are not supposed to have; to rise quickly, a demonic desire. “You’re like I was” she says “You don’t have a shred of devotion for god. Only wild cold dark lust. I know it. I know how you feel. I can see the beast” (52). Leopolda always carries Phallic objects – another metaphor for the power of the patriarchy – which are used to discipline the nuns as they exhibit traits that Leopolda does not favor. In the beginning this phallic object takes the shape of a pole (Erdrich 46) and later it becomes a spoon. With these objects, as she disciplines the nuns, she symbolically castrates them, making sure they adhere to her rules, the rules of the patriarchy. In the first major incident Marie has with Leopolda, Leopolda throws her pole at a closet and subsequently locks Marie in it. At this moment, Marie is “afraid of Leopolda’s pole for the first time”, she feels as if the hook of the pole is able to find her at any time, that it could aim for the beat of her heart, at this moment, “I was nothing”, she says (Erdrich 47). Here Marie recognizes that Leopolda’s phallic gaze is able to find her desire, her aspiration to become something within the patriarchal society, at any time, and that Leopolda’s pole is able to go into her heart and rip that desire out. Leopolda is able to socially castrate her, and she fears that.

As Marie recognizes Leopolda’s power and persistence in hindering her, she plots a tactic to deal with her. This tactic is two-fold; in part, it is that of mimicry. If the tactic of patriarchy
is to make women submissive, then Marie was going to mimic that strategy and become so submissive that she becomes a saint. “The real way to overcome Leopolda was this: I’d get to heaven first. And then, when I saw her coming, I’d shut the gate. She’d be out! That is why, besides the bowing and the scraping I’d be dealt, I wanted to sit on the altar as a saint” (Erdrich 48). This strategy also entails cleverly submitting to the patriarchy by becoming the Angel that it desires her to become, but then from a position of power eventually enabling her to fight back. It is a common feminist strategy popularized by the feminist reading of Victorian novels called the *Mad Woman in the Attic*. For Marie, the strategy is successful, although it takes some effort to convince Leopolda that she is reformed. First, she has to endure being scolded by hot water, but as she does that and keeps praying, Leopolda seems to be convinced (53). Paradoxically, however, as Marie becomes the Angel in Leopolda’s eyes she also loses her sense of self. Of course, it is not the self as in some fixed structure, but if the repressed desires that return in different forms in the conscious are again repressed, then that will lead to the sensation of the loss of self. For Marie, this feeling is expressed as follows: “She’d gotten past me with her poker and I would never be a saint. I despaired. I felt I had no inside voice, nothing to direct me, no darkness, no Marie” (Erdrich 54). Marie is suffering both physical and mental pain by becoming what the patriarchy desires. It is hard. Marie’s mind wavers. She might not be able to endure, she wants to give up, but she cannot. No matter what she tells herself, she is unable to give up and leave (Erdrich 56). Here, it appears that Marie is unable to endure Leopolda’s sadistic torture much longer, certainly not long enough to become a saint, as she concluded on the last page. Ergo, if she is unable to actually surpass Leopolda in the patriarchal hierarchy to get her revenge, she would at least get it symbolically. As that moment approaches Marie knows something was going to happen, but it was not planned, exactly, since it happened more quickly than she would have thought (56). Marie was going to use the trust that she had earned playing the Angel, but instead of
becoming a saint, she was going to kick Leopolda into the oven, and that would be enough for her to be satisfied and able to leave. Ironically as her attempt fails, and Leopolda pierces her with the fork and knocks her out with the poker, this is when Marie manages her goal to become a saint (Erdrich 57). Even though Marie cannot quite tell what is going on as she regains her consciousness she feels that “it seemed entirely natural. It was me” (Erdrich 58). It feels entirely natural to Marie because it is the culmination of her desire to claim a position of power within patriarchal society. Marie had managed to become a saint which gave her enough satisfaction to leave, but despite her brief victory, she had, of course, not really become a saint. She had managed to hit Leopolda back once, which felt good, but in the end she was still the one who had been knocked out and castrated by Leopolda’s poker; an incident which is significant and will be discussed again in light of the analysis of the next section.

In becoming Marie Kashpaw, one might think that Marie was content with briefly becoming saint Marie and that she was now willing to let bygones be bygones. That story does not explain why she feels the need to climb that mountain again, eventually, or why she has to adopt all the children that she adopts. It is more likely that Marie realized after being castrated by Leopolda that rising through the church was not possible for her, so she had to find a different way. As an Indian American woman Marie’s choices were limited however. Her only real choices were to become a mother, to become a nun, or to become a prostitute like June. Since becoming a nun was no longer possible and the idea of becoming a prostitute did not seem very appealing, Marie was going to become a wife and a mother. “Zelda was older in age but not in mind; that is, she did not know what she wanted yet, whereas my mind had made itself up once I walked down the hill” (Erdrich148). She did not want just anyone either, but Nector Kashpaw who was very good looking and a Kashpaw. This is important, because Marie was not content to just become a wife; she had to be the wife of a high status
man. For Marie, it was not enough to just become a mother either. She had to become the best mother. The babies were all over the house, “lost track of which were ours and which Marie had taken in” (126), and Marie did not stop taking babies in either, it continued all along (134). This overcompensation is, by now, characteristic of Marie, but there is no real explanation provided for why she does it. The only conceivable explanation is that since she was unable to compete on the same terms as a man in patriarchal society, she instead competes as a woman in it and the criterion on which women are judged in patriarchal society is often how good mothers they are, or how many children they have. It is, essentially, the return of the same desire that made her want to become Saint Marie. Meldan Tanrisal supports this view, as she writes about mothering and relationships in Lousie Erdrich’s novels: “among the different types of mothers in the novels of Erdrich, Marie Kashpaw in Love Medicine, is the “super mother”. More than any other character, she is both biological and adoptive mother” (Tanrisal 4). It is also important to Marie to make Nector successful because besides being judged by the number of children a woman has, she also derives her status from her husband. The more successful he is, the more successful she is, and because Marie is still determined to claim a high status position in society it is not enough to just marry a Kashpaw, she is also going to make him the chairman of the whole tribe. Even though Marie becomes a successful mother and a wife, perhaps the most successful in all of the Native American reservations, she is still not satisfied. “There was surely no reason I should go up that hill again” (Erdrich 146) she thinks to herself. She does not know the reason why she has to ascend the hill to go and visit sister Leopolda again, but it is the same reason why she is not satisfied. She was socially castrated by Leopolda, and the ‘objet petit a’, the signifier of her hidden desire, had not been satisfied and therefore, had to return (Gallop 103-104). It was not revenge that she wanted, although the idea had reoccurred many times in her mind. Instead, Marie claims, she eventually pitied the hateful old nun (Erdrich 146). Still,
Marie could not forgive Leopolda for having castrated her. “I knew the truth. She had to pray harder than the others because the Devil still loved her far better than any on that hill” (Erdrich 147). It is not the devil, as in evil, that possesses her, but the devil as in desire, the desire to attain a position of power as a woman. Just as Leopolda is able to recognize the desire within Marie, Marie is also able to recognize that Leopolda has attained her position in order to pursue her wicked desire: “I knew the devil drove her toward grace with his persistence” (Erdrich 147). Leopolda is not praying to conceal her wickedness, but to conceal her desire, for the only way for a woman to be prosperous within patriarchy is to submit to it. She is rewarded for her persistence, “There were some who touched the hem of her garment to get blessed as if she were the saint” and “There were those who kept the gravel stones she bled on” (Erdrich 147). But Marie knows the truth; she knows that the Devil loved Leopolda more than anyone, more than herself. So it hardly seems fair that she should be the one castrated. This is why, although she is not aware of it yet, she has to confront Leopolda to reclaim herself. Marie says that “I realized another reason I would visit Leopolda not just to see her, but to let her see me” (Erdrich 148). She wishes for Leopolda to see her because she wants her to see that even though Leopolda castrated her and stopped her from pursuing her desire through patriarchal society, she still found a different path and became successful in it. “Now I’d let her see where my devotion had gone and where it had got me. For by now I was solid class. Nector was tribal chairman. My children were well behaved, and they were educated too” (Erdrich 148).

After Marie ascends the mountain and confronts Leopolda, she tells her about her children and their well-being. She tells her of her husband being the tribal chairman and how he meets with a senator and sometimes goes to Washington. As Leopolda responds to Marie, it would have been expected that she would affirm Marie’s position as successfully assimilated into patriarchal society, but she doesn't. Briefly, she makes a slip and comments that Marie’s
husband ‘has become successful, it sounds like, not her’ (154). It is unclear why she makes
this slip, maybe she just does not want Marie to feel the gratification of her affirmation,
maybe it is jealousy, or maybe it is what she really thinks. Regardless, it is not in line with her
position as a patriarchal figurehead, since a representation of patriarchy would certainly be
pleased by her current domestic lifestyle. However, as Marie insists that it is her work. “He is
what he is because I made him” (154), Leopolda regains herself and concurs. Although she
might have liked to, as an extension of patriarchal thought, she cannot deny Marie’s success
as a mother and a wife. Marie continues by saying that “I quit that when I walked down the
hill. Dust, it was dust. I saw that clear. The meek will inherit the earth!” (Erdrich 155). Marie
is talking about her aspirations to become a saint, to be worshipped at the expense of others,
to claim a position of power. Instead, she would refrain from doing so to the benefit of others,
her children. The meek shall inherit the earth. Leopolda has not given up her desire and is not
interested in it: “I do not want the earth” she answers. But despite Marie supposedly having
given up her desire to reach a position of power by herself, she still ascended the mountain for
a reason. The reason is that she is still not quite content, although she is not aware of why she
is not since it is in her unconscious. In Leopolda’s chambers it suddenly occurs to her, she is
still not certain what the ‘objet petit a’ is, but she recognizes the signified of her desire. “Then
I knew what I had come there for. It came to me with the touch of iron. I wanted that spoon”
(156). The spoon that had once struck her unconscious, had castrated her, is a metaphor of the
phallus and of Leopolda’s patriarchal power over her, and only by taking it could she reclaim
herself and be whole again. “I wanted that spoon because .. it was the iron poker that she’d
marked me with, flattened. It had power. It was like her soul boiled down and poured in a
mold and hardened. That was the shape of it” (156). Marie recognizes that the poker and the
spoon are the same, both phallic objects, and that they have power. The shape, as she
emphasizes, is that of Leopolda’s soul, and her soul, the real Leopolda, in the unconscious, is
that of desire and greed: the will to be powerful and to dominate. By claiming the spoon, Marie would take her power, and by doing so, she could be satisfied with the status position that she had gotten through her marriage.

When discussing the Phallus as a symbol and as the real organ, Gallop writes that “here the conjunction is signed between desire inasmuch as the phallic signifier is its mark, and the threat or the nostalgia of the lack-in-having” (145). The Phallus symbolizes the penis (Gallop 136), but that is its only connection to it. Here, the spoon is the mark of the phallic signifier, of Marie’s desire and the threat is ‘the lack-in-having’ social power. Interestingly enough, just as the spoon is a metaphoric phallic object, which was used to castrate Marie, so would reclaiming the spoon, metonymically speaking, be able to restore her social power. This is interesting because Luce Irigaray, for one, in her criticism or psychoanalysis as phallocentric, accuses it of privileging the metaphor over metonymy. The metaphor is associated more with the male and metonymy more with female (and fluids) (Gallop 127). Metaphorically speaking, the spoon symbolizes the phallus which castrates Marie, but metonymically it symbolizes the social power that she is able to reclaim. The metaphor is not privileged, just as Leopolda cannot be in a position of power without subjects to worship her (the nuns), the metaphor cannot exist without metonymy. “metonymy is there from the beginning, and it is what makes the metaphor possible” (Gallop 124). Gallop concludes her chapter by stating that there are both metaphoric and metonymic readings of the phallus and that both of them have their own narcissistic pathology of interpretation. Preferring either over the other, would be an amputated, unipolar schema (Gallop 131-132). Marie never manages to get a hold of the spoon, for as she reaches for her metonymic interpretation of the phallic symbol, Leopolda clings to her metaphoric one, and insists on attempting to re-castrate Marie by striking her with the spoon (Erdrich 157). As both of them fail their struggle of interpretation and sit in silence (158), perhaps the conclusion to draw is that of the equality of a metonymical and
metaphorical interpretation.

Regardless of Marie’s inability to get the spoon, it was not likely actually getting it that was important, but rather recognizing the need to get the spoon. According to Lacan, the way in which desire returns in different forms shows that desire is being inefficient. If the goal was only the satisfaction of the desire, then there would be more efficient ways in which it could achieve it. Instead, Lacan argues that desire behaves in this roundabout fashion because it is more important to it to be recognized rather than to find immediate satisfaction. Lacan calls this idea the primacy of recognition: “primacy of recognition over the attainment of the goal desired. In order for the desire to be recognizable, it must pursue its aim only in its own fashion. It is more important that a desire pursue the correct path – that is, its own path – to fulfillment than that it be fulfilled” (Gallop 103-104). Gallop continues to say that “repetition, that basic fact of psychoanalysis which Freud attempted to puzzle out in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, is the effect not so much of the frustration of a desire but the lack of recognition of a desire (Gallop 104). In light of this interpretation, Marie’s inability to be satisfied and her need to re-ascend the mountain to confront Leopolda is not because she has not attained what she desired (the spoon), but because she has not recognized her desire.

As Marie returns home, she finds Nector’s letter that he put under the sugar jar and she becomes angry, of course, even desperate, if only for a while. Marie thinks to herself: “The nun was clever. She knew where my weakness was” (Erdrich 164). That weakness would be that of any woman under patriarchy: even though she could make her way through domestic labor and through her husband, he was still the breadwinner and he had the power to leave if he wanted to. Even so, Marie “would not care if Marie Kashpaw had to wear an old shroud. I would not care if Lulu Lamartine ended up the wife of the chairman of the Chippewa Tribe. I’d still be Marie. Marie. Star of the sea” (Erdrich 165). Taking Marie’s words at face value, it seems that her recognizing her desire to not be socially castrated has helped her reconcile with
herself and she now feels that money or status is not as important as it used to be. There was still a part of Marie that wanted Nector to stay, of course, and that part of Marie came up with an ingenious plot: she would put the letter back, as if she had never found it, but she would put it under the salt jar instead of the sugar jar, so as to make Nector forever uncertain if she had actually read it, and forgiven him, or if he just remembered incorrectly where he had put it (Erdrich 165). This is also a symbolic moment of the power struggle in Nector and Marie’s relationship. Nector was the one who created the two metaphors of the salt jar for Marie and the sugar jar for Lulu as he decided to leave, but Marie would be the one to gain control of those metaphors. She would make it so that Nector would be unable to ask her about whether she had read the letter or not, but still be forced to think that she might have, and that he is only allowed to stay with her because of her grace. “So I did for Nector Kashpaw what I learned from the nun. I put my hand through what scared him. I held it out there for him. And when he took it with all the strength of his arms, I pulled him in” (Erdrich 166). Marie’s experience with Leopolda, her recognition of her desire, has made her grow. By not becoming Leopolda, she has actually gained her power: the power to ensnare Nector. Just like she was once unable to leave Leopolda’s clutches, so too, Nector would now be unable to leave her embrace. Marie has recaptured Nector, but has she overcome her desire? Moi writes, in summarizing Lacan, that the unconscious is structured like a language and that “for Lacan, desire ‘behaves’ in precisely the same way as language: it moves ceaselessly from object to object or from signifier to signifier, and will never find full and present satisfaction just as meaning can never be seized as full presence” (Moi 101). It is not, then, a matter of overcoming or fulfilling one’s desire, since desire is an endless return of the unconscious to a new signified. In the words of Paul Fry: “we can never get what we want, but we can get what we need, as long as we try” (Jacques Lacan in Theory). Marie seems to have gotten what she needed by realizing the object of her desire and thus adhering to the rule of the primacy of
recognition. Even if she were to lose Nector and all the status that she has gotten through him, she would not be bothered by it, as she’d still be Marie star of the sea.

Conclusion

Leopolda always saw the dark one in Marie, which has been interpreted as a projection of her own desire: in order to reach her current position, Leopolda had to be ambitious, she had to have the desire to rise in rank, but she also had to pay her dues to get there. She sees herself in Marie, “You’re like I was,” (Erich 52). “The dark one” is metaphorically the Demon/Mad woman which is represented by “male traits” in a female character such as ambition in place of submissiveness and passivity. Recognizing this same desire in Marie is unforgivable to Leopolda and she is determined to make Marie submit in order to allow her to get anywhere. This is likely the reason why Marie has to become a saint, because she has to prove to Leopolda, and by extension the patriarchy, that she is able to be successful within it. It is because of this hidden desire that Marie is unable to be satisfied, even when she claims the position of power and status that she thinks she desires. Peter Barry’s summary of how the letter in the purloined letter symbolizes the unconscious is a great parallel to how this essay argues that Marie’s unconscious affects Marie: “the content of the unconscious is, by definition, unknowable, but everything we do is affected by it: we can guess at the nature of this content by observing its effects, just as we can deduce the general nature of the letter’s contents from the anxiety it generates” (Barry 112).

Marie knows that she has to climb the mountain to become a saint when she is fourteen, but she does not know why. She thinks that it is because of her self-empowerment and that it is because she has to prove her similar value as a white person, but it is not. It only becomes clear as Marie has to pursue a different route, to become a Kashpaw, that she is not satisfied with merely becoming empowered, although she still does not realize why. Only as she
eventually climbs the mountain for a second time to visit Leopolda, it becomes clear to her why she has to climb it. Even though she reached the social position of her desire, Leopolda had already symbolically socially castrated her, disabling her from satisfying her desire. First, she had to regain what was missing, to mend the social castration, which could only be done by taking the object of castration: the phallic symbol. Even though Marie fails to get the symbol, she avoids being re-castrated again, and, more importantly, recognizes her desire. Because of the rule of the primacy of recognition, recognizing her desire is more important than satisfying it so Marie concludes that she is no longer in need of the status and position that she has reached through her husband.

Marie is still living under the oppression of patriarchy, of course, since she would not be able to attain the social position that she used to desire even if she tried. Yet, by recognizing her desire Marie has seemingly enabled herself to become content with her current position and to find a different path in life. Linnea Hallström, in her postcolonial interpretation of motherhood, urges the readers to be careful of conflating western ideals with the ideals of other cultures. She argues that Marie is not just a mother who takes care of her children in a patriarchal sense, where the wife is supposed to take care of the household and the husband is the provider, but that she takes a central position within the whole community and becomes a “super mother” of that community (Hallström 9-10). Perhaps that is what is meant by finally becoming Marie. Marie, star of the sea.
Works cited:


