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Love, Power and Respect:  
Marie's Empowerment in Erdrich's *Love Medicine*

*Nina Behr*  
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**Supervisor: Helena Wahlström**  
**Examiner: Maria Mårdberg**

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## I. Introduction

In her novel *Love Medicine*, Louise Erdrich writes about Native American life on a reservation during a period of fifty years, 1934-1983. The novel takes place on the Turtle Mountain Reservation of the Chippewa tribe in North Dakota. It can be read as a separate novel but also as one in a cycle of six.<sup>1</sup> Although it is a fictive story, critics<sup>2</sup> say it is a very authentic narrative about Native American life.

In interviews, Louise Erdrich mentions how she is of both Catholic and shamanic belief but chooses the parts of each that she likes. Erdrich says, “I wear the holy medals, and really enjoy all the superstitions, but I think some of the strictures are nonsense. Instead I try to follow the Ojibwe tenets of what makes a good person” (Qtd in Farry, 9). In *Love Medicine* this cultural multiplicity is flourishing throughout the novel. The focus of this essay will be on Marie Lazarre/Kashpaw, the character Erdrich uses to show how a life might look when juggling two paradigms. Marie is a mixed blood who struggles with the issues of religion and cultural acceptance. However, in her search for identity and respect it is obvious that it is not easy to fully separate the two systems of belief, or to negotiate them.

The theme of religious and cultural conflict between the Native American tradition and Catholicism is central to Erdrich’s text. *Love Medicine* contains a constant symbolic mixture of both paradigms,<sup>3</sup> especially the chapter “Saint Marie.” Critic Catherine Rainwater points it out as an example of where the reader is cued to think that the story will unfold within a biblical framework, easily connecting it to ‘Saint Mary.’ However, as in many other chapters the biblical material is “juxtaposed with encoded data from the American Indian shamanic tradition” (Rainwater, 165). When Erdrich uses ambiguous symbols it is important that the reader has some knowledge of the Catholic and shamanic belief to make the connection. In the

<sup>1</sup> *The Beet Queen* 1986, *Tracks* 1988, *The Bingo Palace* 1994, *Tales of Burning Love* 1996, *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* 2001.

<sup>2</sup> See Dennis Walsh. For more critics see, *Catholicism in Louise Erdrich’s Love Medicine and Tracks*, 107.

<sup>3</sup> “Paradigm” is used here to denote a belief system that encompasses the notions of living, faith, culture and behavior within ideologies and religions. Often talked about is paradigm shift meaning going from one state to another, as in religion, politics et cetera.

same way a reader with knowledge of Christianity can connect saints to the Catholic belief, one with knowledge of shamanism can interpret the Dark One as a Native American figure. However, the symbolism is not superficial and to be able to interpret it fully one might need more religious education.

To understand the issues of culture and religion it is important to know how the actual situation of this society came about. The colonization of North America gave Europeans the possibility to expand their land and also the opportunity to live their life according to their Christian belief. As the United States formed as a country the immigrants became a stronger majority who established laws. An example is the law that removed Native Americans from their original lands onto Indian territories or reservations.<sup>4</sup> They were seen as a nuisance on attractive land and therefore relocated with a promise to be left undisturbed. However, the Puritans and Catholics saw it as their mission to convert the natives. In the eyes of the settlers, they were seen as heathens and Christianity would make them civilized. Native Americans were exposed to a rapid change of values often said to have had traumatic consequences until today.<sup>5</sup> For example, they had a new language forced upon them, along with the pressure to forget the old. Furthermore, with schools, education became formal in a way they had never experienced it before. There were also the new notions of politics and ownership of land. In a Western society these ideas are what make a country function, and to give people guidelines and structure in society. On the other hand, what has become historically famous is all the blood that was spilt due to these notions.

However, the conversion to Christianity in the Northern regions of the country was not as violent as in many other areas. There, the white settlers and Native Americans had a certain mutual understanding and acceptance. Whites were mostly French fur traders and marriages

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<sup>4</sup> In 1830 the U.S government adopted the Indian Removal Act. Encyclopedia of North American Indians. 2005-06-18 <http://college.hmco.com/history/readerscomp/naind/html/na-016600-indianterrit.htm>

<sup>5</sup> See Allen.

between the two cultures were common.<sup>6</sup> As the land became united, more immigrants arrived and moved to already populated areas. In the North, it was the Catholic faith that became a majority rather than the Puritan – Protestant one that dominated on the coast. Consequently, the shamanic tradition had to reform itself because it became a minority practice. In North Dakota where Erdrich's novel is set, conversion was a smooth process that occurred during a long period of time and without violence. That was then, but still today the Native Americans live between two paradigms trying in many ways to negotiate the two and to find a new religiousness. Native American culture still has its roots of tradition but is redefined to fit the larger society.<sup>7</sup>

The theoretical angle that will be used in this study is a socioreligious perspective. According to this perspective society shapes and molds a person and creates an identity to which he or she feels at home. Every society has norms, for example, in ways of talking properly, dressing right and having similar cultural beliefs. These issues are often based on the ideas of a certain religion. The religious beliefs one grows up with affects a person's world view the most and is not easily erased or changed. The individual itself also has a strong influence on religion and society since people shape societies and reform religions to fit their current needs.

The character Marie Lazarre is caught between two paradigms where she does not fully belong to either of them. She is born a mixed blood and her family's tribal identity is that of being "dirty and lowlife."<sup>8</sup> Although she is raised on the reservation as a Native American she is also looked down upon because her father is white. However, she does not fit into the white community either where she is considered Native American. In her search for acceptance and respect she tries to redefine her identity to be empowered. She wants to prove that she is not a "white lowlife nobody" but is as good as anybody else. She is also driven by

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<sup>6</sup> See Maristuen-Rodakowski

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Erdrich and McGuire.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Erdrich's *Love Medicine* 63, 89.

her loneliness and need to be loved, thus it is also a search to find self-worth. Hence, Marie does not only try to handle a cultural and religious conflict but also a psychological one.

The question is in what ways Marie searches for love, power and respect through cultural and religious acts. The word power is not used here in the sense of controlling others but rather to be empowered.<sup>9</sup> By using the ideas within sociology of religion to support the analysis, this essay will hopefully offer a new perspective to the character Marie different from previous critical views.

Marie tries out different strategies for empowerment as we follow her in the convent, in her marriage to Nector Kashpaw and in her life as a mother. It is my intention to show that through cultural and religious identities she accomplishes her goals and becomes empowered. In the beginning of *Love Medicine* she wants to be accepted as a white girl who is a good Catholic. However, as the story evolves in the novel she turns away from her Catholic belief and becomes an active member of the tribe. Again, these issues concerning Marie will also be analyzed in relation to the ideas within sociology of religion.

### Sociology of Religion

Sociology of religion is a part of sociological theory. Defining sociology of religion becomes immediately problematical. A major problem is not only how to define 'religion' but also 'society.' One cannot say that a religion is where people worship a God because that would leave out religions like Buddhism. However, what critics generally agree on is that 'religion' is what most often consists of a belief in something greater and more powerful than a human being. It is often something that is or has a part of everything around us but is not earthly or concrete in form. Furthermore, a religion often contains rituals and ethical ideas. The point is that there is no list of things on how to define 'religion' and the same goes for 'society'. For this essay I will consider both Catholicism and Native American shamanism as religions. The

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<sup>9</sup> See Longman for reference and difference between power-to verses power-over, 1280

Catholics have a God, rituals and saints while the Native Americans have a belief in the Great Spirit and other deities. However, spirituality within the two paradigms is different where Native Americans see a human and everything around as part of one spiritual context. Christianity instead links human fate to God and puts all power and will in his hands, thereby formulating a more external kind of spirituality.

Sociology of religion looks upon the relationship between religion and society. One of the fields of research investigates the interaction between groups and religion. Society shapes religion to fit its needs, and religion with its structure shapes society. As times change, so do also the religious ways and interpretations of canons like the Holy Bible. Modern society creates new ways of practicing religion and also reforms it to fit into the modern lifestyle. Within sociology of religion it is interesting, as Meredith McGuire<sup>10</sup> says, to discuss what religion is and what religion does. The individual can find an identity by belonging to a religion, which creates a sense of togetherness. She quotes, “Religion represents an important tie between the individual and the larger social group, both as a *basis of association* and as an *expression of shared meanings*” (Greeley, qtd. in McGuire, 27, emphases added).

A religion cannot only give answers to existential questions about life and death but can also be a guide to leading life correctly. Each religion has its own set of rules on how to act and interact with society. Furthermore, it is often important to be part of a certain religion and share those ideas in order to be accepted in it. People that do not fully fit into a certain norm are often apprehended as odd, thus to be accepted can be difficult.

However, only sharing the notion of religion is not enough because the shared notion of society is equally important. For example, a European Catholic is different from a Latino Catholic because of their different societies, although they share the same religion. In a society identities are also based on familial or ethnic belonging, and on speaking a certain language. A person's education and economical status also define one's place. Consequently religion and

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<sup>10</sup> Professor of Sociology and Anthropology.

society work together as one, often in ways that make it difficult to separate the two, in order to give a person a whole identity.

There are certain critical periods in a person's life when religion can become more important than other ones. Such times are for example: childhood, adolescence, marriage, and procreation.<sup>11</sup> These periods are also those that will be looked upon concerning Marie's empowerment. Throughout, sociology of religion will be the theory used in this essay for analyzing the character Marie and her relation to religion and her place in society.

## II. Analysis

### Saint Marie

As a fourteen-year-old girl Marie's initial search for identity is amongst the Catholic nuns in the Sacred Heart Convent. At this age she rejects the fact that she has much Native American blood. By joining the convent, her whiteness is emphasized and an identity is established within the white society. She wants to prove that she is as good a person as they are and is the best Catholic among them. Marie thinks to herself:

No reservation girl had ever prayed so hard. 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. Because I don't have that much Indian blood. And they never thought they'd have a girl from the reservation as a saint they'd have to kneel to. But they'd have me. (*LM*, 43)

In her attempts at being a good Catholic, Marie devotes herself to prayers that seem to go overboard. Words of affirmation make her strongly believe that she will become a saint as she envisions herself as a golden statue.

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<sup>11</sup> See McGuire, 54. Additional periods are old age and dying.

Clearly, Marie knows that the uttermost respect would be gained through sainthood. In the Catholic white society it is the highest achievement with a status that is looked upon with not only acceptance but also with admiration. Her goal to become a saint could be described as purposeful, but no clear plan is presented. Her spitefulness and stubbornness also appear to be stronger than her actual belief in God. In the chapter "Saint Marie," which is told by her later in life, she describes her young self as ignorant.

Since Marie is not born into the white and Catholic society it could mean difficulty for her to identify with it. Not only does her ethnicity make her different but her way of acting, talking and general apprehension of the world, perhaps also signal that she has a Native American identity. Marie cannot change the color of her skin but she can take on the role of being a good Christian. However, as she does her best to reject her native heritage, her world view is still shamanic. Marie does not comprehend that her world view is actually as much Native American as her physical appearance and actions. Therefore she does not reflect on it being something to change but instead she incorporates it with her new knowledge of religion. For example, as critic Louis Owens points out, while on her way to the convent she thinks in terms of her tribal language Ojibwa, when contemplating Jesus.

The easiest way of entering the white community is to take part in its institutional structure, like churches and convents. These institutions give people a stronger group identity and a sense of belonging. However, to go to church or join the convent is an easy way to belong without truly believing. As it seems, Marie is not very religious, nor has she a strong faith that she is driven by. "I had the mail-order Catholic soul you get in a girl raised out in the bush, whose only thought is getting into town" (*LM*, 44). Obviously, the primary wish is not to go to church but to come in to town where the shops and people are. In telling us about her fascination with Sunday events in town, Marie incidentally concludes this account: "And of course we went to church" (*LM*, 44). This is an example of how little the Catholic religion is a

part of her life. It is more of a necessity to get what she really wants, a means to an end. Marie longs for a respected identity and a sense of belonging, and if that means being a good Catholic through the use of rituals, it is easy to take on that role. She says herself that her “soul went cheap” (*LM*, 44). Conveniently in her search for power and respect within the white society, the convent was at the time the most powerful place a woman could be at. It was a place with only women who also had some authority and respect in the outer world.

Marie’s time in the convent is also a period in her life when she is transitioning from childhood into puberty. Sociology of religion sees childhood as a stable time in a person’s life, when the child has its set place in the family and group. It is also a period when the religious ways and culture of that group are taken-for-granted. Adolescence means detachment from old ways and identity and the need to take on a new role.<sup>12</sup> “Childhood is important in establishing identity and group belonging in a general way, but the transition to adulthood means passage to a new identity involving responsibility, knowledge, ritual and symbolic roles, and acceptance into adult circles” (McGuire, 61). Symbolically Marie’s entry into the convent is also her way into puberty. Thus, initiation rites are not only for the Catholic Church but symbolically also into adulthood.

Marie’s conversion to Catholicism can be seen as a common situation of teenage rebellion. According to McGuire it is often a youth’s way to handle the crisis in becoming an adult. “An obvious example of this rebellion is the youth who joins a religious group that appears diametrically opposed to his or her childhood religion” (McGuire, 62). Since shamanism can be seen as opposed to Catholicism this could be one of the reasons for Marie to rebel. She approaches the new religion with total devotion by praying harder than anyone, giving it more than a hundred percent of her attention. McGuire also explains that “these adolescent strategies also can show as a fanatical adherence” (McGuire, 62). Again, Marie does not only convert, she also makes a radical social change by joining the convent.

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<sup>12</sup> See McGuire

Consequently, it does not only change her social identity but it also affects her on a psychological level.

Satan or the Dark One.

In the convent Marie becomes the protégé of Sister Leopolda, a fanatical nun who shows her strong belief by torturing herself and Marie. Sister Leopolda believes she sees Satan in Marie, who then suffers the consequences of Sister Leopolda's attempts to eliminate him from Marie's mind and body. Even though she is tortured and tested by Sister Leopolda, she trusts the nun who seems to have something that Marie looks up to and strives for. She describes it as a love/hate relationship: "But I wanted Sister Leopolda's heart. And here was the thing: sometimes I wanted her heart in love and admiration. Sometimes. And sometimes I wanted her heart to roast on a black stick" (*LM*, 48-49). While Sister Leopolda seeks the love of God and Jesus, Marie on the other hand appears to do everything to please the nun to receive *her* love. Sister Leopolda explains her tough treatment and efforts of initiating Marie into the Catholic belief as love. This attention seems to have a deep effect on filling a void inside Marie, that of loneliness and lack of love.

The cultural and religious conflict is especially focused on Marie and Sister Leopolda's struggle with Satan or the Dark One. As mentioned earlier, Marie does not connect her shamanic thinking with being Native American. In Marie's shamanic way of explaining Satan, she is actually supported by Sister Leopolda. They are the only two in the convent who do see the Dark One, without it appearing odd to them. The nun calls him Satan but shares Marie's incapacity to separate the ideas of each religion. Satan and/or the Dark One has features of a person and is seen as the same character. Marie describes him as "scratching around, tasting crumbs in our pockets, stealing buttons" (*LM*, 46). She also describes how the Dark One could enter one's body. "He could have entered without your knowing it- through

your lips or your nose or any one of your seven openings- and gained your mind. But she would see him” (*LM*, 46). “She” in this quotation is Sister Leopolda and we can only speculate why Sister Leopolda has shamanic perception. It is also interesting to think about why Sister Leopolda does not use the cross and chant away Satan in the name of Jesus Christ. This is most likely what a Catholic would do. Instead she scares him with her pole and tortures Marie to get him out of her heart.

Depending on one’s interpretation of the Holy Bible the distinction between Satan and the Dark One is more or less obvious. The New Testament does include conversations between Jesus and Satan. There he is invisible, just as God, but has the features of a person. In the Old Testament, on the other hand, he is more of a force and a spirit and has less power than God. The evil forces in the Holy Bible are represented not only by Satan but also by demons that are all sent away in the name of Jesus Christ.<sup>13</sup> In the Chippewa tradition they believe in the Great Spirit as the Creator and evil spirits are sent away with different rituals depending on their character. There is a dark force called the Windigo<sup>14</sup> and its narratives can easily be linked to this novel, especially to the chapter “Saint Marie.” Since the shamanic tradition is a nature religion, with the uttermost respect for Mother Earth, there are spirits that represent each occasion; instead of praying to only one God as Christians do, the shamanic tradition has a special spirit for the wind or the rain et cetera.<sup>15</sup> In *Love Medicine*, especially the chapter “Saint Marie,” the reader is shown how difficult it is to separate the two religions.

A recurrent theme in the novel is the need to be loved and since the Dark One wants Marie, he has got a place in her heart. Marie speaks to the Dark One as a friend and enjoys having conversations with him. He makes her feel chosen and there is suddenly something good about being a Native American. “Before sleep sometimes he came and whispered

<sup>13</sup> [www.bibelsajten.nu](http://www.bibelsajten.nu) and [www.bibeln.se](http://www.bibeln.se)

<sup>14</sup> Helen Jaskoski writes about the Windigo being a cannibal giant, an ice skeleton. It can possess a human soul and causes psychosis. The cure from it often involves pouring boiling water on or into the afflicted one.

<sup>15</sup> Spirits are individual and personal, mostly appearing in dreams as guardians or found in nature. See Sister Inez Hilger. Everything once alive also has a spirit. Thus, forefathers and animals can be seen and spoken to after death.

conversations in the old language from the bush. I listened. He told me things he never told anyone but Indians. I was privy to both worlds of his knowledge” (*LM*, 46). In a tribal community it is normal to talk to spirits but looked upon from a Catholic point of view, she could be possessed. Satan is a tempter and a liar and talking to her in Ojibwa inside a convent would be a perfect trick in making her feel special. However, Satan seems to be apprehended as more terrifying to a Catholic than the Dark One is as a shamanic evil character. When Sister Leopolda scares the Dark One away, Marie becomes sad and empty inside and her confidence in the nun disappears.

An important moment in the power struggle between Marie and Sister Leopolda is when the nun pours hot water onto Marie’s head to boil away Satan from her mind. At this moment Marie prays harder than ever and when Sister Leopolda steps away from her neck that she holds down with her foot, Marie has no more thoughts in her head. “I felt I had no inside voice, nothing to direct me, no darkness, no Marie” (*LM*, 54). Finally, the nun has succeeded with her “exorcism” and her attempts to initiate Marie into the Catholic faith. The emptiness Marie describes leaves room for her Catholic vision where she sees herself ripped in gold.

Helen Jaskoski states that this boiling water episode has parallels with several Windigo tales.<sup>16</sup> As an example Jaskoski points to Sister Leopolda’s words to Marie: “You’re cold. There is a wicked ice forming in your blood” (*LM*, 49). This implies that the ice monster (the Dark One) has possessed Marie and therefore she is treated with hot water. It is also said that a person “might return to normal after melting or losing the heart of ice” (Jaskoski, 31). If the Windigo had possessed Marie, she was now healed and that would be her reason for feeling empty. However, if Jaskoski is right, it is again Sister Leopolda who shares Marie’s shamanic view of the Dark One/Satan. Therefore, the conflict of culture and religion might leave the reader with a lot of questions.

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<sup>16</sup> See Jaskoski, 31.

The struggle of Sister Leopolda and Marie.

One part of the power struggle is that Marie wants to surpass Sister Leopolda's achievements. For instance she wants a "bigger, longer, whiter beak than hers" (*LM*, 49). However, Marie knows that the only way to win over Sister Leopolda is to be considered a saint.

In a way the treatment Sister Leopolda gives Marie can be seen as a form of brainwashing. Marie prays so hard while being tortured that finally her thoughts are gone. The nun tries to remove the shamanic upbringing from Marie's head and replace it with the new doctrine of Catholicism. It is a common notion within sociology of religion where "brainwashing" is explained as a way to resocialize a person into a new identity. Most often this is a forced action but since Marie has chosen to join the convent, her form of "brainwashing" is partly voluntary. Although the extent of torture is extreme and unexpected, she endures it due to her trust in Sister Leopolda. McGuire describes the process as a way to erase the old self and give the mind new ways to interpret and understand the world with the new meaning system. It creates a new identity in a new social surrounding. The convent is also the perfect place to succeed in such an effort since Marie is both isolated from her old life, and in the company of only equal thinkers of the new religion. Since the nuns talk, act and live according to the Catholic belief she can easily learn the new social skills. In addition, Sister Leopolda's power and charisma are also necessary leadership qualities in making another individual part of the process of social change.<sup>17</sup> To chant, pray and take part of rituals helps followers find a sense of togetherness and support for what they believe. Marie participates in everything that can prove that she is the "best Catholic." Her stubbornness is one of the reasons why she endures the torture, so is her strong longing for love and acceptance.

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<sup>17</sup> See McGuire, 229.

As a result of the painful torture she gets high on adrenaline. At first she experiences strength and feels mentally stronger and empowered. Marie feels that she rises above Sister Leopolda and is her master. In her mind she becomes a saint and tells the nun to kneel before her. As the numbness of the adrenaline fades away, the pain leads her into temporary insanity. This leads to another fight that finally turns the table of the power struggle between Marie and Sister Leopolda.

In the next fight with Sister Leopolda, Marie tries to push the nun into the oven with its hellish heat where she belongs. However, it is not as deep as Marie thinks and Sister Leopolda rebounds. In her anger, the nun stabs Marie's hand with the fork from the oven and knocks her out with a poker. When she awakes, Marie sees the nuns praying next to her. "I was being worshipped. I had somehow gained the altar of a saint" (*LM*, 57). The nun saves herself from wrongdoing by addressing the wounds on Marie as the stigmata of Christ.<sup>18</sup> At first Marie is empowered by finally winning the mental and social battle over Sister Leopolda but her feelings quickly change to the worse.

Notably, this is the first time that we also see what makes Marie lose power, which is in fact her feelings. Further on in life these are what holds her back in her empowerment, and also shows her that everything cannot be planned. The first moment of triumphant joy in achieving her sainthood changes because she feels pity for Sister Leopolda. According to Marie, "It was a feeling more terrible than any amount of boiling water and worse than being forked" (*LM*, 60). Her final realization is that Satan/ the Dark One is also a part of Sister Leopolda because he made her lie about the stigmata. Torture then is the way Sister Leopolda handles her own fear that Satan is part of herself, not only Marie. Later in the novel, this conclusion makes Marie heal the emotional wounds that she received from the torture.

Although Marie accomplishes sainthood and receives the respect and admiration that follow, she leaves the convent. In her empowerment she realizes that she does not want to be

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<sup>18</sup> Reproduction of the wounds of Christ on hands, feet and head.

part of Catholicism anymore. Marie's time in the convent gives her both mental and physical scars because of the torture and brainwashing. To fit into the Catholic community there had to be a change in social skills and mind set. In her case it is of course a fanatical choice to join the convent, but the nun's treatment of her is also fanatic. As Marie departs from the convent she also leaves puberty behind and directs her way back into the Native American society, searching for new ways to establish a respected adult identity. It is a step towards internal healing and also a continuation of her search for love and empowerment.

### Marie Kashpaw

The first encounter of Marie and Nector Kashpaw is not one of "love at first sight," rather the opposite for they both despise each other. Nector and Marie meet right after her fight with Sister Leopolda and her escape from the convent. When she runs into Nector outside the convent walls, he assumes that she has stolen the linen that protects her wounded hand. Nector says, "Marie Lazarre is the youngest daughter of a family of horse-thieving drunks. Stealing sacred linen fits what I know of that blood" (*LM*, 62). As they get into a fight it is obvious that she still suppresses the fact that she is Native American, and feels that it is degrading to her to be one. In anger she responds to Nector when he holds her down: "Lemme go, you damn Indian" (*LM*, 63). "Indian" is used as a swearword, but it is not the only one that comes out of the recently good Catholic's mouth, as she also calls Nector "sonofabitch" (*LM*, 64).

When he sees Marie's wounded hand it awakens emotions he feels in the presence of wounded animals. "I touch the bodies like they were killed saints I should handle with gentle reverence" (*LM*, 67). Symbolically Marie is actually a "killed saint," recently worshipped as one. Holding her hand is the same for him as holding a wounded animal that he needs to put out of its misery. While he has Marie's hand in his, the scene gives a sense of acceptance, forgiveness and understanding. Even though Nector wants to let go of Marie on the hillside of

the convent, he cannot. He is perplexed by the new unexplainable emotions she triggers in him and also by her way of acting towards him. Nector and Marie end up marrying each other and start a family.

For many religions, as mentioned in the introduction, rituals are an important part of expressing one's belief. One ritual that is important in the empowerment of Marie is to marry Nector who belongs to the leader clan. This is a way for her to establish a new identity, which she hopes will give her a better status and acceptance in the Native American society.

“Marriage marks a status passage and the beginning of a new family of procreation. Especially for women in most cultures, marriage is the entry to full adulthood” (McGuire, 63). This empowerment means that she ‘climbs the ladder’ of hierarchy in the tribal community, where her mixed blood as a Lazarre previously has put her at the bottom. Nector’s original opinion of her is that “She is just a skinny white girl from a family so low you cannot even think they are in the same class as Kashpaws” (*LM*, 63). However, something changed on the hillside of the convent that made him accept her.

Marie knows that in order for her to gain respect as a Kashpaw, she must try to make Nector into someone with authority within the community. One strategy to establish her new communal identity is to make Nector tribal chairman, which makes him a representative of the whole tribe. If they can look up to him and respect his work, it would also give good status to Marie. She says, “I had decided I was going to make him into something big. I didn’t know what, not yet; I only knew when he got there they would not whisper ‘dirty Lazarre’ when I walked down from church. They would wish they were the woman I was. Marie Kashpaw” (*LM*, 89). Apparently, she plans to reach this goal of respect and status through Nector’s achievements rather than to put such focus on herself.

A chairmanship puts Nector in a respected power position within both the Native American and white society. Although this status has a different meaning in each society it

means authority in both. A chairman's job involves going to Washington to speak with the leaders of the country. Not least in the white community, this is looked upon with great admiration. There, a common consequence of such a respected position means economical wealth and good class status. Furthermore, since money has a tendency to change people's opinion and be generally empowering, many social boundaries can be erased. This social scenario does not seem to occur in the Native American society where money does not exist in the same way. Nector describes his job as a chairman within the tribal community as follows: "local politics was all low pay and no thanks" (*LM*, 127). Thus, life on the reservation is poor even for a leader clan like the Kashpaws, where respect is partly a matter of family heritage and also of spiritual kinship.

Allen states that when the patriarchal society of the colonizers came they erased the previous role of the feminine and women were no longer welcome in higher positions of the Native American society. Before that, women in ancient tribal cultures used to have leader positions on their own and did not need a man to speak for them. Susan Castillo interprets the following quotation about Nector and Marie: "He is what he is because I made him" (*LM*, 118). Castillo says that the phrase "because I made him" can possibly mean two things, "because she has literally forced him to achieve the chairmanship, and also because he is very much her creation" (Castillo, 16). Marie is the leader of Nector and her family with a clear idea of what she wants for them. She has the traditional role that Allen talks about as the woman behind the man, the thinker and planner.

Marie hopes that her identity in the community has changed with her marriage, but critic James Ruppert thinks that the community has already "defined her role and position in its complex structure." He also states that: "As wife of the tribal chairman, her social position should be one of leadership, but her communal identity as "a dirty Lazarre" deprives her of this status" (Ruppert, 78). If what Ruppert says is correct about society already having made

up its mind about her being a “dirty Lazarre” her strategies of empowerment are of little importance.

While Ruppert states that Marie does not have a leadership position in the community, this is not made clear in the novel. He does have a point that even though a Kashpaw, there will always be a small part of her that is a Lazarre. Since she grows up as one, the people living in the community receive a certain perception of her. However, I think time is an important factor, and Erdrich’s narrative shows that it works to Marie’s advantage. As time goes by and new generations grow up, the old and once taken-for-granted perception of Marie vanishes. Towards the end of the novel she is described as one of the “Traditionals. Back-to-the-buffalo types” (*LM*, 303). Marie is hired at the Indian factory because she is seen as one of the old leaders and because of her knowledge about their culture and family relations. Therefore, it seems that later in life she holds a leader position and is respected as a Kashpaw and elder of the tribe.

As mentioned earlier, feelings have a tendency to make Marie weak, yet finally embracing her fears becomes empowering. Previously she has relied on others to fill her loneliness and to give her love. Marie really loves Nector and he is a source of love even though he treats Marie poorly. Therefore, she is shocked and devastated when he leaves. Castillo writes that Marie is symbolically “brought to her knees by love for Nector and by her own insecurities. But suddenly Marie seems to realize that she is a person in her own right. Power, after all, lies within us, while authority is conferred by others, and Marie does not need the reflected authority of Nector’s position to exercise her own power” (Castillo, 17). I agree with Castillo that the next scene in the novel establishes Marie’s internal empowerment and self-worth. She is strong in herself as a woman, mother and person. Marie says:

But I was not going under, even if he left me...I could leave off my fear of ever being a Lazarre. I could leave off my fear, even losing Nector...I 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!  
(*LM*, 165)

In the moment when she finds herself losing everything she finally finds herself. She realizes that in her search for love, and admitting that loving Nector is what hurts, her love for herself makes her whole.

### Mother Marie

If becoming a Kashpaw was a more thought-through strategy, Marie's next action to gain respect through motherhood might not have been. It is a very possible way but since this decision is driven by emotions it is probably an unconscious strategy. Nector and Marie unfortunately lose two of their babies within a year. To manage their sorrow they adopt and take in homeless children of the reservation. In addition, they keep on having biological ones. Finally, the children are one of Nector's reasons to be absent, because they are many and everywhere. With so many, Marie does not only gain respect as a Native American mother but can get the respect as the mother of the whole tribe.

Allen discusses the historical view upon marriage and motherhood for the Native American women, which might help to clarify how it is important in empowering Marie. Before the arrival of the colonizers, mothers had the most powerful roles because of their ability to give life. With her womb, a woman was seen as the source to all ritual magic and the beginning of the universe. In many tribes the part of childbearing was also empowering because it meant maturing and entering into womanhood. In addition, Allen says that 'mother' was a name that could be given to honored men who were recognized for their spiritual competence. "They were mothers, and that word implied the highest degree of status in ritual cultures. The status of mother was so high, in fact, that in some cultures Mother... was the

highest office” (Allen, 28). Obviously, shamanism links power to spirituality and womanhood, which is different from the female role within the white society.<sup>19</sup>

Both Allen and Meldan Tanrisal think it is important to note the difference between the two societies when it comes to biological and adoptive children. In the white society it is superior or preferred to have biological children as a part of a nuclear family. This idea comes from the New Testament where a family consists of a mother, father and child.<sup>20</sup> For a Native American, the notion of ‘family’ it is not only a matter of blood relations but also one of spiritual kinship and clan membership, which is determined by your mother.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, to adopt children emphasizes Marie’s power as a mother even more.

A mother’s task within the Native American tradition is to use storytelling to socialize the children and give them a meaning system. It is a way to pass on their culture and history, which will give them an identity. “Early childhood is a critical period in the development of the individual’s religion. The child begins to learn what it means to be “one of us” (our society, our ethnic group, our religion, our family, our tribe, etc)” (McGuire, 54). Whilst Native Americans use storytelling, Catholics, on the other hand, find church and Sunday school important in teaching their ways. However, there is an ongoing religious and cultural change where a mixture of the two paradigms is common in raising native children. For example, they have the tribal traditions of storytelling and other rituals in the family but they also attend school and sometimes Sunday school. Obviously, this is one of the main conflicts presented in *Love Medicine*.

In her work, Tanrisal focuses on mother and child relationships and she says: “In a Native American way of life, tradition is equated with the mother; however, since many traditions have been destroyed the Native Americans have often become motherless children” (Tanrisal, 2). The oral tradition of storytelling recovers the loss of identity and is a way to help

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<sup>19</sup> At this time in history, the white women were most likely submissive wives.

<sup>20</sup> See Allen

<sup>21</sup> See Tanrisal and Allen

link the past, present and future together. A possible outcome for Marie is that she reconnects with her tribal identity through her own storytelling to her children. This is not mentioned in the text but a possible consequence. Owens writes, “the loss of the past means a loss of self, a loss of order and meaning in the present moment, and an inability to contemplate a future that is part of that moment. Storytelling serves to prevent that loss” (Owens, 59). Marie does eventually find stability, when she finds a mother figure that can reconnect her and give her a history.

Although Marie has a defined social identity as a mother, she needs to find her own mother figure to become whole. As Tanrisal points out there are a lot of motherless children who do not have the social identity. It might be that since Marie’s biological mother was not there for her, there is a confusion of culture. Allen states that the key to your identity lies within knowing your mother’s identity. Without it you do not know your position and place in the greater whole of earth and universe. Though Marie grows up as an adoptive child in her aunt’s house, with a Native American family, she cannot feel comfortable in her heritage partly due to her mother’s absence but also her whiteness.

Marie’s lack of a past, and her need of love, puts her on a search for a strong female role model. In my eyes Sister Leopolda is one type of mother figure. Marie says herself that she joined the convent because she wanted Sister Leopolda’s heart. However, when Marie gives birth to her last child she gets help from Rushes Bear. She is Nector's traditional mother with a strong Native American identity who in that moment becomes Marie’s mother figure. She earns the love of Rushes Bear by showing strength in a childbirth that almost kills her. Marie herself says after the birth: “I never saw her without knowing that she was my mother, my own blood” (*LM*, 104). The following words I think states the fact about her reconnecting with her true identity: “More than saving my life, she put the shape of it back in place” (*LM*,

104). The respect is mutual because in the eyes of Rushes Bear, Marie goes from being a “dirty Lazarre” to someone she can call daughter.

One of the pillars of identity is language and for Marie this sequence in the novel also shows her linguistic shift. Dennis Walsh brings up the moment of Marie giving birth as a turning point for her language and meaning system.<sup>22</sup> He and I also share the idea of Rushes Bear taking the place as Marie’s mother in the novel. After birth, Marie starts using her Ojibwa language and finally makes a definite turn away from Catholicism. Symbolically, in Marie’s encounter with death a part of her dies but instead she finds her true essence and is ‘reborn’ as she returns to life with the old traditional shamanic ways.

In the Native American paradigm Marie cannot do better for herself to fit into the social norms. She does marry into the most respected family with a strong communal identity. Socially she becomes a mother for all the abandoned children of the reservation, plus her own. When she matures into womanhood it becomes important for a while to have external attributes to signal her place in society. Marie wants to prove that she is “solid class” (*LM*, 148) and leads a good life. These goals are more or less accomplished but become less important when she finds the power within her, which should be considered as the highest form of empowerment. As an elder she is respected as a Native American traditional and when Nector dies she is left with the tribe’s most valuable ritual items like the pipe.

### **III. Conclusion**

The actual aim of this essay was to look upon the ways Marie searches for love, power and respect through cultural and religious acts. Her different strategies to reach empowerment follow the times in life when sociology of religion states that religion becomes more important. It has been my intention to use some of those stages in her life, her time in the

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<sup>22</sup> See Walsh, 110.

convent, her marriage to Nector and her motherhood to prove my point of her achieving her goals and losing the identity of being “dirty and lowlife.”

Marie’s way to empowerment is analyzed with the theoretical angle of sociology of religion. Both religion and society shape the identity she tries to attain, first when approaching the white society, and later in the Native American one. However, Marie cannot fully separate the two paradigms, which leads to a religious conflict complicated by culture. An example used in the essay is that of Marie’s personalization and friendship with the Dark One that inside the convent is equal to the idea of Satan.

In the convent, Catholicism shapes and supports Marie’s identity as a white novice nun. She finds respect in the white society for devoting her life to God and uses prayers and other rituals to emphasize her conversion and new identity. When Marie accomplishes her goal of sainthood she is worshipped and admired. Consequently, she succeeds in changing her religious and social identity and even her psychological one due to initiation rites and torture.

Marie’s place in the Native American society is also shaped by religion. She has the Native American mind and identity because she was brought up on the reservation in a family of shamanic beliefs. She has its view upon marriage and motherhood and knows that they are possible strategies to change her communal identity. As mentioned in the essay, spirituality is also important in terms of empowerment, and the Kashpaw clan identity and to be a mother elevates that power.

As this essay progressed I could clearly see that the issue of empowerment could be divided into two main parts. One type of empowerment is Marie finding love, power and respect in the external world, which is gained through other people’s approval of her. Marie’s strategies are at first directed to changing their perception of her identity. She hopes for respect as she marries Nector who belongs to the leader clan and also sees motherhood as a possible way to have an accepted social identity. Of course, her sainthood was an admiration

given to her by others too. The result is shown later in life when we know that Marie is a respected elder of the tribe. Her actions in search for power and respect can therefore be seen as successful since she accomplishes her goals.

In her search for love, Marie also relies on others to give it to her. She finds love with Nector although it is a strained relationship. In the convent she wants Sister Leopolda's heart, but the nun's definition of love includes torture. However, she is a possible mother figure and Marie has void to fill because of not knowing her real mother. Sister Leopolda cannot make her whole but finally Nector's mother can. Rushes Bear becomes Marie's 'key' to identity; a mother figure who also respects her. Marie says herself that "she put the shape of [life] back in place" (*LM*, 104).

The other type of empowerment that was not considered in the beginning is the power that comes from within. When Nector leaves Marie she meets her own insecurities and by facing them she finds her internal power. The love for herself makes her accept that being only Marie is good enough. Through self-respect and self-worth she realizes that she does not need external attributes to be empowered. She does not need the external objects like a nice dress or a good husband to be someone.

Critics Allen and Tanrisal's opinion about the importance of a mother to have a past, present and future represents Marie well. As Rushes Bear becomes her mother figure, Marie can find her authentic self and reclaim her identity and history. She becomes complete and also this gives her an internal sense of power. When Marie lands in her Native American identity she can make a definite turn away from Catholicism, symbolically marked by her change of language.

The success of Marie's search for power can be seen differently within the two paradigms. A white society is often more materialistic, therefore her achievements might not seem successful because they do not include economic status. Of course, her devotion and

status as a saint is without remarks. However, within the shamanic tradition she can be successful anyway where the spiritual journey is also important. She does find her authentic and spiritual self, which consequently completes her empowerment. For both paradigms at the time the novel is set, it is valuable to have a family and to be married. Children are also seen as a blessing, and important for the continuance of each tradition. In that sense, Marie cannot do more to influence and change people's perception of her. One critic says that her communal identity cannot be changed and that she will forever be seen as a "dirty Lazarre."<sup>23</sup> Yes, there are people that question Marie's life and may not meet her with respect but there are also those who do. In the relationship with Rushes Bear it is earned but Marie's respect as an elder of the tribe is due to time and new generations without presumptions.

Following Marie's character throughout *Love Medicine* it is my opinion that she finds love, power and respect. She accomplishes all her conscious and unconscious goals from sainthood in the white society, to a wife, mother and elder of the Native American community. Without realizing it from the start, it is in fact Marie's empowerment and sense of self-worth that I find is the most important power, for all people. Although Marie is a fictive person it is easy to relate to her as a possible authentic person, wife and mother in a real society.

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<sup>23</sup> See Ruppert, 78.

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