

Nature • Animals • Non-Human: A Study of Community Consciousness in *The Night Watchman*

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Abstract: *The Night Watchman* written by Louis Erdrich won the 2021 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. The core characters running through the novel are not only Thomas Wazhashk, but Patrice who bears the burden of narrating the natural world of the Turtle Mountain reserve. Louis Erdrich not only noticed the connection between females and nature with keen eyes, but also human and non-humans. The interaction among them reflects the author's thoughts on the ecological environment, human survival, and indigenous tradition conflicted with modern appeal. Therefore, this article, using the Biocentric Equality of deep ecology, explores the Community Consciousness in the novel.

Keywords: Louise Erdrich; *The Night Watchman*; Non-human; Community consciousness

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1. Introduction

The Night Watchman, adapted from a real historical event by Louis Erdrich, won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2021. The novel is exactly set in 1953 when Congress planned to dissolve the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa and other Indian tribes, with the protagonist Thomas leading the tribe to petition Congress as the mainline. But Erdrich told Time magazine that the real focus of the novel was to talk about the 1950s and explore the world of the Turtle Mountain Reserve. After reading *The Night Watchman*, readers will find the core character running through the novel is not only Thomas Wazhashk, modeled on Erdrich's grandfather but also the fictional Patrice. If Thomas assumes the important task of narrating historical stories, then Patrice bears the burden of narrating the world of the Turtle Mountain Reserve. In the novel of Erdrich, a representative writer of the Native American Renaissance, the antagonism between the female Patrice and nature disappeared. What is more, Patrice has a strong sense of nature and empathy for animals. Noticing this is closer to Erdrich's true intention to create the novel. In addition, the story of non-humans in *The Night Watchman* reflects the author's thoughts on the ecological environment, human survival, and indigenous tradition conflicted with modern appeal. The "inhabitants" of the Chippewa include not only humans but also non-humans such as animals, ghosts. In *The Night Watchman*, Thomas Wazhashk could talk to the ghosts of his deceased friend at boarding school while he was on a night watch at the factory; Horses have their ideas, escaping human beings in homecoming parade to narrate their own stories; Patrice can sleep with hibernating bears; Indian ghosts show that they are never assimilated by white ghosts; Thomas connects him with muskrats, a hero in the Chippewa myth. All these things make readers realize the great power of non-human and the author's consciousness of rejecting Anthropocentrism. It should be noted that, just as Europeans include many peoples, Indians are not just one tribe, so we cannot sum up all Indians with single beliefs and values. Therefore, this article will focus on the beliefs and values

of the Chippewa described in the novel. In recent years, deep ecology has provided important nourishment for ecology. It emphasizes the ecological relationship of holism, diversity, consistency, and dependence, and focuses on discussing “Biocentric Equality.” These ecological ideas have been strongly expressed in *The Night Watchman*. Therefore, this paper explores three questions from the Biocentric Equality of deep ecology: How does the author represent the encounter among female Patrice, nature, and animals? How does the novel personify animals and show humans their animal images? How to show the interaction between humans and non-human?

2. Harmony between “Patrice and Nature”

The Chippewa people not only have an ecological view of “close to nature,” but they also consider themselves part of nature. “We really believe that we are part of Mother Earth and we come from her” said one Chippewa elder ^[1]. Looking back into the history, human-centered modernization has led to frequent natural disasters. Deep Ecology holds that human beings should replace anthropocentrism with ecocentrism, enter the era of “post-humanism” and put human beings and other species in an equal position ^[2]. *The Night Watchman* explores the natural world of the Turtle Mountain Reserve and highlights the close relationship between nature and female, showing the author’s ecological consciousness that nature is not only a place for people to live, but also a place for them to relax and absorb energy. Unlike the other thread talking about historical facts with real letters, congressional records, and historical story of tribal leader trying to repeal the termination bill, Erdrich created the virtual female character Patrice to explore the natural world owing to the many ties between female and nature. The author does not confine herself to resent the “ecocentrism” in a pedestrian version in *The Night Watchman* but shows it through Patrice’s perception and rich psychological activities.

“Humans want to include non-humans in their community. This view is new, and it shows that our community is not confined to the realm of human beings, we can form a community together with trees, plants, birds, animals” ^[2]. In *The Night Watchman*, the story of female Patrice reflects a shift from a narrow “me in the family” to a broader “me in the tribe” and finally “me in the ecology.” Her family lives in the forest, closely contacting with all things in nature. Her mother, Zhaanat, is a traditional Chippewa woman, who was raised in Indian rituals and Indian mythology. She knows many things about nature such as collecting herbs and making spice, so Patrice is embedded in the tradition. “People came from distances, often camped around their house, in order to learn. Once, that deep knowledge had been part of a web of strategies that included plenty of animals to hunt, wild foods to gather, gardens of beans and squash, and land, lots of lands to roam ^[2].”

When feeling the stress of the outside world, Patrice takes walks in the forest around her home getting the power of nature to relax her body and mind. “Patrice tells her uncle she wants to walk back from his house. She needs to think. She walks along the water, the cool air smells of dry yellow leaves. Cattails on the leaves have soft brown, stick-like wax, and Reed green leaves stand up like sharp knives. On the lake, the wind blows. The bubble rises to the edge of the beach. The sun shines from the dark clouds” ^[3]. This is the complete sensory experience of Patrice in the Turtle Mountain reserve, but more importantly, the author describes the smells of dry yellow leaves in the first place. Refreshing smells changed the way nature exists. Just like Wang Xifeng’s voice was a device to get people’s attention in *A Dream in Red Mansions*, aroma first attracted Patrice’s attention in *The Night Watchman*. The relationship between the female Patrice and nature is not hostile; there is an only pleasure for Patrice as part of the natural community. Moreover, in the opening of the novel, Erdrich wrote that Congress had promised tribes that as long as the grass grows, the Indian tribes will exist before, but in 1953 Congress want to terminate the Indian tribes and force them to cities. If the bill is passed, members of the tribe, who live closely with nature, will only be forced to move away, which will take them toll, both physically and mentally.

3. Harmony between “Patrice and Animals”

The story takes place in the Turtle Mountain reserve of North Dakota (North Dakota is the northernmost state in the prairie). The vast grasslands and forests strongly affect the Turtle Mountain tribesmen and make Patrice show a clear affinity for animals. Patrice fell into a bear’s nest feeling flustered, but she quickly adapted to the environment, even though the hibernating bear was puffing, and when she woke up, she felt full of power. “Watching the snow glide down put Patrice into a trance, and now she could sense the slow inflation and release of the bear’s lungs, which made her even sleepier. Perhaps the leaves were warmed by the bear’s bulk and slow heave of breath. Patrice rolled herself into a ball and closed her eyes. It was time for her weekend nap, anyway, and how often did a modern working woman get to sleep with a live bear?”^[3] The author sketches the scene of females and animals, which reflects the author’s ecological consciousness that people and animals can live in harmony together in the natural community, and the two members are not in a hierarchical relationship of being killed or killed.

In the tribe’s hunting activities, they will restrain their hunting to protect ecological sustainability. They believe that things have spirits, so they sing or perform rituals to express gratitude to animal sacrifices. In *Animal Liberation*, Singer says that “you kick a rat to the side of the road, which offends its interests because he senses pain”^[4], which means that all sentient creatures should be treated equally by humans. In *The Night Watchman*, there is a scene: “When a bear was killed during hibernation, its meat was milder, sweeter. Patrice had been compelled to tell her mother, but she had hoped her mother would not kill the bear”^[4]. When her mother and uncle sing for bear sacrifices, Patrice included the pain and helplessness of the bear into her moral judgment and she feels the bear like a human longing for other people to stop hurt bear, which represented the awakening of Patrice’s ecological consciousness and her transformation from “Anthropocentrism” to “Biocentric Equality.”

4. The humanization of animals and the animal image of human

Animals are the most intuitive embodiment of the state of nature, and they are one of the most important themes in Erdrich’s novels. In *The Night Watchman*, Erdrich humanize horse and let them to narrates the story directly. Horses are as emotional and cognitive as humans, so they escaped from the fatigue of human slavery as a herald of more freedom. “Teacher’s Pet heard the voice of her rider, calling, but it didn’t affect her the way it had an hour ago. She just kept walking beside Gringo, who had entirely blocked out human sounds and was still enjoying the perfection of his sensations”^[3]. The Indians were free to graze, hunt, mow and idle before the invasion of European colonists, but in the 1950s, the Chippewa was forced to sell their land to the white people that was a disaster of denial of rights and freedom. Thus, employing empathy, the horses breaking these chains fled to seek freedom just like the people of Turtle Mountain Reserve preventing the termination bill to defend their rights. Writer Erdrich is rooted in the Turtle Mountain reserve and steps with the changes of the animals and the people. the animals who are often neglected and enslaved, have the right to speak as equal “residents” of the natural community in *The Night Watchman* showing Biocentric Equality.

In the mythology of the Chippewa, muskrats play the role of the world hero, tribal ancestor, and earth guardian. The myth of animals as heroes embodies Chippewa’s thoughts on Biocentric Equality. Erdrich writes in the preceding chapters “Thomas was named for the muskrat, wazhashk, the lowly, hardworking, water-loving rodent”^[3]. The description of Thomas’ name shows that the author intends to associate the Muskrats with Thomas. In the ecological view of the Chippewa people, muskrats represent the industrious, brave, and intelligent, who is the hero of human beings and the “non-human.” Thomas himself has the same qualities as the muskrat, working hard and smart, becoming a handful of men left to work in the Jewel Bearing Plant. he was also as dedicated as the muskrats, “He took a long time, a very long time, and then finally Wazhashk floated to the top. He was drowned but his paw was clenched”^[3]. The old muskrat died

to protect the land, so as Thomas wrote letters day and night asking for help and went around to stop the bill of Congress but experienced a stroke at the train station. The muskrat is the animal image of Thomas and he thought that too. when he is at the hospital, he draws muskrat at the bottom of each card. When he saw a white nurse, Thomas thinks she is a wolf, muskrat's enemy, with wolf eyes and wolf's gray mane and he would not surprise if she had a pair of pointed ears. Except for Thomas, the author gives many of the animal images to the characters, such as Valentine is cunning, like a Fox; Valentine sits holding himself tightly like a wounded bird; Bucky's hair tangled over his head like a dead animal's fur. Eddie says he is a rooster with two lovely hens.

From the discussion in the above two sections, we can see that there is a great degree of similarity between humans and animals. Both have rich emotions and want to have rights and freedom. Their character and behavior are similar. Although the writer describes only the Tortoise Mountain Reservation, she refers to a broader sense of the Indians who lose land and rights. Besides the "inhabitants" of the reservation are not only the aboriginal population, but also the animals like free-running horses, and the unassuming Muskrat, who are often neglected and enslaved under anthropocentrism. These "special residents" in the novel have the same rights to speak like humans.

5. Human and non-human interactions

The Night Watchman shows many examples of interactions across species as the interaction between ghosts and human remains the brightest spot. Roderick, a classmate of Thomas in boarding school, is a wandering ghost. The non-human narrator remarks that there was killing, injury, or maltreat to the Chippewa in boarding school, and many tribe members who had lost their land have been pushed into poverty. By knowing who Roderick is, the history and the reality of the Turtle Mountain Reserve are presented, the boundaries between life and death are eliminated, and the differences of species are blurred.

Roderick and Thomas were some of those who experienced cultural colonization and loss of land. Roderick came to Thomas because their friend LaBatte was stealing and want to steal jewels from the Bearing Plant. To keep LaBatte from going to prison, Thomas persuaded LaBatte, but "He didn't want to hear the details of why LaBatte needed the money so badly. It would be the same as every story, including his own, though things had eased up considerably with the jewel-bearing paycheck. There weren't enough jobs for tribesmen. There wasn't enough land. There wasn't enough farmable land. There weren't enough deer in the woods or ducks in the sloughs and a game warden caught you if you fished too many fish" [4]. Industrialization has brought a great impact on the values of aboriginal people. The story of LaBatte is the author's response to indigenous tradition conflicted with modern appeal. The author calls for the establishment of an equal and harmonious society, hoping to arouse the attention of the poor Indian people. Roderick's urban journey was constantly exploring his life values. Even as a ghost, Roderick will never be assimilated by other white ghosts. "He didn't go to their white hell and didn't go to their white heaven. But he died in Sac and Fox country, too far away to meet the deadline for Chippewa heaven." At the end of the journey, Roderick chose to stay in the metropolis, and he stopped trap in a bygone era and began to enjoy the present. Facing rapid modernization, the author depicts Roderick, who offers a warning to modern society from his and tribesmen's tragedy.

6. Conclusion

Louise Erdrich deconstructs anthropocentrism and reconstructs the consciousness of the natural community. She describes the beauty of the reserve scenery, which shows her great concern for the nature. Besides, the interaction between female and nature, the animals and human, and the human and non-human show her awareness to the Biocentric Equality in deep ecology. From the non-human perspective, we can see that the industrial development destroyed the ecological balance maintained by the Chippewa, and eventually

led to the physical and mental suffering of the indigenous people. These three interactive processes are closely related to the concepts advocated in the deep ecology. After reading *The Night Watchman*, we recognized the great power of nature, animals, and other non-human beings, and think about the significance of achieving the harmonious community between man and nature.

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