

BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL: SISTER LEOPOLDA'S
TRAUMATIC WILL TO POWER

by

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ABSTRACT

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This is an in-depth analysis of one of Louise Erdrich's most extraordinary characters, Sister Leopolda. I examine Leopolda first as a trauma victim who has suffered the loss of family, witnessed the death and assault of various friends, struggled with her mixed heritage, and fought to establish herself in a world where Indians were rapidly losing their power, their land, and their lives.

Second, I use Friedrich Nietzsche's views of power to illustrate how Leopolda's seemingly random and fanatical exploits are actually examples of her will to power. Because of her disturbing past, Leopolda must struggle to survive; her astonishing

strength, however, drives her, not only to survive, but to succeed in a world that seems set against her from her birth. Although Leopolda begins her life as a victim, she ultimately uses her will to power to become strong and influential within her own realm.

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CHAPTER I

A TRAUMATIC BEGINNING

Sister Leopolda is undoubtedly one of Louise Erdrich's most astonishing characters. As Leopolda's biological daughter, Marie, points out, there is much to be understood about the controversial nun:

Some people, they go so deep. They are like a being made of tunnels.

Passageways that twist and double back and disappear. You have a foot on one path and you follow for a while, but then there is a sinkhole, bad footing, a wall. My mother, she was this kind of person, so deep and intricate of design. (*Last Report* 322)

This is a study of the intricate design that is Sister Leopolda's life. By examining the novels *Love Medicine*, *The Beet Queen*, *Tracks*, *Tales of Burning Love*, and *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, I plan to discuss Leopolda as a trauma victim who has suffered the loss of a stable family, witnessed the death and assault of various friends and family members, struggled with her mixed heritage, and fought to establish herself in a world where Indians were rapidly losing their power, their land, and their lives. Dr. Bessel Van der Kolk, in his book, *Psychological Trauma*, concludes that "the human response to overwhelming and uncontrollable life events is remarkably consistent" (2). So drawing upon psychological and trauma studies, I will demonstrate

how many of Leopolda's actions as an adult are typical of victims who have suffered similar trauma.

In order to further navigate Leopolda's twisting tunnels, I will use Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Will to Power* as a guide to lead readers to a better understanding of this complex character. Initially, a nineteenth century German philosopher may seem an unlikely guide to interpreting a contemporary American novelist of Ojibwe heritage. Erdrich's novels, however, are so rich with collective themes and outside references that she cannot be categorized simply as a Native American author. In an interview with Laura Coltelli, when asked where her novel *Love Medicine*, co-written with Michael Dorris, belongs in the canon of literature, Erdrich replied, "I don't think American Indian literature should be distinguished from mainstream literature. . . . I was thinking ours contributes to literature as a whole in a way that any book would. . . . To contribute to the great run of literature is very worthy" (47-48). The issues Erdrich raises in her novels range far beyond her mixed Ojibwe background and her North Dakota and even American landscapes. Three themes that contribute to her acclaim are the nature of Christianity, the impact it has on individuals, and the means by which individuals attempt to increase their spheres of power, all themes discussed at length in *The Will to Power*.

While there is no evidence that Erdrich had Nietzsche in mind while writing her novels, it is very likely that Erdrich studied the German philosopher at some point in her career. This is not to assume that Nietzsche's philosophy consciously influenced her work; yet by considering some of Nietzsche's ideas, it is possible for the reader to better

understand Sister Leopolda. Nietzsche's views of power, specifically how power is related to morals, Christianity, so-called evil qualities, the strong and the weak, and the individual, help to illuminate Leopolda's seemingly random and fanatical exploits as examples of her strong will to power. Likewise, Leopolda can serve as a sort of literary visual aid that exemplifies and clarifies some of Nietzsche's difficult concepts.

Because of her difficult and disturbing past, Leopolda must struggle to survive; her astonishing strength, however, drives her not only to survive, but also to succeed in a world that seems set against her from her birth. Although Leopolda begins her life as a victim, and her life is undoubtedly influenced by her traumatic youth, she lifts herself out of her fated beginning and uses her will to power to become strong and powerful within her own realm. Furthermore, I argue that the early trauma in Leopolda's life is precisely what pushes her to become stronger, stranger, and ultimately more extraordinary than she would have under relatively normal conditions. I would also like to suggest that in order to develop a Nietzschean will to power one *must* endure this type of tragedy and isolation, as these are the factors that motivate individuals to extreme action and the desire to break with conformity. For this reason, Nietzsche's desire for those he loves is not a pleasant, easy life, but rather one filled with obstacles and turmoil:

To those human beings who are of any concern to me I wish suffering, desolation, sickness, ill-treatment, indignities—I wish that they should not remain unfamiliar with profound self-contempt, the torture of self-mistrust, the wretchedness of the vanquished: I have no pity for them,

because I wish them the only thing that can prove today whether one is worth anything or not—that one endures. (481)

And Leopolda does just this; she bears all of the aforementioned suffering and proves that she can endure.

I have organized my study into two distinct parts. Because the stories Erdrich tells were not written or published in a linear way, I will first look at a composite view of Leopolda's family history and her early life as the mixed-blood Pauline. After establishing Leopolda's traumatic childhood and discussing the motivating factors behind her astonishing and often frightening drive for power, I will then look at Leopolda's life in the order in which Erdrich originally reveals it to her readers. By examining the order in which Erdrich's novels were written, I hope to demonstrate that Leopolda's character and inherent morality becomes increasingly ambiguous and complex as Erdrich develops her in subsequent novels.

Before becoming a nun, Sister Leopolda was known by her given name, Pauline Puyat. And while the details of Pauline's early life are somewhat uncertain, it is obvious that her childhood was less than ideal. In Erdrich's novel *Last Report*, published in 2001, Father Damien, a woman who disguises herself as a man and lives the majority of her life as a priest, learns that Pauline's mother, also named Pauline, was "a young girl in whom the bitterness of seven generations of French and an equal seven of enemy-harassed Ojibwe ancestors were concentrated" (150). The first Pauline's parents despised each other, and her mother's devious pride and hate ultimately

triggered the events leading to her father's death. The young girl watched her father die; as he took his last breaths, he looked her in the eye and told her to kill her mother (155). The mother, hearing her husband's dying command, threatened, starved, and assaulted her daughter in an attempt to intimidate her into submission. But the young girl "grew fast on the blows that didn't land and even faster on the ones that did. She flourished in twisted energy and grew taller than her father and meaner than her mother," until one day her mother fell sick (155). Pauline I took the opportunity to pour rotten, boiling soup down her weakened mother's throat. The heat of the liquid seared her face, the contents of the stew made her stomach retch, and Pauline I savored the next few days as she watched her mother die slowly.

This complete lack of sentiment and refusal to be dominated or controlled, displayed by the first Pauline, is mirrored in Pauline II, who is later seen committing murder and similar acts of violence in order to exert and strengthen her own power. Although this history of violence and murder is disturbing—especially within the immediate family—Nietzsche counters that one's survival always hinges on the demise of another: " 'One furthers one's ego always at the expense of others;' 'Life always lives at the expense of other life'—he who does not grasp this has not taken even the first step toward honesty with himself" (199). With what little background information she gives us, Erdrich seems to be illustrating that the Puyats have a history of a fierce, survivalist detached self-interest. And although this attitude does not win them many friends, it does help the second Pauline to later survive without her family and ultimately increase her realm of influence.

Judith Herman, in her book *Trauma and Recovery*, explains that

compulsive sexual behavior, compulsive risk taking or exposure to danger . . . become the vehicles by which abused children attempt to regulate their internal emotional states. Through these devices, abused children attempt to obliterate their chronic dysphoria and to simulate, however briefly, an internal state of well-being and comfort that cannot otherwise be achieved. (110)

Free of her mother's abusive control, the newly-orphaned first Pauline attempted to comfort herself in the arms of various men, and her promiscuous behavior led to the birth of two children, the first, a son whom she spoiled, and twenty years later, a daughter whom she named after herself. This daughter, Pauline II, was "raised in her [mother's] purified bitterness" and the "killing hatred between mother and daughter was passed down and did not die when the last Pauline became a nun" (*Last Report* 157). Pauline II's family history also contributes to her future trauma. Van der Kolk states that certain biological factors, such as a gender and a genealogical history of mental illness, can make people more vulnerable to trauma (*Traumatic Stress* 79-80). Clues throughout the narrative reveal that Pauline I eventually kills herself, leaving her daughter with a neglectful father and a trauma-filled future.

Pauline II is not born a naturally strong or privileged person. In relating the Puyat history to Father Jude, a priest sent by the Pope to investigate the details of Leopolda's life and possible sainthood, Father Damien comments, ". . . that their clan managed to survive at all was certainly commendable and strange" (*Last Report* 148).

In *Tracks*, narrated by both the young Pauline and Nanapush, a tribal elder and trickster figure, Pauline's apathetic father laughs at his daughter for wanting an outhouse with a door and ridicules her desire to learn lace-making from the nuns instead of taking up traditional crafts. Even at an early age, Pauline undoubtedly has ambition and a growing sense of individuality. Nietzsche describes this quality as vital to an individual's strength: " 'one must want to have more than one has in order to *become* more.' For this is the doctrine preached by life itself to all that has life" (77). Although her father still does not seem to recognize Pauline's positive aspirations to break the family tradition of poverty and shame, he does eventually send her to the small town of Argus, North Dakota to work in a butcher shop with his sister, Regina Kashpaw. When her father warns, " 'You'll fade out there . . . You won't be an Indian once you return,' " Pauline determinately responds " 'Then maybe I won't come back . . . I was made for better' " (*Tracks* 14). Although the work she does handling meat and cleaning up around the store is far from her dream of making lace, Pauline is at least able to gain some independence and get off of the reservation.

Even though Pauline's father never seems to physically abuse her, his verbal taunts and apparent neglect become important in light of Arie Shalev's discovery that "negative parenting behavior, early separation from parents, parental poverty, and lower education independently predict both exposure and PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] following exposure" to trauma (*Traumatic Stress* 86). After going to stay with her aunt, Pauline describes herself as "fifteen, alone, and so poor-looking I was invisible to most customers and to the men in the shop" (15). While neglect and abandonment

may seem minor in relation to other forms of trauma, in her book, *Pillar of Salt*, Janice Haaken contends that “trauma may take the form of a discrete event, such as the loss of a parent or birth sibling, or chronic strains and stresses, such as neglect or abuse” (68). Van der Kolk, goes even further to argue that “the earliest and possibly most damaging psychological trauma is the loss of a secure base” (32). Van der Kolk continues to explain that children who are no longer attached to their primary caregivers may become depressed, introverted, clingy, and passive, among other things (3). This description of a shy and socially inept child fits perfectly with Erdrich’s portrayal of the young Pauline. Pauline indirectly admits to feeling ignored and misplaced among her peers, and while she dreams that they will one day approach her and take her hand, Pauline knows that she “hardly rinsed through the white girls’ thoughts” (*Tracks* 15). And her coworkers are not much more supportive, for until someone needed her, she “blended into the stained brown walls, a skinny big-nosed girl with staring eyes” (*Tracks* 16). Even Lily’s dog, who snaps and snarls at Fleur, never seems to notice when Pauline is in the room (*Tracks* 22).

That winter, while Pauline is working in Argus, an epidemic ravages the reservation and claims the lives of her father and sisters. Although Pauline receives no news of her family for weeks and can only guess at their fate for most of the season, she has dreams of their bodies “swaying in the branches, buried too high to reach, wrapped in lace [she] never hooked” (15). The loss of her family is tragic enough, but in addition to that, Pauline also feels guilty for leaving her family, surviving, and not reaching her original goal of learning to make lace.

In an attempt to build a secure base, Pauline attaches herself to a new mother figure: Fleur Pillager, a strong, mesmerizing eighteen-year old Ojibwe girl who comes to work in the butcher shop. Pauline admits, “I tried to stop myself from remembering what it was like to have companions, to have my mother and sisters around me, but when Fleur came to us that June, I remembered” (*Tracks* 15). In contrast to Pauline’s imperceptible presence, Fleur “knew the effect she had on men, even the very youngest of them. She swayed them, sotted them, made them curious about her habits, drew them close with careless ease and cast them off with the same indifference” (*Tracks* 16). Initially, Pauline envies Fleur’s beauty, cunning, and power over men as she realizes that her own physical appearance will never demand equal attention from the opposite sex: “For my dress hung loose and my back was already stooped, an old woman’s. Work had roughened me . . . forgetting my family had hardened my face, and scrubbing . . . boards had given me big, reddened knuckles” (19, 20). After moving to a new place and experiencing a feeling of invisibility, Pauline attaches herself to Fleur, who seems to have more control. At this point in her life, Pauline is still feeling somewhat weaker than Fleur, and this difference in strength is what draws Pauline to the older girl. Nietzsche explains that “The weaker presses to the stronger from a need for nourishment; it wants to get under it, if possible to become one with it” (346). One night, while watching Fleur play cards with the men, Pauline falls asleep and finds herself “lifted, soothed, cradled in a woman’s arms” and then placed in a closet to sleep on a soft pile of papers and string (20). After that night, Pauline clings to Fleur and becomes “her moving shadow that the men never noticed, the shadow that could have

saved her” (22). In describing herself as Fleur’s shadow, Pauline is clearly trying to become one with Fleur’s strength. And the fact that Pauline feels that she could have saved Fleur implies that Pauline, at the time of crisis, felt that she had some power over the situation.

In addition to her incredible beauty, the men in the shop become aware of another one of Fleur’s powers when she manages to win exactly one dollar from them every time they play cards. Frustrated less by her small winnings than by the regular precision of her jackpot, one of the men, Lily Veddar, finally raises the stakes in an attempt to make Fleur walk away with something other than her habitual dollar. After stringing the men along for a few rounds, Fleur finally takes the last hand and all of the men’s money. Infuriated by the realization that they have been duped by a young woman, the men let Fleur walk out of the room and begin her evening chores in the yard before chasing her into the smokehouse and raping her. In instances of rape, Herman explains, “the purpose of the attack is precisely to demonstrate contempt for the victim’s autonomy and dignity” (53). In this case, the fact that a woman was able to use a male-dominated game to outsmart them and take their money was too much for the men’s ego, so they attempted regain their authority by objectifying Fleur for their own vengeful pleasure.

Pauline and Russell, Regina’s young son, watch the entire assault from behind some nearby bushes. Russell begins to yell when he sees Dutch, his stepfather, move in to take his turn with Fleur. And even though Pauline stuffs her fists in his mouth, he manages to run to Dutch, who “dragged him for a few steps, his leg a branch, then

cuffed Russell off and left him shouting and bawling in the sticky weeds” (26). Pauline, however, reacts differently to the trauma and psychologically cannot force herself to come to Fleur’s aid. Herman explains that “When a person is completely powerless, and any form of resistance is futile, she may go into a state of surrender. The system of self-defense shuts down entirely” (42). So instead of charging the men or running for help, Pauline closes her eyes and covers her ears in an attempt to block out the yells, the heavy breathing, and Fleur’s repetition of Pauline’s name among the strange words of her native language.

Although Fleur was obviously the direct victim of this sexual assault, both she and Pauline suffer intense psychological trauma. Herman describes psychological trauma as “an affliction of the powerless. At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force” (33). In this manner, both victims and witnesses experience trauma. One difference between the two is that survivors or witnesses are often additionally plagued by guilt for escaping danger and not risking their own lives (Herman 54). While psychologists can account for Pauline’s immobility as a consequence of the trauma she has just witnessed, Pauline is racked with guilt over her failure to aid Fleur: “I should have gone to Fleur, saved her, thrown myself on Dutch the way Russell did” (26). Pauline does not have the luxury of psychological help, however, and the guilt plagues her dreams and memories for years.

The morning after the attack, Fleur has returned to the reservation, Russell is hugging his knees and rocking back and forth in the yard, the men are avoiding each other’s gaze, and Pauline feels sick and smothered. As she goes outside to see Russell,

a mysterious storm comes up and the two children have to run for shelter. They race towards the meat lockers, where Pauline is sure the men have taken refuge, but even though Russell screams and they can both hear Lily's dog barking from inside the lockers, the heavy door remains shut. At this point in Pauline's story, her memory falters. Pauline describes the wind as "a shrill scream that tore through the walls and gathered around the two of us, and at last spoke plain" (27). As if he were following spoken directions, Pauline says she is sure it was Russell who first moved towards the bar that locked the doors to the meat locker. Yet at other times she admits that she might have been the one to trap the men inside: "thinking back, I see my arms lift, my hands grasp, see myself dropping the beam into the metal grip. At other times the moment is erased" (27). And three days later when the town begins to search for the three missing men, they discover that the door is "wedged down, a tornado's freak whim" (30). Pauline's vacillating memory is most likely a sign of dissociation, which can involve the "reversals, substitutions, and transportations of images and ideas" (Haaken, "Recovery" 1076). Van der Kolk adds that "Pathologies of memory are characteristic features of post-traumatic stress disorder. These range from amnesia for part, or all, of the traumatic events to frank dissociation, in which large realms of experience or aspects of one's identity are disowned" (*Psychological Trauma* 191). Since two of the three men inside the locker freeze to death, Pauline naturally wants to repress the memories that reveal her culpability. It is not until about five years later, when Pauline has grown in confidence and purpose, that she can fully own and pride herself in the fact that she closed the Argus lockers.

Upon returning to the reservation, Pauline is no longer content to feed off of Fleur's limited resources, so she quickly sets out to overpower her. Herman explains that

Traumatic events call into question basic human relationships. They breach the attachments of family, friendships, love, and community. They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others. They undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience. They violate the victim's faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis. (51)

This is an apt description of Pauline, whose determination to gain power becomes even stronger. She has seen a strong Pillager woman fall prey to the whim of some insignificant white men. The rape illustrates for Pauline the fact that Native power is not always strong enough to keep a person from harm. Also, although Pauline still has some contact with Fleur, their relationship thereafter is always strained. Pauline no longer thinks of Fleur as a kindly mother-figure, but as an equal and a rival: "In my dreams, I look straight back at Fleur, at the men. I am no longer the watcher on the dark sill, the skinny girl" (*Tracks* 31). Many of Pauline's actions before becoming a nun are motivated by her *ressentiment* towards Fleur. *Ressentiment*, as described by Nietzsche, is simply "envy—the all too natural feelings of the underprivileged" (201). Michelle R. Hessler points out, in her article "Catholic Nuns and Ojibwa Shamans: Pauline and Fleur in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*," that one of the reasons Pauline desires to become a nun is so she can gain some form of dominance over Fleur and the other Native

residents of the reservation: “As a member of the reservation community, Pauline is inferior to Fleur, but as a member of the cloister she belongs to the mainstream Christian community which repeatedly dispossesses the Anishinabeg” (42). The reader gets a further sense of Pauline’s envy when she describes the power passed on through the Pillager bloodline. Pauline, who was born into a weaker family, resents Fleur’s power that was “handed out before birth” (*Tracks* 31). Pauline was not blessed with Pillager genes and instead has to struggle greatly for every bit of strength she obtains. Nietzsche explains, however, that “In general, every thing is *worth as much as one has paid for it*. . . . It is because the great man has *cost* so much, and *not* because he appears as a miracle and gift of heaven and ‘chance,’ that he has become great” (508). Pauline’s struggle, therefore, is precisely what strengthens her and helps her to rise above her family’s embarrassing reputation.

After the rape, Pauline and Fleur both leave Argus and return to the reservation. Pauline claims to have left because she “couldn’t get rid of the men. They walked nightlong through my dreams, looking for whom to blame. Pauline! My name was growl on their lips. A suspicion, a certainty, an iron hook on a rail” (*Tracks* 62). Nanapush, the second narrator in *Tracks*, confirms that Regina sent Pauline back to the reservation “when she got peculiar, blacked out and couldn’t sleep, saw things that weren’t in the room” (39). Herman verifies that even after the traumatic event has past, victims often “relive the event as though it were continually recurring in the present. . . . The traumatic moment becomes encoded in an abnormal form of memory, which breaks spontaneously into consciousness, both as flashbacks during waking states and as

traumatic nightmares during sleep” (37). Forced to fight her traumatic memories by herself, Pauline seems to suffer even more than Fleur. Erdrich does not give any indication that Fleur suffers from symptoms of PTSD, and the reader can only guess that the support she receives from Nanapush and his wife Margaret help her to recover from the rape.

Fleur lives quietly down by the lake for several months before giving birth to Lulu, a baby girl that sparks controversy within the community. Rumors fly about who might be the father: Misshepesu—the magical creature of the lake—scandalous white settlers, or windigos: cannibal spirits in human form. Though the father of Fleur’s baby is unknown, Pauline feels confident in her knowledge that that the child was likely fathered in a smokehouse in Argus. Although she may privately be horrified by what has happened to Fleur, Pauline also feels special for having been present at such a perilous encounter. While Herman points out that feelings of “specialness” are only a guise that “compensates for self-loathing and feelings of worthlessness” (204), Haaken acknowledges that “the trauma story anoints the survivor with a heroic status—as the bearer of unspeakable truths” (“Recovery” 1083). Certainly this heroic status is what Pauline is feeling as she condescendingly remarks on the villagers’ faulty knowledge of Fleur’s new baby: “It comes up different every time, and has no ending, no beginning. They get the middle wrong too. They only know they don’t know anything” (*Tracks* 31). Unlike the rest of the Puyats, who “were known as a quiet family with little to say,” Pauline has no scruples about telling the community what happened at the butcher shop that night (14). Pauline not only enjoys the attention she receives after telling her

story; she also experiences a temporary sense of relief: “No one who saw Pauline afterwards could doubt the good it did her to be set free of the tale. She walked lighter as if the story had weighed on her” (54). Pauline, herself, admits that she felt both heavier and lighter, but she also concedes that her confession was a mistake that brought her disturbing memories back to life (65).

Considering Pauline’s extensive experience with trauma and neglect, it is not surprising that she suffers from blackouts, insomnia, and hallucinations. Herman explains that people who have suffered recurrent trauma often have intrusive physical symptoms: “People who have been subjected to repeated abuse in childhood may be prevented from developing normal sleep, eating, or endocrine cycles and may develop extensive somatic symptoms and abnormal pain perception” (187). These symptoms of hyperarousal, in addition to her fragmented memory, all imply that Pauline is afflicted with dissociative disorder. She is suffering from what Herman identifies as “the central dialectic of psychological trauma:” she is torn “between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud” (1). While Pauline wants to deny her involvement in the men’s death and her lack of involvement in Fleur’s attempted rescue, she also, as mentioned previously, feels the need to tell others about what she has witnessed.

Since all of Pauline’s family died of influenza and Regina becomes occupied with tending to Dutch—who suffered severe frostbite but survived the three days in the locker—Pauline finds herself in need of a social support group. In his book, *Psychological Trauma*, Van der Kolk describes various factors affecting the duration and severity of a victim’s response to trauma. Van der Kolk explains that “Disruption

or loss of social support is intimately associated with inability to overcome the effects of psychological trauma. Lack of support during traumatic experiences may leave enduring marks on subsequent adjustment and functioning” (11). Pauline obviously does not have a strong foundation to fall back on, and is left, instead, to deal with her trauma alone. As Pauline is searching for an accepting community and a way to escape her mental anguish, Bernadette Morrissey and her brother Napoleon arrive in town.

The Morrisseys are mixed-bloods who were able to obtain land that the older Chippewa could not hold onto; Pauline quickly latches on to them as her new makeshift family. Pauline knew Bernadette’s two daughters, Sophie and Philomena, from Catholic school, but even though she had scorned their haughty French ways at the time, Pauline is clearly willing to overlook past annoyances in order to connect with the girls’ family. When speaking with Bernadette, Pauline concedes, “I counseled myself to ask after them, to yearn after them, to lower my eyes and stare at my feet in confusion until Bernadette asked me what was wrong. Then I told her” (64). Pauline is able to manipulate Bernadette into inviting her to stay with them by telling Bernadette that Regina beats her and makes her work extremely hard. This type of calculated lie, Nietzsche claims, is typical of the powerful: “One conceals oneself in the presence of the unfamiliar: and he who wants to attain something says what he would like to have thought of him, but *not* what he thinks. (‘The powerful always lie’)” (204). From this point on, Pauline’s scheming increases, and she begins to work her way towards public recognition.

Pauline is able to use Bernadette in several different ways. Besides providing food and housing, Bernadette teaches Pauline how to read and write the nun's impeccable script that she had learned in Quebec. Pauline also begins to follow Bernadette as she makes house calls to watch over the dying and eventually tend to their lifeless bodies. This seeming act of compassion really serves to further Pauline's authority on multiple levels. First, Pauline realizes that the nuns think that Bernadette is holy because she visits the dead (*Tracks* 65). Since Pauline ultimately wants others to think her holy too, it is in Pauline's best interest to follow Bernadette's example. Second, watching people die gives Pauline the sense that she has the power to control death. After watching former classmate, Mary Pepewas, die Pauline comments, "Perhaps, hand over hand, I could have drawn her back to shore, but I saw very clearly that she wanted to be gone. I understood this. That is why I put my fingers in the air between us, and I cut where the rope was frayed down to a string" (*Tracks* 68). Third, because of her ability to ease people into death, Pauline furthers her reputation among the community. People come to recognize her and call on her during times of death. While taking care of dead bodies is not a glamorous thing to be known for, Pauline is beginning to distinguish herself from others and is slowly making herself visible.

Nietzsche contends that a weak person is scared of death and turns away from its ugly presence. Bernadette's daughters, for example, did not want to be around death because they "hated the slops, the smell, the buckets and pans to rinse" (*Tracks* 66). Pauline, on the other hand, actually feels better in the presence of death: "I handled the dead until the cold feel of their skin was a comfort . . . I accompanied Bernadette,

waited for the moment that brought me peace” (*Tracks* 69). Not only does Pauline feel comforted by death, it also gives her a sense of power over the community:

now when people saw me walking down the road, they wondered who was being taken, man, woman, or child. I was a midwife that they hailed down with both interest and dread. I was their own fate. Somewhere now, in the back of their minds, they knew that these bodies to which they were devoted, all in good time came to me. (*Tracks* 75)

Nietzsche asserts that a characteristic of the strong is their ability to see unpleasant things as attractive or beneficial: “the feeling of *power* applies the judgment ‘beautiful’ even to things and conditions that the instinct of impotence could only find *hateful* and ‘ugly.’ . . . a *preference for questionable and terrifying things* is a symptom of *strength*” (450). Therefore, the fact that Pauline is pleased by death is yet another sign of her growing power.

Although initially the Morrissey household appears to be a safe and nurturing environment for Pauline, her stay there quickly leads to further trauma. Herman observes that the abused child often has a hard time forming stable relationships and that in “attempting to create a new life, she reencounters the trauma” (110). This is precisely what happens to Pauline as she hopes to find refuge and opportunity in her new home. Napoleon Morrissey is portrayed as a bachelor with “a weakness for drink,” and his drunken loneliness prompts him to seek comfort in the arms of his young houseguest (64). Pauline proclaims that she ignored his advances and tried to avoid him, and while she admits that girls her age were already married, Pauline shows no

interest in a man she describes as “gray and lined with the marks of hard fortune and distilled drink” (65). When Napoleon corners Pauline behind the house, she asks him to pour out his whiskey, and then simply freezes as Napoleon laughs at her rigid fear. Despite his inappropriate behavior, Pauline keeps Napoleon’s tasteless flirtation a secret because she is afraid that Bernadette will send her away if she discovers the truth. Herman states that many women refrain from taking precautionary measures against rape because they wish to avoid conflict and potential embarrassment (69). Meanwhile, Pauline’s nightmares about Fleur, the men, and the rape persist and increase in intensity until she becomes afraid to even close her eyes: “Every night I was witness when the men slapped Fleur’s mouth, beat her, entered and rode her. I felt all. My shrieks poured from her mouth and my blood from her wounds” (*Tracks* 66). The nightly trauma causes Pauline to scream and thrash in her sleep so much that she bruises Bernadette’s daughters with whom she shares a bed.

Herman explains that the self-esteem of trauma victims “is assaulted by the experiences of humiliation, guilt, and helplessness. Their capacity for intimacy is compromised by intense and contradictory feelings of need and fear” (56). It is perhaps this low self-esteem that initially motivates Pauline to look for a husband: “I thought I must get married, must find myself a husband. I thought that the reason I was not wanted was just that I was alone. So I cast around the village. I was obvious” (72). Nanapush notices Pauline’s new resolve and, in an obvious manner, points her out to Napoleon. While Pauline showed nothing but fear and contempt for her guardian’s brother before that day, afterwards she admits to seeing him in a different light: “Instead

of the grizzled hairs and hard-set mouth, I noticed his strong hips, the width of his neck” (72). After becoming increasingly lonely and jealous of the growing passion between Fleur and her new lover, Eli Kashpaw, Pauline ultimately loses her resolve and agrees to meet Napoleon in an abandoned house in the woods. Although Pauline may still fear Napoleon, she simultaneously needs the attention of an older male figure, and her sense of self is currently too weak to separate these two emotions. Once their first awkward experience is over and Napoleon leaves her in the forest, Pauline fantasizes about a different, more violent encounter: “I snapped him in my beak like a wicket-boned mouse. He crushed me to a powder and spread me across the floor. . . . Our bruised mouths moved on each other and our hands to what they knew” (73). This sadomasochistic desire, Herman explains, is common among abused children who are often drawn into the cycle of repeated victimization (112). Similarly, W.G. Niederland emphasizes that a victim’s reaction to trauma may “cover ‘the whole spectrum from masochistic character changes to psychotic depression’ ” (Van der Kolk, *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* 15). Shortly after their trip to the woods, Napoleon goes down south to sell his horses, but their affair continues once he returns. Concerning their private visits together, Pauline states, “Napoleon and I met again and again . . . I came to him in ignorance . . . I could not resist more than a night without his body, which was hard, pitiless, but so warm slipping out of me that tears always formed in my eyes” (*Tracks* 95). Like her mother before her, Pauline is attempting to comfort herself through compulsive sexual behavior and risk taking.

After experiencing sex and gaining a new knowledge of exactly what type of physical passion she is missing out on with Eli, Pauline's jealousy of Fleur and Eli's relationship intensifies: "Now that I understood the way things happened with a man and a woman, now that I knew it would not happen to me, I tried to warm my hands at the fire between them" (75). Her small attempt to flirt with Eli, however, is unsuccessful, and Pauline "both turned from him and desired him, in hate" (77). Having been scorned by Eli, but not ready to give up, Pauline plots a different approach.

Because traumatic events cause victims to feel frightened and helpless, psychologists agree that two of the primary steps in recovering from trauma are establishing safety and a sense of power. Herman asserts that "Trauma robs the victim of a sense of power and control; the guiding principle of recovery is to restore power and control to the survivor" (159). In *Psychological Trauma*, Van der Kolk comments that "To have adequate mastery of one's life, one just needs to have an internal locus of control; that is, the perception that one is in control of one's environment and the rewards it offers" (Van der Kolk, *Psychological Trauma* 223). Pauline has no power over Eli's feelings toward her, but she needs to feel some control over her circumstances and over Eli.

Pauline's plot to assert her control begins when she notices how beautiful Sophie, Bernadette's fourteen year-old daughter, is becoming, and volunteers to buy material and make her a blue dress that is sewed on so close "you could see her nipples when they tightened" (78). Pauline then convinces Bernadette that the farm could use an extra worker and that Eli would be the best person for the position. Finally, Pauline

obtains a medicine powder from Moses Pillager that is “crushed fine of certain roots, crane’s bill, something else, and slivers of Sophie’s fingernails” (*Tracks* 80). Over the next few days, while Eli works in the fields, Pauline bakes pinches of the powder in his lunch and has Sophie deliver it to him. But even before she begins to season his food with the magical dust, Pauline realizes that her plan will succeed because, when it comes to flirting, “Sophie had a natural ability I came nowhere near” (81).

Pauline is rewarded for her patience only a few days later when she bakes the last of the medicine powder in Eli’s bread and then watches as Sophie completes the seduction and inspires Eli to pick her up and ravish her in the river. Pauline sees the entire encounter from behind a concealing pile of brush, and in this way is able to experience, vicariously, the sexual pleasure she wants from Eli: “She shivered and I dug my fingers through the tough claws of sumac, through the wood-sod, clutched bark, shrank backward into her pleasure” (83). In addition to seducing Eli, Pauline also succeeds at controlling and humiliating the more attractive Sophie, who receives a beating from Bernadette. By arranging this betrayal, Pauline is also able to hurt and, at least temporarily, break up Fleur and Eli for laughing at her previously unsuccessful sexual advances.

Shortly after moving in with the Morriseys, Pauline demonstrates a fanatic interest in Catholicism and a desire to become a nun. There are several valid explanations as to why Pauline expresses such a radical interest in religion. Van der Kolk attests that “Religion fulfills the critical function of providing a sense of purpose in the face of terrifying realities by placing suffering in a larger context . . . religion can

help people transcend their imbeddedness in their individual suffering” (*Traumatic Stress* 25). He continues to explain that “Some traumatized people deal with their encounter with unpredictability and meaninglessness by converting to fundamentalist political or religious sects that have rigid codes of behavior, exclusionary criteria for belonging, and a designated group of outsiders who embody evil” (26). By becoming a white nun and adopting strict, ascetic practices, Pauline effectively chooses to side with white Christians against evil and Native heathens. In “History, Postmodernism, and Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks*,” Nancy J. Peterson explains that Pauline’s pursuit of spirituality is really an attempt to “repress her sexual desire and her connection to tribal culture” (988). Napoleon does not desire a committed relationship with Pauline, and even if he did, she would never be content to live the ordinary life of a wife and mother. Herman explains that in healing and gaining control of one’s body and environment, trauma victims also strive to gain “control of self-destructive behaviors” (150). Pauline does not love Napoleon, and she realizes that although their time together provides her with temporary solace, she needs to terminate the unhealthy relationship that will ultimately interfere with her larger goals of becoming a nun.

Since Pauline had recently betrothed herself to God, she is devastated when she learns of her growing baby. In an attempt to avoid blame for her illegitimate child, Pauline claims, “Satan was the one who had pinned me with his horns” (133). When Bernadette discovers Pauline ramming the handle of an axe into her stomach, she has to bargain with Pauline to get her to carry the child to term. Together, the two women conspire to hide the pregnancy and deliver the baby in secret. As much as she despises

the new life within her, Pauline basks in Bernadette's motherly attention. During labor, she even endeavors to hold the baby inside because she knows that once she gives birth she will "be lonelier. . . . an outcast, a thing set aside for God's use, a human who could be touched by no other human" (135). After finally giving birth, Pauline shows no signs of attachment to her new daughter, Marie: "the child was already fallen, a dark thing, and I could not bear the thought. I turned away" (136). Having never received proper love from her own mother, Pauline seems void of any natural motherly instincts, and right before abandoning her child, Pauline remarks only that the baby, who Bernadette had to pull out of her with makeshift forceps, is " 'marked by the devil's thumbs' " (136). This image of the devil's physical presence in Pauline's life prevails throughout the rest of the novel as Pauline joins the church and strives to become a nun.

Pauline is willing to use whatever cultural means necessary to increase her power. For example, although she refused to work with beads, quills, hides, and other traditional crafts, Pauline had no problem using Ojibwe love medicine to bewitch Sophie. However, in order to impress the nuns, become a member of the convent, and begin her climb towards sainthood, Pauline begins to manipulate a completely different set of cultural clichés. Once she has decided that she wants to join the Church, Pauline begins to experience visions, miracles, and special visitations involving, not Ojibwe manido, but Jesus, Satan, and the Virgin Mary. Conveniently, most of Pauline's religious hallucinations serve to benefit her in other ways as well. For instance, Pauline attests that one night God appeared to her on the stove in order to inform her of her heritage: "He said that I was not whom I had supposed. I was an orphan and my parents

had died in grace, and also, despite my deceptive features, I was not one speck of Indian but wholly white” (137). This revelation comes just in time, because days later the convent receives word that they are not to accept Indian girls into their order. Pauline also states that God forgave her of her daughter and advised her to move on to more important matters: “He had an important plan for me, for which I must prepare, that I should find out the habits and hiding places of His enemy” (137).

Pauline even tries to manipulate religious phenomenon to help her with small practical issues. When the Mother Superior asks Pauline if the Lord ever visits her, Pauline, who is often uncomfortable at night, reveals her vision of God on the stove, and then adds, “ ‘He doesn’t stay long though, Mother. He says it is much too cold’ ” (138). Superior does not fall for this trickery, however, and in response sends Pauline out to the forest to gather dead wood for the stove. On another occasion, Pauline is about to return her Superior’s blanket when she suddenly sees her own shadow move without her. Pauline determines that this movement is a sign of the devil and that he is the one who has told her to return the blanket; therefore, Pauline concludes that the only godly thing for her to do is resist the devil and keep the warm covering for herself (139). Later that same night, God makes it clear to Pauline that the Indians are not protected by their gods and that the whites are going to continue to grow in wealth and knowledge. She comes to the realization that the old Indian traditions are dying out and “there would have to come a turning, a gathering, another door. And it would be Pauline who opened it, same as she closed the Argus lockers” (139).

Furthermore, any time that something negative happens to Pauline, she assumes it is the devil who is causing the trauma and testing her faith. So when Nanapush plays a practical joke that forces Pauline to run for the outhouse, she concludes, “He was informed by Satan, sent to me on purpose to test my resolve” (150). Haaken reinforces the commonality of delusive means of self-defense when she reveals that “increasingly, trauma stories have taken on a mythic tone in casting the survivor in dramatic combat with an archetypal personification of evil” (“Recovery” 1083). Haaken strengthens her position by referencing Janet Liebman Jacobs, who notes that girls raised in conservative religious households are inclined to view all appearances of evil as the direct work or manifestation of the devil himself (1085). Similarly, when something happens that Pauline cannot understand or control, she excuses it as being the work of God or Satan. Van der Kolk reveals that the “tendency to attach magical explanations to events beyond their control” is a characteristic of abused children (*Psychological Trauma* 11). In short, Pauline needs to believe in God and Satan in order to make sense of the tragedy in her life.

Pauline’s spiritual awareness, at this point, is yet another sign of her inability to come to terms with her environment and to accept responsibility for her own actions. For example, when Fleur’s labor comes on too quickly during her second pregnancy and Pauline is sent out for a specific medicinal plant, Pauline blames her faulty memory, shaking hands, and clumsy feet on God: “I do not know why the Lord overtook my limbs and made them clumsy, but it must have been His terrible will” (157). Just as in her previous experience of witnessing Fleur’s rape, Pauline seems to

falter and freeze when faced with a moment of crisis and fear. But Pauline chooses to see her inability to help Fleur, for the second time, not as a sign of physical limitation or fear, but rather divine intervention.

Even while giving premature birth to her baby, Fleur is obviously disgusted by Pauline's inability to perform the simplest of tasks. After cutting the umbilical cord with her own knife, Fleur throws the instrument at Pauline. Though Pauline quickly moves her legs apart and escapes harm, the knife pierces through her clothing and pins her to the wall. At this point, the near danger and the stress of watching Fleur give birth to a dying baby cause Pauline to have a vision in which she and Fleur walk through the woods into the heaven of the Chippewa. Van der Kolk explains that "Memories and feelings connected with the trauma . . . return as intrusive recollections, feeling states (such as overwhelming anxiety and panic unwarranted by current experience) . . . and . . . in behavioral reenactments" (*Psychological Trauma* 185). During their walk they pass many dead people, including Pauline's parents, before ultimately stopping at a group of three men playing cards. The two women take up the roles they played in Argus: Fleur joins the game, and Pauline watches quietly. The fear caused by the reenactment of this scene causes Pauline to disappear: "I stood watching, quiet as I'd watched in Argus . . . so intent that I ceased to breathe and turned invisible . . . my presence was finally nothing more than a slight distortion of the air" (161). This imaginary, yet self-defensive ability to disappear, Van der Kolk explains, is typical of victims of abuse who are trying to distance themselves from further trauma (*Traumatic Stress* 191). But Pauline's disappearing act does not work this time, and after Fleur wins the game and

takes all of their money again, the men turn to Pauline. The look in the men's eyes make it clear that they know who is responsible for their deaths, but before they can attack, Pauline grabs Fleur's sleeve and the two of them run safely back to the cabin (162). Because the vision, with its reenactment of the trauma, concludes with Pauline and Fleur escaping together unharmed, Pauline is finally able to move past her nightmares and her guilt over this aspect of her life.

While Pauline was initially burdened by feelings of guilt, Nietzsche makes it clear that a guilty conscience is not synonymous with culpability: "In fact, the conscience reprehends an action because it has been reprehended for a long time. It merely repeats: it creates no values" (166). Guilt in general is a useless emotion and yet another sign of weakness. Concerning remorse, Nietzsche states, "I do not like this kind of cowardice towards one's own deeds . . . An extreme pride, rather, is in order. After all, what is the good of it! No deed can be undone by being regretted" (136). While Pauline's memory is temporarily troubled by the events in Argus, by the time she is ready to become a novice at the convent, she learns to free herself from the pangs of her conscience. It is after joining the church and taking a new name that Pauline seriously begins to grow out of her weak beginnings and into a more powerful self.

Although Pauline joins the Catholic Church, she neither abandons all of her Ojibwe beliefs, nor adopts all of the Church's beliefs. Instead Pauline creates a unique mixture that gives her power over both cultures. Both Ojibwe and Nietzsche agree that the most powerful people of all are those who can do both good and harm. A person who can only do good is only half a man—he has cut himself off from his evil side and

is therefore incomplete and weak. In contrast, the strong do not separate themselves from their darker nature, but rather embrace it and use it to their advantage: “The concept of power, whether of a god or of a man, always includes both the ability to help and the ability to harm. . . . It is a fateful step when one separates the power for the one from the power for the other into a dualism” (Nietzsche 193). Similarly, Ruth Landes notes in her book *Ojibwa Religion*, that the Ojibwe hold an “absolute conviction that a man’s power lies in ability to do evil, knowingly” (59). The Ojibwe believed that the sorcerer was the “ideal strong man,” and that his power was “inseparable from his alarming personality, seen in the manifestations described as jealous, greedy, bullying, and extremely ambitious” (59). Pauline certainly has an “alarming personality;” she is fueled by jealousy and an ambitious need for power, and even into her old age she continues to bully others.

In “A Healthy Balance: Religion, Identity, and Community in Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine*,” Karla Sanders agrees that what motivates Pauline to join the Church is “the power she associates with Anglo religion” (133). She joins the Church, not because she believes in the virtues of humility, peace, and grace, but because she wants to persuade others to assume these weaker qualities. In discussing the politics of virtue, Nietzsche advises that the key to power lies “in learning, not how one *becomes* virtuous, but how one *makes* virtuous—how virtue is made to dominate.” Nietzsche goes further to assert “that to desire the one—the domination of virtue—one absolutely must *not* desire the other; one automatically renounces becoming virtuous oneself” (170). In her desire to convert and save souls, Leopolda wishes only to accumulate more willing

subjects. This, Nietzsche contends, has been the mission of society, particularly the church, since the beginning of time:

Much labor has been expended in all ages, and especially in the Christian ages, to reduce mankind to this half-sided efficiency, to the 'good' . . .

The essential demand here is that mankind should do nothing evil, that it should under no circumstances do harm or desire to do harm. The way to achieve this is: the castration of all possibility of enmity, the unhinging of all the instincts of *ressentiment*. (192)

Pauline has no intention of avoiding evil; she only affects holiness so that she can teach others to be harmless. As a nun, Leopolda masquerades as a humble servant, but underneath her habit is a proud woman who serves no one. When Nanapush tells Pauline that she is the most unusual woman he knows, Pauline admits that her "pride was overwhelmingly tempted" and asks him to continue describing what he has noticed (147). Similarly, when Mother Superior comments that she "had never known a novice so serious and devoted, or so humble," Pauline "swelled on that and smiled" (138).

Because her traumatic and loveless childhood left her starving for attention and affection, Pauline spends her entire life attempting to be noticed, feared, and admired.

Further evidence of Pauline's paradoxical beliefs is seen in her attack of Misshepesu. Before entering the convent as a novice, Pauline tells Superior that she must go to the lake one more time before giving up her former life. Pauline says that she is going to visit her acquaintances one last time, but more importantly, she intends to conquer the lake creature in order to save herself and her god. For Pauline, the lake

monster represents both a Native and a Christian adversary, and conquering it will give her unique power in both realms. According to Victoria Brehm's article "The Metamorphoses of an Ojibwa Manido," descriptions of the Great Lynx arose in the seventeenth century and may have been inspired by the panthers and cougars common in the Great Lakes area (680). The legends said that those who sought Misshepesu, also known as Micipijiu, were given tremendous power for both good and evil (Brehm 680-81). Pauline's excursion onto Matchimanito Lake is a power-hunt in other ways as well. Her journey to the lake mirrors the animal groom tales of Ojibwe culture in which "a woman mates with a supernatural creature, frequently a beast. She may be given or sold to him by relatives; she may seek him herself; or he may attack her and she will either resist successfully or be captured" (Brehm 685). In Ojibwe culture, these animal groom tales "celebrate courage in the face of danger," so by tempting and overcoming Misshepesu, Pauline sets herself up, by Native American standards, as a brave and empowered woman (Brehm 686).

Of further relevance is the fact that Misshepesu is the source of Fleur's strength and power. Hessler notes that Pauline's plan to fast on Matchimanito and wait for Misshepesu is motivated, not by her desire to save souls, but her need to conquer Fleur (43). With the advance of white civilization, however, Fleur's power seems to be waning: she cannot prevent starvation, the death of her premature baby, or the loss of her land. One reason Pauline attacks the lake creature is because she recognizes an opportunity to ultimately overthrow Fleur and set herself up at the head of a new culture:

Our Lord, who had obviously made the whites more shrewd, as they grew in number, all around . . . while the Indians receded and coughed to death and drank. It was clear that Indians were not protected by the thing in the lake or by the other Manitous . . . There would have to come a turning, a gathering, another door. And it would be Pauline who opened it, same as she closed the Argus lockers. Not Fleur Pillager. (*Tracks* 139)

Even though the form of Misshepesu turns out to be the body of Napoleon Morrissey, Pauline does have some success in her attack. Shortly afterwards she foresees the future of the local tribal lands and people, and she correctly predicts that Fleur will lose her cabin and that younger generations of Indians will be blinded and deafened by government schooling. While Pauline becomes a nun and begins her rise towards sainthood, Fleur is blamed for Napoleon's death and must struggle the rest of her life for the two things most important to her: her daughter and her land. Even Nanapush notices that Fleur has been weakened:

what was happening was so ordinary that it fell beyond her abilities. She had failed too many times, both to rescue us and save her youngest child. . . . Her dreams lied, her vision was obscured, her helper slept deep in the lake, and all her Argus money was long spent. . . . Fleur was a different person than the young woman I had known. She was hesitant in speaking, false in her gestures, anxious to cover her fear. (*Tracks* 177)

Nanapush follows his comments on Fleur's weakened state with a reflection on the nature of Native power. "Power dies, power goes under and gutters out, ungraspable. It is momentary, quick of flight and liable to deceive" (177). He continues to explain that his secret was never to assume that he owned his own power, "For who can blame a man waiting, the doors open, the windows open, food offered, arms stretched wide? Who can blame him if the visitor does not arrive?" (177). This perspective on power is similar to the Christian view that all good things come from God. Pauline, however, does not strictly adhere to either of these humble views.

In the pattern of Christ's temptation, Pauline goes to Matchimanito to confront Misshepesu as the devil in the wilderness. Unlike most Christians, Pauline does not attribute her power to God or a spiritual figure. On the contrary, she takes pride in everything she does and approaches the lake as if she were doing her feeble God a personal favor:

Christ had hidden out of frailty, overcome by the glitter of copper scales, appalled at the creature's unwinding length and luxury. New devils require new gods. . . . Because my own God was lamblike and meek and I had strengthened, daily, on His tests and privations, it was I who was armored and armed . . . I would be His champion, His savior too.

(Tracks 195)

Although she prays as she nears the lake, she addresses God "not as a penitent, with humility, but rather as a dangerous lion that had burst into a ring of pale and fainting believers" (*Tracks* 196). This comparison is particularly revealing of Pauline's self-

image, and corresponds both with the lake cat she intends to destroy and with the new name she later assumes, which means “bold as a lion.” Pauline intends to go to Matchimanito one last time to rid herself of her former life before entering the convent as a novice: “They could starve and fornicate, expose their young for dogs and crows, worship the bones of animals or the brown liquor in a jar. I would have none of it” (*Tracks* 196). After this visit to the lake, Pauline is determined to be free of her previous feelings of guilt, of her former connection with the pagan Indians, and of her feelings of inferiority and jealousy towards Fleur: “I would be chosen, His own, wiped clean” (196). Pauline learns quickly that she is the one in control of her feelings, and nobody else can make her feel guilty.

Pauline’s trip onto the lake in Nanapush’s boat is a physical representation of how she is separating herself from her Indian heritage and her former friends and family. In “They Talk, Who Listens: Audience in American Literatures,” Kenneth M. Roemer notes that Pauline, “listened selectively to her Christ-on-the-stove vision” (11). Roemer explains that even though her vision instructed her to help the Indians, Pauline “is so captivated by her self-aggrandizing notions of herself as the heroic vanquisher of the Devil-Lake Creature and as Christly ‘suffer[er] in the desert’ rising above temptation, that she far from listens” (11). From her precarious position on the lake, she stares at the gathering community on the shore and laughs, “They were such small foolish sticks strung together with cloth that in the heat of my sudden hilarity I nearly tumbled over the side” (197). She clearly wants to demonstrate her newfound independence and isolation from the people she formerly relied on for support, and she

decides that “This was how God felt: beyond hindrance or reach” (198). Pauline gains a sense of power as she decides to further separate herself from “the kingdom of the damned” (199), stating, “I was important, beyond their reach, even Fleur’s” (198). This incident represents a turning point in Pauline’s life, because she makes the conscious decision to establish her self-worth beyond the influence of others.

Nietzsche describes the individual as

something quite new which creates new things, something absolute; all his acts are entirely his own. Ultimately, the individual derives the values of his acts from himself; because he has to interpret in a quite individual way even the words he has inherited. His interpretation of a formula at least is personal, even if he does not create a formula: as an interpreter he is still creative. (403)

Pauline’s strange interpretation and mixture of Christianity, Ojibwe culture, and her own ideals clearly identifies her as an individual in the Nietzschean sense. Pauline is creative in forming her new religion because she is so intent on being different.

Comparing herself to predictable martyrdoms, Pauline boasts, “Mine took another form” (*Tracks* 152), “I knew there never was a martyr like me” (*Tracks* 192). It is Leopolda’s eccentricity, not her righteousness, that sets her apart and places her above the herd. Concerning individuality, Nietzsche explains, “It is not a matter of going ahead (--for then one is at best a herdsman, i.e., the herd’s chief requirement), but of being able *to go it alone*, of being able *to be different*” (196). Leopolda does not want to be known merely as a good person; she wants to be a saint like no other.

As Pauline gains independence and distinguishes herself among the community, she also begins to assume more responsibility for her actions. Unlike when Pauline closed the locker doors in Argus, the next time she kills she does so with a sense of purpose and control. Pauline claims that her aggression was directed toward the devil, or the lake creature, but even as she confronts him, she notices that he was “a man’s size” and has “human-looking hands” (201-02). She also says that it was not until dawn that “the thing grew a human shape, one that I recognized in gradual stages” (202-03). But even after she discovers that Misshepeshu has taken the form of Napoleon, she feels no sense of regret or pity for killing the man she used to sleep with: “it was suddenly revealed to me that I had committed no sin. There was no guilt in this matter, no fault. How could I have known what body the devil would assume?” (203). Even though she distances herself mentally from the specific target of her violence, her ultimate ability to assume responsibility and take pride in her actions is evidence that she is no longer content to be a victim of circumstance, but has chosen instead to take charge of her own future. While she formerly admitted, with a sense of detachment, that she occasionally recalled seeing her hands drop the beam of the locker in place, this time her hands are directly under her command: “What I told them to do, then, they accomplished. My fingers closed like hasps of iron, locked on the strong rosary chain, wrenched and twisted the beads close about his neck until his face darkened and he lunged away. I hung on while he bucked and gagged and finally fell” (*Tracks* 202). Pauline’s capacity to end, however viciously, her self-destructive habit of running to Napoleon for physical comfort further attests to a growing independence and strength.

Although Pauline's past continuously influences her life as an adult, it is fitting that as she becomes a nun and achieves control of her future, she leaves behind her old name, meaning little or humble, and with it her status as a helpless victim. In fact, Nietzsche explains that often the strongest people are compelled to succeed by their traumatic pasts. When describing the characteristics of the strong, Nietzsche exclaims that "To fight upward out of that chaos to this form [of strength]—requires a compulsion: one must be faced with the choice of perishing or prevailing. A dominating race can grow up only out of terrible and violent beginnings" (465). Thus, Sister Leopolda owes her eventual success and power, in part, to her painful past, for without it she would not have been motivated to go to the extremes necessary to receive recognition. While Pauline suffered emotional injuries beyond her control, Sister Leopolda carefully orchestrates each aspect of her life as a nun and is eager to make tremendous sacrifices in order to become a potential saint.

CHAPTER II

LEOPOLDA IN PROGRESS

Readers get a glimpse of how Leopolda develops as a nun in two chapters of Erdrich's earliest novel, *Love Medicine*, published in 1984. The first chapter, "Saint Marie," takes place in 1934 and is Marie Kashpaw's recounting of her relationship with Leopolda, her childhood (tor)mentor. In this initial glimpse of Leopolda, the reader finds a manipulative nun whose punitive reactions towards her pupils are questionable at best. Even though she is not particularly fond of children, as a nun and teacher, Leopolda uses her position to influence her young students.

Marie recalls that as a young girl going up to the Sacred Heart Convent for the first time she dreamed of being worshipped by the nuns and "had the mail-order Catholic soul you get in a girl raised out in the bush, whose only thought is getting into town" (44). At this point in her life, Marie, like her mother before her, has little to no interest in becoming a truly good person. She merely wants to use the Church as a means to move off the reservation and gain public recognition. Sanders concurs that "Marie yearns to become a saint because she associates martyrdom with power" (134). Nietzsche would find nothing strange about this, as he claims that the desire for power always trumps the desire for goodness: "One would make a fit little boy stare if one asked him: 'Would you like to become virtuous?'—but he will open his eyes wide if asked: 'Would you like to become stronger than your friends?' " (485). Sister Leopolda

immediately recognizes Marie's pride and ambition—so similar to her own—and attempts to mold the girl into her own image in order to control her.

Leopolda begins her training by convincing Marie that the devil is after her: “She always said the Dark One wanted me most of all, and I believed this. I stood out. Evil was a common thing I trusted” (46). After installing this belief in Marie and her other young students, Leopolda is able to coerce and abuse them under the pretense that she is driving the devil from their hearts. But as cruel as Leopolda often is towards her, Marie is strangely drawn to the nun: “I was that girl who thought the black hem of her garment would help me rise. Veils of love which was only hate petrified by longing—that was me” (45). Similarly, Marie admits, “sometimes I wanted her heart in love and admiration. Sometimes. And sometimes I wanted her heart to roast on a black stick” (49). Marie even admires Leopolda's strange ways and her connection to and awareness of the devil: “I had this confidence in Leopolda. She was different. The other Sisters had long ago gone blank and given up on Satan. . . . But Leopolda kept track of him and knew his habits, minds he burrowed in, deep spaces where he hid” (45). Marie and Leopolda challenge, and therefore interest each other. Concerning the company one keeps, Nietzsche warns, “Beware of the good-natured! Association with them makes one languid. All associations are good that make one practice the weapons of defense and offense that reside in one's instincts. All one's inventiveness toward testing one's strength of will” (486). Leopolda and Marie's strange relationship to each other is a perfect example of this continual testing of one's will. Marie even describes Leopolda as “the definite most-hard trial to anyone's endurance” (45). The two seem to

share reciprocal feelings of hate and admiration, and they are constantly vying to dominate each other.

As harsh as her actions and advice may be, Leopolda does appear, at times, to have her biological daughter's best interest in mind. Since Leopolda is very familiar with Marie's background and the general hardships and prejudices that mixed-blood women face, she sponsors her to come to the Catholic school and ultimately wants her to join the church. Once at the school, Leopolda candidly attempts to persuade Marie to become a nun: " 'You're not smart. You don't have the ambition to get clear. You have two choices. One, you can marry a no-good Indian, bear his brats, die like a dog. Or two, you can give yourself to God' " (*Love Medicine* 48). As Erdrich publishes subsequent novels and the reader learns more about Leopolda's traumatic past, related specifically in *Tracks* and *Last Report*, it seems more likely that Leopolda may be sincere in her attempt to save her daughter from the various types of pain that she endured growing up. Leopolda sincerely believes that the best opportunity for a girl of her background can only be found within the Catholic Church, where she can attain a respected and influential position in the community, practice a life of strict self-discipline, and be free from the troubles of a husband or lover.

Although Leopolda loves Marie in the only way she knows how, the manifestation of her love is something that most would rather avoid. Leopolda's wish for those she loves seems to mirror Nietzsche's aforesaid desire that those he cares about endure "suffering, desolation, sickness, ill-treatment, indignities . . . the only thing that can prove today whether one is worth anything or not—that one endures"

(481). In an attempt to drive out the devil and accustom Marie to physical suffering, Leopolda pins her down and scalds her back with boiling water. Once she is finished, however, Leopolda has tears in her eyes, and before leading Marie to her room to cover her wounds with salve, Leopolda gasps, “It was so hard, Marie . . . but I have used all the water up now. I think he is gone” (53). Marie is confused by Leopolda’s actions and does not fully accept the abuse as a perverted indication of love, yet she does not immediately run away or call for help. Instead, Marie assures Leopolda that she had “prayed very hard” (53). This initial reaction suggests that Marie places some trust in Leopolda’s instincts and is sincere in her desire to drive the devil from her heart, yet Sanders concludes that Marie’s religious “fervor is less a sense of love for an almighty God than it is a battle between the hatred she feels for and the love she seeks from Sister Leopolda” (136). But Marie is not content to be a passive victim for long, so she tries to turn things around by yelling at Leopolda: “ ‘He was always in you . . . even more than in me. He wanted you even more. And now he’s got you. Get thee behind me!’ ” (56). In a surge to regain control of the situation, and of Leopolda, Marie tries to kick the nun into the oven, and then yells “ ‘Bitch of Jesus Christ! . . . Kneel and beg! Lick the floor!’ ” (57). At this point, Leopolda spears Marie’s hand with a large bread fork and knocks her out with poker.

When Marie awakens, her previous dream of being worshipped is realized as the nuns all kneel in reverence around her bed. While she enjoys the spectacle, she does not understand what has happened until Sister Leopolda admits to telling the Sisters that Marie fainted upon receiving a vision and the appearance of the holy stigmata on her

palm. By telling this lie, Leopolda is not only able to save herself from being discovered, but, at the price of a power reversal, is also able to further her reputation through her presence at a supposed miracle. Also, although Leopolda is temporarily at Marie's mercy, once Marie sees Leopolda "kneeling within the shambles of her love," she pities her and no longer triumphs in her victory: "I pitied her. Pity twisted in my stomach like that hook-pole was driven through me. I was caught. It was a feeling more terrible than any amount of boiling water and worse than being forked" (60). While most readers see Marie as the warmer, more admirable character, her influence over others never reaches the pinnacle that Leopolda's does. Nietzsche explains that "One cannot establish the domination of virtue by means of virtue itself; with virtue itself one renounces power, loses the will to power" (171). Following this thought, Marie's true saintly virtue and her inability to take further advantage of the situation can be seen as weaknesses in her character. There is no room for pity in Nietzsche's ideal: "Pity is a squandering of feeling, a parasite harmful to moral health . . . The suffering of others infects us, pity is an infection" (199). In contrast to this, Leopolda's utter lack of pity, although unbecoming of a saint, is a sign of her strength and will to power.

The second time that the reader hears of Sister Leopolda in *Love Medicine*, is in the chapter titled "Flesh and Blood," which is also narrated by Marie, but is set in 1957. By this time, Marie has long forgotten her previous dream of becoming a saint and is busy empowering herself through her marriage to Nector Kashpaw, who is the tribal chairman, and motherhood. Marie tries to explain what compels her to go visit the nun more than twenty years after their last dramatic encounter, but initially the only reason

she can articulate is that she heard that the nun was dying and again took pity on her: “There was surely no reason I should go up that hill again. For days, for weeks after I heard Sister Leopolda was dying, I told myself I was glad. I told myself good riddance to her puckered mind. . . . But every time I thought of her damned, I relented. I saw her kneeling, dead faced, without love” (146). After further contemplating her decision and deciding to take her daughter Zelda with her, Marie admits to another motivating factor behind her trip to the convent: “I would visit Leopolda not just to see her, but to let her see me. I would let her see I had not been living on wafers of God’s flesh but the fruit of a man. . . . I’d let her see where my devotion had gone and where it had got me. For by now I was solid class” (148). Marie goes to great lengths to prove herself to Leopolda: she makes sure that Zelda is dressed neatly, she brings a jar of canned apples from her tree, and she wears her own best dress, despite the fact that it is made of wool and is an impractical choice, considering the warm temperatures and the long walk ahead. Upon reaching the convent and seeing the nun in bed, Marie continues feeling superior until she goes to hold Leopolda’s hand: “I started to feel sorry for her, so dried up and shriveled. That was always my mistake. For I grasped her hand like a common consoling friend and felt, immediately, the grim forbidding strength of her, undiminished after all these years” (152). Despite her frail appearance, it soon becomes clear that Leopolda is just as powerful and uncompromising as she was twenty years ago.

Leopolda is not impressed by Marie’s physical attempts to show off, and instead insults the exact things that Marie intends to use as proof of her increased status: “ ‘I

feel sorry for you too, now that I see. . . . So poor that you had to cut an old Easter shroud up and sew it' ” (152-53). And instead of directly commenting on Zelda, Leopolda only vaguely observes that Marie must have “ ‘had brats with the Indian . . . sickly and mean’ ” (153). Even when Marie boasts of her husband’s position and experiences as tribal chairman, Leopolda’s lack of interest is unrelenting: “ ‘So you’ve come up in the world,’ she mocked, using my thoughts against me. ‘Or your husband has, it sounds like, not you, Marie Lazarre’ ” (154). This is a very important distinction for Leopolda, because she has made a concerted effort to improve her situation independent from the help of a man, while Marie has settled on being the wife of a leader, or, according to Nietzsche, a herdsman. In Leopolda’s eyes, Marie only married because she was too weak to achieve anything on her own.

Angered and embarrassed by the nun’s scathing remarks, Marie feels the need, once again, to physically dominate Leopolda. This time, instead of trying to kick her into a stove, Marie simply wants to take away the heavy black spoon the nun keeps at her side and uses to bang against the steel frame of her bed: “I wanted that spoon because it was a hell-claw welded smooth. It was the iron poker that she’d marked me with, flattened. It had power” (156). But in the first attempt she makes to grab the spoon out of Leopolda’s hand, Marie realizes that the nun “had the strength of the grave” (155). Moments later, when the two women struggle again over the spoon, Marie notes that Leopolda’s “gaze . . . was a deep square hole. Her strength was the strict progress of darkness” (158). Even though Marie is younger and uses various

means to flatter and distract the nun, she is still unable to steal the physical symbol of Leopolda's power.

Sister Leopolda makes only a brief appearance in Erdrich's 1986 novel, *The Beet Queen*. Here she is seen racing for a camera in order to document the holy visage of Christ that appeared when Mary Adare, one of the novel's protagonists, went down a slide and crashed headfirst into the frozen ground below. This brief glimpse of the nun, set in 1932, reinforces the reader's idea of Leopolda as a power-hungry woman seeking to attach herself to anything supernatural or newsworthy. But what Celestine James, Mary's friend and classmate, notes is that Leopolda was also seen several days later "kneeling at the foot of the slide with her arms bare, scourging herself past the elbows with dried thistles, drawing blood" (38). Due to the order in which the novels were published, Erdrich's first readers would not be able to make the obvious connection between Leopolda's self-inflicted injury and her traumatic childhood.

Leopolda's self-mutilation begins as a result of her troubled past and continues throughout her adult life under the guise of extreme asceticism and religious flagellation. Herman asserts that "The connection between childhood abuse and self-mutilating behavior is by now well documented" and that most people who self-mutilate claim that the "physical pain is much preferable to the emotional pain that it replaces" (109). On a chemical level, Van der Kolk cites studies that "found elevated metenkephalins in some patients who habitually mutilate themselves" (*Psychological Trauma* 72). These metenkephalins are chains of amino acids that have an opiate effect on the brain, and therefore soothe and relax patients.

Psychologically, as previously stated, trauma victims need to establish a sense of safety and control in order to recover and adapt to future challenges. In an attempt to heal and assert this type of authority in her life, Leopolda wants to demonstrate power over both others and herself. Nietzsche explains that ugliness can possess power “in so far as it mildly excites in us the pleasure of cruelty (under certain conditions even a desire to harm *ourselves*, self-violation—and thus the feeling of power over ourselves)” (422). In *Tracks*, even before becoming a nun, Pauline fasts and tortures herself in multiple ways: she wears her shoes on the wrong feet, lets her toenails grow long, refuses to bathe, wears potato sacks as undergarments, sticks her arms in boiling water, uses her hands to break through frozen surfaces, forbids herself to use the bathroom more than twice a day, kneels in prayer for hours at a time, and chooses to sleep on the floor. Van der Kolk reiterates that “self-mutilation is a common reaction to social isolation and fear,” because for most victims it “restores a feeling of being alive” (*Traumatic Stress* 189). But the fact that Leopolda gains pleasure and strength from these measures points not only to her past abuse, but also to her will to power. Nietzsche describes pleasure as: “an excitation of the feeling of power by an obstacle (even more strongly by rhythmic obstacles and resistances)—so it swells up. Thus all pleasure includes pain.—If the pleasure is to be very great, the pains must be very protracted and the tension of the bow tremendous” (347). Leopolda feels powerful, and thus gains pleasure from her ability to bear the pain of fasting and torture. Nietzsche also maintains that the magnitude of the obstacles overcome is in direct proportion to the quantum of power and pleasure received (353). By increasing her suffering,

Leopolda exalts in the power of her will to surmount the growing obstacles she places in front of herself.

It is not until 1988, with the publication of *Tracks*, that Erdrich finally gives readers a more comprehensive and sympathetic view of Sister Leopolda. While all of Erdrich's other novels portray the nun from the perspective of other individuals, *Tracks* is the only opportunity that Leopolda's character is allowed to speak for herself. And while Leopolda's first-person account of her adolescence is not exactly heart-warming, it does allow her unidentified audience to get an idea of how she becomes the fanatical nun portrayed in earlier novels. Also, although her means of coping are severe and unconventional, at the very least, Leopolda is ambitious and focused. Unlike some of Erdrich's other characters, most of whom are also forced to deal with traumatic pasts and crises of identity and religion, Leopolda never loses herself in drunken bouts of self-pity, and she ultimately does accomplish her goal of being honored and sought after, at least by a select few.

In *Tales of Burning Love*, published almost ten years later in 1997 and set mostly in 1994 and January of 1995, Eleanor Mauser, a university professor, decides to study and write about Sister Leopolda's life and the various miracles connected to her. In order to better know the subject of her studies and sort through her own personal problems, Eleanor goes to the Sacred Heart Convent. Referring to Leopolda, who is now 108 years old, Eleanor notes,

It was rumored that she had caused a replication of the marvel of the loaves and fishes . . . when a great bowl of custard kept in the convent

refrigerator was filled and refilled over the course of many nights.

Leopolda's dreams predicted events, and her advice was often sought though the meaning of her words had become somewhat obscure. Still, she was venerated, and suffered to make her own rules. (48-49)

And even in her old age, Leopolda is still seen testing and strengthening her will through her strange ascetic practices. In *Tales*, the nun is known for eating bits of paper and kneeling in prayer for hours at a time. And while Eleanor finds Leopolda's personality to be "magnetic," the sisters who live with and care for her on a daily basis find her mental clarity and abrasive wit "exhausting" (44). But even after a long life and a significant increase in power, Leopolda still does not seem satisfied. Instead of reminiscing about her strength, Leopolda complains to Eleanor, "It is hard to be weak. Hard to be so old" (51). Nietzsche offers an explanation as to why one so powerful and revered as Sister Leopolda might express dissatisfaction even after such great accomplishment:

It is *not* the satisfaction of the will that causes pleasure . . . but rather the will's forward thrust and again and again becoming master over that which stands in its way. The feeling of pleasure lies precisely in the dissatisfaction of the will, in the fact that the will is never satisfied unless it has opponents and resistance. (370)

This desire for opponents and resistance may be part of the reason why Leopolda allows Eleanor to stay and follow her around the convent. Not only does Leopolda enjoy the attention and the prospect of being studied and written about; she also appreciates the

opportunity to chastise Eleanor for her weaknesses and stupidity. For example, when Eleanor confesses that many years ago she lived with a fool, Leopolda asks, “ ‘You lived alone?’ ” (50). But at this point in her life Leopolda is also tired, and she eventually asks God to “[e]nd this torment” (53). In an appropriate conclusion, Leopolda spends her last moments of life reaching forward for one last blessing from what she thinks is the statue of the Virgin Mary come to life. The statue is really Jack Mauser, Eleanor’s former husband, who has snuck into the convent garden to rendezvous with Eleanor and quickly holds a honeysuckle bough and pretends to be a statue when the nun walks in to say her nightly prayers. As a storm blows in, Leopolda kneels right in front of Jack. When she lifts her arms into the air and tries to catch a glimpse of the Virgin’s face, Jack feels compelled to hand her the sweet honeysuckle he holds in his arms. Once the nun receives her gift of sweet honeysuckle from the Virgin, she sinks back into her request and dies with a feeling of “strong and vigorous ecstasy” (53).

Although this is the end of Leopolda’s physical life on earth, it is not the end of her story or her influence on others. The morning after her death, there is no sign of Leopolda’s body, but the nuns find her walker “twisted, blackened, and somehow shrunk no larger than a pair of bobby pins” (63). Next to it is a heap of ashes, in the shape of a cross, that some of the sisters believe to be the missing body. And while most people believe that Leopolda was evaporated by the intense lightning from the previous storm, “there were those who saw a miracle in this disappearance. The word *assumption* was whispered about” (63). And for months after Leopolda’s

disappearance, stories pour into the convent of miracles caused by local honey, thought to have been made by bees that brought away Leopolda's remaining ashes.

Seven months after Leopolda's death, Eleanor and Jack's four other wives are carpooling on their way back from Jack's funeral. While on the road, a terrible snowstorm forces the women to pull over, and they spend the entire night telling each other stories to stay awake. In order to prevent carbon dioxide poisoning, the women periodically venture outside of the car and form a chain as one of them clears the snow from the exhaust pipe. Throughout the night, Eleanor is particularly insulting towards Marlis, the youngest of Jack's ex-wives. When it is Eleanor's turn to clear the exhaust pipe, Marlis gets revenge by letting go of Eleanor's hand. As Eleanor stumbles around, lost in the storm, Leopolda miraculously appears and saves the woman's life. The scene that Erdrich describes is rather ambiguous and left to interpretation, and I would like to offer two plausible explanations, both of which illustrate the nature of Leopolda's power.

The first possibility is that Eleanor is hallucinating and only imagines the encounter with Leopolda. Eleanor has been under a lot of personal and occupational stress. She thinks that her ex-husband/recent lover has just died, she has not slept all night, she is drifting alone in a dangerous snow storm, and it is right after blindly running into something that she suddenly sees a light radiating from a shroud that covers the deceased nun. It seems likely that the recent mental and physical trauma would be enough to cause hallucinations under the aforementioned conditions. But even if Eleanor does hallucinate her conversation with Leopolda, the hallucination itself

is evidence of the impact that the nun had on Eleanor during their brief time together. It is possible that Leopolda inspired such faith in Eleanor that Eleanor not only wanted to study and write about the nun, but also went so far as to create a life-like mental image of her when she most needed help. Eleanor is so convinced of Leopolda's supernatural powers that she credits the dead nun with saving and improving her life: "The appearance of Sister Leopolda, whether wholly real, within her perceptions only, or some of both, sustained her hope and calm . . . [and] had saved her life that night" (446). Eleanor's strong belief and appreciation is therefore indicative of the nun's power to mesmerize and inspire others from beyond the grave.

Another possible interpretation of Leopolda's strange arrival is that the spirit of the nun did actually pay a supernatural visit to Eleanor during the early morning snowstorm. Because Leopolda is not known for her generous acts of kindness, her miraculous appearance to save Eleanor's life may initially seem out of character. Leopolda is, however, notorious for looking out for her own best interest. Therefore, the possibility that Leopolda would materialize in a snowstorm in order to rescue Eleanor corresponds with what I have already demonstrated about her character. Eleanor is currently Leopolda's strongest known supporter, and because she has shown an interest in the nun's life, it is to Leopolda's advantage to save the professor who will help preserve her memory and promote her status as a prospective saint.

Last Report, published in 2001, is the most recent novel portraying Sister Leopolda. In this book, Father Jude Miller has been sent by the Vatican, per the Pope's request, to investigate the life of Leopolda and either validate or nullify the claims that

she is a saint. Although her story is related by others, as opposed to the first person account given in *Tracks*, *Last Report* provides the reader with comprehensive details of Leopolda's family history, her life as a nun, and her postmortem status as a prospective saint.

While *Tracks* recounts some of Leopolda's final acts of violence as Pauline and reveals her new name and position as a nun, *Last Report* gives a more detailed description of how Pauline manages to make that transition. After choking Napoleon with a rusty barbed wire crucifix and rolling around in dirt and leaves, Pauline returns to the convent and collapses before the altar. She then begins what the members of the cloister believe to be a severe penance of sleeping on the floor, maintaining a strict fast and prayerful concentration, and ultimately raising her rigid legs and torso towards each other in a V position. Only years later does Father Damien make the connection between Napoleon's death, the marks on his neck, the rusty crucifix found in the bushes, and the strange marks on Pauline's hands that supposedly appeared when she had a vision of Christ's crown of thorns. Even though Damien eventually discovers that Pauline was really suffering from a severe bout of tetanus, when news initially gets out to the rest of the reservation about what is happening to Pauline, the community assumes that she is somehow having a spiritual intervention for her people. This strange phenomenon makes people believe that Pauline is holy and inspires them to bring her gifts and requests for healing. Nietzsche elucidates the dual nature of pilgrims, and explains that "Wherever one adored one sought one who could give" (31). The people are abruptly compelled to call on Pauline because they think that she can

offer them a sense of hope. It initially seems surprising that people are most drawn to Pauline when she is in her weakest physical state, but Nietzsche explains that people are often intrigued by what is pitiful and strange: “The sick and the weak have had fascination on their side: they are more interesting than the healthy: the fool and the saint—the two most interesting kinds of man” (460). Concerning Pauline’s sudden rise in public esteem, Erdrich writes similarly, “In desperation, they made a saint. They made a saint because they had to, in those times, in that swale of loss” (*Last Report* 131). Although the members of the reservation are healthier and more physically capable of taking care of themselves, they become mesmerized by the spiritual power they believe Pauline possess. Nietzsche asks, “How, in fact, does one gain authority over those who possess physical strength and authority? . . . Only by arousing the belief that they have in their hands a higher, mightier strength—*God*” (89). It is Pauline’s ability to feign holiness and turn challenges—like her struggle with tetanus—into alleged spiritual connections that sets her apart as unique and powerful. Nietzsche asserts that the power of the will can be measured “*by how much resistance, pain, torture it endures and knows how to turn to its advantage*” (206). According to these standards, Pauline emerges as the pinnacle of a strong will.

Returning to Pauline’s early life of trauma, psychologists agree that one of the steps that victims must take in their journey to recovery is to tell their story. Herman explains that the victim “tells it completely, in depth and in detail. This work of reconstruction actually transforms the traumatic memory so that it can be integrated into the survivor’s life story” (175). While Pauline does need to speak to someone about her

trauma, she is very calculating in both her means of confession and her choice of confessor. Pauline initially approaches Father Damien to confess her sexual involvement and the resulting child with Napoleon: “she began, avid, eager in desperation to spill” (125). As she continues, however, Damien becomes increasingly disturbed by the enthusiasm Pauline has for her confession: he was “repelled now by her sly excitement . . . Her wildness shook him, her insistence on strange details, her description of her own nakedness and that of her rapist or uncle or even someone she half allowed” (125). Pauline seems to become aroused as she relates to Damien, not her actual encounter with Napoleon, but the masochistic fantasy that she imagined between the two of them. Janice Haaken confirms that, “In many of the popular and clinical reports, there is, indeed, allusion to an orgasmic release in storytelling, although the clinical term for this is *abreaction*” (184). After her story is complete, Pauline is quick to ask for her punishment. The fact that Pauline is using her confession and her penance, not as a demonstration of sincere contrition, but as a means of sexual arousal, causes Damien to feel increasingly uneasy about the aspiring nun.

Years after killing Napoleon, Sister Leopolda has discovered Damien’s gender secret and she again confronts the priest with her need to confess. But once more, Leopolda means for her confession to serve dual purposes. The priest is already aware of her crimes and immediately recognizes that the nun must have some ulterior motives behind her confession: “she wanted to force some knowledge upon him. To plague him with a morbid responsibility” (*Last Report* 272). As before, Leopolda relates her story “with a bitter and oily enthusiasm,” and when Damien asks her if she sincerely repents

of her actions, Leopolda merely rocks back and forth and laughs in reply (272). After the priest instructs Leopolda to turn herself in to the authorities, she refuses and then replies, “ ‘You are considering how you can turn me in yourself. . . . I know what you are. And if you banish me or write to the bishop, *Sister* Damien, I will write to him too’ ” (273). Leopolda does not seem to gain the same sexual gratification that she did in her first major confession, but she uses the occasion of this profession of guilt to reveal her knowledge of Damien’s identity and exert her power over him. And although Damien denies his true gender and refuses to absolve Leopolda, he wants to continue his work as a priest and is intimidated enough not to turn her in to the sheriff.

Nietzsche posits that authentic individuals, because they tend to be strong, are not usually embraced by society. Because individuals are unique and strange, the herd views them as threatening: “The herd feels the exception, whether it be below or above it, as something opposed and harmful to it” (159). This explains why Father Damien, for instance, is very uncomfortable by Leopolda’s intimidating personality: “He did what he could to avoid the nun . . . Her presence disturbed his equilibrium, forced a wary and combative stance he disliked maintaining” (272). According to Nietzsche’s perspective, Damien’s desire for peace and stability is a common sign of weakness. His uneasiness around Sister Leopolda and the fact that he never went to the authorities about Napoleon proves that he is too weak to risk his own comfort and confront her individuality.

As Erdrich reveals more about the Leopolda in each new novel, her character becomes increasingly complex and ambiguous. This ambiguity complicates matters for Father Jude, who is forced to decide whether or not Leopolda is holy. One obvious constant in Leopolda is that she manipulates and uses people and events to her advantage. Otherwise, Pauline is repeatedly described as “a creature of impossible contradictions” (*Last Report* 123). Nanapush recognizes her as “an unknown mixture of ingredients,” and he admits that people “never knew what to call her, or where she fit or how to think when she was around” (*Tracks* 39). Before becoming a nun, Pauline even describes herself in contradictory terms: “I knew I was different. I had the merciful scavenger’s heart. I became devious and holy, dangerously meek and mild” (*Tracks* 69). Father Jude, originally intending to write about Leopolda’s saintly life, concedes, “. . . the nun in question’s life had been a contrast. No retiring servant was she, Leopolda, but a fiercely masterful woman” (*Last Report* 52). And the more Jude learns about Leopolda, the more frustrated he becomes until he finally exclaims: “‘I wish there were one, just one thing that Leopolda did that was not of an ambiguous nature!’ ” (147). One of the troubling effects that the priest notices in connection to Leopolda is that while she was bitter and selfish, her outwardly pious acts “nonetheless resulted in acts of troubling goodness, inspirations, even miraculous involvements” (52). This mixture of good and evil in Leopolda’s life is important because it allows her to become powerful. Only the “good man” or the weak man, Nietzsche explains, acts solely on one side of his nature: “For every strong and natural species of man, love and hate, gratitude and revenge, good nature and anger, affirming acts and negative acts,

belong together” (191). A weak man therefore can only be good because he is not strong enough to be evil. While Jude struggles with the fact that Leopolda did not live a purely good life—according to Christian principles, Nietzsche further asserts that “every instance in which a man has raised himself significantly above the average of humanity, we see that every high degree of power involves *freedom* from good and evil and from ‘true’ and ‘false,’ and cannot take into account the demands for goodness” (140). So although Leopolda does not fit the stereotypical, meek and self-sacrificing description of a saint, she would not have attained her power and esteem as a nun if she were compelled to adhere to all of the Church’s moral precepts.

While conducting his investigation, Father Jude cannot help but compare Leopolda’s life with that of Father Damien. In Jude’s mind, Damien clearly has more saintly virtues. This quandary leads Jude to question the nature of saints in general: “When are they ever simple cases? . . . They seem by nature to foster problems, surprises, at best or worst, envy’ ” (*Last Report* 145). In the closing pages of *Tales*, Eleanor has similar reflections on the lives of saints, but to her mind it is precisely Leopolda’s strong character and her “excessive zeal,” as Father Jude refers to it (146), that convince her that Leopolda is a saint:

Saints are humans in a sickness of desire. . . . Saints are obsessive. They are focused in their neuroses and dedicated in their instincts. In some ways, they are like other people, only hungrier. Wolves. They tear apart the world with raving teeth to feed their own spiritual longings. Saints have no balance. There is an egoism to their sacrifice. (447)

This focused and obsessive desire, though frightening to some, is what makes Leopolda not only a potential saint, but also an example of a strong, Nietzschean, will to power. Nietzsche states that “A full and powerful soul not only copes with painful, even terrible losses, deprivations, robberies, insults; it emerges from such hells with a greater fullness and powerfulness” (532). In further describing how great individuals attain great strength, Nietzsche asserts that “All the virtues and efficiency of body and soul are acquired laboriously and little by little, through much industry, self-constraint, limitation, through much obstinate, faithful repetition of the same labors, the same renunciations” (518). This laborious process, requiring so much self-constraint and obstinate repetition, is precisely how Pauline works her way into a position of power. While her earthly dominion is meager, she has attained one of the highest degrees of power available to her through the Church, and in her mind, she is building towards an all-encompassing spiritual domination. For instance, when Marie attempts to remind the nun that the meek will inherit the earth, Leopolda retorts, “ ‘I don’t want the earth’ ” (*Love Medicine* 155). Although Leopolda was shaped by her meager and traumatic childhood, she also triumphed over her past to become an influential soul and an object of study, speculation, spite, intimidation, and veneration. After all, Nietzsche proclaims, “One has to tyrannize in order to produce any effect at all” (437).

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Alisha Stafford Feitosa earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Southwestern Adventist University and then accepted a teaching position at Keene High School. After teaching full-time for three years, she returned to her studies, this time at the University of Texas in Arlington, where she worked as a Graduate Teaching Assistant and completed her Master's degree in English. While her interests are broad, she has focused on twentieth century American Literature and is also intrigued by the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche.

Upon completing her Master's degree, Alisha has accepted a teaching position at an international high school in Istanbul, where her and her husband plan to reside for the next two years. While she is still considering the possibility of returning for a Doctorate degree, she is also contemplating a life of teaching, learning, and adventuring abroad in the international school system.