

On the Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnic Writing in *Four Souls*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explain Louise Erdrich's literary works and her fictive imagination in the light of ethical literary criticism and *Four Souls* is therefore used as a sample work involved in this paper. Based on the detailed analysis of the novel *Four Souls*, the purpose of the study aims to show that in *Four Souls* Louise Erdrich's writings are much concerned with the complex tribal, bloodline and national ethical issues in a deep sense. The paper will illustrate this point from the following three aspects: the relationship between mankind and land in view of land ethics, human to human relationship in view of family ethical identity and the relationship between mankind and society from the perspective of survival ethics. Using the sample text of *Four Souls*, this paper finds out that Erdrich combines the ancient theme of revenge with the unique Indian qualities together and creates a new revenge—wandering—homecoming narration while adopting the ethical dimensions and by depicting the conflict and compromise between the whites and the Indians Erdrich's concern with the Indians' history, life, survival and destiny is revealed and her consciousness of human nature and human development is showed.

Keywords: Ethnic writing, revenge-wandering-homecoming, ethical dimensions

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Introduction

Louise Erdrich, as one of the most prolific American writers, continuously publishes new books since her first publication in 1984. As an ethnic writer of Indian-European origin, she explores themes like culture conflicts, history, ethnicity as well as a social class in her literary creations. *Four Souls (FS)*, published in 2004, continues the story of Fleur Pillager who is one of the characters in *Tracks* and its lyrical and magic style of writing. It takes up the very ancient ethical theme of revenge and combines it with Indian qualities to explore the ethnic relations from the perspective of ethics. *FS* starts the story from a single individual's life experiences and develops into some kind of universal themes such as anger, love, loyalty, and jealousy. Different from *Tracks*, *FS* has metamorphosed from anger and revenge into love and healing, producing a unique narrative mode of revenge-wandering-Homecoming.

As a literary criticism, “ethical literary criticism is a methodology which interprets, analyzes and explains literary works, their writers and other related issues from the perspective of ethical standpoint.” (Nie, 2010,14) Literature explains various social phenomena and their implied moral lessons, and then make judgments. The plotline through *FS* is threaded and interconnected by the following three ethical knots: the land ethical environment created by the relationship between human and land, family ethical identity created by the relationship between human beings and the survival ethical choice created by

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the relationship between human and society. This paper applies ethical literary criticism to the discussion of *FS*. Tracing back to the Indian land history and traditions, deconstructing the aforementioned ethical knots and reconsidering the three groups of relations, this paper aims to reveal deeper themes about Indian land history, ethnic relationship and human nature.

Research Objective

The objective of this research is to declare that Louise Erdrich's literary works deal with lots of ethnic themes from various perspectives. Louise Erdrich is much interested in depicting the conflict and compromise between the whites and the Indians. While she is concerned with Indians' history, life, survival and destiny, she is strongly conscious of human nature and human development.

Research Questions

1. How are Louise Erdrich's works concerned about Indians history, survival and destiny?
2. How is the relationship developed between the whites and the Indians in the past and at present?
3. How do the westerners' ethics differ from the Indians'?
4. How does Erdrich rewrite the traditional revenge writing?

The questions raised above will be answered in the analysis of the text *Four Souls*. The scholarly articles of different researchers will definitely help getting the answers of these questions. By the answer of the questions this research aims to fulfill the ultimate purpose of the research that Erdrich is concerned with Indians' history, life, survival and destiny, she is strongly conscious of human nature and human development.

Literature Review

Louise Erdrich's literary works have been an increasing research topic for scholars and researchers, who are more interested in the discussion on the relationship between Catholicism and Chippewa spirituality. Among those, Catherine Rainwater argues that there exists a complex relationship between Catholicism and Chippewa spirituality and there are lots of "conflicting codes" in Erdrich's works after analyzing four pairs of conflicting modes. Yet, scholars like H. Wendell Howard, on the other hand, insists that Catholicism and Chippewa spirituality are syncretical and Chippewa spirituality can have more possibilities to survive during the process of syncretism. He believes that there are a lot of "dual trails" in Erdrich's poems and stories.

Researchers have done well in discussing on Erdrich's religious ideas, but they may have overlooked that Erdrich's works also have literary and political nature as well.

Research Methodology

This study is qualitative, and text based. The analysis and findings of scholars in the same subject will be included to enhance the logic of the research objective. Due to the nature of literary works and the research objectives, this study mainly based on the original text for data collection. The researches of literature are mostly dependent upon the previous scholarly writings rather than any direct empirical activity. This study follows secondary sources of data collection and the findings are manually added from the secondary sources.

Major Findings and Discussion

Land Ethics: Ethical Environment and the Beginning of Revenge

The concept of revenge is deeply rooted in the western religion, philosophy and law. From *Orestes* to *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *Sons and lovers*, all the classical works imply a theme of revenge. Revenge frequently reoccurs in literature and it either takes the form of blood lineage revenge or non-blood lineage revenge. While ancient revenge incidents happen all the time in literature, the beginning of revenge in *FS* comes from the loss of indigenous land. The heroine, Fleur Pillager, is taking revenge for the benefits of her family, tribe and ethnicity, which manifests the importance of land for the Indians and Indians' keen awareness of land ethics.

American ecologist Aldo Leopold (1887-1948) first proposed the concept of land ethics in his famous work, *A Sand County Almanac*. Leopold believed that there should be an ethic to deal with the relationship between humankind, land and the plants and animals on the land. Land ethic "has expanded the concept including land, water, plants and animals", "all the elements should be called land". "Even though as part of the nature, the relationship between humankind and the land is monopolized by the colonizers, land ethic is totally dominated by egoism." (Leopold, 2015, 210) Before the European immigrants arrived in America, Indians were the masters of this indigenous land. They called the earth Grandmother. Whenever times are difficult, they ask her help; when they were harrowed by death, they throw us upon her and weep onto her chest. Besides spiritual healing, plants and animals on the land were the source of Indians' life, which decided Indians' life style of hunting and herding. However, to the Europeans, Indians lifestyle was a result of their inefficient use of the land and the environment, which resulted in their poverty and a justified reason for their land to be exploited by the Europeans.

In American history, *Indian Removal Act* regulated that land should be private. During the process of privation, Indians "were snared by laws then...attempting to keep what was left of our land was like walking through a landscape of webs." (Erdrich, 2004,79) The territory of land which Indians can control is dwindling, hunting place is accordingly diminishing, therefore, the migration tribe is forced to become farmers and their life mode is shattered by the white people's misunderstanding of land ethics, which threatens Indians' survival. Even though Indians are not willing to sell their land, they have to pay mortgages. Since some Indians cannot pay the heavy taxes, they are forced to hand over their land to the whites. *Dawes General Allotment Act* finally made two thirds of Indians lose their land, resulting in their poverty and intertribal fights. For Indians, "allotment of land is just a joke." (Erdrich, 2014, 9) Originally, the biological chain of "land-oak-tree-deer-Indians" is substituted by "land-corn-cow-farmers". (Leopold, 2015, 221)

Different ethical attitudes to land from the Indians and the whites become the first ethical knot in *FS*. *FS* is based on the aftermath resulting from *Dawes General Allotment Act*, "which resulted in the loss of two-thirds of Native lands across the U.S. The novel seeks to recuperate the obscured histories which reside in these appropriated and now ecologically degraded places. ...The persuasive force of the novel comes not only from its depiction of these abuses, but from its dismantling of the colonial narratives of progress that legitimate them." (Harrison, 35) The 160 acres of land and forest that Fleur Pillager has inherited from her ancestors are allotted under *Dawes General Allotment Act*. The Pillagers used to live a happy life until the pulmonary tuberculosis ravaged the reservations, leaving Fleur alone. In the spring of 1919, the land and forest are sold to the white people, Mauser, by Tatro who is with the Indian Affairs Office since Fleur is unable to pay the land taxes. In the novel, James Mauser represents for those shrewd white businessmen. Mauser deceives Indian girls into marrying, takes over their land and abandons them after taking advantage of the forest. That's why when Fleur comes to find Mauser to take revenge, Mauser asked if she is a relative of

one of the women he wronged. Fleur replied, "I am the woman whose land you stole." (Erdrich, 2004, 44) The first ethical knot is revealed in front of the readers and the importance of land can be understood, which explains why Fleur needs to take vengeance.

Words such as "land", "government papers", "contract" and "stealing" frequently appear in *FS* as well as in Erdrich's other novels. The white people cut the trees, build houses on the land, leading to serious problems in biological chain. The relationship between human and land should be dependent, but now unfortunately is replaced by controlling and being exploited. In contrast, for Indians who have environment-awareness, it is a wrong ethical attitude and behavior to control the land, disregard the wholeness of the environment without love, respect and awe. Naturally, different ethical attitudes to land become the main background and reason for racial conflicts.

Family Ethics: Ethical Identity and Identity Change

Seemingly, *FS* extends the plot of *Tracks* which is published in 1988. Fleur is both charming and dangerous who is like a Sphinx, a mythical creature with the head of a human and the body of a lion. Any men who have ill intentions for Fleur are doomed to be drowned or frozen to death. Even though Fleur's family name Pillager is no longer that damaging in *FS*, Fleur's appearance in Mauser's house is so damaging as to change their own destiny. From enemies to lovers, from lovers to strangers, Fleur's relationship with Mauser, Polly, Placide explains the western family ethics and reverses the ethnic relationship between the whites and the Indians.

Modern western family ethics originate from the Greek time and develops into the middle ages. With the development of capitalism and reformed movement, "marriage is considered as an agreement based on the principle of exchange at equal values." (Li, 15) "Selling and buying", "freedom", "agreement" and "social class" are the basics and principles of marriage. Even though western marriage is based on economy, free choice and satisfaction of sexual love is widely recognized and is the core and basic element of marital agreement. It is naturally considered in modern European law of marriage that marriage is a mutual unity of men and women. Mauser in *FS* is a representative of capitalists who has accumulated great wealth through manipulating and "his heritage was more than exaggerated." (Erdrich, 2004, 35) What disappoints him is that he doesn't have a son to inherit his great wealth and his disappointment and depression is hidden inside. It is embarrassing that when he tells his trouble to his sister-in-law, Polly feels that "Placide and I had not been fused into a single person." (Erdrich, 2004, 35)

If the relationship in marriage is like a possession to a human being, then that marriage is in danger. The western family ethical relationship which is based on wife-husband relationship is facing a challenge when Placide expresses her attitude not willing to give birth to a child. Karezza and inharmonious marriage will sooner or later lead to the shattering of their marriage, and Fleur's show-up in the family accelerates the shattering of the family. When Fleur threatens to kill Mauser, Mauser slyly answers "my spirit is meant to be the slave of your spirit. I will make you my wife and give you everything I own." After divorce, Polly and Placide have to leave Mauser's house. The core of the western family ethics is individualism, which means "the importance of individuals is more emphasized in family relations and an individual's survival, intention, willingness, development, independence and freedom should be superior to family interests." (Ma, 278) Mauser and Placide's attitude to their family reveals that the western marriage which is based on "agreement", sexuality and sensibility are subject to change and too fluid to be trustworthy. Even not because of Fleur, Mauser's marriage will not last long, especially when Mauser is threatened to death. That is the first ethical knot in *Four Souls* while the relationship between Fleur and Polly is the second ethical knot.

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FS is based on Fleur's story of revenge, but "it mixes many characters' psychological complexes during the process of revenge." (Zhang, 123) Mauser faces a dilemma in his family ethics and his change of attitude to his family also poses a difficult question for Fleur, therefore, the characters have to deconstruct the ethical complex and make ethical choices which finally lead to identity change of the characters. Even though Fleur never appears as a narrator in the novel, the conflict between two cultures are deeply felt through the other two narrators, Polly and Nanapush.

Polly used to work as an assistant in her sister's house, a maiden who likes kids very much. In Polly's opinion, Fleur can be used as a laundress. Yet, she despises Indians from the bottom of her heart and thinks that "Indians are intelligent, to the civilized mind I mean, as far removed in habit of thought and behavior as wild wolves from bred hounds." (Erdrich, 2004, 14) The relationship between Fleur and Polly develops further after Fleur heals Mauser's disease with traditional Indian herbs which makes a dramatic change on Polly and Mauser. Since Mauser divorces his wife, Placide and marries Fleur, Polly doesn't have any legal relationship with Fleur. To the readers' surprise, Polly comes to take care of Fleur when hearing Fleur needs help, and "to be needed by someone as strong as Fleur, as bold, as conscious, even though at first glance despised her", (Erdrich, 2004, 65) Polly begins to feel a flow of love and naturally makes friends with Fleur. Their friendship meets each other's spiritual need and exceeds social class and racial conflicts and it's a humanity molded in a certain ethical environment and develops in morality. Polly changes her arrogant attitude to Fleur and she is her friend and looks like her relative. When Polly realizes that Fleur's son is an idiot, Mauser goes to the church to pray to God, Polly "cried shame. Shame on God!" (Erdrich, 2004, 121) The change of the relationship between Polly and Fleur has totally reversed the traditional tense relationship between the whites and the Indians which is not only a change of family ethical relationship but also a social class and an ethnic relationship. *FS* on the surface has explored the themes of love and revenge. However, it aims to tell that forgiving and tolerance can bring survivance rather than revenge and conflicts.

Survival Ethics: Ethical Choice and Spiritual Salvation

"Existence" means to question human beings' state of survival and meaning of values. In western cultures, survival ethic is naturally an ethic of religion. A religious ethic has two dimensions, freedom and homecoming. "Human beings' existence makes freedom the core of human existence which leads to the possibility of ideal life and opens a way for origins which makes human existence a homecoming journey." (Tian, 2) In *FS*, Mauser and Fleur hold different survival ethics which resonant with the two dimensions of freedom and homecoming.

Mauser has acquired a lot of land from cheating Indian girls into marriage and then abandons them, thus lays a basic requirement for his survival. When Fleur comes to take revenge, Mauser chooses to marry Fleur and abandons his ex-wife and when economic crisis comes, he chooses to leave Fleur and their disabled son again. All the survival ethics and choices Mauser has chosen to do is based on "freedom", an individualized survival strategy. It is the basic goal and requirement of capitalist ethic to satisfy and chase material life. This kind of survival tells the true nature of human beings and, but "religion tells the limit of human beings and opens a dimension of extremity and exceeding." (Tian, 1) Since Mauser knows that his son is a mentally disabled boy, he frequents the church more often than before and his "fervent adoption of religious practice" (Erdrich, 2004, 90) puzzled Polly, his sister-in-law. However, as for Mauser himself, he thinks this is a punishment from God and in order to be bestowed with love from Him, he has to respect Him.

Either Fleur's son's idiocy comes from His punishment or from her alcohol drinking, Fleur takes advantage of this opportunity to get back her land. The white people get salvation

from Catholics or Christianity while Fleur returns back to her spiritual homeland through Indian spirituality. It is both very amazing and unbelievable that “by some strange and secret method he assigned to his little world numbers, numerical values, mathematical identities.” (Erdrich, 2004, 89) Even though Polly thinks “it wasn’t right for Fleur to teach the boy every kind of poker and gambler’s trick when he couldn’t yet recite the alphabet”, (Erdrich, 2004, 89) a subcontext is set up here, a chance to change the characters’ destiny.

Whether it is moral to acquire survival through gambling depends on the environment and the time period and its ethical nature. “As for tribal people generally, gambling is an important aspect of ceremonial and narrative traditions. Gambling rituals and stories reenact and recount the sacred gambles of powerful spirit beings who contest each other for control of the earth.” (Pasquaretta, 145) Gambling is commonly used in Indian cultures, which reflects Indian’s survival strategies of not yielding to fate. Through gambling, Indians define and make ethical choice, which is also a kind of ceremonial survival and resistance. Nobody can imagine that the idiot son who “moved his lips and kept his eyes turned toward the ceilings as if reciting a fool’s prayer was working out the whole game in his head” can win the stake and get back their land, which surprises Tatro, Nanapush and the other neighbors.

Louise Erdrich combines fictional world with history to maintain the Indians’ dignity, thus discussing Indians’ life from the perspective of survival ethics. Fleur’s survival strategy is like a trickster’s survival ethic and implies Indians’ resilient survival ethic to win back their life through traditional Indian cultures. Basically speaking, “all the chance games are a game of change and change of power.” (Chavkin, 10) Through gambling, Fleur wins back her land and her dignity, but during the whole process of revenge, Fleur has lost her spiritual support from her Indian name, *Four Souls*, “names that heal a person just for taking them, and names that destroy” (Erdrich, 2004, 47) and lost her power to heal herself after a series of events have happened. From her beginning intention to take vengeance, becoming a laundress, healing Mauser with Indian herbal therapy, until finally being addicted to alcohol, coming home and asking help from Margaret’s medicine dress, Fleur has gone through the whole process of revenge-wandering-homecoming and that echoes with the Indian homecoming narration and emphasizes the Indian traditions’ unconquerable healing power.

Limitations

This paper will be only using one novel which is *Four Souls* by Louise Erdrich. This paper focus solely on the concept of ethics, specifically on different ethics between the westerners and the Indians in the novel. *Four Souls* deploys distinctive ethical dimensions and rich representations of ethics worth analyzing. And it starts from the ancient literary theme of revenge. In this paper, I focus specifically on the concept of ethical literary criticism proposed by a Chinese scholar, Zhenzhao Nie. Other than that, this paper also focuses on the ethical themes and overlooks its revenge theme and revenge structure.

Conclusion

Four Souls contains the theme of vengeance to love, trauma to healing, Indians’ sense of destiny, circular universe and circular time reveals that “powerful kinship bonding and the notion of mutual respect and interchange among spirits, animals, and gods are also definitive.” (Allen, 2006) *FS* is an ethical novel. It starts from the ethical theme of revenge and then transcends in the way that it avoids the traumatic aftermaths accompanied or resulted from revenge and aims to find love and moral forgiving. From Erdrich’s works, the readers are presented with the history of Indian land exploitation, the damaging influences that boarding schools have impacted on Indian families, the religious pollution of forced Catholic on Indian traditions and the influences of alcohol drinking on Indians’ psychology, on which Erdrich has made her moral judgements and expressed her concerns. Louise Erdrich’s

fictional world of tolerance to history and desire to return back and a resilient survival attitude is thus established.

The ethical value of a literary work lies in its moral meanings. (Nie, 2014,7) *FS* starts from an individual's personal and tribal experiences to explore Indians' survival dignity, strategy and desire and ends with the criticism of western cultures. It reverses the "white mythology" and criticizes the unjustified ethical behaviors of the whites to the Indians such as the killing of the Indians and the plundering of the Indians' land and religion infiltration as well as the traumatic aftermaths brought and the Indians' survival ethics and strategies to cope with the reality and to heal the trauma. More importantly, Louise Erdrich's reconciling attitude in her literary works implies her ethical attitude that love can heal.

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