The Shawl

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LOUISE ERDRICH

Louise Erdrich is one of seven children born to a German-American father and a Chippewa mother. Both of her parents taught at a boarding school run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Erdrich credits her love of writing to her father, who she says paid her a nickel for every story she wrote (two of her sisters also grew up to become writers). She attended Dartmouth College from 1972 to 1976, part of the first class of women admitted to the college. While at Dartmouth, Erdrich met the anthropologist and writer Michael Dorris, whose work as the director of the school's new Native American Studies program inspired her to look into her own ancestry and use it in her writing. During that time, she also worked as an editor for the Boston Indian Council newspaper, *The Circle*. After graduating from college, she completed an M.A. at Johns Hopkins, and then returned to Dartmouth as a writer-in-residence, where she reconnected with Dorris. They became collaborators on short stories—Erdrich writing and Dorris mainly editing—and eventually began a romantic relationship, marrying in 1981. Their collaboration led to the publication of Erdrich's debut novel, *Love Medicine*, which won the National Book Critics Circle Award. Since then, she has published over a dozen other novels, three books of poetry, and a collection of short stories, in addition to seven books for younger audiences and several works of nonfiction. She and Dorris separated in 1995, and she now lives in Minnesota, where she owns Birchbark Books, a small independent bookstore. She is an enrolled member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Though critics have designated 1969 as the beginning of the Native American Renaissance, that does not mean that Native Americans were not producing literature or other works of artistic merit prior to 1969—this time period is just when the mainstream literary public began to pay attention to it. There are several reasons for this shift in public consideration. First, in the 1960s and early 1970s, a generation of Native Americans who had received substantial English-language education—and who therefore were more likely to graduate from college—was coming of age. This aligned with an overall improvement in conditions for Native Americans in the United States. At the same time, there was a new effort among historians to represent historical events from a Native American perspective and to discuss the harsher truths of the history of European invasion and colonization of North America. These developments in turn led to a rise in mainstream interest in Native cultures, as well as increased activism within Native American communities. Finally, in the 1980s, resources began to be devoted to the development of Native American Studies departments at several universities, including Dartmouth College, where Erdrich went—in fact, her freshman year overlapped with the first year of the college's Native American Studies program.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Louise Erdrich's work is considered part of the Native American Renaissance. This term, coined by the critic Kenneth Lincoln, refers to a boom in publication of literary works by Native American authors in the U.S., starting with the 1969 publication of N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*. Other works published during the Native American Renaissance include Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* and James Welch's *Winter in the Blood*. In their work, authors who are considered part of this Renaissance emphasize the reclamation of Native American heritage, often writing about protagonists who return to the reservation and embrace traditional tribal life. Many are also concerned with the struggle of reconciling or integrating contemporary American life with a Native American or mixed heritage. Erdrich specifically is known for building on the Native traditions she draws from by bringing their myths and artistic values into her exploration of modern-day Native American life. In her novels and short stories—many of which take place in the same fictional world, with recurring characters—Erdrich often uses a style of multi-voice narration, crafting intricate narratives that slowly reveal the life stories of characters who are subject to fate and the legacies and sorrows if their ancestors, as in "The Shawl." This style and the use of a fictional area across multiple works has led to comparisons between Erdrich's work and William Faulkner's polyphonic Yoknapatawpha novels, which are all set in the fictional Mississippi county that Faulkner created.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Shawl
- **When Published:** 2001
- **Literary Period:** Native American Renaissance
- **Genre:** Short story
- **Setting:** Anishinaabe ancestral land, now known as the northern United States and Southern Canada, around the Great Lakes
- **Climax:** The narrator's abusive father comes home drunk and the two get into a physical fight
- **Antagonist:** His father

- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Magazine Publication: Though "The Shawl" was originally published in the *New Yorker* in 2001, it also appears in Erdrich's only short-story collection, *The Red Convertible*. This book was published in 2009.

European Ancestry: Though the majority of Erdrich's work deals with themes and traditions related to her Native heritage, in her 2003 novel *The Master Butchers Singing Club*, she attends to the European half of her heritage. The book tells the story of a World War I veteran, his wife, and other inhabitants of a small North Dakota town.

PLOT SUMMARY

The narrator of "The Shawl" begins by introducing a story told among the Anishinaabeg people: a woman named Aanakwad has a child by a man whom she loves but who is not her husband. She already has two other children with her husband—a nine-year-old daughter and a five-year-old son. When Aanakwad gives birth to this third child, she is so overcome by her love for the baby's father, and her despair that she does not love her husband, that she neglects the child. Instead, the daughter cares for the infant. As Aanakwad's despair deepens to the extent that she stops cooking or cleaning, the daughter takes on those tasks too. Because of this, the young girl is often exhausted, and sleeps deeply every night wrapped in a red-and-brown plaid shawl.

Eventually, the husband is forced to acknowledge that his marriage is no longer working. He sends for the other man's uncle, who comes in a horse-drawn wagon to pick up Aanakwad and take her to the other man. Aanakwad and her husband decide to split the children: the infant and the daughter will leave with their mother, and the son will stay with the husband. The son, desperately wanting to prevent his mother from leaving him, chases after the wagon until he collapses. Before losing consciousness, he sees some gray shapes entering the trail ahead from the surrounding woods.

When the husband collects the young boy, the son tells him about the shapes, and the husband travels on the trail to investigate. He finds wolf tracks, and from the terrible scene left behind puts together that the daughter was thrown to the wolves in order to protect the woman, the infant, and the uncle driving the wagon. The brings home a torn piece of his daughter's plaid shawl. After a few years, as the husband is weakening from tuberculosis, he reveals the story to the son, who is deeply disturbed to imagine his mother throwing his sister to the wolves.

The narrator then tells the story of his own childhood. He describes how his father became an alcoholic after his mother died. The narrator cares for himself and his younger twin siblings, Doris and Raymond. The children get in the habit of leaving the house and hiding in the woods when they hear their father coming home drunk, because otherwise he will beat them. One night, when the narrator is 13, he decides he is now big enough to take on his father and they fight. The narrator overwhelms his father and knocks him to the ground. When the fight is over, the narrator sees that his father is bleeding, and reaches for a nearby cloth his father keeps around—a piece of a red-and-brown plaid blanket. The father suddenly seems sober and reveals to the narrator that he once had a sister. At this point, the reader understands that the father is the five-year-old son from Aanakwad's story.

The narrator provides further detail about his father's drinking: he notes that it began during a difficult time for his people, the Anishinaabeg, after they were forced by the government to move into towns and housing, instead of living in the spread-out way they were used to. This change led to widespread drinking, suicide, and general despair among the people. This is the context in which the narrator's mother died, his father's drinking got bad, and his father began to abuse him and his siblings. Though things have begun to get better for the survivors of this era, the aftereffects of the despair remain, passed down from ancestors who endured it.

Eventually, some years later, the narrator and his father again discuss the shawl and the father's sister's death. The narrator convinces his father to burn the shawl instead of holding onto it, as it is the tradition of their people not to hold onto the relics of the dead. The narrator also suggests a possible revision to the father's understanding of what happened to the sister: What if, instead of being thrown, the sister had sacrificed herself out of her love for her mother and her infant sibling?

CHARACTERS

Narrator – The narrator of "The Shawl" lives in the same Anishinaabeg lands that his ancestors lived in (in the region of the United States and Canada roughly around the Great Lakes). His mother died when he was young, so as an adolescent and early teenager he grew up with his father, who for a time drank a lot and was abusive, and his younger twin siblings, Raymond and Doris. He develops strategies to deal with his father's behavior: stashing away food for himself and the twins so that their father can't sell it, taking off his father's belt when he's passed out drunk and hiding it so that he can't use it to beat them, and slipping money from his father's sock to provide for himself and his siblings. By age 13, he feels big enough to fight his father, and so one night rather than hiding when his father returns home drunk, he brawls with and overcomes his father. Afterward, his father suddenly seems sober, and for the first time shares that he had a younger sister who died and his own

(and therefore the narrator's) connection to the story of the nine-year-old daughter who Aanakwad threw to the wolves in order to save herself and her infant. As an adult, the narrator lives near his father and his siblings, but he lives alone, while everyone else has found a partner. He connects his chosen solitude to the relatively recent era wherein his people, after being forced off their land and into towns by the United States government, experienced widespread alcoholism and depression. Though things have improved, his generation still bears the aftereffects of that difficult period, and it's possible that his solitude is a symptom of this inheritance. The narrator is influenced by stories of the Gete-anishinaabeg, the older generation of his people who are said to have been generous and kind. He eventually suggests to his father that perhaps his sister was this kind of person, and thus that she may have sacrificed herself to save her mother, Aanakwad, and the others. In so doing, the narrator suggests that the legacy his family has inherited may not be one of shame and sorrow, but rather of heroic sacrifice and deep cultural connection.

Aanakwad – Aanakwad is the narrator's grandmother, and the mother of the narrator's father. Her name means "cloud," a word that also describes her changeable temperament. When the narrator's father was young, Aanakwad had a child by a man whom she loved but who was not her husband, and she became so depressed that it was arranged for her to leave the husband and live with this other man instead. After arguing about it, Aanakwad and her husband decide to split up their own children: their nine-year-old daughter and the infant will leave with her, while their five-year-old son (the narrator's father) will stay with her husband. The other man's uncle fetches Aanakwad, the daughter, and the infant in his horse-drawn cart. Not long after they set off, they are attacked by wolves. The husband arrives at the scene of the attack not long after and can see from the remains that the daughter has been eaten by the wolves. He believes that Aanakwad threw their daughter to the wolves in order to save herself, her baby, and the uncle, and passes on this version of events to his son. At the end of the story, the narrator suggests that perhaps Aanakwad didn't throw the daughter, but that the daughter jumped and sacrificed herself instead. This version of the story, to some extent, redeems Aanakwad in her son and grandson's eyes.

Son/Father – The narrator's father is an Anishinaabeg man who experiences several tragedies in his life. When he is five years old, his mother, Aanakwad, has a child by a man who is not her husband and ends up leaving the family as a result. When the other man's uncle comes to fetch Aanakwad, the son is meant to stay with his father while his sister, the daughter, leaves with their mother and her infant. The son, dismayed that he is being left behind, tries to jump on the departing wagon, and then chases it desperately through the snow as fast as he can. Eventually he loses consciousness, but not before seeing some gray shapes approach the trail that the cart is on. He later finds out from his father that the shapes were wolves, and that his sister was eaten by them, with only a scrap of her plaid **shawl** remaining. His father assumes that Aanakwad fed her daughter to the wolves in order to save herself and her infant, an idea that haunts the son. As an adult, he struggles through the difficult period when the U.S. government moves the Anishinaabeg people from their reservation into towns and public housing. His wife dies during this time and he turns to alcohol, neglecting his three children—the narrator, Raymond, and Doris—and beginning to beat them when he comes home drunk. Eventually, when the narrator, his oldest son, is 13, the two get into a fight in which the narrator knocks down and bloodies his father. After this fight, the father reveals the story of his sister for the first time, and his drinking and abuse seem to stop. The father remains sober, and eventually begins a new romantic relationship. Some time later, the narrator and his father discuss the events that led to his sister's death again. The narrator suggests to his father that rather than continue to carry around his sister's shawl, he should burn it in accordance with their people's traditions, and the father agrees to do so. The narrator also suggests to the father that his current understanding of his sister's death—that she was thrown to the wolves—might not be what actually happened. It's possible, he tells his father, that his sister instead sacrificed herself to save her family, suggesting that the father's sense of loss and shame at his family legacy might just as easily be reinterpreted into a sense of pride and heroism.

Daughter – Aanakwad's daughter is pushed into taking on adult responsibilities at the age of nine, when her mother's depression over her romantic situation becomes so overwhelming that she cannot take care of her infant or of her household duties. Her daughter takes this labor on instead, and even becomes something of an intermediary between Aanakwad and her husband, the girl's father. When it is decided that Aanakwad will go to live with her lover, the other man, the daughter goes with her. After the son tells his father about the grey shapes he saw on the trail as he chased the cart that was carrying his mother and sister, the husband investigates and finds that wolves have eaten the daughter. He takes home a piece of her plaid shawl and, years later, tells his son what he thinks happened: the wolves attacked the cart and Aanakwad threw the daughter to them in order to save herself, her infant, and her lover's uncle, who was driving the cart. The son is deeply disturbed by this story, and it is suggested that his sense of shame and sorrow corrupt his life. But after the son reveals the story to *his* son, the narrator, the narrator in turn suggests that, given that the daughter had been such a good person, a Gete-anishinaabeg, it's also possible that she sacrificed herself. While the daughter's story *could* be seen as one exemplifying shame and sorrow, the narrator's reinterpretation of it suggests that the story—and perhaps history more generally—can also be reinterpreted to offer hope, strength, and cultural connection.

Husband – Aanakwad's husband recognizes that she loves not him, but rather the other man, with whom she has just had a baby. Eventually, as their family life becomes untenable due to her despair, the husband sends for the other man's uncle to come pick up Aanakwad and take her to live with her lover. The separation is painful for him, especially because they are splitting up the two children they had together — their daughter will go with Aanakwad, while their son will stay with him. When the uncle arrives, the husband stops up his ears to avoid having to listen to their departure, so he doesn't notice at first that his son is chasing the cart through the snow as it leaves. When he does realize and goes to get his son, his son tells him about the gray shapes he saw on the trail, the husband goes to investigate. He then discovers that his daughter was eaten by wolves and assumes that Aanakwad threw the daughter to the wolves in order to stave them off and save herself, her infant, and her lover's uncle. The husband takes a scrap of his daughter's plaid shawl from the scene of the attack but initially keeps the story of what happened to himself. When, years later, he begins to weaken from tuberculosis, he tells this story to his son, and then begins to tell it to everyone, whenever he can.

Uncle – When Aanakwad's husband realizes that they cannot go on living as a family because of her despair at being apart from her lover, he sends for the other man's uncle to come and fetch Aanakwad. At the time, there are no roads, only trails, so the uncle lives a long trip away. When he arrives, he takes Aanakwad, her daughter, and the infant she had with the other man in his cart. The group is attacked by wolves on the trail, but it is assumed that everyone other than the daughter survives.

Raymond – Raymond is the narrator's younger brother. He is one of a set of twins — Doris is his twin sister. Both Doris and Raymond are cared for by the narrator after their mother dies and their father devolves too far into drinking to parent them. They regularly hide in the woods when they hear their father coming home to avoid his drunken beatings. As adults, Raymond and Doris marry a set of siblings, and they continue to live near the narrator and their father. Sometimes, they discuss their childhoods. These conversations occasionally reveal new information: for example, it is through this kind of comparison of memory that the narrator learns that Raymond once saw him hiding their father's belt.

Doris – Doris is the narrator's younger sister. She is part of a pair of twins, the other being Raymond. After their mother's death, Doris and Raymond are cared for primarily by the narrator, since their father turns drunk and violent. With her siblings, Doris gets in the habit of sneaking out of the house to hide in the woods when their father returns from his binges. When they grow up, Doris and Raymond marry another pair of siblings, and live near their brother and their father.

Other man – The events in the story are set off by Aanakwad having an affair with this other man, who is not her husband. The affair produces an infant. Aanakwad cannot bear to care for the baby or attend to her other children because of her despair over not being with the other man, whom she loves. Eventually, Aanakwad's husband sends for the other man's uncle, and Aanakwad, her daughter, and the baby leave their home to go live with the other man.

THEMES

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INHERITANCE, REINTERPRETATION, AND PERSONAL AND CULTURAL LEGACY

Louise Erdrich's story "The Shawl" is a story about inheritance—of stories, material items, and traumas. The narrator begins by sharing an anecdote told among the local Anishinaabeg (a name that refers to several related Native American tribes that live around the Great Lakes region of the U.S. and Canada) about a mother named Aanakwad, who leaves her husband for a different man, taking her nine-year-old daughter and infant with her while leaving her five-year-old son behind with her husband. During the trip, Aanakwad and her children are attacked by wolves. Afterward, at the grisly scene, Aanakwad's husband finds a torn piece of his daughter's **shawl** and assumes that Aanakwad threw their daughter to the wolves in order to save herself and her infant. After the narrator moves on in the story to describe his own childhood with an alcoholic and abusive father, it is revealed that his father has the shawl and is in fact the younger brother of the girl who was thrown to the wolves. As the narrator and his father later revisit the story of the sister's death, the narrator wonders whether the girl was not thrown at all, but rather sacrificed herself to the wolves in order to save her mother and the infant. Through this reinterpretation of the anecdote, Erdrich suggests that inheritance is not simply something static that you receive passively, but rather something you can reshape.

From the beginning of the story, Erdrich emphasizes things that are passed between and among family members and communities. The shawl referenced in the story's title is the most literal instance of something being passed down. It first appears on the girl in the anecdote—a "red and brown plaid shawl" that she wraps herself in as she sleeps. After the girl has been killed by wolves, her younger brother notes that it is kept in the house where now only he and his father live. By the end of the story, it reappears after the narrator finally fights and

defeats his abusive father, and then use "this piece of blanket that my father always kept with him for some reason" to wipe away his father's blood. The shawl, then, has traveled from being a significant object to Aanakwad's daughter to being one to Aanakwad's grandson.

For Erdrich's characters, stories are also an inheritance. The anecdote that opens this story, about the girl who was fed to the wolves, is framed in the very first sentence of "The Shawl" as something that "is told ... among the Anishinaabeg" people, of whom the narrator is one. In other words, it is a shared story, something that has been passed through the community. Later, the narrator reveals that he first heard this story from his father, further demonstrating the path the anecdote travels among generations.

But for Erdrich, just as one can inherit a shawl or a formative story, one can also inherit traumas and sorrows from their family or community. Erdrich implies that the narrator's father's abusive behavior is tied to his sorrow about what he understands his mother to have done to his sister. When, as a young boy, the narrator's father learns what happened to his sister, "he knew that this broken place within him would not be mended." Later, when the narrator finally fights back against his father's drunken physical abuse and is able to overpower him, the father becomes subdued and suddenly sober. At this moment, he tells the narrator the story of the shawl and the sister to whom it originally belonged: "Did you know I had a sister once?" The father here acknowledges that his drunken rages were the result of the trauma he inherited, a trauma he has been passing down to his own children.

Inherited sorrow is not limited to the narrator's immediate family, though. It's something that afflicts his entire community. The narrator describes how, when the United States government moved people from his and related tribes into towns, "it seemed that anyone who was someone was either drunk, killed, near suicide, or had just dusted himself." Even though this period of "despair" is over by the time the narrator is telling this story, its effects still linger in the existing generation: "We still have sorrows that are passed to us from early generations, sorrows to handle in addition to our own, and cruelties lodged where we cannot forget them."

Despite all this, "The Shawl" does offer the hope that such cycles of inherited trauma can be disrupted through the story of what happens after the narrator's father finally reveals what happened to his sister. After sharing the story of his sister, the narrator's father suddenly speaks in "the new sober voice I would hear from then on." The father doesn't just become sober for that moment, but instead remains sober from then on, suggesting that in sharing the trauma with others, the pain and rage—if perhaps not the sorrow—induced by that long-ago tragedy is eased. Further, once he learns of the origin of the shawl—the literal symbol of a thing passed down—the narrator tells his father that "we never keep the clothing of the dead. Now's the time to burn it.... Send it off to cloak her spirit." The father agrees, which indicates that he is letting go of this manifestation of the sorrow from his sister's death that he'd been holding onto his whole life, and which had cut him off from his people's traditions.

Not only does the narrator convince his father to let go of the shawl, the physical embodiment of the terrible story about his father's sister, but he also reinterprets the story itself. Instead of the story the father had always believed, that his mother Aanakwad had been so selfish as to feed his sister to the wolves in order to save herself, the narrator proposes another possible reading: What if his sister, known to be dutiful and loving to her mother and the infant, was similar to the old Anishinaabeg people in her remarkable kindness and had sacrificed herself in order to save everyone else? What if it had been her decision?

Notably, the narrator offers this reinterpretation in the form of a question. The reader doesn't see the father's response, and thus Erdrich ends "The Shawl" without explicitly saying whether one or the other interpretation is true or even considered plausible among the characters. Yet the truth of what happened to the daughter is ultimately not important. Instead, the story's ending demonstrates how the narrator and his father might be able to reinterpret the story they inherited, rather than passively accepting the sorrow passed on to them. In doing so, they transform their history from a legacy of victimhood and shame to one of heroism that connects them to the profound kindness inherent in their Anishinaabeg cultural legacy. That "The Shawl" connects the daughter's story to the despair of the larger Anishinaabeg community further implies that such reinterpretation might offer not just the narrator and his father a path forward, but also it might give the entire Anishinaabeg community the ability to view their own cultural legacy not with shame but with pride.

COMMUNAL STORYTELLING

The narrator of the "The Shawl" begins his story by sharing another story told "among the Anishinaabeg" about a woman named Aanakwad. This tale, in addition to being well known within the area where the narrator lives, is important for the narrator's grandfather (Aanakwad's husband), his father, and the narrator himself, making it clear that, for Erdrich, storytelling is a powerful force. As different stories are told throughout "The Shawl," it becomes evident that part of storytelling's power is the way it can enable the sharing of emotional trauma, a curative process inherent to the very act of telling. However, this curative power is not only born of the act of passing a burden onto someone else, but also in the revelations that can be found in sharing the role of narration itself with another person. For Erdrich, storytelling must be communal in order to be meaningful.

Throughout "The Shawl," Erdrich shows how the simple act of telling a story can be curative or therapeutic. Aanakwad's story

is widely known among the Anishinaabeg people, as the first line of "The Shawl" indicates. The narrator suggests that this may be because, after finding his daughter's remains and realizing what must have happened to her, Aanakwad's husband "had to tell what he saw, again and again, in order to get rid of it." Telling the story of something disturbing is a way to "destroy its power."

This vision of storytelling as a way to lighten the burden of a terrible experience or memory is reinforced later in "The Shawl," when the narrator and his father get into a physical fight. Before the fight began, the father was drunk and violent. By the end of the fight, after the narrator has stopped striking his father and offered him the **shawl** to clean up his blood, the father becomes not just subdued but sober. In this moment, he tells his son, for the first time, the story of his sister, Aanakwad's daughter who was eaten by wolves: "Did you know I had a sister once?" After this revelation, the father remains sober and his relationship with the narrator improves, the implication being that the act of telling the story was enough to address the rage the father was carrying that made him drunk and violent.

Erdrich also emphasizes the way that storytelling can be communal, an exchange of perspectives rather than the mere transmission of a story from one person to a listener or reader. The narrator describes how, once he and his two siblings Raymond and Doris have grown up, they continue to live near each other and get together often. He notes that, while their story of paternal drunkenness and abuse isn't a rare story, it's still useful for them to discuss their childhoods with each other because "it helps to compare our points of view." In fact, for Erdrich, the therapeutic properties of storytelling do not simply come out of the act of unburdening oneself, but are actually a result of the communal nature of storytelling. When the narrator describes the sharing of perspectives with his siblings, he explains why it is helpful by providing the example of the fact that, without this kind of comparison, he wouldn't have known that his brother saw him the first time he hid their father's belt so that their father couldn't beat them with it. In other words, the narrator thought he'd experienced something profoundly difficult in solitude—taking complete responsibility at a very young age for protecting himself and his siblings from their father—and that he was the only possible narrator of that story. But through the process of sharing stories with his siblings, he is able to realize he was not alone in the story and so he does not bear its weight alone now.

The most significant instance of communal storytelling in "The Shawl" is the evolution of the story of Aanakwad, the story that opens Erdrich's piece. For the father, who heard the story from *his* father, it is a story of his mother's betrayal by throwing the daughter to the wolves to save herself. But for the narrator, it has the potential to be something else—the story of the daughter's brave sacrifice of herself to save those whom she loves. It is through sharing stories with others that they can change, influenced by the perspectives and experiences of these other people. In Erdrich's formulation, a story is not a private, singular thing, but a co-created, living thing, The implications of this perspective on storytelling are potentially enormous: history, as the ultimate "story," is, in the mainstream, traditionally told from one perspective—that of the powerful. In the case of the history of Native peoples in the United States, history as it concerns them is traditionally told from the perspective of the settlers and, eventually, the U.S. government. Erdrich is pointing to the necessity of a more communally composed history—one that allows the Native peoples to reclaim the interpretation of their past for themselves—and is in fact offering a sort of alternative history herself through her writing.

THE U.S. GOVERNMENT, THE ANISHINAABEG, AND THE CONSEQUENCES OF INTERFERENCE

One of the underlying narratives in "The Shawl" is that of the Anishinaabeg people and their relation to the U.S. government. Louise Erdrich's narrator describes the profoundly negative effects of the government's effort to force a specific way of life onto his people by moving them from their traditional living situations into towns, which led to alcoholism, suicide, and general despair among the Anishinaabeg. For the narrator, these consequences were personal, as it was during this period of despair was when his mother died and his father began drinking and became violent. Yet while the efforts of the U.S. government to control the Anishinaabeg sits at the heart of the story in "The Shawl," it isn't the only example of such efforts at control. The conflict Erdrich depicts in the story is not just one between an oppressed people and the government, but also a more general one between what she frames as a state of untamed but natural balance in conflict with an artificial effort to control and organize.

Through the story of what happened when the government pushed the Anishinaabeg into towns, Erdrich demonstrates the negative consequences of U.S. governmental interference in the culture and lives of the Anishinaabeg. The story's narrator describes how the Anishinaabeg used to live spread out on the reservation. This is indicated in Aanakwad's story too—the uncle arrives to fetch Aanakwad in a wagon with sled runners, because at that time, "people lived widely scattered along the shores and in the islands, even out on the plains." When the U.S. government disrupted this way of life and "moved everybody … onto roads, into towns, into housing … it all went sour." This effort by the government was a kind of interference in traditional Anishinaabeg culture and society, such that the members of that culture lost their sense of self and "anyone who was someone was either drunk, killed, near suicide, or had just dusted himself." Though the narrator describes the depths

of that "term of despair" as having now passed, the negative impact of the governmental interference extends beyond just the people who were moved. The narrator notes that the survivors and their descendants "still have sorrows that are passed to us from early generations, sorrows to handle in addition to our own, and the cruelties lodged where we cannot forget them." The disruption to the Anishinaabeg people is not just a brief interruption but rather a crisis with far-reaching and radiating effects, a fact that underscores Erdrich's critique of interference.

The impact of interference on the Anishinaabeg way of life is also clear in the way their relationship with their land and its animals changes. In Aanakwad's story, the wolves attack the cart carrying Aanakwad, her daughter, and her infant because, at that time, "guns had taken all [the wolves] food for furs and hides to sell." This brief explanation is loaded with a history of contact between Native Americans and Europeans. The Anishinaabeg people came into possession of guns through European merchants and settlers. They hunted small animals (the wolves' prey) in order to participate in the fur trade, an economy imposed on them by the Europeans who invaded their land. The fact that the result of this contact was at odds with an "old agreement between [wolves] and the first humans" implies that things had once been different for the Anishinaabeg people, that they had once had a harmonious and balanced relationship with these wolves who are now hunting them. This balance was disrupted by outside interference, specifically by the European invaders who eventually founded the United States. This means that there is a direct line between the wolves' hunting of Anishinaabeg people and the despair brought on by the government forcing the people to move into towns.

When the narrator describes the government effort to move the Anishinaabeg into towns, he specifies that they are moved "onto roads"—something they did not have in the past when Aanakwad's story took place. A road (as opposed to trails traversable by wagons and sleds) is presumably built according to an organizing logic that connects a place (in this case the reservation) to a larger network of roads, making it accessible and comprehensible for outsiders. From the perspective of the merchants, settlers, or the U.S. government, this kind of interference may have looked like necessary, if violent, progress—giving the Native Americans technology in the form of guns, sometimes letting them participate in the dominant European economy, later forcing them to organize their living situations according to a logic the government recognized as valid. But through the destructive impacts that these changes had on the Anishinaabeg people, Erdrich shows how these imposed changes were in fact incredibly damaging.

Though Erdrich illustrates the long-term disruptions caused by such impositions, she also seems to indicate that it is possible to restore the way of life that once existed. She illustrates this possibility with the story of the father's nose. The narrator says that his father's nose is perfectly straight, but this straightness is a result of it having been punched out of place during a drunken fight, and then punched back into alignment during another drunken fight. In other words, his nose may look straight from the outside, but it is like that because of his awful personal state. In the story's climax, when the narrator and his father fight, the narrator's blows make his father's nose crooked again. This, however, is not represented as a bad outcome. Rather, the re-breaking of the father's nose comes at the moment when the father suddenly becomes sober and then reveals for the first time the story of his dead sister, which begins the healing in the narrator's family. The story presents the restoration of what looks like disorder as the solution to the disease of artificially imposed order.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE SHAWL

The red-and-brown plaid shawl symbolizes a connection to the past of the Anishinaabeg people. In the story, the shawl is literally an inheritance, since, after the daughter's death, it is passed down from the husband to the son (who is also the narrator's father). Because the shawl is associated with the dutiful daughter and the story of her death in which she was thrown to the wolves as a way for her mother to protect herself and her infant child,[BF1] it's specifically an inheritance of sorrow.

While the shawl symbolizes the specific sorrow passed down within the narrator's family, it also symbolizes the passing [BF2]down of communal sorrows born of systemic injustice. After the U.S. government "moved everybody off the farthest reaches of the reservation, onto roads and towns," life for the Anishinaabeg people "went sour"—many became drunk, suicidal, and generally depressed. The narrator suggests that even in the generations after those that were directly affected by this government intervention, the traumatic inheritance persists: "That term of despair has lifted somewhat … but we still have sorrows that are passed to use from early generations." When it is revealed that the narrator's father—whose alcoholism began during the period when the government relocated the Anishinaabeg people—carries the shawl with him everywhere, it becomes clear that the shawl symbolizes not just this particular family's inherited trauma, but a broader communal inheritance of trauma as well.

However, the connection to the past that the shawl embodies is not only a connection to pain and sorrow. At the moment that the shawl reappears in the story as a rag that the narrator uses

to mop up his father's blood, the father's life is changing again: he suddenly becomes sober and subdued, and he finally tells the narrator the story of his sister who died. The shawl, then, is a portal into storytelling, and storytelling is another kind of inheritance because it connects one to the past. When the narrator urges his father to burn the shawl and "send it off to cloak [the sister's] spirit," he is suggesting both a way to let go of the burden the shawl represents and that a positive connection to the dead—the past—exists. And when, at the end of the story, the narrator suggests that the sister, as one of the old type of people thought to be lost in the forced transition to the towns, might have sacrificed herself in a noble act, he is showing how these old ways of life, these old people, are in fact still accessible. Further, he is showing that the past—both of the sister and of the Anishinaabeg more generally—can be interpreted as heroic rather than shameful. Thus, over the course of the story the shawl comes to represent the possibility of a path back to the old ways of Anishinaabeg life that had been disrupted by the U.S. government.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Harper Perennial edition of *The Red Convertible* published in 2009.

The Shawl Quotes

❝ Perhaps the story spread through our settlements because the father had to tell what he saw, again and again, in order to get rid of it. Perhaps as with all frightful dreams, amaaniso, he had to talk about it to destroy its power—though in this case nothing could stop the dream from being real.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Husband

Related Themes:

Page Number: 393

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage early in "The Shawl," the narrator is in the midst of telling Aanakwad's story. Her husband (referred to as "the father" here) has gone out to investigate the gray shadows the son saw chasing after the departing Aanakwad and her daughter and infant, and has discovered something horrible—what exactly that is, the reader doesn't know quite yet. Notably, this is a moment when the narrator is both telling a story and also describing the source of that story's transmission. In other words, the story includes the tale of its own telling.

Not only is the act of storytelling emphasized in this passage, but the passage also frames storytelling as a way to take power back from a harrowing experience. While that experience—such as the terrible thing the father saw—may have "power," telling others about it is a way to "get rid of it." It is as though by telling a story about a bad experience or memory, the speaker is attempting to hand off pieces of that burden to others. And yet, it is also notable that in telling the story the father does not change it or lessen its power: he just relieves himself of it by passing it off to others. Elsewhere, "The Shawl" will suggest that there are ways of sharing a story that can offer more than simply passing on trauma to others.

The passage describes the father's experience itself as a "frightful dream." Since dreams are, by definition, not real, the assertion that "nothing could stop the dream from being real" is an apparent paradox. At the very least, this comparison to dreams along with the very strong insistence on its truth actually puts the actual veracity of the father's story—whatever it is—into question, implying that it may in fact be a product of his mind, as dreams are. At the same time, the notion that somehow this dream is "real" also captures the real impact of the dream-story on the father's life and the lives of those he told the story to—those he asked to help him carry the burden of the dream.

❝ The shadows' tracks were the tracks of wolves, and in those days, when our guns had taken all their food for furs and hides to sell, the wolves were bold and had abandoned the old agreement between them and the first humans. For a time, until we understood and let the game increase, the wolves hunted us.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Husband

Related Themes:

Page Number: 393

Explanation and Analysis

The husband, after he rescues his son from the snow and the son describes the gray shadows he'd seen chasing the wagon carrying Aanakwad and her daughter, goes to investigate. He realizes that the shadows were actually wolves. In this passage, the reader learns that the wolves' hunger is a result of the Anishinaabeg people's over-hunting of the wolves' prey.

The detail that the Anishinaabeg had killed the wolves' prey

with guns ties the wolves' hunting of humans to the contact between the Anishinaabeg people and European merchants and settlers. Like all Native Americans, the Anishinaabeg people were introduced to guns by the Europeans. Further, by specifying that the purpose of killing these smaller animals for "furs and hides to sell," the narrator is implying that they killed them not for food, in accordance with the natural balance between prey and predator, but rather in order to participate in the fur trade, an economy imposed on them by these very settlers.

The fact that this way of killing animals is something forced on the Anishinaabeg people from the outside is further emphasized by the detail that the Anishinaabeg people had once had an agreement with the wolves. In other words, European intervention into Anishinaabeg life had disconnected them from their past and from nature, a severance with fatal consequences.

> It was only after his father had been weakened by the disease that he began to tell the story, far too often and always the same way: he told how when the wolves closed in, Aanakwad had thrown her daughter to them. When his father said those words, the boy went still. What had his sister felt? What had thrust through her heart? Had something broken inside her, too, as it had in him? Even then, he knew that this broken place inside him would not be mended, except by some terrible means … He saw Aanakwad swing the girl lightly out over the side of the wagon. He saw the brown shawl with its red lines flying open. He saw the shadows, the wolves, rush together, quick and avid, as the wagon with sled runners disappeared into the distance—forever, for neither he nor his father saw Aanakwad again.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Aanakwad, Daughter

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 393-394

Explanation and Analysis

For a while, Aanakwad's husband—the father—doesn't tell his son his understanding of what happened to his daughter, so the son has gone on thinking that his mother and sister are alive and living with Aanakwad's lover on the other side of the lake. However, the father eventually begins to slowly die from tuberculosis, and in his weakened state starts telling the story—the clear implication being that the father is no longer strong enough to bear its weight on his own.

The experience of hearing this story from his father is formative for the son. Not only does he remember the experience of being abandoned by his mother and how that had "broken" him, he is also confronted with the idea that his mother had similarly abandoned and even murdered his sister for selfish reasons, which breaks him further, to the extent that he cannot imagine ever being "mended."

The story's titular shawl reappears in this passage, imprinting it with the weight of the tragedy that the son is buckling under at this moment. The story will reveal later that the son kept the shawl into his adulthood, and the inheritance of the shawl therefore also comes to symbolize the inheritance of the emotional trauma that the shawl symbolizes for the boy.

Importantly, this passage ends with the note that neither the son nor the father ever saw Aanakwad again. As with the comparison of the father's story to a "dream," this detail seems like a subtle way to cast doubt on the father's version of the story. In fact, though the father thinks he knows what happened, the father did *not* see what happened—he doesn't know for a fact that Aanakwad threw his daughter to the wolves, and he has no way to ask Aanakwad what happened. Despite this, he still tells the story to his son as if it is fact, and this telling has far-reaching effects for the son, as indicated by the fact that he can't imagine ever not being "broken" after hearing it. Aanakwad's story is told not by her, but instead by those left to tell it, by those left to interpret it.

> When we get together … there come times in the talking and card playing, and maybe even in the light beer now and then, when we will bring up those days. Most people understand how it was. Our story isn't uncommon. But for us it helps to compare our points of view. How else would I know, for instance, that Raymond saw me the first time I hid my father's belt?"

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Doris, Raymond

Related Themes:

Page Number: 394

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, the narrator explains how, now that they are adults, he and his siblings Raymond and Doris still get

together and talk about their childhood experiences with their alcoholic father. The narrator's description makes clear that these shared conversations and points of view allow them to process and share what happened. In essence, they are doing the opposite of what Aanakwad's husband did, which was to hold inside the story of what he believed happened, such that it festered and consumed him until he couldn't hold it in any longer.

Further, the fact that through these conversations the narrator learned that his younger brother witnessed him hiding their father's belt shows that sharing stories does more than just provide an emotional outlet. The sharing of viewpoints means that everyone gets a broader view of what happened. The narrator had thought that hiding his father's belt was something that he did by himself, in secret. He hid the belt in secret because he wanted to protect his younger siblings, both from beatings with the belt but also even from the understanding that the belt had to be hidden in the first place. The act was a noble one, but it also meant that he felt that his work, while a child, of protecting his even younger siblings was his burden alone to bear. But the discovery that Raymond saw him hide the belt meant that the narrator was not actually alone, that his siblings understood what he was doing for them, that they could bear the burden of being children who had to hide their father's belt together. Even though the narrator only learns this truth in adulthood, it transforms the story of his past for him, from one of loneliness to one of togetherness.

> He became, for us, a thing to be avoided, outsmarted, and exploited. We survived off him as if he were a capricious and dangerous line of work. I suppose we stopped thinking of him as a human being, certainly as a father.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Son/Father, Doris, Raymond

Related Themes:

Page Number: 395

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator in this quote describes his and his siblings' relationship with their father after their father becomes an often-violent alcoholic. As an unreliable and dangerous alcoholic, the children cease to see their father as a father at all, or even as a human. Instead, he becomes for them a danger and a resource.

The narrator, then, is describing a situation in which the normal family order has been completely upended and torn apart. "The Shawl" makes clear that this destruction of the family has a clear cause: it began when the U. S. government relocated the Anishinaabeg people from their traditional way of life into towns. After that, the narrator's mother died and his father became the alcoholic who the narrator and his siblings no longer can even view as a father. The direct line from governmental interference to the breakdown of the narrator's family order is clear.

What is also worth noting is the way in which the narrator's description of his father after the family has been disrupted—as a dangerous force to be avoided, exploited, and outsmarted—is similar to the description of the wolves in the Aanakwad story, after the relationship between the wolves and the humans is disordered after the humans begin to use guns to hunt the wolves' prey for their fur. In the Aanakwad story, the introduction of guns and a capitalist economy hungry for pelts disrupts the Anishinaabeg people's relationship with nature, and as a result the wolves begin to prey on people. In the narrator's own story, the interference of the government disrupts the people from themselves, and where there was once natural balance of family there is instead an "economy" of mutual exploitation and fear.

> His nose had been pushed to one side in a fight, then slammed back to the other side, so now it was straight.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Son/Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 395

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator here describes his father's nose, and what happened to it after he became an alcoholic. Put simply, his nose *looks* straight, but that straightness is not the result of it being naturally straight, but rather of it being *extra* broken.

This description is important because the father's nose can be seen as a metaphor for the father himself, and for the Anishaanebeg people more broadly. As the narrator has made clear, the Anishaanebeg, and the father, fell into despair and alcoholism after being relocated by the U. S. government from their natural and traditional way of life into life in towns. This relocation involves the Anishaanebeg people being moved from their lives on the twisty trails that

are evident in the Aanakwad story into the cookie-cutter streets of the towns. In other words, the government relocation is an effort to "straighten" the Anishaanebeg people themselves such that the government can then understand and control them. But, like the father's nose, that straightness is artificial, and it's seeming regularity masks a deeper brokenness.

Later in the story, the narrator confronts and fights his father, and in the process re-breaks his father's nose such that it is crooked again. After that fight his father sobers up, and the nose is further established as a metaphor for a natural order that may not be "straight" but is nonetheless right and true and balanced.

❝ Gently, though, he clasped one hand around my wrist. With the other hand he took the shawl. He crumpled it and held it to the middle of his forehead. It was as if he were praying, as if he were having thoughts he wanted to collect in that piece of cloth. For a while he lay like that, and I, crouched over, let him be, hardly breathing. Something told me to sit there, still. And then at last he said to me, in the sober new voice I would hear from then on, *Did you know I had a sister once?*

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Son/Father

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 397

Explanation and Analysis

This scene occurs after the narrator has finally confronted, fought, and overcome his alcoholic father. After the fight, the narrator tends to his injured father, and picks up a scrap of a shawl—which is clearly the shawl that belonged to the girl in the Aanakwad story—to wipe up his father's blood. The natural order between son and father has been restored, and the father leaves his alcoholism behind, and tells the narrator of his own secret past.

The scene is critical to "The Shawl" in a variety of ways. First, it connects the Aanakwad story to the narrator's story, and shows how the inherited trauma of that story ran through from the narrator's grandfather, to his father, and then to the narrator himself. That the father has kept the shawl all these years symbolically shows how he has held onto that trauma.

Second, the scene shows the beginning of the family's healing from the trauma. That healing begins when the son, after fighting and defeating his father—which might also be read as the son directly confronting the trauma that drives his father's alcoholism—then tends to his father, re-establishing the family order of father and son. And in tending to his father, he uses the shawl—that symbol of his father's sister's death—and so the symbolism of the shawl and its relation to that terrible death is muted and now connected also to the recreation of familial bonds. And, in this moment, the father reveals his past and his trauma to his son. What he had kept inside, and which fueled his alcoholism, he now shares and lets out. As he does so, his drunkenness disappears, and not just for the moment, as the narrator notes that the father speaks in "the sober new voice I would hear from then on." In this moment, the story clearly connects the sharing of communal storytelling, of personal traumatic history, with healing from that trauma.

❝ There was a time when the government moved everybody off the farthest reaches of the reservation, onto roads, into towns, into housing. It looked good at first, and then it all went sour. Shortly afterward, it seemed that anyone who was someone was either drunk, killed, near suicide, or had just dusted himself. None of the old sort were left, it seemed — the old kind of people, the Gete-anishinaabeg, who are kind beyond kindness and would do anything for others. It was during that time that my mother died and my father hurt us, as I have said.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Son/Father

Page Number: 396

Explanation and Analysis

Earlier in "The Shawl," the narrator briefly interrupts his story of Aanakwad to explain the history behind why the wolves attacked Aanakwad's traveling party—because the Anishaanebeg, after white settlers brought guns and an economy hungry for animal pelts, had over-hunted such that wolves no longer had their normal prey, upsetting the normal balance and causing the wolves to attack humans.

In this quote, the narrator again breaks off from his story to give some background history. And, as with the history about the wolves, this history also focuses on the ways that white settlers—now in the form of the U.S. government—relocated the Anishaanebeg people, establishing an "order" that in fact destroyed a natural way of life, threw things out of balance, and led to despair and death. It is through this quote that the narrator most clearly connects the trauma that has passed through his family to

governmental interference and attempts at asserting control over the Anishaanebeg people.

> First, I told him that keeping his sister's shawl was wrong, because we never keep the clothing of the dead. Now's the time to burn it, I said. Send it off to cloak her spirit. And he agreed.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Son/Father, Daughter

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 397

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator is now an adult. His confrontation with his father is quite some time in the past, and their relationship has been rebuilt. The narrator has described himself and his family as having, to some degree, escaped the trauma of their past and he and his father regularly get together and speak of the past.

In this moment, as they talk of the past, the narrator suggests that his father let go of the shawl that in the story has acted as an embodiment of the tragedy and shame of his father's sister's death. The narrator offers two reasons for his idea: that holding onto the clothing of the dead is at odds with the traditional way of life of the Anishinaabeg, and that in burning the shawl it could return to offering comfort to the sister's soul. In other words, the burning of the shawl is not just a symbolic release of the trauma that the father has held onto for so long—though it is that. The narrator is making clear that holding onto the trauma has disconnected the father from his cultural legacy and from the very sister whom he continues to mourn. In agreeing to burn the shawl, in letting go of the trauma of his past, the father is reconnecting to that past, to his sister, and to his cultural legacy.

> The other thing I said to him was in the form of a question. Have you ever considered, I asked him, given how tenderhearted your sister was, and how brave, that she looked at the whole situation? She saw that the wolves were only hungry. She knew that their need was only need. She knew that you were back there, alone in the snow. She understood that the baby she loved would not live without a mother, and that only the uncle knew the way. She saw clearly that one person on the wagon had to be offered up, or they all would die. And in that moment of knowledge, don't you think, being who she was, of the old sort of Anishinaabeg, who things of the good of the people first, she jumped, my father, indede, brother to that little girl? Don't you think she lifted her shawl and flew?

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Son/Father, Uncle, Aanakwad, Daughter

Related Themes:

Page Number: 397-8

Explanation and Analysis

The story ends as the narrator offers a re-interpretation of the story of Aanakwad and his father's sister. In this re-interpretation, he recasts his father's sister from being a victim to a hero, from being someone who was betrayed by her callous mother to someone who showed the traits of the "old sort of Anishinaabeg" and selflessly gave her life to save the lives of those she loved. This re-telling of the story offers not just a release from the trauma of the sister's death, but a complete transformation of it. Her death becomes something to look back on not with shame but with pride, not as something that destroys self-respect but as a foundation on which respect for oneself and one's culture can be built.

The narrator explicitly offers this re-interpretation in the form of a question, and no answer is provided. But the very open-endedness of the question is part of the point, and stands in contrast to the way that the narrator's grandfather definitively stated that Aanakwad had thrown the daughter to her death. In fact, simply by being an open-ended-question, the story makes clear that the grandfather's version of what happened was also just an interpretation, influenced by his own personal feelings, and should never have been taken as definitive in the first place. In this way, the story shows how stories are told by those who survive and remain, and how their interpretation becomes not just *a* version of the story, but the *only* version of the story, and how damaging it can be to accept the interpretations of a single person.

Further, by posing the story as an unanswered question, the narrator brings the reader into the story by making the

reader grapple with this re-interpretation. The narrator and his father have communally constructed a new story of their past, and have actively included the reader in that communal act of storytelling. "The Shawl," then, operates in a way similar to the narrator's own retelling of his aunt's long-ago death. It offers a story to the world of not pain but rather of bravery and survival, invites communal construction of that story, and in so doing offers a path to re-interpretation of the Anishaanebeg past and cultural legacy that offers hope and a way forward.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE SHAWL

There is a story told among the Anishinaabeg about a woman named Aanakwad. Aanakwad is known to be moody, a characteristic reflected in her name, which means "cloud." She's married and has two children (a nine-year-old daughter and a five-year-old son), but falls in love with another man who isn't her husband and has a child by him. Aanakwad can't bring herself to care for the new baby. Not because she doesn't love it — in fact, she loves it too much, as much as she loves its father, and she can't face the pain of not being with the other man. Her daughter, a dutiful nine-year-old, takes care of the baby instead and, when Aanakwad stops being able to cook or clean, the daughter takes over that work too. The daughter is so exhausted by this work that she sleeps deeply every night, wrapped in a red-and-brown plaid **shawl**.

In the very first line of "The Shawl," the reader is thrust into a story with no context for how it relates to the unnamed narrator. Since it is introduced as a story told "among the Anishinaabeg" (a name that refers to several culturally related indigenous tribes that live around the Great Lakes region of the United States and Canada), it's clearly a story with significance that expands beyond just the narrator. This opening also offers the first mention of the titular shawl. It's closely tied to the daughter and the fact that she is forced to take on her mother's responsibilities at a young age.

The husband, aware that his Aanakwad is suffering because he is not this other man whom she loves, becomes afraid of her. The husband eventually realizes that this life is untenable, and sends for the other man's uncle so that he can come fetch Aanakwad. At this time, there are no roads in the Anishinaabeg land, and people live spread out, connected only by trails they traveled with horses, wagons, and sleds.

In addition to describing Aanakwad's complicated family situation, the narrator describes what Anishinaabeg life was like at the time of this story. That the narrator specifies that their life was like this during Aanakwad's time *implies that it no longer is—in other words, this is a story of the way things used to be. The details given indicate that people weren't easily accessible, living in remote corners of the reservation without roads or systematized transportation. There also is a contrast building here between Aanakwad and her family—she is selfish and subject to her emotions, like her namesake cloud—while the husband and his daughter are painted as selfless and responsible.*

The uncle eventually arrives in a wagon drawn by horses and with sled runners. Aanakwad and her husband, after days of argument, decide to split up the children: the daughter will go with her mother and the baby, while the son will stay with the husband. The son, desperate not to be left behind, chases after the cart as the uncle drives it away into the snow. He tries to jump into the wagon, but his mother pries his hands off. So he runs as fast as he can behind the cart, faster than he's ever run before, until he collapses. As he lies in the snow watching them leave, he realizes he doesn't care if he lives. Right before he loses consciousness, he sees gray shapes heading out of the woods and onto the trail ahead.

The son's realization that he doesn't care if he's alive or dead represents a dramatic break for a five-year-old. His mother's abandonment is so traumatic that he cannot imagine life mattering once he realizes his efforts to avert this desertion are futile. This experience plants a seed for his later emotional and familial troubles as an adult. It is worth noting that while the story makes clear that the parents argue over the fate of the children, it isn't clear what they argued about. While the son feels abandoned by his mother, it is possible that the mother argued for her son to come with her, but lost the argument. What is unknown in a story is just as important as what is known.

The husband finds the son and takes him home. At first, when the boy tells him about the shapes he saw, the husband thinks they are manidoog—spirits. But with further description, the father decides he ought to go investigate. He takes a gun. It's likely that the reason this story spreads through the settlements is because what the husband sees next is so disturbing to him that he has to retell it, over and over, to try to dampen its power over him. What he discovers are wolf tracks and evidence that the daughter has been eaten by these wolves.

Like all Native Americans, the Anishinaabeg people gained guns through their contact with European settlers and traders. The presence of a gun in this part of the story is a result of the influence of white settlers on the Anishinaabeg way of life. In these scenes the reader also begins to see the significance of storytelling for these people, picking up the thread that was laid down in the first line of "The Shawl." Here, storytelling is a way for the father to try to escape from, or eject from himself, the trauma of a painful memory.


The narrator interjects to comment that the wolves weren't always a threat to the Anishinaabeg people. They only became one when the people, wanting furs and hides to sell, had used their guns to kill all the animals that the wolves would normally eat. This led to the wolves violating the old agreement between them and the first humans. So the wolves hunted humans until the people understood what was going on and left enough game for the wolves.

The full significance of the gun—the influence of white settlers—is now clear. Not only did contact with Europeans introduce guns into Anishinaabeg life, but those guns led directly to a disruption of what had been an old and balanced relationship between the Anishinaabeg people and the wolves, and this imbalance had fatal consequences for the Anishinaabeg. More broadly, the gun and the fur trade imply the way that the arrival of European settlers enmeshed the Anishinaabeg in a new economic system that pushed them toward behavior that turned out to be self-destructive.

The husband finds the daughter's torn plaid **shawl** at the scene of her death and brings it home. At first, he doesn't explain to his son what he knows, so his son continues to think that his sister and his mother are living with the other man across the lake. When the son asks about the shawl, the husband cries. Eventually, the husband begins to weaken from tuberculosis, though it takes him years to die. In these years, he finally tells his son what he thinks happened: the wolves began to close in, and Aanakwad, in order to save herself, her baby, and her lover's uncle, threw her daughter to the wolves. The son is stunned by this story, remembering how, when he was chasing the cart, he hadn't cared if he lived or died. He imagined that in this moment, when their mother had betrayed her too, the daughter had also felt this. The son is haunted by this idea, as well as by the knowledge that the thing that was broken in him the day his mother left might never be repaired. He never sees Aanakwad again.

The shawl reappears again here, but now its initial connection to the daughter's outsized and unasked-for responsibilities is also drenched in tragedy as it is the only remnant of her death. That tragedy, embodied in the torn piece of her shawl, is handed down to the son in the form of the father's story of what happened, a passage of sorrow from one generation to another. Again, note how this story that the narrator is imparting about Aanakwad includes instances of the story's own telling, showing the process of it moving from one man's understanding of what happened to a story told among a whole people. The fact that, at this moment, it's noted that the son never saw Aanakwad again after the day she left is a hint that this widely told story isn't necessarily accurate. It's an interpretation *of what happened, told by those left to tell it.*


There is a shift in the story: now the narrator is describing his own life. He explains that his father begins to drink a lot after the death of his wife, the boy's mother. The father drinks in binges, not returning to the house for days. When he does come home, he's violent. The narrator and his younger twin siblings, Doris and Raymond, get into the habit of sneaking out of windows and hiding in the woods until their father passes out. The boy is only ten, and his siblings are six, but he takes care of them.

Though the narrator has shifted to describing his own life, there's still no explanation of why Aanakwad's story matters. However, the narrator's childhood seems to echo Aanakwad's story in a few ways: just as Aanakwad became an absent mother because of her emotional torment and the husband also became tormented by sadness, the narrator and his siblings have no mother and a father lost to alcoholic rages. And, just as Aanakwad's daughter is forced to take on her mother's work, the narrator does the same, caring for himself and his siblings even though he's very young. This symmetry suggests that there may be a connection between Aanakwad's story and the narrator's life, something passed down from one to the other.

The narrator notes that as a result of what they've experienced together, the siblings remain close into adulthood. As adults, they live near each other. Doris and Raymond marry a brother and sister, and the siblings get together to play cards and—sometimes—drink beer together. Though what they experienced as children is not rare in their community, they appreciate being able to talk about it with each other because it's helpful to be able to compare their different perspectives. For example, when he is an adult, the boy learns that Raymond saw him the first time he hid his father's belt while his father was passed out.

The ability to compare perspectives on their childhood experiences allows the narrator and his siblings to understand that their memories can exist from different perspectives. The example of stealing the belt illustrates this: while the narrator may have felt very alone when he first made this effort to save himself and his siblings from a portion of their father's violence, he later learns that Raymond shared in this experience with him, making it a less lonely memory. This strategy of sharing and rehashing childhood memories in a way that opens them up to revision by other people stands in contrast with the way that Aanakwad's husband kept telling a story that only had a single author (himself) who hadn't even been present at the time of the daughter's death. The latter passed trauma from father on to son, while the former seems to open up the possibility of emotional connection and release.


However, hiding the belt didn't prevent their father from hitting them with other things—a board, a willow wand, his own hands. So the boy and his siblings Raymond and Doris constructed their own hiding spot in the woods, with a campfire, to wait out their father's violence. They also learned to sneak cash out of where their father stashed it in his sock, and to stow away food so that their father could not sell it. The result of all these machinations is that the boy and his siblings begin to regard their father as something other than a father, as something not even quite human.

The children's father's behavior, driven by his own despair after governmental relocation and the death of his wife, is now inherited by his children. Just as the five-year-old boy must endure the pain of both losing his mother and then coming to see his mother Aanakwad as a monster, so do these children cease to have a father or even be able to see their father as a human being.


When the boy is 13, he decides he's big enough to take on his father. He's gained adult height at a young age and has been practicing fighting with hand-made punching bags. So when he hears his father coming home after a drinking binge, he sends Raymond and Doris out of the house. His father returns, five days drunk. He's still a big man, not yet weakened by all his drinking. His nose had been broken and twisted in a fight, but pushed back straight by another fight. The boy surprises his father with a punch and, as the two fight, the boy is surprised by a sort of joy he feels in fighting his father, and by the extent to which he feels he wants to kill his father, on his own behalf and for his siblings. He feels like he's not himself, like he's watching himself from outside.

During the fight with his father, the boy becomes almost dissociated from himself—he is both in the fight, and watching himself from outside the fight. The implication is that he is protecting himself and his siblings, but he is doing so at the cost of losing his connection to himself. The father's nose, which is straight because it has been broken twice recalls the impact of governmental interference on the Anishinaabeg. The government forced the people out of their out of the way homes into towns, onto mapped roads. The government sought to straighten the Anishinaabeg into something the government could control. But as the father's nose indicates, something can be straightened and yet broken, or even it can be straight because it has been doubly *broken.*

The fight reaches its climax: the father breaks a chair and throws the pieces. The boy uses one of the chair legs to hit his father on the ear and continues hitting him over and over again. He sees this scene as if he's watching himself hit his father, watching his father fall and hold up his hands to beg for the beating to stop. He realizes that his father hasn't been fighting back for a while.

The inheritance of trauma is enacted in what happens to the chair in the fight: the weapon of the father becomes the weapon of the son. The violence of the father is passed down to the son.

When he recognizes that his father has given up, the boy suddenly feels the two of them thrust back into their normal relationship—he recognizes his father as his father again. He notes that his father's nose is broken again, and bleeding. To wipe the blood, the boy uses a piece of a plaid woman's **shawl** that his father always kept for him. As the boy cleans, his father watches him and then grabs the boy's wrist and takes the shawl from him. He holds the shawl against his forehead, and lies still for a while. The boy doesn't dare move—he's barely breathing. Finally, the father says, in a suddenly sober voice, "Did you know I had a sister once?"

The reappearance of the shawl in the story reveals that the alcoholic father is the same person as the five-year-old boy left behind by Aanakwad, connecting the two stories in "The Shawl" and making clear the path of trauma: from the father who found the shawl, to his son, and from that son to the narrator of "The Shawl." The revelation of the connection between the stories is also a moment of healing, though: just as the reader realizes the connection, the alcoholic father begins to share the story with the narrator. And in this moment of shared storytelling, the narrator loses his desire for vengeance against his father and instead cares for him, and the father becomes sober. It is as if in sharing the story, the trauma of the story dissipates.

The Anishinaabeg used to live spread out across the reservation. At some point, the U.S. government moved everyone into towns and housing. This had seemed like a positive change at first, but it didn't work as expected: soon after, many people became drinkers, depressed, or suicidal. This was the context in which the narrator's mother died, and during which his father began drinking and became abusive. Though this dark period is now in the past, the newer generations are still carrying the burden of those years. Because of this, they feel a strong urge to try to forget.

The narrator once again shifts the story to a brief history of the recent past of the Anishinaabeg. This shift, occurring right after the father reveals his own history of trauma to the narrator, is meaningful. It links the Anishinaabeg's general inherited trauma from U.S. government interference to this particular family's trauma. And it shows how, even after the darkest moments of pain have passed, the trauma remains along with feelings of shame and a desire to avoid that past. But it is notable that the narrator, in telling this history, is refusing to forget that past, and is instead sharing it with the reader just as his father shared the story of Aanakwad with the narrator.

The narrator, grown now, feels he's gotten away from the impact of the dark period, to an extent—his continued solitude is, for him, connected to the aftereffects of those bad years. His siblings Raymond and Doris are both married, and in the narrator's estimation they've gotten away. And even their father has recently connected with a new woman.

The narrator and his family are representative of those who have suffered and inherited past trauma. Even those who largely escape its legacy are at least partly always affected by it. The narrator connects this trauma with loneliness, with solitary living, with not sharing *a life with other people. The implication is that some who have inherited trauma seek to stop the cycle of inheritance by keeping it to themselves, but that this is a trap, and that in fact is through sharing that healing can come.*

One day, the narrator and his father discuss the old days and, specifically, Aanakwad's story. The narrator has been thinking about this story and has two things to tell his father. The first thing is a suggestion: he tells his father he shouldn't be holding on to his sister's **shawl**, because it's not part of their tradition to keep the dead's clothing. He should burn it to send it off for her spirit to wear. His father agrees.

While the narrator lives alone, he has nonetheless reconnected with his father, as the fact that they now meet and talk about the past together indicates. That these conversations result in the father agreeing to burn the shawl—the embodiment of the trauma of the sister's death— show that such shared communication has a healing power. Further, that conversation—that sharing of stories—between the two men leads not just to personal healing but to closer alignment with the practices of the cultural heritage from which their forced relocation had cut them off.

The second thing the narrator's been thinking about is a question. He asks his father if he thinks it's possible that his sister, the narrator's aunt, was not actually thrown by their mother from the wagon, as the father had spent his life believing, but that she had instead jumped of her own volition. His rationale for this question is that the father has often said how brave and how good of a person his sister was—one of the old kind of their people, who had apparently been lost in the transition to towns. Being this kind of person, she may have understood the situation—the wolves were hungry, the baby needed her mother, the father (her brother) was in the snow behind them, and the uncle was the only person who knew the way—and recognized that, if someone had to be eaten by the wolves, it should be her. Given all of that, she may have jumped from the wagon herself, her shawl flying out behind her like a cape.

The narrator and his father continue to share the story of the father's sister. But now with a further step: the narrator is not just sharing the story, but re-interpreting it in a way that only communal storytelling allows. In this re-interpretation, the sister is not a victim but a hero. Her death is not a product of Aanakwad's shame, but rather of her own courage and of her cultural heritage as an Anishinaabeg. And the shawl, in this reinterpretation, is not the embodiment of the tragedy of her death, but almost like a superhero's cape. By re-interpreting the story of the past, the narrator gives his father and himself a new path forward. Their past becomes not something to try to forget or be ashamed of, but something to celebrate and which gives them strength. Interestingly, "The Shawl" itself performs a similar function. It shares with the reader a story and re-interprets it, and finds in the Anishinaabeg history not a tragedy from which there is only trauma, but rather a foundation on which to build.

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