

Not Yet Finished

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By Owen Neace

In Jane Yolen's *Favorite Folktales From Around The World*, a Sioux Indian tale entitled "The End of The World" attempts to catalogue Sioux culture before, during, and after European colonization. In addition, the tale chastises the Europeans' oppressive colonization of Native America, which not only attempted to eradicate the Sioux tradition and religion, but also tried to foster a new, foreign culture upon these native people. The tale tells of a hermitic woman, whose life and work seem altogether unaffected by European colonization. Her steadfast traditionalism symbolizes the Sioux resistance. Through the timeless telling of this allegorical folktale, the Sioux were able to emerge from this adversity, while also reflecting on the past, and speculating on the future of their society.

The folktale "The End of The World" opens with a description of a remote setting: "somewhere at a place where the prairie and the Maka Sicha, the Badlands, meet, there is a hidden cave" (Yolen 474). Immediately following this description, the tale interjects its first statement regarding the influence of European colonization on Sioux culture. The line "even now, with so many highways, cars, and tourists, no one has discovered this cave," reveals how the Europeans were unsuccessful in their efforts of complete geographical takeover (Yolen 474). It is unclear at this early point in the folktale however, if the Sioux attribute the cave's steadfast isolationism to an extreme, geographically separated location, or to another, more supernatural power that has aided this specific cave in avoiding discovery by white colonists. Robert M. Utley, in his book *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation* writes on the somewhat distorted perspective the Sioux held post-white conquest: "the Sioux had never really accepted the reality of their conquest by the United States Army. They still harbored illusions that the day of liberation would come, that somehow, someday, they would return to the way of life their fathers had known, to the time when no white men interfered with their religion, their economic system, their government, their society" (Utley 5). The cave detailed in the folktale symbolizes this illusion of liberation, the Sioux dream of a survival, however minute, of their culture. With this knowledge, "The End of the World" may be interpreted as a sort of sad dream of a dying culture—one completely eradicated by white colonization.

White colonization crippled Sioux culture in an array of realms, many of which the folktale evidence. Immediately following the initial description of the secluded cave, the folktale introduces the first inhabitant of this cave: "In it lives a woman so old that her face looks a shriveled-up walnut. She is dressed in rawhide, the way people used to be before the white man came" (Yolen 474). This reflects the Sioux disgust with whites' encroachment upon their traditional dress. In his novel *The Great Sioux Nation*, Fred M. Hanz describes traditional Sioux dress prior to white colonization: "All thin skins, such as the deer, antelope and mountain sheep, are prepared for clothing. After the hair has been removed, these skins are so neatly worked down that many of them are as thin, white and soft as a piece of fine flannel" (Hanz 161). This description more closely parallels that found in the folktale. In contrast, Robert M. Utley in his book *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation*, describes post- white colonization dress common among the Sioux. He writes that:

The face of each was painted, foreheads, cheeks, and chin bore circles, crescents, and crosses that symbolized sun, moon, and morning star. The central feature of the costume, worn above buckskin

leggings, was the Ghost Shirt. It was a sacklike garment of cotton cloth or muslin ornamented, like the face, with painted circles, crescents, and crosses, and with designs symbolizing the eagle, magpie, crow, sage hen, and other birds and animals having special significance in Sioux mythology (Utley 86).

The folktale's omission of the newer, more extravagant style of dress reflects the Sioux's general disdain for this new form, as well as their interest in upholding and continuing the traditional customs of pre-colonial Native America.

After further describing this very old traditional Sioux woman, the folktale tells how she has "for a thousand years or more, been working on a blanket strip for her buffalo robe" (Yolen 475). The Sioux people prized their buffalo robes. Fred M. Hanz writes: "The most skilful, as well as tedious, process of all is the preparation of the buffalo robe. These skins are all so thick and unwieldy that they cannot be made pliable until reduced to about one-half in thickness" (162). He further describes the meticulous process of preparing these robes for use, ending with: "All of this hard work completed, a longer and more patient labor devolves upon the loving wife, which she bestows upon the robe to be used by her husband on all fine dress occasions, such as important tribal councils with other races and nations" (163). No doubt this process demands much time, or, as more exactly described by Franz: "Many a squaw has put in all of her spare time for a year or more on one robe of this kind" (163). In the folktale, the old woman's continuous work on this robe post-European conquest symbolizes the Sioux people's desire to uphold their culture and traditions.

Along with this endlessly working woman, an ominous black dog inhabits the cave. Immediately following the woman's description and work, the folktale describes this dog: "Resting beside her, licking his paws, watching her all the time is Shunka Sapa, a huge black dog. His eyes never wander from the old woman" (475). Though initially enigmatic, the folktale later describes the intent of this dog, but not before telling of how the old woman occasionally steps away from her quilt work to tend to a nearby stew (475). Described as brewing in "a big earthen pot, the kind some Indian peoples used to make before the white man came with his kettles of iron," this stew distracts her from the black dog's divisiveness. Every time she leaves her quilt work to stir this soup, Shunka Sapa destroys her quilting, rendering her unproductive, and leaving her work unfinished (475). The woman however seems unflustered by this constant impediment and accepts it conciliatorily. Rather than simply choosing one of the tasks over the other, she chooses to divide her life between the two, all the while living with this dog, and making no effort to destroy it so that she may easily complete both of her objectives. This peculiar relationship speaks bounds about Sioux Indian religion and philosophy.

On a shallow level, the woman's choice to not destroy this dog reflects a deep respect for wildlife and nature found among Sioux Indians. In his book *Sioux Indian Religion*, Raymond J. DeMallie describes this relationship: "Humankind and nature were one, just as the natural and the supernatural were one. Human existed not outside nature but as a part of it. Human beings stood in awe and fear of the universe, venerated in it, and dared to manipulate it to the best of their limited capability" (28). This quote not only explains why this Sioux woman chose not to kill this dog, but also introduces a hypothesis regarding these two unlikely tenants' relationship. Obviously to this woman the dog represents more than a source of adversity. She views him as pivotal to the balance of humankind and nature. Therefore, the dog's intent—as well as her quilting, rank secondary among her concerns. Though this philosophy seems harmless, it starkly contradicted with that of Europeans, which resulted in yet another point of dissonance between the two societies.

The happenings in the folktale collectively express a disdain for the white colonization that eradicated the culture and practices of the Sioux Nation. In addition to the rather minute, independent aspects of Sioux culture such as dress, pottery, and labor, the folktale chastises the “white man’s” culture in a more general sense. The perpetually quilting woman is symbolic of Sioux culture, which the “white man” so oppressively forced out and replaced with his own. Writing on the dichotomy between these two societies, Raymond J. DeMallie states: “Once established, the relationship between humankind, the buffalo, and all the rest of the universe was fixed. In Sioux culture time was not conceived of as a casual force; history was not directed, nor did it embody that notion of progress and change which is so fundamental to European culture” (31). The Sioux’s ultimate insult of this invading culture comes in the last line of the folktale. It reads: “The Sioux people used to say that if the old woman ever finished her blanket strip, then at the very moment that she threads the last porcupine quill to complete the design, the world will come to an end” (475). This final line correlates directly with Raymond J. DeMallie statement regarding Europe’s culture of constant progress, as opposed to the Sioux’s, which favored no such progressivism. In the folktale, the black dog does not represent the “white man,” nor his oppressive expansion upon Native America. In actuality, the woman’s completion of her shawl symbolizes this expansion. The metaphoric completion of this shawl represents the encroachment upon a culture that was fully sufficient without highways, cars, or tourists; cloth clothing or iron kettles. The completion of the shawl—the shift from perpetual harmony to perpetual progress, marks the death of the Sioux culture.

But is this shawl complete? Though one may conclude the Sioux culture as extinct, due to the crushing colonization of North America by the Europeans, the existence of this folktale may tell otherwise. Perhaps that woman still resides in that hidden cave, undiscovered, with the dog close by, always waiting for her to leave her work. She has long-stopped quilting however, as porcupine quills are no longer used make blankets. She now uses these quills for something else. Soon she will rise to tend her stew, and the moment she is gone the dog will undoubtedly tear up her work. But she thinks not of the dog, for she is working. After dipping a quill in ink, she continues her new work, by putting it to a page.

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