

# **waterlily by ella cara deloria**

Waterlily by Ella Cara Deloria is a mesmerizing novel that immerses readers in the rich cultural heritage of the Dakota Sioux. Written in the early 20th century, the narrative captures the life and traditions of Native Americans, particularly focusing on the role of women in their communities. Deloria, a member of the Yankton Sioux tribe, brings authenticity and depth to her storytelling, presenting a vivid portrayal of a society that grapples with change while striving to preserve its identity.

## **Background of the Author**

**Ella Cara Deloria (1887–1971) was not only a novelist but also a linguist, ethnographer, and educator. Born in the Dakota Territory, she was deeply rooted in her Native American heritage, which greatly influenced her writing. Deloria's work aims to preserve the stories and traditions of her people, making her one of the most significant figures in Native American literature.**

**– Key Aspects of Deloria's Life:**

- Born to a prominent Sioux family.
- Received her education at the University of South Dakota.
- Actively involved in preserving the Lakota language and culture.
- Worked with anthropologist Franz Boas, contributing to the understanding of Native American traditions.

## Overview of Waterlily

Waterlily is a semi-autobiographical novel that provides an intimate glimpse into the life of a young Dakota woman. The narrative unfolds through the eyes of Waterlily, whose experiences reflect the broader struggles and triumphs of her community. The novel is set during a time of significant transition for Native Americans, facing pressures from colonization and cultural assimilation.

## Plot Summary

The story begins with Waterlily's childhood, where she is raised by her grandmother, who imparts traditional values and teachings. The novel follows her journey as she matures, exploring themes of identity, family, and resilience. Key plot points include:

### 1. Childhood and Education:

- Waterlily's early life is filled with teachings from her grandmother about the natural world and Dakota customs.
- The importance of storytelling as a means of preserving culture is emphasized.

### 2. Adolescence and Relationships:

- Waterlily's relationships with friends and family shape her understanding of her role within the community.

- She navigates the complexities of love and friendships, which are influenced by tribal traditions.

### 3. Cultural Challenges:

- The novel highlights the impact of external forces on Dakota life, including the arrival of settlers and government policies.
- Waterlily grapples with the tension between maintaining her cultural identity and adapting to changing circumstances.

### 4. Maturity and Motherhood:

- As Waterlily grows into adulthood, she faces the responsibilities of motherhood, reflecting the continuity of tradition.
- The significance of women in Dakota society is underscored, showcasing their roles as caregivers and cultural transmitters.

## Thematic Elements

Waterlily is rich with themes that resonate deeply within the context of Native American life. Some of the most prominent themes include:

- **Cultural Identity:**

- The struggle to preserve cultural identity amidst external pressures is a central theme.

- Waterlily's journey reflects the importance of connecting with one's roots and traditions.

- **Women's Strength:**

- The novel highlights the critical role women play in Dakota society.

- Female characters are portrayed as strong, nurturing, and pivotal in maintaining cultural continuity.

- **Nature and Spirituality:**

- Deloria beautifully interweaves the connection between the

**Dakota people and the natural world.**

- Nature is depicted as a source of wisdom and guidance, integral to the characters' lives.**
- Adaptation and Resilience:**
  - The characters' ability to adapt to changing circumstances while remaining resilient is a testament to their strength.**
  - Waterlily embodies the spirit of her people, showcasing both vulnerability and determination.**

## **Literary Significance**

**Waterlily stands out not only as a narrative of a Native American woman's life but also as an important contribution to American literature. Deloria's unique voice and perspective offer readers insights into the complexities of Native identity.**

## **Style and Structure**

**Deloria's writing style in *Waterlily* is characterized by:**

- Descriptive Imagery:**

- Vivid descriptions of the Dakota landscape create a strong sense of place.**

- The natural world is depicted with reverence, enhancing the cultural significance of land.**

- Narrative Technique:**

- The use of a first-person narrative provides an intimate connection to *Waterlily*'s thoughts and emotions.**

- The storytelling approach mirrors traditional oral narratives, emphasizing the importance of storytelling in Dakota culture.**

- Symbolism:**

- Waterlily herself symbolizes beauty, resilience, and the interconnectedness of life.
- The waterlily flower represents purity and the deep-rooted cultural connections of the Dakota people.

### Impact on Native American Literature

Ella Cara Deloria's *Waterlily* has had a lasting impact on Native American literature. It serves as a precursor to many contemporary Native American authors who explore similar themes of identity, culture, and resilience. The novel is often studied in academic settings for its contribution to understanding Native American perspectives.

- Influence on Future Writers:
- Authors like Louise Erdrich and N. Scott Momaday have



drawn inspiration from Deloria's work.

- The focus on women's experiences and cultural preservation continues to resonate in modern Native literature.

- Cultural Preservation:

- Deloria's efforts to document and preserve Dakota culture through her writing have paved the way for future generations to explore their heritage.

- Waterlily acts as a bridge connecting past and present, encouraging readers to appreciate and respect Indigenous cultures.

## Conclusion

Waterlily by Ella Cara Deloria is a profound exploration of a young Dakota woman's life, encapsulating the richness of

Native American culture and the enduring strength of women. Through its engaging storytelling, vivid imagery, and deep thematic elements, the novel not only serves as a reflection of Deloria's own experiences but also as a vital contribution to the broader narrative of American literature. As readers journey through Waterlily's life, they are invited to connect with the beauty, complexity, and resilience of Indigenous identities, ensuring that these stories continue to resonate for generations to come.

## Frequently Asked Questions

What is the main theme of 'Waterlily' by Ella Cara Deloria?

The main theme of 'Waterlily' revolves around the importance of tradition, cultural identity, and the interconnectedness of community among the Dakota Sioux people.

Who is the protagonist in 'Waterlily' and what is her significance?

The protagonist, Waterlily, represents the resilience and strength of Native women, embodying the values and teachings of her community as she navigates her life and relationships.

How does Ella Cara Deloria incorporate Dakota culture into 'Waterlily'?

Deloria incorporates Dakota culture through detailed descriptions of customs, beliefs, and practices, as well as through the use of Dakota language, which enriches the narrative and provides authenticity.

What narrative style is used in 'Waterlily'?

Ella Cara Deloria employs a first-person narrative style in 'Waterlily', allowing readers to experience the protagonist's

thoughts and emotions intimately while providing a personal perspective on Dakota life.

What role does storytelling play in 'Waterlily'?

Storytelling serves as a crucial element in 'Waterlily', functioning as a means of preserving history, passing down wisdom, and reinforcing cultural values within the Dakota community.

What challenges does Waterlily face in the novel?

Waterlily faces various challenges including navigating personal relationships, cultural expectations, and the impact of external forces on her community, all of which test her resilience and identity.

How does 'Waterlily' address the theme of gender roles?

The novel addresses gender roles by highlighting the strengths and responsibilities of women in Dakota society, showcasing their influence in family and community dynamics while also challenging traditional gender expectations.

What impact did 'Waterlily' have on Native American literature?

'Waterlily' is considered a significant contribution to Native American literature, as it provides an authentic representation of Dakota culture and serves as a voice for Indigenous experiences, inspiring future generations of Native writers.

In what ways is 'Waterlily' considered a coming-of-age story?

The novel is considered a coming-of-age story as it follows Waterlily's journey from childhood to adulthood, exploring her

personal growth, self-discovery, and the lessons she learns about love, family, and her heritage.

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