

Love is a choice: a
theme essay on
louise edrich's love
medicine



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In Louise Erdich's *Love Medicine*, we are introduced to the protagonist, Lipsha, who has great love and respect for his grandparents who raised him. Interwoven throughout the story, we witness the complicated history and dynamic of his grandparents' marriage. It is through this relationship that the main theme of the story emerges. Louise Erdich's *Love Medicine* shows us that love is ultimately a commitment that requires hard work and persistent effort that cannot be demanded, forced, or bestowed upon someone.

As the story opens, we learn that Lipsha's grandpa suffers from a dementia-type illness, which has caused him to revert to some of his old ways, such as his affair with an old lover named Lulu. Interestingly, rather than justifying the affair with the fact that his grandpa is ill, Lipsha describes it as if he is falling back into an existing weakness: "You know, some people fall right through the hole in their lives. It's invisible, but they come to it after time, never knowing where. There is this woman here, Lulu Lamartine, who always had a thing for Grandpa. She loved him since she was a girl and always says he was a genius" (281). Rather than excuse his grandfather's behavior to him not being in his right mind, Lipsha believes that the part of him that "is all there" is what is causing the affair. "Now what was mostly our problem was not so much that he was not all there, but that what was there of him often hankered after Lamartine" (286). From early on in the story, it is established that Lipsha's grandpa is not fully committed to his wife.

As the story continues, we are introduced to the contrasting concern and love that Lipsha's grandma has for her husband. "While he started getting toward second childhood he went through different moods. . . It scared me, it scared everyone, Grandma worst of all" (281). Grandma Kashpaw knows

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about the affair, and because of her love for her husband, is deeply hurt by it. He, however, is not able to love her this same way in return. “ She loved him. She was jealous. She mourned him like the dead. And he just smiled into the air, trapped in the seams of his mind” (282). Lipsha marvels over this love that he witnesses his grandma have for his grandpa, longing to have such a love for himself one day. “ I could see her point for wanting him back the way he was so at least she could argue with him, sleep with him, not be shamed out by Lamartine. She’d always love him. That hit me like a ton of bricks. . . I never loved like that. It made me feel all inspired to see them fight, and I wanted to go out and find a woman who I would love until one of us died or went crazy” (283). The contrast of the unconditional love of Grandma Kashpaw with that of her apathetic and unfaithful husband is what sets up the main theme of the story.

Lipsha’s idealized, faultless perception of love, likely similar to the perceptions of many readers such as ourselves, is shattered as he observes his grandparents’ marriage. He learns that love is not something that one can simply become good at over time, or something that requires less effort the longer you have experienced it. “ I saw that tears were in her eyes. And that’s when I saw how much grief and love she felt for him. And it gave me a real shock to the system. You see I thought love got easier over the years so it didn’t hurt so bad when it hurt, or feel so good when it felt good. I thought it smoothed out and old people hardly noticed it. I thought it curled up and died, I guess. Now I saw it rear up like a whip and lash” (282). Love is painful and difficult, no matter how long you’ve been at it. As he continues to reflect, Lipsha talks about how love is based on so much more than just emotion—it

requires commitment. Though he does not quite yet understand it, Lipsha describes this phenomenon as “staying power.” “. . . you need that, staying power, going out to love somebody. I knew that quality was not going to jump on me with no effort” (283). He wrestles with the fact that his grandfather does not possess this “staying power,” and ponders over how one can acquire it. Perhaps, he considers, this “staying power” is simply bestowed upon someone, like a “kind of magic”. “For what could I snap my fingers at to make him faithful to Grandma? Like the quality of staying power, this faithfulness was invisible. I know it’s something you got to acquire, but I never known where from. Maybe there’s no rhyme or reason to it, like my getting the touch, and then again maybe it’s a kind of magic” (286). It is evident that though Grandma Kashpaw is fully devoted to her husband, he is not able to return the same love. Desperate to repair this broken relationship, both Lipsha and Grandma Kashpaw go to extreme lengths to seek a “kind of magic” in hopes that it will help Grandpa Kashpaw to acquire this “staying power.”

In their desperation, Lipsha and his grandmother decide to use a “love medicine” to make Grandpa Kashpaw show commitment to his wife. Because he is not willing to display such love to his wife on his own accord, Lipsha “took powers in [his] own hands” and “did what [he] could” (287). He decides to feed his grandparents the hearts of a pair of geese, since geese mate for life. Amusingly, he lacks the skills to shoot the geese himself, and instead settles for frozen turkey hearts which he takes to the church to be blessed with holy water. He figures that this shortcut will still achieve the same effect. At the climax of the story, the author brilliantly juxtaposes the

reactions of Lipsha's two grandparents to the turkey hearts as a way of contrasting their love and commitment.

As Lipsha brings home the hearts, his grandma sits down and quickly and enthusiastically eats hers without question. In fact, she even insists on eating it raw, in hopes that it would work more effectively. " I unwrapped them hearts on the table, and her heard agate eyes went soft. She said she wasn't even going to cook those hearts up but eat them raw so their power would go down strong as possible. I couldn't hardly watch when she munched hers. Now that's true love" (292). While Grandma Kashpaw was eager to finish her raw turkey heart without a single complaint, Grandpa Kashpaw reacted quite the opposite. " I saw grandpa picking at that heart on his plate with a certain look. He didn't look appetized at all, is what I'm saying. I doubted our plan was going to work" (292). This heart, believed to be a magic cure to make him fall in love with his wife again, was in no way alluring to him. His wife pleads with him to eat it, urging him to " swallow it down" and he'll " hardly notice it" (292). Though Grandma Kashpaw downed her own turkey heart unseasoned and without garnish, she tries her best to make her husband's appealing to him by putting the heart " smack on a piece of lettuce like in a restaurant and then attached to it a little heap of boiled peas" (292). She refers to it as " fresh grade-A" and even offers to salt it for him: "' not tasty enough? You want me to salt it for you?' she waved the shaker over his plate" (292). Despite his wife's pleas, Grandpa Kashpaw still has no interest in eating the heart. "' What you want me to eat this for so bad?' he asked her uncannily. . . he put his fork down. He rolled the heart around his saucer plate. ' I don't want to eat this,' he said to Grandma. ' It don't look good'

(292). No matter how much Grandma Kashpaw pleads with him, he is unwilling to give it a try. Ultimately, it is his decision alone.

As Grandma Kashpaw practically begs her husband to eat the heart, he responds by mocking her, putting the heart in his mouth but not swallowing. "First he rolled it into one side of his cheek. 'Mmmmm' he said. Then he rolled it into the other side of his cheek. 'Mmmmmmm,' again. Then he stuck his tongue out with the heart on it once to far" (293). Overcome with frustration and anger with her husband's unwillingness to eat the heart (and ultimately, to love her), she hits him in attempt to force him to swallow. She is unsuccessful, however, and he chokes. Grandpa Kashpaw could not be forced to love his wife in the way that she so desired. While his grandma was willing to fight for their love at all costs, Lipsha observes that even while choking, his grandpa has no desire to do so. ". . . he wasn't choking on the heart alone. There was more to it than that. It was other things that choked him as well. It didn't seem like he wanted to struggle or fight" (293). To Lipsha and his grandmother's despair, as they try to force the heart down Grandpa Kashpaw's throat, they discover that love cannot be forced upon someone else. Love is a gift that cannot be demanded nor manipulated. It is a continual choice that requires commitment, hard work, and persistent effort.

At the end of the story, Lipsha comes to the realization that there is indeed nothing magical about love. Love can only be found in the human heart, not that of a goose or a turkey. "Love medicine ain't what brings him back to you, Gradma. No it's something else. He loved you over time and distance. . .

It's true feeling, not no magic. No supermarket heart could have brung him
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back" (297). This "staying power" that he had marveled over is to love someone "over time and distance," to remain committed to them even when times get hard. However, this kind of love and commitment takes time and devotion, cannot be achieved by shortcuts, and can only happen by way of an individual's personal resolve to love. Perhaps if given more time, Grandpa Kashpaw would have one day been able to return his wife's unconditional love, upon his own accord. It takes an act of death for Lipsha and his grandmother to realize that love is not easy and cannot be simply bestowed upon someone, as if by magic, or shoved down someone's throat. They learn that love is a choice, and thus cannot be forced upon someone against their will. Readers of *Love Medicine* from all backgrounds and walks of life can learn from this story that it is a privilege to be loved, but to love another wholly is a choice that takes time, effort, and hard work.