

# “the red convertible” a formalist criticism

[War](#), [Cold War](#)



"The Red Convertible" a Formalist Criticism While reading the story The Red Convertible of the series Love Medicine, the author Louise Erdrich portrays two Indian brothers and their connection to a red convertible. Far more than being a shiny car, the red old convertible portrays many meanings through the cultural and is very symbolic. The car carries the audience from its lighthearted and carefree beginning to its movingly tragic end. The red convertible brings together the two brothers in a special relationship in life. The vehicle also corresponds to many of the events of the story. It removes the brothers from their dreary life in the reservation and brings them into a life of peace, quiet, freedom and contentment. The first time the brothers Henry Junior and Lyman saw the car they couldn't believe their eyes. "There it was, parked, large as life. Really as if it was alive. I thought of the word repose, because the car wasn't simply stopped, parked, or whatever. That car reposed, calm and gleaming, a for sale sign in its left front window." (Erdrich 219). It is as if the car has a life of its own which is also paralleled in Henry's life and is also a symbol of the profound relationship between the brothers Lyman and Henry. All throughout the story the car keeps on changing just like Henry's story. At the beginning of the story the vehicle is a symbol of happiness and satisfaction but at the end it becomes a symbol of sadness and tragedy. In Henry's first view of the vehicle it was just like him in harmony with the universe and alive. At the end of the story the high raging waters of the red river are responsible for Henry's death. Henry's last words were "My boots are filling." (Erdrich 226). With help from Lyman the river takes the red convertible too. When he is unable to rescue Henry he drives the convertible to the edge of the river and lets it fall slowly into the

river. Similar to the scenario of when Henry went through the devastating terrors of the Vietnam War he is then overwhelmed by the current of the raging river. The raging current consumes the convertible as it did to Henry. The purchase of the red convertible stands for the piece of the puzzle, which builds up the strong bond of brotherhood between Henry and Lyman. As brothers and co owners of the vehicle they share a common attachment. The car is a symbol not only of Lyman and Henry as a team but also it creates new friendship. “ We went places in that car, me and Henry. We took off driving all one summer. ” (Erdrich 219). The vehicle transports them all over the country, which gives them a great opportunity to develop a strong bond of brotherhood and friendship. The car goes ahead to give the brothers a complete love cycle. Their feelings towards the car are so profound that they give it human characteristics. This makes the car to be like a second brother to them, which makes their bond even stronger. The brother's are aware of the war that can break their bond, which happens when Henry goes to Vietnam. Upon the return of Henry from Vietnam, Lyman has the expectation of continuing their relationship from where they had left off. However, this is not possible, as Henry has been changed by the war. He has become quiet and withdrawn as he feels resentment towards Lyman who did not go to the war. Lyman states in the story “ When he came home, though, Henry was very different, and I'll say this: the change was no good. ” (Erdrich 221). Henry has been changed by the war yet Lyman has remained the same; this is the root of Henry's resentment. Lyman is at peace with life and does not understand the grumpy Henry. He has the desire to have the old peaceful Henry back and this is not possible. The author Erdrich then uses the

symbolic nature of the car to portray the brother's relationship. Lyman resorts to smashing up the car, which formed a very strong bond between him and Henry. He does this in the hope that he will get Henry's attention. Lyman knows how important the vehicle had been to their relationship and expects that by smashing it he would send a message to Henry of their failing relationship. Lyman is ready to do anything even if it entails the destruction of the red convertible, which played a great role in building the brotherhood bond. However, Henry is so withdrawn that it takes him a long time to discover the smashed up convertible. Henry leads himself to believe that the restoration of the red convertible to what it once was would mend their damaged relationship. It doesn't take long for him to realize that his plan won't work. “ He said he knew what I did with the car. It was obvious it had been whacked out of shape and not just neglected. ” (Erdrich 224). He even refuses the car that is offered to him by Lyman. This plan also fails which lead Henry to decide on the last option of suicide. All through this time Lyman still had hope that the bond they had shared could be repaired. It is only with the suicide of Henry that he realizes this can never be and thus he lets go of the car, which was the symbol of that bond. The author Erdrich wants to draw the attention of the reader to the cultural of the color red. The color red is a representation of blood and this is the strongest bond that people usually have. Erdrich describes Henry's nose as sharp as a hatchet and compares it to the nose of a Red Tomahawk. “ He had a nose big and sharp as a hatchet, like the nose on a Red Tomahawk. ” (Erdrich 221) According to the culture of the Chippewa red is a color, which symbolizes communication. The communication between Henry and Lyman was to a

great extent revolving around the red convertible. According to Lyman, Henry had the physique of a brick house with the color red also being associated with bricks. " He was built like a brick outhouse anyway. " (Erdrich 221). Also Henry pertains to the negative perception of the color red to imply blood, danger, aggression and war, which are shown after he gets out of the Vietnam War. The color red is also a color associated to the fires and the explosion of bombs in the war. Upon his return from Vietnam the effects of the war are visible on him through his deep trauma and his aggression towards Lyman. He even at times bit through his lip and yet does not notice that he is eating food that is mixed with his blood. " I looked over, and he'd had bitten through his lip. Blood was going down his chin. " (Erdrich 222) The association of red with Henry becomes a cycle when he gives the suggestion of going to Pembina and the Red River in order to see the high water. They go to the Red River in the red convertible where Henry is swept away by the river's strong current. Upon the realization of Henry's death, Lyman pushes the red convertible into the river after him. In the mind of Lyman, Henry and the car were on empty and without Henry's possession of the vehicle it would be meaningless. Henry meets Susy during their trip to the Blood reserve and she goes on to affect him in great way by increasing his free spirited nature. Henry would joke around and have a good time with Susy. Her hair was really long so Henry thought it would be funny to have her go on his shoulders to see how long it really was. " I always wondered what it was like to have long pretty hair, Henry says. " (Erdrich 220). When the two brothers take the convertible for one last spin to the red rock it is significant in that it marks the end of the free carefree days. The

red convertible provides the story's connection and rising action, which makes it of great significance. The relationship of the two brothers revolves around the red convertible. The red convertible is the bond, which allows the two brothers relationship to continue. At the beginning of the story the car is a symbol of youth, adventure and the chance given to the siblings to get out of the borders of the reservation and explore the world. They loved traveling the open road and meeting new people especially when they got to Alaska. "We got up there and never wanted to leave." (Erdrich 220). They loved traveling the open road meeting new people especially when they got to Alaska. The red convertible goes full cycle from taking the two brothers out of the reservation into taking them back to face war and its effects upon their relationship. Midpoint through the story, the car plays a central role in keeping Lyman in touch with Henry when he is fighting the Vietnam War. "I wrote him back several times, even though I didn't know if those letters would get through. I kept him informed all about the car." (Erdrich 221). The end of the story again involves the vehicle, which transports them to the place of saying goodbye. The car is strongly a symbol of Lyman's love for Henry. Not only that but, there are changes that occur in the relationship of the two brothers through time and experiences. All through the unfolding of the story, the state of the car is a parallel to the emotional state of Henry. Lyman has always kept the vehicle in immaculate condition while Henry was at war. When he learns of Henry's return he intentionally does damage to the car in the hope that Henry would have the desire to repair it and therefore himself. "One night Henry was off somewhere. I took myself a hammer. I went out to the car and I did a number on its underside. Whacked it up."

(Erdrich 222). The damaged vehicle is a symbol of the relationship of the two brothers, which just like the red convertible has been damaged. This is very hard for Lyman to come to terms with, as while the damaged red convertible can be repaired the emotional distress of the Vietnam War upon Henry is not reversible. Sadly in spite of the heroic efforts of Lyman, Henry's trauma is too great to be reversed. The strong current of the river robs Lyman of his brother Henry. By instinct, Lyman acknowledges that he must push the red convertible down into the river after Henry. “ I put it in gear and then I take my foot off the clutch. I get out, close the door, and watch it plow softly into the water. ” (Erdrich 226). The river's strong currents will continue to rage on just like the love that Lyman feels for Henry will continue to burn in his heart even after his death. The red convertible remains the central tool of the two brothers friendship and brotherhood. It is also the thing that tears them apart. It represents the first piece of the puzzle and also the last one. The red convertible and the war are responsible for the start and the end of the relationship of the two siblings. The red convertible is used symbolically by Erdrich to show how something so insignificant by ordinary people may be so important to two people. The red convertible stands for the making of a strong relationship of two brothers, which then unfortunately ends in sorrow.