

Alcoholism in love medicine



**ASSIGN
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Jenn Baldwin Alcohol: The Medicine of Love One object that repeatedly appears in the novel, *Love Medicine*, is alcohol. Many of the main characters exhibit traits of and struggle with alcoholism. A majority of the chapters in *Love Medicine* present scenes of characters drinking alcohol, whether it be in casual occasions or in more serious matters. It seems that these Native Americans in the novel treat drinking as a social and cultural activity, at first, but then it turns to an addiction and a serious problem for some of these characters.

This presence of alcohol is an underlying factor that drives these main characters' actions and ultimately determines the plot of the novel. I believe that the drive of alcohol and drunkenness leads characters to make decisions about love and this can be related to the title, *Love Medicine*. The opening scene presents June, who is at a bar getting drunk with a "male friend." She is only interested in the man because she believes that he is somewhat rich.

As she becomes more intoxicated she warms up to the man and eventually has sex with him in his car. It is clear that an "attraction" does not lead June to engage in sexual relations with this stranger man, but instead her actions are influenced by the alcohol. The emotion of love is clearly lacking from this scene and the alcohol, which acts as a "love medicine," fixes the flaw and enables June to partake in this "act of love." However, while intoxicated she begins a long walk back to the reservation, a walk which ends her life.

The intoxication led to June to make the decision of walking; therefore the alcohol takes the lead in the plot and determines the outcome of June's life. This example, at the very beginning of the novel, shows the reader how

important of a role alcohol will play throughout the rest of the story. In the same chapter, the family uses alcohol as a crutch to cope with June's death. King gets drunk in order to mask the pain he felt after his mother's death and then uses this pain to beat his wife, Lynette.

Later on, Gordie, a recovering alcoholic, returns to his drunkenness to deal with the death of June, who was the love of his life. He loses his way and, as can be seen in "Crown of Thorns," goes crazy. Both remaining members of June's small family exhibit alcoholic traits and drunkenness as a result of her death. To me, it seems ironic that the true reason for June's death becomes the demise of the rest of her family after her death. I think that both loved June so much that there was no other way to cure their loss.

In this way, alcohol functions as a "love medicine" differently because it is used to make King and Gordie feel better. Again, alcohol plays a huge role in the plot of the Kashpaw family and acts as a link between June, Gordie and King. Other characters abuse alcohol in other parts of the story. Nector Kashpaw, patriarch of the Kashpaw dynasty, uses alcohol to survive his marriage to Marie. This time, the alcohol is used to help cope with the lack of love Nector felt for Marie. Also, Henry Jr. son of Lulu Lamartine, abuses alcohol after his service in the Vietnam war. It aids in his relations with Albertine Johnson and plays the role of "love medicine" by being the drive behind their sexual relations. I believe that the reoccurring role of alcohol in Love Medicine displays the reasoning behind Erdrich's choice of title. It seems that the "love medicine" IS alcohol because it plays a huge role in many of the novel's important relationships. Without the presence of alcohol and drunkenness, the plot of the story could be quite different.