

Between two worlds: author's craft in love medicine



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Often in literature, central themes are based around two or more opposing forces. Whether it be religion, socioeconomic class, or race, conflicts allow the author to challenge the audience's beliefs and societal expectations of the past and present. This aspect of creativity is especially apparent in Louise Erdrich's novel *Love Medicine*. As a biracial author, Erdrich has lived her entire life as a member of the two unique communities from which her parents came. She shares with the world some of the trials and tribulations she has and continues to endure as a mixed person in modern America throughout her novel. This story of two Native American families, the Kashpaws and the Lamartines, incorporates facets from both Western and Native American lifestyles as Erdrich blends together a community of multicultural people searching for authenticity. Throughout *Love Medicine*, Erdrich borrows from her own mixed identity in order to cast the modernized Western aspects against the more indigenous ones of multicultural heritages of millions of people around the world.

Erdrich pointedly critiques Western culture as she compares Native American "Love Medicine" to more modern medical practices (Erdrich 227). After undergoing a medical procedure that is intended to correct her partial blindness, Lulu Lamartine is subjected to the painful and restrictive side effects of Western medicine. Lulu complains frequently that "The operation had my eyes so dried out," that she was unable to properly "mourn the death...of a true love," (Erdrich 291-292). The side effects of her modern procedure not only hindered her ability to cope and heal spiritually with a traumatizing event in her life, but they also prohibited her from ever "... stooping down, screaming, or jiggling again because the stitching in my eye

might slip" (Erdrich 292). Lulu is severely limited by an operation that was intended to improve her life, a flaw of modern Western medical practices that Erdrich highlights as she compares Lulu's painful, complicated procedure to Ojibwe "Love Medicine" (Erdrich 227). Granted "the touch", commonly referred to as "Love Medicine", Lipsha Morrissey "...knew the tricks of the mind and body inside out without ever having trained for it, because...the touch... I got secrets in my hands... Take Grandma Kashpaw with her tired veins all knotted up in her legs like clumps of blue snails. I take my fingers and I snap them on the knots. The medicine flows out of me. The touch. I run my fingers very gentle above their hearts or I make a circling motion on their stomachs, and it helps them. They feel much better." (Erdrich 227) Unlike Lulu's surgery, Lipsha's healing methods are noninvasive, natural procedures that cause no uncomfortable side effects. The results are instant, and his skill requires no training.

Through the comparison between Lulu's Western optical surgery and Lipsha's "Love Medicine," Erdrich is addressing the potential danger and harm associated with modern medicine. This aspect of the narrative is in connection with Erdrich's personal struggles. After marrying and having children with Michael Dorris, a man suffering from severe depression, Erdrich decided to send her children a therapist in hopes of helping them deal with their own struggles. After their visits with their psychologist, allegations of sexual assault and abuse "...began. That therapist contacted the authorities, stating she suspected child abuse. Charges were filed against Dorris, and eventually dropped after an investigation... but the allegations... permanently damaged Dorris further...he would later commit suicide"

(Luzajic 1). Erdrich brought Western psychology into her family to improve strained conditions, but it ended up only furthering the damage. Erdrich was also deeply impacted by the death of one of her adopted children, when “ he was hit by a car,” and died, and the effects of fetal alcohol syndrome, a disease that afflicted all of her adopted children. American doctors were not able to save and cure her children, causing Erdrich great distress. Her distrust of modern medicine, stemming from her personal struggles, are portrayed through Lulu Lamartine and Lipsha Morrissey.

Erdrich then explores the contrasts between Catholicism and traditional Chippewa religion. She presents young Marie Lazarre, a mixed Caucasian and Native American girl who harbors a deep desire to become a nun. Marie strives tirelessly for the Catholic title, and “ No reservation girl had ever prayed so hard” as she (Erdrich 43). Marie finds herself one day at the local convent, where she is mentored by a nun named Sister Leopolda. Sister Leopolda “...was different...” from many of the other nuns, she “...kept track of the devil and knew his habits, minds he burrowed in, deep spaces where he hid,” (Erdrich 45). Extremely devoted to her religion, Sister Leopolda takes Catholicism very seriously. She is so fixated with purging the Devil from Sacred Heart Convent that she resorts to beating and punishing children within whom she believes the devil to be dwelling. She “...used this deadly hook-pole for catching Satan by surprise. He could have entered without your knowing it...but she would see him. That pole would brain you from behind...she offered pain...” (Erdrich 46). As a “ light skinned” Native American, Marie Lazarre is fascinated by both side of her bicultural heritage, and is curious about the religious opportunities each has to offer (Erdrich

40). After she visits Sister Leopolda, however, Marie realizes how sadistic the nun is, and decides to flee the convent—thus abandoning organized Catholicism forever. This is not unlike Erdrich herself, who “ was once religious...at the age of magical thinking... After I went to school and started catechism I realized that religion was about rules. It all seemed so dull...I've come to love the traditional Ojibwe ceremonies...” (Halliday 1). This parallelism between Marie and Erdrich serves as a statement by the author, as she points out that Western religion is exorbitantly regulated and structured. By portraying Sister Leopolda and the Sacred Heart Convent as oppressive and abusive, Erdrich critiques the heavily mandated expectations of many Western Catholics; and as Marie hastily flees the convent in search of a more traditional Native American lifestyle, the author is exhibiting the desire for within all people to express their spirituality freely.

This parallelism continues as Erdrich traces Marie's actions in connection to her religion throughout the rest of her life. Although she denounced Catholicism, an act that Sister Leopolda claimed would “...damn...the soul eternally!”, Marie matured into a responsible, respectful adult (Erdrich 40-42). She “...had taken in...babies...cared for everyone she met...raised her own children...married Nector...protected those she loved...” (Erdrich 120-123). Even a life without religion, Marie manages to embody a saintly entity for which many search for through worship— just as Erdrich leads a successful life without prayer. This is in direct contrast with Sister Leopolda, who, after a life of strict devotion, has “...shriveled to bones...her hair was white...thin from her skull...she was frail and dead as a plant...wrapped in dust...she cursed at me...” (Erdrich 148-149). The juxtaposition of these two characters

serves to highlight Erdrich's belief that Western religion is deadly and corrosive to the spirit, mind, and body. Although she achieved one of the most honorable titles in the Catholic religion, Sister Leopolda—once a formidable nun—is now nothing but a decaying old woman. Her religion failed to glorify her, even after she committed her entire life to her God. Erdrich utilizes the duality between the two prevalent religions in European-Native American culture to exhibit the dangers of oppressive, Western religious values.

Erdrich again challenges Western values as she compares American and Ojibwe educations. She shows the contrasts between the two through Eli and Nector Kashpaw, twin Native American brothers. Eli and Nector both received an education, but "...the government put Nector in school...Eli hidden in the root cellar...Nector came home from boarding school knowing white reading and writing, while Eli knew the woods" (Erdrich 19). Eli's knowledge was based more on more traditional Native American values, while Nector's was formulated by the Western government. When he comes back from school, Nector is praised by his community, said to be "...an astute political dealer," on account of his "legitimate" education (Erdrich 18-19). Although he was given a modern, Americanized education, Nector slowly begins "...remembering dates with no events to go with them, names without faces, things that happened out of place and time," while "Eli was still sharp" (Erdrich 19). Through displaying the long-term results of the two contrasting forms of education—Western and Native American—Erdrich is commenting on the shallowness and superficiality behind modernized schooling.

Similarities between the educational contrasts in *Love Medicine* is apparent in Erdrich's life as well. In an interview for *The Paris Review*, she reveals information about her grandfather "...Patrick Gourneau. An Ojibwe man. He had only an eighth-grade education, but he was a fascinating storyteller, wrote in exquisite script, and was the tribal chairman during the treacherous fifties termination era (when the U. S. Congress decided to abrogate all Indian treaties and declare Indian Nations nonexistent). My grandfather was a persuasive man who made friends with people at every level of influence. In order to fight against our tribe's termination, he went to newspapers and politicians and urged them to advocate for our tribe in Washington."

(Halliday 1). Although neither Eli nor Patrick Gourneau received an extensive, formal education, they are successful men who lead fulfilling lives. Nector may have attended a renowned government institution, but even he admits that "Eli has second sense and an aim even I cannot match..." (Erdrich 61). Ojibwe wisdom cannot be indoctrinated by a state school, and even after many years, Eli's mind is well equipped with the knowledge he needs to lead a successful life—while Nector's government-mandated brainwashing has left his mind in tatters, as he stumbles through a life for which his education has left him ill prepared.

Although she was raised around both modern American and Ojibwe customs, biracial author Louise Erdrich finds authenticity within her Native American heritage. It is through her comparisons of these two cultures that her audience is able to appreciate the immeasurable value of understanding one's origins, as they play a significant role in shaping one's life. Erdrich borrows from her own biracial background as she compares and contrasts

the two unique communities in which she grew up in order to critique Western religion, education, and medicine in her novel *Love Medicine*.