

# Louise erdrich's love medicine. a study in contemporary fiction

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Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction Vol. 31 #1 Louise Erdrich's Love medicine: Loving Over Time and Distance Louise Flavin Many Native American novels deal with specific Indian American issues, such as reservation life and the problems of relocation and termination. Often, the conflict in the novel arises out of the native American concern for connectedness with the land and the interrelatedness of all life. When the Indian American moves off the reservation and begins life in a culture essentially different from his own, the results can be disastrous.

The typical native American story has a "homing" plot. In these stories, the hero finds fulfillment, personal growth, and value in returning home, in finding himself in his cultural past among his own people. "To Indians tribe means family, not just bloodlines but extended family, clan, community, ceremonial exchanges with nature, and an animate regard for all creation as sensible and powerful." Louise Erdrich's Love Medicine, looks at Indian American reservation life in a less optimistic light. In this novel, the returning Indian finds that the tribe has disintegrated, the past has been forgotten, and the reservation lands no longer support a livelihood. Leaving home is the road to fulfillment.

The story is at the same time one of disintegration and breaking connections, and of bonding and restoration. Presenting the story from so many different points of view suggests not tribal or family unity, but separation and difference. At the same time, the points of view are unified around the subject of one family. This accentuates the theme of the breakdown of relationships, while showing the unique tie the family and

reservation life have for these people. The novel has no central conflict or protagonist. Instead of a clearly defined conflict, the novel portrays a variety of characters attempting to love and survive in a world where G-d and the government seem to have forsaken them. Left to their own devices, many of them - especially the men - flounder. While the men in the novel accept inevitable doom in their lives, the women approach the same reservation world with a different outlook. The novel is clearly feminist in its depiction of two strong women who raise families in adverse situations and, in the end, bond with each other after their children are raised and the man that they both had loved has died. Marie and Lulu not only survive, but look back on their lives with satisfaction, having endured without the support of a strong male figure or the help of G-d or the government.

One of the survivors of reservation life is Lipsha Morrissey, abandoned by his mother June and raised by "Grandma" Kapshaw. Lipsha narrates two central chapters - one gives the novel its title, and the other ends the book as a link to the opening chapter and the death of June. Lipsha recognizes that life on the reservation is bleak, more so than ever before. He bemoans the loss of faith in the Chippewa gods and the inefficacy of praying to the Catholic god, who does not seem to hear. The absence of an attentive god is part of the problem of the Indian Americans. In the absence of a god, Lipsha attempts to help his family and friends by restoring the primitive art of witch doctoring. He believes himself to have healing powers, which he calls "the touch." he attempts to heal the rift between his grandparents by having them eat the raw heart of a wild goose. Since wild geese mate for life, Lipsha believes that

eating the goose heart will lessen the separation that has developed between his grandparents over Nector's affair with Lulu. His attempt to work love medicine is made comic when he fails to shoot a wild goose and resorts to using a frozen supermarket turkey heart. The final deflation occurs when old Nector Kapshaw chokes and dies trying to swallow the heart. Instead of the "healing touch", Lipsha works a different kind of "love medicine." His real insight comes from being a man of strong feelings coming from being raised on love.

The story is not one of continuity, relatedness, and harmony with the land and nature, with culture and tradition which are ideas that shape much native American fiction. Instead, Louise Erdrich depicts a cultural milieu where the sacred ceremonies, tribal rituals, and Indian cultural identity have disappeared. The connectedness to the land has disappeared, the means to make a living is gone, and the younger generation must find work off the reservation or stay there and flounder. While the novel is untraditional in many ways, it gives a compassionate humanistic account of the lives of reservation Indians without glorifying their culture yet without demeaning them in their weakness and failure.

Ms. Erdrich is able to present realistically their unique characters and situations, focusing upon the Indian American as a race with definite problems but with the same enduring nature as all Americans. Critique: *Studies in Contemporary Fiction* Vol. 30 #2 The Triumph of the Brave: Love Medicine's Holistic Vision Nora Barry and Mary Prescott Louise Erdrich challenges the romantic vision of native Americans as destined for cultural

oblivion. Her novel celebrates native American survival and credits spiritual values with that survival. Erdrich focuses on the failure of ritual and traditions that divide according to gender. According to Erdrich's holistic vision, survival and continuity depend on a character's ability to internalize both the masculine and the feminine, the past and the present. It is apparent in *Love Medicine* that rituals and traditions that are exclusively male will no longer work. For instance, through King Kapshaw, Henry Lamartine, Jr., and Gordie Kapshaw, Erdrich presents the failure of the warrior tradition.

Marie Kapshaw is one of Erdrich's strongest characters because her life is a blending of two complementary gender-based traditions. Her life includes risks, transformation, householding, and medicine, as well as an integration of past and present. Her participation in womanly ritual is obvious in her willingness to absorb orphan children into her own family. Her role in the novel is most prominent, however, when she is taking risks and drawing upon the past. Marie's vision during her adolescence, incorporating power and compassion, guides her at crucial points for the rest of her life. She practices the compassion that her vision teaches her when she takes in homeless children, most significantly June and Lipsha, and when in her old age she Lulu, her rival, regain her sight. Lulu Lamartine is Marie's powerful counterpart, lifelong rival for the Nector's affection, and, ironically, her companion in old age. Lulu is a worthy adversary because she is effective at complementarity as Marie is. The two characters mirror one another in their role as mother, in their ability to take risks, in their way of blending past and

present, and in their wielding of power in old age. Lulu challenges the tribe when her land is in danger of being sold to a manufacturer of tomahawks, fearing the threat to the old way of life that the factory represents. Lulu alone seems mindful of the conflict between the old values and the influences of the white standard of economic success. June inhabits a netherworld between the masculine and feminine; her life lacks structure because she feels no connection to either tradition, nor can she blend the two. Throughout her life, she wanders into the worlds of masculine and feminine ritual inconsistently. As a child, she participates in masculine ritual with her guardian Eli, wearing a hat just like his and hunting with him. Marie observes June's identification with Eli and traces it back to the incompetence of June's mother, who had completely neglected the child and fostered a mistrust of women. June does not become Eli, however, nor is she ever comfortable with the feminine rituals of wives and mothers. Her marriage with Gordie is on-again-off-again, so she is not always available to her son King. She gives her second son, Lipsha, to Marie to raise, watching him grow only from a distance. Her efforts to succeed in the white world as a beautician, secretary, clerk, and waitress fail, too. It is understandable that June feels dislocated in these traditionally feminine roles. Although she is apparently unaware of it, the chaos in June's life is a result of a fragmented gender identity. Because June tries early to adopt a woodlands tradition that is no longer workable in most cases, she cannot carry into her adult present the life that made her childhood secure. June cannot reconcile her past with her present in life. Only in her death does June finally feel comfortable with her past and her present; she feels secure, solitary, and she has a direction.

Lipsha shows some promise because he has the power to heal. It is apparent in the section "Love Medicine" that Lipsha is not yet a mature caretaker of his power. He dares to try to work the potent love medicine that would revive the passion between Marie and Nector, but when that ancient prescription proves to be difficult to follow, he improvises and bungles. His toying with tradition has serio-comic consequences, when it results in Nector's demise. Lipsha's growth begins after Nector's death, when two old women impel him on his search for his place in the scheme of things. First Lulu offers Lipsha significant information about his heritage and teaches him how to cheat at cards. Then by broadly hinting that Lipsha should help himself to her savings, Marie provides the means for the journey through the trials he needs to overcome if he is to progress. With the help of his trickster father, Lipsha gambles for his just inheritance and wins the car that his half-brother King bought with June's insurance money. Traditionally, the new culture hero returns home with prizes or gains them from the tribe as recognition of his new status. Lipsha's great prize is his awareness of himself, his sense of belonging and of being a real person. His triumph is internal. It consists of being a man who will never be trapped by ritual exclusive to men and who has the capacity of reconciling his present with his past. Erdrich forces the reader to peer into the breach that separates two ways of viewing the world and human experience. Rather than showing readers a civilization in decline, Erdrich offers a vision of a culture that continues to evolve. Even as she posits that the old gender-based rituals of hunter and warrior are no longer fulfilling, she draws upon the rich tradition of folklore and vision to offer characters a promising context for growth. When characters call upon

tradition to guide their lives, they reconcile the distant and recent past with the present. Erdrich places great value in experience with emphasis on rituals and roles that are not gender-based. Characters trapped in or between gender-based roles are unfulfilled. Those who take advantage of the fluidity between past and present and are free enough to incorporate it into their experience rituals complementing the gender-based behavior that is expected of them will survive and even triumph.