

The native american
oral tradition in the
red convertible, a
book by louise erdri...



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

A red convertible has a stigma attached to it as an object of desire. It enhances the image of its owner and the “ red car” carries similar meanings connected with youth, recklessness, passion, luxury and speed. However, the red convertible described in the story “ The Red Convertible” is more family-oriented where the true goal is strengthening the sibling bond. Louise Erdrich came from a large family with many brothers and sisters. She chooses to delve into the history of the Vietnam War and its ravages on the mind and spirit of a Native American young man who entered the war and its negative impact on his brother and their car. The story traces the decline and separation of two heroes, Henry and Leyman, who were celebrated love and life in one period of time. The story brings to the surface Native American oral tradition seen through the eyes of author, brotherhood, the characterization of Leyman and Henry, the irony of the narrative, and self-identity.

In her novel, Louise Erdrich infuses parts of her own biography as one who shared Native American roots, and lived close the Native American Reservations in Minnesota. Erdrich was related to the Chippewa Indians, the same tribe to which her characters belong. Her parents were also instructors of Native American children. The structure of The Red Convertible is a story within a story. Story-telling is a very important tradition for Native Americans who passed down tradition and history during these occasions. “ Erdrich grew up in a family of storytellers and learned very early to thus appreciate the world of possibilities invoked by the storyteller’s voice” (Stookey 1). In this short story, Lyman Lamartine is retelling the biography of the life and love for his brother, Henry. The Chippewa also has connections with the

Anishinaabe Indian peoples. The narrative autobiographic style of the story is essential.

The story is told in the first person therefore the speaker is already well acquainted with the details and has had a firsthand experience with the subject. Leyman injects the story with direct quotations and speech which he remembers, at the same time, he uses prose, using his own words to build the story. The informal speech and the easy language also make known the simplicity of the speaker and the conversational tone he adopts to connect to his target audience. However, the easy and direct language is also deep in matter and subtle since Leyman speaks of a dearly departed brother and a past happier time in history.

The story "The Red Convertible" is rooted in reality, for the events that occur are credible and contain no elements which gloss over, embellish, and decorate the truth. Instead, the ugly face of reality is seen as the story unfurls from a hasty decision to buy a car, an enjoyable summer (which is told in the height of nostalgia), the impact of the Vietnam war, the call for soldiers, and post-traumatic stress, family alienation, change, a tragic accident (or an apparent suicide), and deep bereavement. The truth of the narrative is based on word of mouth; however, one can see that it is no idle tale to entertain the masses. Bitter political criticism bleeds through the story where Lyman would blame the government for letting his brother Henry go out to war and become so terribly damaged psychologically and emotionally such that he is incompetent to deal with his family and the world. Lyman accuses that "the whole war was solved in the government's mind" (Erdrich). The suspicions of the futility of the war and the <https://assignbuster.com/the-native-american-oral-tradition-in-the-red-convertible-a-book-by-louise-erdrich/>

government's underhanded support of the war were not a secret which the American public attacked. Lyman expresses "life on reservation roads, which they always say are like government promises—full of holes. It just about hurt me, I'll tell you that!" (Erdrich). This candid commentary shows Lyman's disillusion with the American government, the injustice and neglect of the Native American population, and the abandonment to reservations.

The theme of identity is central to Native American narratives. "The mythical American success story still examines primarily our deepest identity as individuals using the narrative paradigm" (Reid 65). Lyman mourns the loss of a brother and the loss of the convertible—both entities one and the same. The narrator rejoices in the person his brother was during the glory days of youth. The account is told in memoriam of his brother Henry, who transitions from being a fun-loving, even-tempered young man to a jittery, unstable, and melancholy war veteran. "Henry returns home in The Red Convertible changed from once an easy-going youth to a withdrawn, tense shell of a man" (Beidler 178). The title of the story, The Red Convertible is actually "Henry" since the car becomes almost human and is destroyed when Henry dies. To solidify this point one only has to observe the connections between Henry and the red convertible. The post-war picture of Henry has "shadows on his face (as) deep as holes (Erdrich) and when Lyman vandalizes the car in order to get Henry to repair it, Lyman describes that "it looked worse than any typical Indian car—full of holes" (Erdrich). Hence the brotherly connection between Lyman and Henry becomes transferred to the car. As a war veteran, Henry has been changed to an object riddled with holes, symbolic of the holes a body would suffer because

of bullets. In this case the holes are emotional ones which reveal a broken human spirit. On the other hand at the beginning of the story Lyman's encounter with the red car was like love at first sight, "large as life. Really as if it was alive. That car (was) reposed, calm and gleaming" (Erdrich). This red car was in pristine shape just as Henry was before he entered the war - in perfect condition.

The story has Henry as the victim who suffers and goes under because of intense internal trauma. The narrative reveals, "a legacy of devastation (which) menaces Love Medicine's characters, and some succumb. Henry Junior, for example, epitomizes those Indians ...as suicidal, inarticulate, almost paralyzed in their inability to direct their energies toward resolving what seems to them an insoluble conflict" (Gleason). Henry gives up the fight by plunging in the Red River which reminds the reader of the flow of blood and the color of the car. Not only is Henry a victim but his brother as well for although he has survived his brother's suicide, he is still hurting, "Lyman walks not out of poverty but out of despondency" (Nagel 41). The only difference between Henry and Leyman is that Leyman is able to articulate what he feels and achieves a literary catharsis. Henry is victimized by the war and its horrific scenes forever etched in his memory. He becomes invalid to society and his family, serving as "a prototype of the displaced soldier returning home...the experience of the combat destroys the sense of reality, making it difficult if not impossible to reintegrate himself back into society" (Wong 72). The ties of brotherhood are very affected so that every the relationship which is developed through the car has become shattered.

Despite Lyman's urgings Henry could never socialize or hang around with the family as he used to.

Erdrich portrays Lyman's character as a Native American who is ambitious, lucky, spontaneous, easy-going, selfless, and who greatly loves his brother. The point of focus in Lyman's character is his surrender of the car to Henry who he labels the sole owner ever since he died, " We owned it together until his boots filled with water on a windy night and he bought out my share. Now Henry owns the whole car" (Erdrich). The move from joint ownership to non-ownership is represented by the passage of the book. Lyman's generosity causes the value of the material possession to depreciate while holding in high esteem the worth of his brother Henry and their relationship. What he does when the truth hits home that his brother has died is vital in the Native American tradition where " Lyman's driving the car into the river represents the custom of burying a dead person's private possessions along with him" (Wong 74). Ultimately this act is a rebuttal when the siblings were fighting over who should possess the car. Lyman refuses the car because the prime source of his happiness came from seeing his brother happy, and since his brother has perished, the meaning of the car has sunk into meaninglessness. The next important feature is that Lyman places his brother Henry as the elder of the two at the beginning of the story, although in reality, Lyman is the elder. This age reversal only shows the deference and respect for his brother that Lyman thinks he deserves. Lyman abuses the car terribly in a desperate attempt to recover his brother whom he had lost during the war. As if knowing that death was near, Lyman shakes his brother shouting, " Wake up, Wake up, Wake up...(Henry's) face was totally white and hard

(Erdrich). Lyman's primary role in the story after the war is to initiate the process of resuscitation and recovery since his brother has lost his true self to the Vietnam War. It can be argued that Henry was already dead since what returned after the war was only a shell of the once energetic and light-hearted young man. Lyman tries to salvage what remains of their relationship by going out on a trip with Henry and by giving him the car, in hopes that it would contribute to some meaningful purpose in life.

Lyman's ambition is also a quality which he speaks about with pride. He prefaces the story with the fact that he was the first to ever own a convertible on the Native American reservation. Native Americans are typically poor and insolvent. Lyman reveals this fact since when he was young he was good at earning money. The car is a memorial of his achievement at the restaurant which ended unfortunately by a natural disaster for he spends most of his money on purchasing the car. He makes the boast that " I was the first one to drive a convertible on my reservation" (Erdrich). His business acumen was noticed by those around him. He gives the reader a list of his former jobs shoe-shiner, flower vendor, dishwasher, busboy, cook, assistant manager, manager, co-owner, and owner, a self-made success. The upward social movement and success set Lyman apart from his brother and his native society. The car becomes identified with his success in American society since " the car is very clearly an artifact of the industrial world,...and it signifies that the children of Lulu are moving rapidly in the international world.... the car is an expression of modernity in the white world and an emblem of pride for the boys" (Nagel 42). The poverty of

the Native Americans is clearly outlined in their earlier years. The odd jobs serve to earn income to provide for the needs of the family.

The irony of the story that the very convertible through which Lyman hopes to bond with his brother is the very instrument that precipitates separation and demise. With hopes that the car would help heal Henry and his shattered self, the car becomes one of the main reasons why the brothers disagree. Before Henry leaves for war (as if not expecting to return), Henry gives up his rights to the car and gives Lyman his keys. However, Lyman objects and proposes that he would keep the car safe until his brother returns from the Vietnam War. The ironic and climactic fight near the river is over the issue of ownership of the car which Henry's death ironically solves. Lyman chooses to renounce all right to having another car so that the red convertible becomes the first and last car that he ever owns. Walking from place to place is his preferred way to travel because it would mean replacing his brother somehow.

In conclusion, the story "The Red Convertible" is one which conveys a message of grief, and despair because of unwelcome change. Lyman chooses to continue the memory of his brother Henry, making him come alive in the story. What was once a representative of social triumph becomes an unforgettable and tragic model of an ill-fated brother, unable to come to terms with the cruelty of war and cannot reconcile the civilized, pacific world with the war torn world of the soldiers and veterans.