

# Flow of a river and people on the riverbed



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Louise Erdrich's novel *Love Medicine* conveys the state of Native American life in today's society. Her symbolism stands out to me above all else in the book. While Erdrich uses many symbols and motifs, the most poignant is her water and river imagery and the symbolism behind it. She uses water to symbolize many concepts in the novel, most prominently time and religion. The passage of time being likened to the movement of a river is not an unprecedented idea due to the endless flow of a river being easily equated with time. However, Erdrich points out the destructive force that such a power of nature has and likens the people in her story to stones on a riverbed. Through symbolism, she illustrates the effect time and religion have had on Native American society and how those two concepts, as eroding forces, are simply consequences of modern American society's effect on Native American culture.

The most prominent example of Erdrich's symbolism can be found in Nector Kashpaw's realization and acknowledgement of the passage of time as she illustrates time and its effect on the characters of the novel. In a moment of peace, Nector has a revelation that changes his life. As the world around him stills, Nector sees time rushing past him as he observes, "Time was rushing around me like water... I was not so durable as stones. Very quickly I would be smoothed away" (Erdrich 123). He observes that time is quickly passing by and that he has not been living this life to the fullest. He also knows that time will get the best of him in the end because he is not a sturdy stone able to withstand the flow of time. In an attempt to recapture the time that has gone by, he rekindles his relationship with Lulu, his love during his younger years. He eventually dies as a result of choking in the same way that a

drowning person would perish. As he predicted, time eventually wears away at him until he welcomes death as shown in Lipsha's observation: " It was other things that choked him as well. It didn't seem like he wanted to struggle or fight" (Erdrich 246).

Erdrich uses this same symbolism in Marie's character and her attachment to June's beads. The beads were left by June when she left to live with Eli. She holds onto them in order to retain a piece of June, who in time left her. However, when she is holding the beads, she observes, " I touch them, and every time I do I think of small stones. At the bottom of the lake, rolled aimless by the waves, I think of them polished. To many people it would be kindness. But I see no kindness in how the waves are grinding them smaller and smaller until they finally disappear" (Erdrich 93). The beads are rosary beads that people would keep in their hands. She observes that, like stones, the beads are worn away due to the constant touching. Since rosary beads are a symbol of religion and religious belief is symbolized by people's use of them, Marie is conveying her idea that religion in her society simply wears away at people, just as it did to her at an early age and continues to in her reflections upon Leopolda. On top of Nector's observation that time wears away at people like water wears away at stones, Marie observes that the modern practices of religion do the same in their society.

Lipsha ties the water symbolism together in the last paragraph of the novel. As he goes across the bridge, Lipsha stops the car and observes the river below: " I'd heard that this river was the last of an ancient ocean, miles deep, that once had covered the Dakotas and solved all our problems" (Erdrich 333). In referring to the river as an ocean remnant is a reference to

the characters in the story being the remnants of their Native American ancestors. The river used to be an ocean, which is more stationary and does not constantly run. With the evolution of the still ocean into a rushing river, Lipsha is conveying the idea that modern American society has worn away at their culture and the remnants are now harmful to his people. This erosion has turned time and religion into eroding forces. With this deviation from the traditional Native American culture, the simpler and calmer times of their ancestors have disappeared along with the old beliefs of their people. With his observation that the ocean “solved all our problems,” Lipsha is conveying that these same problems or forces did not plague their ancestors. However, Lipsha realizes that the ocean has withered down to a river that simply erodes. In the same fashion, their way of life has been degraded to something that seems to be destroying people rather than causing them to thrive as they waver between two cultures. For this reason, he moves on and drives to Canada, leaving the reservation as so many had tried to do before. With this ending, Erdrich seems to be conveying the pessimistic belief that Native American culture cannot survive in modern American society.