

ANALYSIS

Love Medicine (1984)



Louise Erdrich

(1954-)

“Erdrich’s first novel, *Love Medicine* (1984), was generously praised in the United States where it won the National Book Critics’ Circle Award for the Best Work for 1984. Abroad, it set a record for advanced sales for foreign rights and was published in ten foreign language editions. The novel is structured as a series of separate narratives—several of which were first published as short stories—spanning a period of fifty years from 1934 to 1984. Set on a North Dakota reservation, the stories focus on relations between three Chippewa families, the Kashpaws and their relations, the Lamartine/Nanapush, and the Morrisey families. The novel opens in 1981 with a young college student’s return to the reservation on the occasion of the death of June Kashpaw. Coming home she sees clearly the pain and devastation the years have wrought on her family, and struggles in her first-person narrative to comprehend what force or attraction in that situation would compel her Aunt June to set out for her home across an empty, snow-covered field on the night she froze to death.

The stories that follow probe the relations between these families and in so doing focus on three major characters Marie Lazzare, a strong-willed woman of great spirit and beauty whose sense of principle is founded on feelings of inadequacy that have bedeviled her all her life. Lulu Lamartine, a woman of passionate intensity, who learned early in her life of the frailty of the flesh and its enormous capacity to heal life’s pain and redeem its guilt; and Nestor Kashpaw, a man of good looks and popular appeal, who is irresistibly drawn to Lulu, but marries Marie (June is her daughter)... We meet Marie Lazzare and come to understand her need for a ‘love medicine,’ a medicine which would create love, a love that would be a medicine.

Most recently, Erdrich has published a second novel, *Beet Queen*, which returns to the upper midwest, but focuses more of its attention on the Euro-American townspeople of the region than on Native Americans. Both novels are marked by a generous, compassionate spirit, a marvelous sense of comic invention, a sometimes acute irony, and a finely honed sense of imagery and style.”

Andrew O. Wiget
The Heath Anthology of American Literature 2
(D.C. Heath 1990) 2180

“The function of its narratological structure, where no single voice or point of view takes hierarchical position over another or dominates another voice in the novel, approximates or embodies the oral tradition and the role of the storyteller in this tradition, a role that pulls together the community.... In *Love Medicine* the Native protagonists have gained experience of various kinds and are now returning home.... ‘Home’ is the last word in the first and last sentence of *Love Medicine*. The journey of a Native protagonist is not, as St. John de Crèvecoeur wrote of Americans, the journey of one who leaves the old to take the new, but the reverse. The process of ‘homing in’ involves realignment with the traditional Native world. It also involves the immersion of readers who are unfamiliar with Native culture... Readers share the experience of being brought into a new home, of learning family stories.... Alcoholism, sexual promiscuity, death, guilt, rage, poverty—these causes of suffering are depicted throughout the novel, and readers often find themselves meditating between violence and humor....

Oral tradition generally refers to how familiar narratives and the spoken language manifest themselves in a written form through a narrator’s voice, wordplay, and gaps in the plot—resulting in a mutual creation that takes place between the teller and the audience.... The most apparent manifestation of the oral tradition is [are] the episodic plot structure and the various speakers. Paula Gunn Allen suggests that ‘traditional tribal narratives possess a circular structure, incorporating event within event, piling meaning upon meaning, until the accretion finally results in a story.’ The episodic plot is less important than the effect of multiple voices. Being told a story allows the listener to participate as a member of a group.... Of the eighteen narratives in the novel, all but five are told in the first person, and the reader shares in the intimacy of being told an event directly by the teller... The accomplishment of this novel is that it reinvents an oral storytelling tradition, presenting a tribal perspective. The effect is not divisive, nor does it alienate a non-Native reader. It makes the reader the mediator who unites the community. The oral tradition is apparent in the novel through its structure and the demands put upon the reader.... Those chapters in the novel written in the third person...emphasize the alienation of the protagonists from the values of the Native community....

The narration stresses how awkward Beverly feels on the reservation and how far removed he is from his community. Looking at Lulu’s boys, he notes, ‘Clearly they were of one soul. Handsome, rangy, wildly various, they were bound in total loyalty, not by oath but by the simple unquestioning belongingness of part of one organism.’ In contrast, Beverly feels he is not part of any group.... Although it is impossible to create an oral story for a reader, Erdrich comes close, by having narrators from five families—Nanapush, Lamatine, Lazarre, Morrissey, and Kashpaw—and a time frame that spans the years from 1934 to 1984, although not in a straightforward, sequential order. The reader is asked to integrate the different voices and the stories told by numerous characters and to draw the significance out of these stories... ‘And here is where events loop around and tangle.’ Nector’s circular, intertwining metaphor illustrates Erdrich’s narratological frame for the novel and exemplifies the oral tradition....The accomplishment of the narrative is that it represents an oral storytelling tradition that focuses not on the individual tellers but on the tribal perspective.... The narrative is medicinal, creating community for the listening readers.”

Paul Lumsden

“Tribal Perspectives in *Love Medicine*”

Approaches to Teaching the Works of Louise Erdrich

eds. Greg Sarris, Connie A. Jacobs, and James R. Giles

(MLA 2004) 114-17

“The *Love Medicine* portraits of Lulu, Gerry, and Lipsha reveal that they have...inherited [the] Pillager gifts. Lulu knows people’s secrets without being told, as if, Lipsha tells us, she had ‘some kind of power.’ Gerry is, of all Lulu’s sons, the one who most fully inherits the Pillager traits, seen particularly in his uncanny ability to escape from prison. In his escapes, Gerry is described as ‘eellike’ or ‘like a fat rabbit disappearing down a hole,’ descriptions suggesting the shape-changing attributes of his namesake, the Ojibwe trickster, Nanabozho. In Gerry’s son Lipsha, this Pillager power takes the form of Lipsha’s healing ‘touch.’ Gerry and Lipsha also share another form of the Pillager ‘touch,’ inherited through Fleur and Lulu—clever Pillager fingers, adept at ‘understanding’ a deck of cards.

Another family system represents particularly well both the persistent power of family character and the freedom of individuals to rewrite their family story. This is the heritage of control and socio-religious ambition that is passed down through three generations of Puyat women—Pauline Puyat; her daughter Marie Lazarre; and her granddaughter Zelda Kashpaw. The portrait of Pauline in *Tracks* reveals traits remarkably similar to those of the young Marie in *Love Medicine*, even though Marie grows up not knowing her mother's identity. Both women are members of less-respected, even despised, reservation families. Both want to rise socially through contact with the white world, specifically by becoming ultrapious nuns. Pauline flagellates herself with extreme penances in order to be a 'martyr' elevated above the common lot, and a decade and a half later, Marie longs to be 'a saint' to whom the other nuns must kneel. Furthermore, just as Pauline, as Sister Leopolda, is obsessed with controlling the young Marie, Marie controls her husband, Nector, determined to make him into something big on the reservation.

This mother and daughter, in turn, bequeath their ambition and their instinct for control to Marie's daughter Zelda. Zelda's social ambitions are reflected first in her own thoughts of becoming a nun and then in her rejecting the love of an Indian suitor in favor of successive white husbands. In the opening story of *Love Medicine*, Zelda's controlling nature is evident in her relationships with her sister and daughter. But *The Bingo Palace* most fully develops the portrait of Zelda as an inheritor of her grandmother's obsessive desire to control others 'for [their] own good.' What Lipsha Morrissey says about Zelda in the novel—'I remember to fear her pity, her helping ways'—Marie might easily have said of Leopolda, who 'helps' her daughter by scalding and stabbing her.

And yet, as this female Puyat heritage makes clear, in Erdrich's fiction family character is not absolute fate. In fact, the similarities between Marie and her mother highlight their differences. Marie's pathological family heritage makes it all the more remarkable that she develops into the nurturing mother we see in the later *Love Medicine* stories, a woman who provides for both her own children and countless 'took-ins' the stability she herself had lacked as a child. Ultimately, Marie takes a route to sainthood opposite that of her mother, nurturing rather than annihilating her humanity.

Near the end of *Love Medicine*, Lyman Lamartine, son of Marie's husband and her rival, has an epiphany of Marie as both saint and mother, with eyes like those of 'a saint carved into the wood of a broad wall' and hair standing out on each side 'white and winged.' Even the iron-hearted Zelda, we discover at the end of *The Bingo Palace*, ultimately finds the power to alter her grandmother's destructive heritage of obsessive ambition and control. After a lifetime of freezing out love for fear of losing control like her father, one night, imagining herself to be dying, Zelda is seized by the realization that she is 'sorrer for the things she had not done'—for *not* relinquishing control—'than for the things that she had.' She sees that the ever-chaotic emotion of love, like the fire in her father's pipe, is the element connecting heaven and earth.

Not only do individuals in Erdrich's fiction alter inherited family traits through their acts of will and moments of sudden insight, but the blending of multiple families in the heritage of certain characters facilitates their ability to rewrite their prevailing family story. Although a number of Erdrich's characters are points of intersection among different families, the most prominent 'hinge of bloods,' as Lyman Lamartine calls him, is Lipsha Morrissey. From his mother's side of the family, Lipsha has inherited the blood of the 'dirty' Lazarres and 'no-good' Morrisseys—a heritage that has destroyed his mother, June Morrissey. In his initial narration in *Love Medicine*, Lipsha represents himself as a typical Morrissey, a no-account, and Marie at times concurs, calling him 'the biggest waste on the reservation.' Yet Lipsha's character is redeemed from the fate of being a no-good Morrissey by his inheritance from two other families. One is his connection with Marie and Nector Kashpaw as the adopted grandchild of their old age.

As *Love Medicine* closes, Lipsha realizes that he is 'lucky' that June had relinquished him to Marie, since he turned out far better than King, the son she had acknowledged. Lipsha's Nanapush (i.e., Pillager) inheritance also serves to mitigate the Morrissey-Lazarre curse. When his father, Gerry, tells Lipsha in 'Crossing the Water' that he is 'a Nanapush man,' Lipsha receives his first ever sense of true belonging. This Pillager-Nanapush heritage of energy, spirit, and renewal empowers Lipsha not only to escape the Morrissey-Lazarre curse himself, at least in part, but also to bring the wandering spirit of his mother home at the novel's end."

“While land loss and recovery play a central role in Erdrich’s novels, love medicine is her unifying trope. Moses sells Pauline the love medicine that she uses to trap Eli in *Tracks*; Lipsha, too afraid to buy love medicine from Fleur, tragically makes his own in *Love Medicine*; and Lipsha and Fleur—the tribe’s past and future—come together as Lipsha overcomes his fear in his own quest for love and belonging in *The Bingo Palace*. Love medicine is the medicine that heals and holds people together, and it is the power that keeps them going—their means to survival, as families and as Ojibwe people. As Lipsha plans to make a love medicine that will bring his grandparents Marie and Nector closer together, he reflects, ‘These love medicines is something of an old Chippewa specialty. No other tribe has got them down so well. But love medicines is not for the layman to handle.... You could really mess up your life grinding up the wrong little thing.’ Indeed, the practice of love medicine is a distinctive part of traditional Ojibwe culture....

Lipsha, Fleur’s great-grandson and the confluence of all the families that populate Erdrich’s novels—Pillager, Morrissey, Lamartine, Lazarre, and Kashpaw—represents the hybridity of contemporary Turtle Mountain people. His love medicine—a ‘charm’ designed to bring his grandparents, Nector and Marie, together—branches out from his Pillager roots to encompass contemporary Ojibwe family life, wedding love medicine and humor as survival strategies. Since he ‘wasn’t anywhere near asking Grandma to provide me all the little body hits’ that traditional love medicine required, he decides to feed his grandparents the hearts of a pair of geese, since geese mate for life. Lacking adequate skill to shoot the geese, Lipsha settles for frozen turkey hearts and as an added precaution, takes them to church to be blessed with holy water, bringing together Ojibwe traditions and Catholicism and valuing both.

In what is ironically one of the funniest scenes in the book, Nector chokes on the turkey heart, which Marie serves him on a bed of lettuce, and dies. Though Lipsha briefly loses his ‘touch,’ his healing power, after Nector’s death his grandfather’s presence does linger, as Marie acknowledges, saying, ‘It’s the love medicine, my Lipsha.... It was stronger than we thought.’ Laughter, the fearsome power of the Pillagers, is here appropriated by Lipsha, the gentle and confused clown who doesn’t really even understand the power that he has, though he demonstrates to us his potential.

The precision of traditional love medicine makes Lipsha’s improvised ceremony even funnier because it highlights his simultaneous ineptitude, carelessness, and insight. His seemingly haphazard medicine actually mirrors Nector and Marie’s first encounter, when they make love in sight of the convent while Nector’s game—two geese—flop over his arm and stare at the lovers with their ‘frozen’ black eyes. Nector gives Marie the geese as a reluctant sign of his attachment to her, and nearly fifty years later Lipsha chooses the geese as the love medicine that continues to bind them even beyond death. He proves himself a budding successor to Fleur, improvising an appropriate ceremony by drawing on all his cultural influences, thwarted only by the inexperience and fear he feels because he has not yet learned of his own roots and heritage. These patterns and repetitions of medicine and metaphor connect the generations of Erdrich’s extended family of characters. As each branch grows, develops, and tells its story, we see the Ojibwe roots of these characters flourish and continue, changed, but still powerful, adapting traditional ceremonies to heal in the contemporary world.”

Amelia V. Katanski
“Tracking Fleur: The Ojibwe Roots of Erdrich’s Novels”
Approaches 71-73

“Like the traditional stories of the Ojibwe, the same characters evolve through many works. Sometimes what happens in one story will be contradicted in another; no definitive version exists. Events happen that could be termed supernatural, which Erdrich prefers to term ‘unpredictable.’ Stories continue ‘nose to tail’; sometimes people who are assumed to be dead live again in another story.... In addition to formal features, Erdrich’s work uses characters, plot patterns, and relationships from traditional Ojibwe culture and mythology....

Like the ‘tricky Nanabozho,’ the culture hero of the Ojibwe about whom innumerable stories are told, Oshkikwe and Matchikwewis reappear in cycles of stories. In fact, some storytellers claim they are the trickster’s daughters. Their names are descriptive: Oshkikwe means ‘young woman’... Oshkikwe, the younger, demonstrates the traditional virtues of politeness, modesty, and common sense. Matchikwewis, the elder, is rude, greedy, and impulsive, especially in matters that concern sex. Both mythical sisters, however, are equally loved by the Ojibwe. I see a close correspondence between these sisters and Marie Kashpaw and Lulu Lamartine of *Love Medicine*....Understanding these women as bonded like the mythical sisters acknowledges in a satisfying way the centrality of their relationship. Knowing the Ojibwe stories of the two sisters makes the pattern of relationship between women in all Erdrich’s novels emerge from its background....

The women in *Love Medicine* correspond to the mythical sisters in age, Lulu being older than Marie, and their personalities exhibit each sister’s identifying traits. Like the elder sister Matchikwewis, Lulu is sexually assertive and adventurous, initiating liaisons with men who are taboo by blood relationship or marriage to other women. Marie, like the younger Oshkikwe, is sexually modest. At fourteen, she is not completely clear about what physically happens during sex. As an adult, when her husband Nector has apparently left her for Lulu, Marie does not even return the gaze of his brother Eli, who has begun to spend time at her house in Nector’s absence and whispers her name late one evening. While Lulu presents herself as a sexual creature, wearing low-cut dresses, spike heels, lipstick, and ‘passion-pink fingernails’ even in the retirement home, Marie lets her hair grow gray and favors long baggy traditional clothing. Marie’s and Lulu’s relationships with Nector, from their meeting onward, reflect Matchikwewis’s and Oshkikwe’s relationships with men in the traditional tales....

A major link between Lulu and Marie is their relationship with Lipsha Morrissey, which reflects and refracts the Ojibwe tale called ‘Oshkikwe’s Baby.’ Raised by Marie, Lipsha discovers when he reaches maturity that Marie is his great-aunt and Lulu his biological grandmother. In ‘Oshkikwe’s Baby,’ the two women live together, apart from all other persons, and Matchikwewis ‘takes good care of’ her younger sister. Oshkikwe finds a magic pipe and ‘because of the pipe’ gives birth to both a miraculous boy and a puppy, which she nurses together with the baby.”

Karah Stokes
“Sisters, Lovers, Magdelens, and Martyrs:
Ojibwe Two-Sisters Stories in *Love Medicine*”
Approaches 51-53, 55

Michael Hollister (2014)