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## **CIRCULARITY IN LOUISE ERDRICH'S *LOVE MEDICINE***

**Abstract:** The circular structure used by Louise Erdrich in her novel *Love Medicine* proves to be a successful pattern at the service of characterization, themes and the process of text decoding that the readers go through. The characters search for their identity and come to terms with the past -two major themes- while the readers adopt an active role in establishing connections in order to build the world of the novel.

**Keywords:** American literature – narrative – Louise Erdrich – *Love Medicine*

**Resumen:** La estructura circular en la novela *Love Medicine*, de Louise Erdrich, enmarca a los personajes y a los temas principales, e involucra al lector en un interesante proceso de decodificación del texto. Los personajes buscan su identidad y se reconcilian con el pasado (dos temas fundamentales) mientras que el lector adopta un rol activo en el proceso de establecer conexiones con el fin de construir el mundo de la novela.

**Palabras clave:** literatura estadounidense – narrativa – Louise Erdrich – *Love Medicine*

## CIRCULARITY IN LOUISE ERDRICH'S *LOVE MEDICINE*

On reading *Love Medicine*, Louise Erdrich's extremely successful first novel, the reader cannot escape the enticing spiderweb of its moving richness. He is trapped, probably for ever, because the novel touches the human heart and stirs emotions deeply locked in the soul. Not only does the reader feel strongly identified with the characters -even if at first sight they may seem members of a remote culture- but he is also enthralled by the circularity present throughout the novel.

In this powerful novel, the first of her Native American series, Louise Erdrich introduces several generations in the interrelated families living in and around a Chippewa reservation in North Dakota. Spanning fifty years, from 1934 to 1984, *Love Medicine* is told through the voices of a series of vivid characters, mostly Chippewa men and women who are caught up in the emotional tangle of their families' histories, but who struggle to gain some control over their lives. In her uniquely poetic style, Erdrich creates an intense vision of a world that is at once violent and tender, ugly and lyrical, realistic and gothic. The separate stories that make up the novel convey the subtle pressure exerted upon the souls of people who are culturally mixed, those whose lives are shaped by both Native American and non-Indian values, habits, and customs.

The circular structure of the novel gives expression to a sense of perfection and completeness. Erdrich's narrative strategies are shaped in the form of a spiral structure that forces the reader to go back, re-read, decode and participate actively in the marvellous disclosure of the characters' lives. The characters themselves go back in time to understand, to find their own identity and to come to terms with that past which, more often than not, tells them who they are and where they come from. In relation to these ideas, the purpose of this paper is twofold: on the one hand, to show how the circularity present in *Love Medicine* engages the reader in an active process of establishing ties and building bridges; on the other, to show how this circular structure is at the service of the characters' search for identity and their reconciliation with the past.

## The Readers' Active Role

Maitino & Peck (1996) present a very interesting analysis of this aspect of the novel in their book *Teaching American Ethnic Literatures*. They suggest that

*Erdrich adopts a spiral structure that circles through time to reveal with each swing more information about past events that tie the narratives together [...] The story is in the telling and, as in any storytelling event, the audience has a role to play. We must untangle events; we must straighten out the fishing line of lives, for only the reader can recognize all the ties, define the relationships, and discern the patterns. (Maitino & Peck, 1996: 9)*

The reader is invited to do so all the time. With the help of a family tree, he has to work out the tangled stories of the Kashpaws, Lamartines, Morriseys and Nanapushes -the main Native American families that knit the intricate plot through the voices of the different narrators. The untangling process is carried out throughout the novel. For instance, June's death at the very beginning of the novel is understood later on under the light of the different reactions of the members of her family and of the truth about her youth love relationship with Gerry Nanapush and about their son Lipsha. It is only after several chapters that the reader discovers that the girl walking up the hill towards the Sacred Heart Convent to meet Sister Leopolda is the same Grandma Kashpaw that adopts June first and her son Lipsha later. She is the same Marie Lazarre who marries Nector Kapshaw unexpectedly and remains deeply in love with him for the rest of her life, in spite of the love triangle that is established with Lulu Nanapush. This same Lulu is the resolute adolescent who follows her inner desires and her old uncle Nanapush's advice that "the greatest wisdom doesn't know itself [and] the richest plan is not to have one" (Erdrich, 1984: 76), and dives passionately into the silent world of her cousin Moses Pillager. She is the same resolute and self-assured woman who fiercely fights for her rights over her

land. She is the same woman who has nine children all with different fathers, who has the inner strength to overcome the death of her son Henry Jr. and the motherly sensitivity to help her grandchild Lipsha discover who his parents are. These are only a few examples of the way the reader is forced to go back in time, establish relationships, tie up the apparently loose ends and, thus, take an active role in the reading.

Maitino & Peck highlight the storytelling quality of Erdrich's narrative. This idea can be connected to her Native American origin since, as she once said,

*People in [Native American] families make everything into a story [...] People just sit and the stories start coming, one after another. I suppose that when you grow up constantly hearing the stories rise, break, and fall, it gets into you somehow. (as cited in Narins)*

In an interview with Laura Coltelli in 1985, Erdrich explains her preference for fiction over poetry:

*I began to tell stories in the poems and then realized that there was not enough room in a poem [...] to really tell the story. I just began to realize that I wanted to be a fiction writer; that's a bigger medium, you know. I have a lot more room and it's closer to the oral tradition of sitting around and telling stories. (as cited in Coltelli, 1990)*

Erdrich's love for the oral literary traditions of Native cultures is clearly shown in *Love Medicine*. Maitino & Peck consider it is a novel "written as a series of 'as-told-to' biographies, a genre much used in literature written about American Indians" (Maitino & Peck, 1996: 92). The different narrators tell their stories from their own points of view, each of them presenting a subjective picture which the reader will have to strain, decode and relate to other stories. The result is an enticing narrative that engages the reader tremendously, making him spin back and forth in time in an attempt to reconstruct the characters' destinies.

## Search for Identity

The circularity in *Love Medicine* infuses the novel with a sense of closure to the novel. The opening events are intimately connected to the ending. This feeling of completeness is closely related to the idea of identity as well. The characters search for their identity in a gradual, careful and painful way. They do so both at a personal and at a social level. They listen to stories, find truths in their past and fight for their rights as Native Americans. Their aim is to find a place of their own, to know who they are and where they come from.

The idea of identity is an essential topic in Native American literature. In his book *Other Destinies. Understanding the American Indian Novel*, Louis Owens (1992) clearly refers to the problem of identity:

*The recovering or rearticulation of an identity, a process dependent upon a rediscovered sense of place as well as community, becomes [...] a truly enormous attempt. This attempt is at the center of American Indian fiction. [...] For writers who identify as Native American, the novel represents a process of reconstruction, of self-discovery and cultural recovery [...] it is a re-remembering or putting together of identity. [...] For the contemporary Indian novelist -in every case a mixedblood who must come to terms in one form or another with peripherality as well as both European and Indian ethnicity- identity is the central issue and theme. (Owens, 1992: 5)*

In relation to Erdrich's writing, Owens comments that she "weaves genealogies and fates as characters appear and reappear in successive, interconnected stories", thus creating a "web of identities and relationships" that arise from the land itself (Owens, 1992: 193). That is the reason why she is a storyteller. She weaves stories in *Love Medicine* -and in other novels as well- where the narrators knit a single story that gradually turns into 'a recovered center' (Owens,

1992: 194). It is this recovered centre that allows the characters to know who they are.

The search for identity within a circular structure will be shown through the analysis of three characters: June Morrissey, Lipsha Morrissey and Albertine Johnson. In fact, the novel opens with June and closes with Lipsha, both of them going back home. Although their 'homing in' (Maitino & Peck, 1996: 85) has different characteristics, both homecomings are connected to the idea of identity. The novel begins with June on the way back to the reservation, on the eve of Easter Sunday:

*The morning before Easter Sunday, June Kashpaw was walking down the clogged main street of oil boomtown Williston, North Dakota, killing time before the noon bus arrived that would take her home. (Erdrich, 1984: 1)*

She never reaches the reservation. When she decides to go to a bar with an oil engineer rather than walk home, she thinks, "The bus ticket would stay good, maybe forever. They weren't expecting her up home on the reservation" (Erdrich, 1984: 3). After a quick sexual encounter with the man, she is caught in a snowstorm and dies. Owens considers that June takes up the role of "a permanent traveler, infinitely dislocated with no family/community/tribe to expect her return" (Owens, 1992: 195) and deliberately chooses death. Her death may be the product of an accident due to her drunkenness, or maybe a deliberate choice to end her life. Whichever the case, her 'homing in', her desire to go back to her own place, is clear. She knows that if she stays in the car with the oil engineer "she [will] crack wide open, not in one place but in many pieces" (Erdrich, 1984: 6). She cannot bear this fragmentation and moves towards that place, that centre that will restore her identity. In fact, she does not return physically, but comes home through the memories and stories recalled by other characters. Maitino & Peck clearly explain this:

*June's return is subtly veiled, for she does not return 'physically'. Instead, she comes home as vivid, warm, unshakeable memories for all the characters who*

*... speak to us after, or more pointedly, she comes home as a character in the stories they tell, the oral literary canon they all share that tells them who they are in relation to others. [...] June [is] a disembodied, silent, yet palpable presence -a nebulous yet powerful center-throughout the stories and lives of other characters. (Maitino & Peck, 1996: 85)*

Moreover, June dies on the eve of Easter Sunday. The echoes of resurrection are inevitable. She may be seen as a Christ-like figure ready to die for the sake of others. Her 'disembodied presence' gives coherence to the novel and to the other characters' lives. They are forced to go back into the past, ask questions and find answers. Furthermore, "her death is described in terms of movement, continuance, and a return" (Maitino & Peck, 1996: 86). She walks through the storm with the idea of "Uncle Eli's warm, man-smelling kitchen" (Erdrich, 1984: 6) in her mind, thus focusing on home and family and, by doing this, recovering her essence. The ending of the section in the first chapter that deals with her story -the only one in the whole novel told in the third person and in past tense to remove "her own 'voice' (and vision) from the novel" (Erdrich, 1984: 84)- accounts for this:

*Even when her heart clenched and her skin turned crackling cold it didn't matter, because the pure and naked part of her went on.*

*The snow fell deeper that Easter than it had in forty years, but June walked over it like water and came home. (Erdrich, 1984: 7)*

Erdrich shapes the novel into a circular pattern by echoing this last line in the concluding sentence of the novel, where June's son, Lipsha Morrissey, crosses the river in his Firebird car -bought with June's insurance- and takes her home: "I got inside. The morning was clear. A good road led on. So there was nothing to do but cross the water, and bring her home" (Erdrich, 1984: 367). Lipsha is taking the car home, but he is also metaphorically taking his mother home. Together with her, he is taking his own disentangled identity, too. In

the course of the novel, he also undergoes an enlightening search for identity that leads to his discovery that June is his mother and Gerry Nanapush his father. Lulu Nanapush, his grandmother, discloses the truth to him. She has nothing to lose by telling him the true story. She says, "It's simple. I either gain a grandson or lose a young man who didn't like me in the first place" (Erdrich, 1984: 336). She says so because she is confident that the truth will help Lipsha avoid an inner disintegration that would come out of not knowing who he really is. She wants to help him put the pieces together and achieve inner peace. Lulu tells him, "Well / never thought you was odd. [...] Just troubled. You never knew who you were. That's one reason why I told you. I thought it was a knowledge that could make or break you" (Erdrich, 1984: 337). The truth definitely 'makes' him. He learns his mother watched him from a distance when he was left under the care of Grandma Kashpaw, and that June hoped he would forgive her some day. He had been the product of his mother's love affair with young Gerry Nanapush, a teenager, who had had a crush on her, a much older woman, married and with one son already. The truth hurts him, but does not destroy him. On the contrary, it urges him to meet his father and that is how he ends up at his half-brother King's place where he wins the car over a card game. It is precisely with this car - bought by King with June's insurance- that he helps his father Gerry run away from the police and get to the border of Canada to meet his wife and daughter. After doing this, Lipsha is ready to go back home, taking the car -and his mother- with him. He is not resentful towards June, he knows now that what she did for him was good, even if that meant abandoning him. She did what she could. With this capacity to forgive, Lipsha matures and regains his identity. He is made complete. His coming to terms with the past is a synonym of his 'homing in'.

Albertine Johnson, also one of the characters of the young generation in the novel, proves to be quite sure of her identity even if, ironically enough, her father is Swede Johnson, a white man. According to Owens, her certainty can be attributed to the fact that her mother -with whom she has a conflictive relationship- raised her an Indian: "'My girl's an *Indian*', Zelda emphasized. 'I raised her an Indian, and that's what she is'" (Erdrich, 1984: 24). Her self-assurance can also be attributed to her capacity to build up a life of her own, with



a career of her own. Her strength comes mainly from her ability to establish ties with the past. She goes back in time, remembers, and brings that knowledge to the present. Owens (1992) clearly explains this:

*Albertine's strength comes from this unshakeable knowledge of who she is and from her awareness that the past is a formative part of the present [...] The past permeates the present, coexisting through cyclical temporality within the spatial reality of the Native American world, staying with us, telling us in a single breath where we have been, where we are, and where we are going [...] The loss of the past means a loss of self, a loss of order and meaning in the present moment, and an inability to contemplate a future that is part of that moment. Storytelling serves to prevent that loss. (Owens, 1992: 198)*

On remembering June, her dear aunt, Albertine recalls all those things June used to tell her, "things you'd only tell another woman, full grown, and [she] had adored her wildly for these adult confidences" (Erdrich, 1984: 17). Albertine did not understand many of them at the time, but "those words stayed with [her]" (Erdrich, 1984: 17). She brings them to the present to understand June better, to have a clearer idea of herself, her family and her roots, to hold a more compassionate view on human beings. Such is her attitude with Dot Adare and Gerry Nanapush, helping the former with her baby Shawn, and understanding the latter, passing no judgement on his constant runaway behaviour. Albertine listens to family stories that first spin her back into the past and then drive her forward towards the present. In this way, she manages to find her own identity and shape a better future for herself.

## Coming to Terms with the Past

The circularity in *Love Medicine* is at the service of the characters' search for identity. It is also at the service of their reconciliation with the past. In fact, the characters' journey towards self-knowledge and inner peace at times implies coming to terms with painful events of the past. Such is the case of Marie Lazarre, Lulu Nanapush and Nector Kashpaw. Their love triangle is at the centre of the novel, told through fragmented narratives that cover fifty years and that the reader has to put together. Their relationship touches the lives and stories of all the other characters. Even though more often than not it brings about suffering, the outcome is also a deep reflection on the capacity to learn, forgive and grow wise.

Marie Lazarre marries Nector Kashpaw without much careful thought. She stumbles into him one day, the next they are married. This happens in spite of Nector's infatuation with Lulu, which results in their passionate relationship for five years of his married life. The love triangle is thus settled and, as usual, it brings about pain and anger. The sharp angles of the triangle always hurt. However, Marie is a strong woman, ready to fight for the man she loves. On learning about Nector's infidelity, she does not reject him. On the contrary, she pulls him in, back into her life, taking advantage of his fear and the goodness in him. Erdrich masterfully conveys this through the metaphorical presentation of the waxed floor:

*He stood there looking at me over that long, shiny space. It rolled and gleamed like a fine lake between us. And it deepened. I saw that he was about to take the first step, and I let him, but halfway into the room his eyes went dark. He was afraid of how deep this was going to become. So I did for Nector Kashpaw what I learned from the nun. I put my hand through what scared him. I held it out there for him. And when he took it with all the strength of his arms, I pulled him in. (Erdrich, 1984: 166)*

Nector gives Lulu up after five years. The emotional conflict is solved on a solitary night and a swim in the lake. He dives to the bottom and feels he should perhaps stay there, but he doesn't. The water bounces him up and he realises he has "to get back in the thick of [his] life" (Erdrich, 1984: 138). Lulu loses not only her love, but also her house and land. Nector is responsible for all her losses, but she mourns him all the same many years later when she learns that he has died. Yet, she does not cry. She is incapable of doing so; there are no tears in her eyes. She has just had her eyes operated on and they are literally -and metaphorically- dry. The operation and life itself have dried them up. It is at this moment that life brings Lulu and Marie together and, even if they are both old and experienced women, Lulu admits that "things are new even at the age when we are supposed to have seen everything" (Erdrich, 1984: 296). Marie volunteers to take care of Lulu. They do not talk about Nector; he is already there. They sit in silence and mourn him together and, surprisingly, that gives Lulu "deep comfort" (Erdrich, 1984: 297). Marie gently removes the bandages that cover Lulu's eyes to put the eyedrops that will cure her. With a motherly, protective attitude, Marie helps Lulu see again. Her eyes are full of good tears now and as they are shed, Lulu and Marie come to terms with the past. Marie can forgive; Lulu can understand -maybe for the first time- that "whatever had happened the night before, and in the past, would finally be over once [her] bandages came off" (Erdrich, 1984: 297).

"The Good Tears" is probably one of the most touching chapters of the novel. The image of the two old women sitting in silence, with the man of their lives right there, helping each other in spite of past suffering, able to forgive and understand, gives the reader a feeling of closure. A stage in their lives is over, another one begins. No wonder the last line makes reference to "the way a mother must look to her just-born child" (Erdrich, 1984: 297). The two women have been able to come to terms with the past. On doing so, they have transformed the triangle into a circle joining the three of them. This time, no sharp angles hurt.

## Conclusion

The circle is the symbol of perfection and completeness. It is the symbol of the Absolute and of time, of the turning wheel. To North American Indians, too, the circle is the symbol of time, for the daytime, the night-time and the moon time are circles above the world (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1996: 195-197). No wonder *Love Medicine* moves in circles. Louise Erdrich's masterful craft sways the reader back and forth from beginning to end, just to take him back to the starting point when the story closes. The reader searches for the truth in the same way the characters search for their identity, delving into past experiences and family stories. They all grow wiser, both the reader and the characters. In this process, the closely-knit web of identification between them makes this novel universal and memorable. It is no longer a Native American trying to understand who he is, or a community of Native Americans searching for their place in the world. It is all of us trying to understand our destinies and decipher our lives. As Marcela Raggio (2000) clearly points out,

*Above all, and beyond ethnic differences, life defines itself in a constant pursuit of self, in an acceptance of a multifaceted existence, and in a contemplative attitude of the sameness of humanity. (Raggio, 2000: 123)*

Searching for the truth of who we are and where we come from, accepting what life has in store for us and coming to terms with the past -even if it is a painful past- is what will make us all better human beings. Only then will the circle of our lives be complete.

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