The Red Convertible Study Guide

The Red Convertible by Louise Erdrich

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

"The Red Convertible," one of Louise Erdrich's most anthologized short stories, is the second chapter of her debut novel *Love Medicine.* The novel is a collection of fourteen stories bound by common characters and themes. When Holt published it in 1984, it became a bestseller that won awards such as the National Book Critics Circle Award and the American Academy of Arts and Letters award for best first fiction. Since its publication, it has been translated into eighteen languages. In 1993, Erdrich expanded the book by four more stories. *Love Medicine* is the first in Erdrich's series of novels portraying twentieth-century Chippewa life in North Dakota.

"The Red Convertible" functions as a standalone story and is often selected by instructors to introduce Erdrich's writing to students. In this story of brothers struggling to cope with their changing relationship and the changing world, Erdrich demonstrates the difficulties many Vietnam veterans and their families faced after the war.

Author Biography

Louise Erdrich (birth name, Karen Louise Erdrich) was born on June 7 (some sources say July 6), 1954, in Little Falls, Minnesota. She was the first of seven children born to Ralph and Rita Joanne Gourneau Erdrich, both of whom taught for the Bureau of Indian Affairs schools. Erdrich was reared in Wahpeton, North Dakota, near the Turtle Mountain Chippewa Reservation, where her mother's parents lived. The family visited the reservation often, giving Erdrich a strong sense of her Native American heritage. Erdrich's father was of German descent, and this part of her heritage was also fostered, although to a lesser degree.

In 1972, Erdrich entered the first co-educational class at Dartmouth College. She graduated with a degree in English in 1976 and then taught for the Poetry in the Schools Program sponsored by the North Dakota Arts Council. In 1978, she entered Johns Hopkins University where she completed a master's degree in creative writing a year later.

While at Dartmouth, Erdrich studied with Michael Dorris, a writer who was also part Native American. Dorris was an anthropologist who chaired the then-new Native American Studies program. After Erdrich graduated, she and Dorris stayed in touch and became literary companions. In 1980, Erdrich returned to Dartmouth as a writer-in-residence, and a year later she married Dorris. In addition to the three Native American children Dorris had already adopted, he and Erdrich eventually had three children of their own. Erdrich and Dorris enjoyed a great deal of success as literary collaborators until their separation in 1995. Two years later, Dorris committed suicide.

Erdrich's first novel, *Love Medicine* (1984), includes fourteen stand-alone chapters united by common characters, themes, and the setting—a Chippewa reservation in North Dakota. One of these stand-alone chapters is "The Red Convertible." Over the years, Erdrich has written numerous novels and collections of poetry. Her most recent works include the children's book the novel *Grandmother's Pigeon* (1996) and the novel *The Antelope Wife* (1998).

Erdrich is known for her insightful, moving, and sometimes amusing depictions of modern Chippewa life. Because so much of her work is set in North Dakota Chippewa communities, Erdrich is often compared to William Faulkner, whose fictional Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, provided the backdrop for his literary vision of the South. Erdrich is also compared to Faulkner because of her regional focus, imagery, and fragmented narrative style.

Plot Summary

"The Red Convertible" is narrated by Lyman Lamartine, a member of the Chippewa tribe who lives on a reservation with his family. He tells a story from his recent past about his older half-brother, Henry. As Lyman tells the story, the year is 1974.

Lyman was able to buy a red convertible Olds-mobile with his brother because he had always been good with money. He started working as a dishwasher at the Joliet Cafe when he was fifteen, and at the age, of sixteen, he became the cafe's owner. Soon after, it was destroyed by a tornado.

On impulse, Lyman and Henry bought the car on a visit to Winnipeg. That summer, they took the car on a trip without an itinerary or any plans. They traveled around Montana for half the summer before picking up a Native American girl named Susy, who was hitchhiking home to Alaska. They agreed to take her, and her family welcomed them for the rest of the summer. The brothers shared good times before returning home. They went back home so that Henry, who had enlisted in the Marines, could begin his military service. After training and briefly visiting his family at Christmas, Henry was sent to Vietnam. It was early 1970. Before he left, he gave Lyman his key to the car, but Lyman just laughed and kept it for when Henry came back home.

Three years later, Henry returned as a different person. No longer easygoing, funny, and talkative, he was quiet, anxious, and moody. He often watched television, though doing so made him extremely tense.

Lyman and his mother discussed how they could find help for Henry. There were no Chippewa doctors on the reservation, and they feared that a hospital would either reject Henry or attempt to solve his problems by giving him too many drugs. Lyman decided to try to revive Henry by damaging the car so that Henry could fix it. A month later, Henry saw the car and began working on it.

Henry worked diligently on the car for the rest of the winter. In the spring, he asked Lyman to go on a drive with him. Lyman was thrilled because his brother seemed to be getting back to his old self. Before they left, their eleven-year-old sister, Bonita, took their picture. Lyman tells the reader that he never looks at the picture anymore. He used to have it on his wall, but he can no longer stand to look at it.

Returning to his memories of the day he and Henry took the car for a drive, Lyman recalls that they headed to the Red River because Henry wanted to see the high water. When they arrived, it was evening, so they started a fire. They started talking and drinking, and Henry told Lyman that he knew how the car got damaged. He said that he fixed it so that he could give it back to Lyman. They argued about who should have it—Henry insisting that Lyman take it, and Lyman insisting that they share it—until they started physically fighting. Then they started laughing, and Lyman thought that Henry was his old self again. Henry said he needed to cool down, and he jumped in the river.

When Lyman saw him, he could see that the current was carrying him. Henry said, "My boots are filling" and was carried away by the river.

Although Lyman tried to save Henry by jumping in the river after him, he could not find him. Lyman returned to the car, started it, put it in first gear, and let it go into the river. He watched it until it went all the way in and the headlights went out.

Summary

"The Red Convertible" is a short story about the relationship between two Native American Indian brothers. It analyzes how their bond changes with the passage of time and is affected by both internal and external factors in the late 1960's and early 1970's.

The story is told from the point of view of Lyman Lamartine, a young man who is a Chippewa Indian living on a reservation in North Dakota in 1974. Lyman remembers that he was the first person to ever drive a convertible on the reservation. The convertible was red, and Lyman owned it jointly with his brother, Henry. At present, Henry still owns the car, and Lyman must walk everywhere he goes.

Lyman relates that he had always been good at making money and was able to buy his share of the car when he and Henry came upon it. Lyman had worked as a shoeshine boy in the American Legion Hall when he was very young and sold spiritual bouquets door-to-door at Christmastime to make money. When he was fifteen, Lyman got a job washing dishes in the Joliet Cafy, which he came to own just a year later. A tornado destroyed the cafy, and Lyman had just enough money remaining to buy his share of the red convertible.

Both Henry and Lyman have all their money with them when they take a ride with a friend to Winnipeg and spot the convertible. Neither brother ever mentioned buying a car, but both knew immediately upon seeing it that they wanted to buy it.

During that summer, Henry and Lyman drive all around the Dakotas and end up in Montana with no plan or need for an itinerary. Along the way, the brothers pick up a hitchhiker named Susy and take her home to Alaska. They spend the balance of the summer there, before returning home to North Dakota.

Upon their return, Henry is called into the military and returns home for a Christmas visit before going overseas. The year is 1970, and Henry's letters home report only that he is stationed in the northern hill country. Lyman thinks Henry is in Vietnam, but has trouble remembering which part of Vietnam the good soldiers come from.

The whole time that Henry is gone, Lyman works on the red convertible, trying to repair some of the damage done during the long road trip of the previous summer. Lyman is as good with numbers as he is with money. Fortunately, his number never comes up, requiring him to go into military service.

It is three years before Henry returns home, and Lyman has worked on the convertible until it is in nearly perfect condition. Lyman is distressed to see Henry's condition, particularly his brother's restless, sullen moods. Lyman remembers times when he and Henry would just sit and watch the scenery and talk to anyone who happened to stop by. Henry used to like a good joke, too, but now he never smiles. Lyman determines that Henry is just "jumpy and mean."

During the time of Henry's service, Lyman purchased a color TV set for the family. Now, he regrets it, because Henry gets so intense watching it that he grabs the armrests of his chair as if the pictures might propel him forward, crashing into the set. Lyman recalls one evening when Lyman bit through his lip while watching the screen and does not even notice the blood running down his chin.

Getting help for Henry is not an easy job as there are no Indian doctors on the reservation. To make matters worse, their mother does not trust the medicine man who may take revenge on Henry, as she spurned the man in younger days. Both Lyman and his mother agree that hospitals cannot help with Henry's problem, because they just give a person drugs and do not address the real issues.

Out of all the "viable" options, Lyman remembers how Henry had loved the red convertible and hopes that the car might rejunate him . One night when Henry is away, Lyman beats the underside of the convertible with a hammer so that the car is in desperate need of repair.

Lyman waits until Henry makes the observations about the car and begins to make the necessary repairs after chastising Lyman for not maintaining the convertible while he was gone. The winter is breaking into spring, and Henry spends most of his time working on the convertible's repairs. Lyman can see some improvements in Henry's mood, but not enough to say that the real Henry is back.

Finally, spring arrives, and Lyman's hopes are buoyed when Henry asks Lyman if he wants to take a ride in the convertible. Before the two brothers leave, their little sister, Bonita, takes a picture of Henry and Lyman posing in front of the car.

Lyman's narrative transitions to the present, and he mentions that he never looks at that picture anymore. A short time ago, Lyman had pinned the picture to the wall, because he liked looking at it. Now, Lyman cannot bear to see it. One day, a friend of Lyman's helps him put the picture in a brown paper bag in the back of a closet; but Lyman is still very much aware of the photo's presence.

Lyman begins to remember the day that he and Henry took a ride in the car after their sister took the picture. The brothers have a full cooler in the trunk and head out for the Red River, where the water is always so high. Lyman has the feeling that his life is starting again, because the spring breezes have begun to wash away the dregs of winter.

Upon reaching their destination, Henry and Lyman build a fire on the riverbanks where little piles of snow still sit among the winter's trash. The river has not yet overflowed its banks, but Lyman can tell that it will soon. Lyman feels a constricting sensation inside and realizes that this is what Henry is experiencing too.

Lyman does not know what comes over him, but he jumps up and begins to shake Henry by the shoulders, urging him to wake up. Lyman sits again beside the unresponsive Henry, who can only say that he understands, and that it is no use. Henry

gives the convertible to Lyman, who does not want it. The brothers scuffle, and Henry tears the sleeve off of Lyman's good, suede jacket.

Lyman hits Henry very hard in the jaw, bringing both blood and tears. Henry just laughs and tells Lyman to have fun in the car. The brothers share some beers and laugh for awhile, and Lyman thinks that maybe the old Henry is returning.

Lyman suggests returning home and picking up some girls, but Henry's mood has turned dark again. Suddenly, Henry jumps up, throws off his jacket and begins to dance wildly. Lyman laughs at his antics. Yelling that he needs to cool off, Henry runs to the river and jumps in. Lyman tries to see where Henry is, but cannot locate him in the high waters.

Finally, Lyman spots Henry halfway across the water and hears Henry say that his boots are filling. Then, the current carries him away. Lyman jumps into the water but is not able to retrieve Henry. It is now evening, and Lyman pulls the convertible to the riverbank and turns on the high beam lights. Putting the car in first gear, he gets out and watches the red convertible sink until the headlights go out. Lyman is aware of the sound of the rushing water in the darkness.

Analysis

The story is told in first person narrator from Lyman's point of view. This technique allows the author to provide background information quickly and thoroughly, without the necessity of extra dialogue or story line. Throughout the story, Lyman shares his feelings about the relationship he shares with Henry, and how that changes from pre-war Henry to post-war Henry.

Lyman proves to be an especially sensitive young man. One example is Lyman's intuition that Henry needs a purpose upon his return from Vietnam, and Lyman's destruction of the carefully preserved convertible to provide Henry with an immediate focus.

Lyman's sensitivity is painfully evident at the end of the story when he cannot comment on Henry's drowning or the sinking of the convertible. Lyman simply states that he can see nothing in the darkness and hears nothing but the rushing of the water. The emotions Lyman feels are too painful to describe, so he reverts to descriptions of elements outside himself.

The author uses the literary techniques of similes and metaphors to help describe Lyman's feelings and observations. When Henry is going away to the Marines, Lyman states that Henry is only wanted for his Indian nose "big and sharp as a hatchet..."

When Lyman describes the condition of the red convertible after he has beaten it up, he says, "By the time I was done with the car it looked worse than any typical Indian car that has been driven all its life on reservation roads, which they always say are like government promises - full of holes."

Another good example is the description of Henry's face when Lyman tries to shake him out of his lethargy on the banks of the river. "His face was totally white and hard. Then it broke, like stones break all of a sudden when water boils up inside them."

The most obvious technique used by the author is the symbolism of the red convertible, which represents the brothers' life together. When Henry and Lyman buy the car, they have some money and are happy and healthy. Henry has some premonitions that the state of the relationship will change when he gives the car keys to Lyman before leaving for Vietnam. During Henry's absence, Lyman lovingly maintains the convertible as if it is his bond with Henry and needs intense protection.

It is also the car which somewhat brings Henry back to life, when he returns depressed from the war. Then, the brothers' relationship is temporarily renewed . Lyman feels that if Henry were to repair the car, then the relationship between the brothers would also be repaired. Unfortunately, Henry's problems cannot be resolved so easily; and Lyman's sinking of the convertible represents the end of the relationship of the two brothers.

The beginning of the story makes sense only when the story's plot line is finished. In the opening paragraph, the author states that Lyman owned the car until one night when Henry's boots filled with water. Now, Henry owns the entire car, while Lyman has to walk everywhere. The author regresses in time to explain the events leading up to Lyman's memory of the story. It's Henry's drowning which fills his boots and the sinking of the car which provides final ownership to Henry.

Analysis

The story is told in first person narrator from Lyman's point of view. This technique allows the author to provide background information quickly and thoroughly, without the necessity of extra dialogue or story line. Throughout the story, Lyman shares his feelings about the relationship he shares with Henry, and how that changes from pre-war Henry to post-war Henry.

Lyman proves to be an especially sensitive young man. One example is Lyman's intuition that Henry needs a purpose upon his return from Vietnam, and Lyman's destruction of the carefully preserved convertible to provide Henry with an immediate focus.

Lyman's sensitivity is painfully evident at the end of the story when he cannot comment on Henry's drowning or the sinking of the convertible. Lyman simply states that he can see nothing in the darkness and hears nothing but the rushing of the water. The emotions Lyman feels are too painful to describe, so he reverts to descriptions of elements outside himself.

The author uses the literary techniques of similes and metaphors to help describe Lyman's feelings and observations. When Henry is going away to the Marines, Lyman states that Henry is only wanted for his Indian nose "big and sharp as a hatchet..."

When Lyman describes the condition of the red convertible after he has beaten it up, he says, "By the time I was done with the car it looked worse than any typical Indian car that has been driven all its life on reservation roads, which they always say are like government promises - full of holes."

Another good example is the description of Henry's face when Lyman tries to shake him out of his lethargy on the banks of the river. "His face was totally white and hard. Then it broke, like stones break all of a sudden when water boils up inside them."

The most obvious technique used by the author is the symbolism of the red convertible, which represents the brothers' life together. When Henry and Lyman buy the car, they have some money and are happy and healthy. Henry has some premonitions that the state of the relationship will change when he gives the car keys to Lyman before leaving for Vietnam. During Henry's absence, Lyman lovingly maintains the convertible as if it is his bond with Henry and needs intense protection.

It is also the car which somewhat brings Henry back to life, when he returns depressed from the war. Then, the brothers' relationship is temporarily renewed . Lyman feels that if Henry were to repair the car, then the relationship between the brothers would also be repaired. Unfortunately, Henry's problems cannot be resolved so easily; and Lyman's sinking of the convertible represents the end of the relationship of the two brothers.

The beginning of the story makes sense only when the story's plot line is finished. In the opening paragraph, the author states that Lyman owned the car until one night when Henry's boots filled with water. Now, Henry owns the entire car, while Lyman has to walk everywhere. The author regresses in time to explain the events leading up to Lyman's memory of the story. It's Henry's drowning which fills his boots and the sinking of the car which provides final ownership to Henry.

Characters

Bonita

Bonita is Lyman and Henry's only sister. She was eleven when Henry died. On the last day of Henry's life, Bonita took a picture of Lyman and Henry just before they took the car for a drive.

Henry Lamartine, Jr.

Henry was Lyman's older half-brother. He is described as having had a large, muscular build and a strong profile. As the story opens, the year is 1974 and Henry is dead, but Lyman tells the reader about some of his experiences with Henry before his death. Henry was somewhat impulsive, taking a trip without an itinerary or plans of any kind and agreeing to take a hitchhiker all the way to Alaska. He was a secure man with a sense of humor and an easygoing disposition.

Henry enlisted to serve in the Vietnam War and became a Marine. When he returned three years later, he had changed. He was jumpy, silent, moody, and detached, and he rarely laughed or smiled. When Lyman tried to restore Henry's spirit by damaging the car so that Henry could fix it, Henry knew what had happened to the car. Still, he fixed it so that he could give the car back to Lyman. On the day of his death, Henry was smiling and joking. He was also talkative, leading Lyman to think that Henry was himself again. That night, however, Henry walked into the river and was carried away. Whether this was a suicide is left open to interpretation.

Lyman Lamartine

Lyman is the story's narrator. He is a young Chippewa man who lives on a reservation with his family. He tells the story of when he, along with his older half-brother Henry, owned a red Oldsmobile convertible. Lyman's relationship with his brother was typical; Lyman admired his older brother and had the most fun when they were together. Lyman was able to afford partial ownership in the car because he had always been good with money. When he was fifteen, he started working at the Joliet Cafe as a dishwasher, and he became first part owner and then sole owner when he was only sixteen. Although the cafe was soon destroyed in a tornado, he enjoyed the short-lived success and was able to buy the car with his brother.

When Henry went to fight in the Vietnam War, Lyman remained optimistic. He maintained the car so that when Henry returned, they could enjoy it just as they had before Henry left. Lyman was naïve to think that his brother would be the same when he returned, but when he saw that Henry had changed, he was sensitive to his brother's feelings. Lyman's unselfish nature is apparent in the way he treated his older brother

and in his attempts to help him find joy again. Lyman felt very close to his brother, even when his brother was emotionally unavailable.

Lyman and Henry's Mother

Little is said about Lyman and Henry's mother, who does her best to cope with Henry's sullen disposition when he returns from the war. At the time of the story, she is not married although she has been married many times in the past.

Susy

Susy is a hitchhiker whom Lyman and Henry pick up during a summer-long road trip that Lyman recalls in the story. She is a Native American girl of small stature. When she tells Lyman and Henry that she wants to go home to Alaska, they take her. Her family is welcoming, and the brothers stay with them until the weather turns cold.

Themes

Brotherhood

At the center of "The Red Convertible" is the relationship between Lyman and Henry. Lyman's motivation for telling the story is to embrace and preserve his brother's memory.

Because the story is told from Lyman's point of view, the reader has no direct insight into Henry's thoughts and feelings. His words and actions, however, indicate that he loved his brother very much and valued their relationship. When he prepared to leave to serve in the Vietnam War, he wanted to give his younger brother the car that had brought them so much happiness. Presumably, he did not know whether he would survive, and he wanted his brother to become more independent. This may also explain the infrequency of his letters home. After he came home from the war, he was a different man. When Lyman intentionally damaged the car so that Henry would have to fix it, Henry understood what Lyman was trying to do for him. Rather than respond with anger or resentment, he fixed the car so that Lyman would have it. That Henry apparently committed suicide when he was alone with Lyman suggests that Lyman was the only person Henry truly trusted and the only person with whom he was willing to share this tragic moment.

Wartime Trauma

Initially, Henry is seen as an easygoing, funny, carefree young man. After spending three years fighting in Vietnam, however, he was a very different person. Describing Henry after the war, Lyman remarks:

When he came home ... Henry was very different, and I'll say this: the change was no good. You could hardly expect him to change for the better, I know. But he was quiet, so quiet, and never comfortable sitting still anywhere but always up and moving around.... He'd always had a joke ... and now you couldn't get him to laugh, or when he did it was more the sound of a man choking, a sound that stopped up the throats of other people around him. They got to leaving him alone most of the time, and I didn't blame them. It was a fact: Henry was jumpy and mean.

Henry was like many veterans in that he was emotionally detached, unwilling to talk about his experiences and uncertain about how to function at home. What is now known as post-traumatic stress disorder was not fully understood at the time. Lyman comments that his brother spent three years fighting in the war, adding, "By then I guess the whole war was solved in the government's mind, but for him it would keep on going." Rather than seek ways to start a new life for himself, Henry chose to stagnate, watching television and keeping to himself. While his family loved him very much, they were unequipped to cope with Henry's problems. Although he seemed to be improving when

he finished fixing the car, this lighter mood was temporary—or perhaps even feigned. The anguish bottled up inside him eventually destroyed him.

Style

First-Person Narrator

"The Red Convertible" is told entirely in the first person from Lyman's point of view. He tells the reader about his brother, expressing the love and admiration he felt and his pain at being powerless to help him in the end. His voice is seemingly trustworthy and reliable, and he is unashamed of his sensitive and emotional nature. Not only does he remember exactly how he felt during each episode he relates, but he also describes his emotions openly to the reader. He recalls the excitement he felt at first seeing the red convertible: "The first time we saw it! ... There it was, parked, large as life. Really as *if it* was alive." He remembers a moment of complete relaxation during his road trip with Henry: "I remember I laid under those trees and it was comfortable. So comfortable. The branches bent down all around me like a tent or a stable. And quiet, it was quiet." Lyman also recalls the optimism he felt when he and Henry took the car for a drive after Henry fixed it. It was springtime after a snowy winter, and Lyman comments, "When everything starts changing, drying up, clearing off, you feel like your whole life is starting."

The only incident in which Lyman holds back from the reader is the one in which he lost his brother. He tells the reader that he saw his brother in the river and that he tried to rescue him, but he does not say how he felt. He describes running the car into the river after his brother, but he does not tell the reader how doing it made him feel. This sudden privacy makes Lyman seem realistic to the reader. As a first-person narrator, he retains the right to choose what to divulge and what not to. Because he is so forthcoming throughout the rest of the story, this emotional silence tells the reader that his feelings are too painful to share.

Symbolism

Erdrich uses numerous symbols in "The Red Convertible" to convey meaning and to communicate complex ideas. The title of the story points to the most fully developed symbol in the story, the car. The car is a complex symbol because its meaning changes as the story progresses. It represents the connection between Lyman and Henry. They buy it together on a mutual impulse, and then they take it on a summer-long road trip together. Twice Henry tries to give Lyman full ownership of the car, but Lyman refuses because the car symbolizes their union. In the end, the car is the literal vehicle that takes the brothers to the site of their tragic last meeting. Once Henry is dead, Lyman knows that he has lost his innocence and his connection to his brother, and, therefore, he has no use for the car.

Erdrich uses symbolism in other ways in the story. Susy has very long hair that she wears in buns. Until she lets her hair down, Lyman and Henry have no idea how extraordinary her hair is. Susy's hair symbolizes qualities people have that are visible

but are not what they seem to be. This is important later when Henry returns from the war and is obviously disturbed, yet nobody is capable of understanding him because Henry refuses to make himself fully visible. The television Lyman buys for the family symbolizes the intrusion of the events of the world into their otherwise peaceful home on the reservation. Erdrich also uses the seasons to symbolize the characters' inner worlds. The brothers take a carefree road trip that lasts an entire summer. When the summer comes to an end, so do their innocent good times. Henry continues to be withdrawn as he fixes the car in the winter, but when spring comes, he seems renewed (if only temporarily).

Toward the end of the story, Lyman and Henry watch their beer cans as they throw them into the river. They watch to see how far the cans will float until they fill with water and sink. The river symbolizes the trials everyone endures in life, especially Henry. The story shows how much he was able to take from life before it dragged him under its current. This image also serves a dual purpose as symbolism and foreshadowing because it prefigures Henry's drowning.

Historical Context

American Involvement in the Vietnam War

The Vietnam War lasted from 1959 to 1975, with the North Vietnamese and the National Liberation Front fighting the South Vietnamese and the United States military. The United States involvement stemmed from the belief that if Vietnam came under communist control, communism would quickly spread throughout Southeast Asia. In 1965, the first American troops were sent to South Vietnam to prevent the downfall of the government. More troops were sent to Vietnam over the following years despite the war's unpopularity at home. Demonstrations, sit-ins, and anti-war songs became common in 1960s America.

In 1968, Richard Nixon defeated Lyndon B. Johnson in the presidential election, promising peace with honor. He was unable to make progress in peace negotiations but won reelection in 1972. In January 1973, all participants in the Vietnam War signed the Treaty of Paris. Among the terms of the Treaty of Paris were the withdrawal of American troops from South Vietnam (that occurred by the end of March) and a cease-fire.

The casualties were immense: three to four million Vietnamese lost their lives, close to two million Laotians and Cambodians were killed after these nations were drawn into the conflict, and over fifty-eight thousand Americans died. The war cost the United States well over $ 130 billion. Despite the terms of the treaty, conflict persisted in Vietnam, and, in 1975, it was unified under communism.

Chippewa Tribe

The Chippewa originally settled in a large area ranging from present-day Ontario and Quebec to Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. This area expanded to include Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and the Dakotas. When European explorers and settlers came to America, the Chippewa formed fur-trading relationships with them. This trade led many Chippewas to the prairies, where they gradually adopted a lifestyle different from that of their woodland forebears. In Erdrich's *Love Medicine,* the Chippewa reservation is in North Dakota, making her characters descendents of the original tribe.

The Chippewa on the Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota were among the few Native American populations who asked that the government create a reservation for them. By 1960, close to seven thousand Chippewas lived there. Twenty years later, that number had decreased to about four thousand.

Life on Native American reservations has traditionally been difficult. The land assigned to reservations is generally unfit for rich crop cultivation, unemployment is high, education is lacking, disease and alcoholism are ongoing problems, and communication between generations is made more difficult by the Americanized schooling received by youngsters. Still, progress made since the 1980s has improved conditions.

Critical Overview

"The Red Convertible" serves as the second chapter of Erdrich's acclaimed debut novel, *Love Medicine.* Critics are impressed by the novel's presentation of modern Native American life and of the diversity among people within a single culture. Louise Flavin of *Critique* remarks, "Erdrich's *Love Medicine,* while nontraditional in many ways, gives a compassionate, humanistic account of the lives of reservation Indians without glorifying their culture yet without demeaning them in their weaknesses and failure." Erdrich (who is part Chippewa and part German-American) is regarded as a bridge between the Native American experience and the white experience. In *North Dakota Quarterly,* James Ruppert observes:

Love Medicine is a dazzling, personal, intense novel of survivors who struggle to define their own identities and fates in a world of mystery and human frailty. In her writing, Louise Erdrich both protects and celebrates this world. To assume effectively the roles of protector and celebrant, Erdrich must mediate between two conceptual frameworks, white and Native.... This dual vision allows her either to use one code to illuminate another, or to ignore one code and stay within another if she wishes. She can create value and meaning through a Native worldview or through a contemporary American worldview or both at the same time.... She is capable of satisfying two audiences at once, commenting on two cultural systems from a position of deep understanding and knowledge.

Consisting of fourteen stories, *Love Medicine* is told from seven different points of view. Some reviewers find the shifting narrative voices confusing. In fact, many critics contend that the book is not a novel at all but rather a loosely connected collection of short stories.

Still other critics cite Erdrich's use of multiple narrators as a strength of the book because diverse narrators (like Lyman) tell personal stories in their own unique ways, as in the Native American oral tradition of storytelling. Roberta Rubenstein of *Chicago Tribune Books* writes, "Through lyrical language, vivid characterizations, and freshly minted images, the narrative masterfully sustains the illusion of oral stories." She adds, "The medley of narrative voices resembles the medley of colors in an Indian rug pattern: Each heightens the contrast and amplifies the design as a whole."

Critics find the character Henry Lamartine, Jr., compelling. He is seen as a tragic figure who represents conflict between white culture and Native American culture. According to Nora Barry and Mary Prescott of *Critique,* Henry embodies the "failure of the warrior tradition." They explain:

Because Henry is denied the ritual catharsis of recounting his exploits when the warrior tradition of the past does not agree with the present reality of an untraditional war, his memories explode and destroy him.

Ruppert comments that from the white perspective, Henry's demise is understandable and foreseeable because his sense of reality has been shaken by the trauma of fighting in the war. From the Native American perspective, however, Henry's inability to cope with life stems from the conflict between his experience and the Chippewa understanding of war, death, and honor. Ruppert explains that Henry has no passion about the war and no choice about how he will fight. Flavin notes, "He is less a victim of reservation life than of a war that is not of his own making. The Indian brave no longer fights for his own land and food but in a foreign war in which he has no stake." Critics point to Henry and other characters in *Love Medicine* as symbols of the Native American struggle to preserve their cultural richness in the face of a dominant, conflicting culture.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Bussey holds a master's degree in interdisciplinary studies and a bachelor's degree in English literature. She is an independent writer specializing in literature. In the following essay, Bussey explains the complex symbolism of the car in Erdrich 's "The Red Convertible."

In "The Red Convertible", Erdrich uses symbolism in a variety of ways. The most important symbol is the title car, the significance of which changes as the story unfolds. Erdrich's use of symbolism in this way gives her story depth and complexity and enables her to communicate ideas and character developments without lengthy explanations. As a result, the red convertible embodies, at various points in the story, everything the story is meant to express.

Perhaps the convertible's greatest contribution to the story is as a symbol of the relationship between Lyman and Henry. Initially, it represents their close companionship. They bought it together on a whim, which demonstrates their willingness to share a major responsibility and to do so on impulse. After buying it, they took a summer-long road trip together. The decision to take the trip was mutual, and their unplanned approach to the trip also was mutual. That they enjoyed the extended trip shows that they were close and genuinely enjoyed each other's company.

The convertible symbolizes the brothers' reaching out to each other. Before leaving for Vietnam, Henry used the car to reach out to Lyman. He told Lyman to take the car, and he handed over his key. After returning from the war, Henry was emotionally distant, but again he tried to give Lyman full ownership of the car. These are significant episodes in the story because they reveal Henry's love for Lyman. As a Chippewa, Henry learned to be reserved in expressing his feelings; his culture expected men to refrain from emotional displays. Because of this, he would not tell his brother outright that he loved him, wanted him to be independent, or feared that he (Henry) might not return from the war. Instead, he expressed these feelings by offering the car to his brother.

Lyman used the car as a means to reach out to Henry. When Henry returned from the war moody, detached, and silent, Lyman intentionally damaged the car to get Henry involved in something. When Henry saw the condition of the car, he said to Lyman, "When I left, that car was running like a watch. Now I don't know if I can get it to start again, let alone get it anywhere near its old condition." Henry's statement is deeply significant when read in light of the car's dual meaning. Lyman's decision to damage the convertible was important because he saw the car as his brother's only chance of regaining his sense of self. When Lyman damaged the car, cosmetically and mechanically, he demonstrated his willingness to risk not only a prized possession but also his relationship with his brother (symbolized by the car) for his brother's happiness. The changing physical condition of the car is also symbolic of the relationship of the brothers because it reflects the status of their brotherly closeness.

Besides symbolizing the complex relationship between Lyman and Henry, the convertible represents other aspects of the characters' inner worlds. During the summer road trip, it represented freedom. At the time, Lyman was only sixteen, an age at which most young people long to explore the world and to make their own decisions. Together, Lyman and Henry used the car to leave the reservation where they lived and to see what was beyond its borders.

The convertible also symbolizes the carefree, innocent life that precedes Henry's three years in Vietnam. Lyman and Henry traveled without care or worry, enjoying whatever experiences came their way. When Henry prepared to leave for Vietnam, he gave Lyman his key to the car. Henry likely realized that by going to Vietnam, he was sacrificing his innocence. Lyman, however, could still enjoy being carefree, so, by giving Lyman his key, Henry was encouraging him to embrace his last innocent years. At the end of the story, Henry dies in the river, and Lyman runs the car in after him. This is a highly symbolic moment because it represents the end of Lyman's innocence as well as the end of the brothers' relationship. The car had no meaning for him after his brother was gone, and he had learned too much about the world to feel carefree again.

The car represents as well a much-needed outlet for Henry after the war. When he came home, he was unable to function as he had in the past. After Lyman damaged the car, Henry had the opportunity to work toward a goal, instead of watching television all day. In this way, the car symbolizes Henry's need for a sense of purpose and mastery. He did not know how to be a member of his family or community, but he did know how to fix the car. Fixing the car seems to have lifted his spirits because it was familiar and something that allowed him to feel useful and competent for a while.

"The Red Convertible" is a seemingly simple story, but the changing symbolism of the car gives it richness and depth. In describing metaphors, scholars often use the terms vehicle and tenor. The vehicle is the image used to communicate meaning (the tenor) to the reader. Applying this terminology to the convertible in Erdrich' s story, the reader finds numerous tenors revealed through one literal vehicle. Fraternal bonds, freedom, innocence, control, and wisdom—all of these themes are carried by one red convertible.

Source: Jennifer Bussey, Critical Essay on "The Red Convertible," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, Korb discusses what the red convertible represents to Henry Lamartine on each of his journeys.

In Erdrich's story "The Red Convertible," Henry Lamartine makes three memorable journeys off the Chippewa reservation. The first journey, which he takes with his brother Lyman, is a pleasure-filled jaunt around the western part of the United States. The next time he leaves the reservation he is sent to fight in the Vietnam War. His third journey is his last; he travels with Lyman to the Red River to commit suicide. These trips all differ greatly, but the presence of the Lamartine brothers' red convertible ties these journeys together.

In the opening paragraphs of the narrative, Lyman sets up the sense of freedom and luxury that the red convertible brings to Henry and him by suggesting the impoverishment and disaster that befall the Chippewa on the reservation. Ironically, the only reason Henry is able to afford his share of the convertible is through misfortune; he had two checks in his pocket when they saw the car—his weekly paycheck and "a week's extra pay for being laid off." Lyman is the sole person on the reservation with the talent for making money. In this aspect, he differs from the rest of the Chippewa, a truth that "everyone recognized." Allowed special privileges, such as keeping a percentage of the money he raises for the church selling spiritual bouquets, Lyman soon discovers that the "more money I made the easier the money came." In Lyman's successes, the failures of the rest of the people on the reservation are revealed by implicit comparison. Yet, despite his talent, even Lyman experiences his share of difficulties. After only one year of owning the Joliet Café, "the worst tornado ever seen around here" blew in, and the "whole operation was smashed to bits. A total loss. The fryalator was up in a tree, the grill torn in half like it was paper." This incident, which touches Lyman, the one person with good luck, further emphasizes the nature of the depravation on the reservation and why the brothers—particularly the unlucky Henry— feel the need to escape by means of the red convertible.

It is no coincidence that Henry and Lyman come across the car in Winnepeg, on a trip off the reservation. They had been walking around, "seeing the sights." The narration implies that such a marvelous object—a car that "reposed"—was not available on the reservation. The brothers purchase the car, as they say, "before we had thought it over at all," and it turns out to be their ticket to a new world. "We took off driving all one summer," writes Lyman, visiting many places around the West and Northwest. In Montana, the brothers find a spot that was "So comfortable." There, Lyman "feel[s] good," and Henry seems at peace with the world, "asleep with his arms thrown wide." Lyman is not sure of their exact location, for "it could have been anywhere." With the red convertible in their grasp, joy is everywhere because the car provides the key to life off the reservation and away from the constraints and troubles the reservation bears.

The red convertible brings the brothers to travel as far away as Alaska, a place they "never wanted to leave." Lyman describes their time in Alaska as idyllic. It is a nether world, neither light nor dark; the "sun doesn't truly set there in summer, and the night is more a soft dusk." Alaska makes Lyman feel as if he is in a pleasant dream world, where responsibilities or difficult tasks or choices fall away. "You might doze off, sometimes, but before you know it you're up again, like an animal in nature," he says. "You never feel like you have to sleep hard or put away the world." Alaska also brims with the promise of possibility, for "things would grow there. One day just dirt or moss, the next day flowers and long grass."

As the season changes, the sky begins to get darker and the "cold was even getting just a little mean." The brothers need to escape the upcoming winter and its metaphoric chill, so they head back south, looking for "greener pastures." However, although they speed through the northwestern states, they are hopelessly "racing the weather," and the winter eventually catches up with them back on the reservation. This is a place too beaten down to support the red convertible, so it is not surprising that the brothers "got home just in time ... for the army to remember that Henry had signed up to join it." Henry thus sets off on his second journey, but it bears no resemblance to the one from which he has just returned. This journey is not a pleasurable one; Henry must go without the company of his brother and the potent force of the red convertible.

The Henry that departs the reservation, the Henry of the summer trip in the red convertible, is full of life, vitality, and strength. "I don't wonder that the army was so glad to get my brother that they turned him into a Marine," Lyman muses. "He was built like a brick outhouse anyway." Henry's nose, "big and sharp as a hatchet, like the nose of on Red Tomahawk, the Indian who killed Sitting Bull, whose profile is on signs all along the North Dakota highways," is a further representation of Henry's power and vigor. Despite possessing the physical qualities of a fighter, Henry is captured by the enemy. Although the family only receives two letters from Henry while he is gone, Lyman understands that the red convertible offers the best chance of helping Henry through this hard time. As Lyman states, "[I] wrote him back several times, even though I didn't know if those letters would get through. I kept him informed all about the car."

After three years, Henry returns home, but according to Lyman, he "was very different, and ... the change was no good." This new, reduced Henry has been sculpted by the Marines and the experience in Vietnam. He spends his time watching TV, sitting in a chair and "gripping the armrests with all his might." Even the red convertible brings no life to Henry. In desperation, Lyman destroys the car, rendering it "worse than any typical Indian car that had been all its life on reservation roads," in hopes that Henry will restore it. This ploy eventually works, and Henry spends all of his time, day and night, fixing the car. That spring, when Henry suggests they go for a ride in the convertible, Lyman believes that Henry "could be coming around." Lyman feels all the hope that the melting snow and the "very bright" sun bring. Their younger sister takes a picture of Lyman and Henry, who significantly is still wearing his soldier's field jacket and the other "worn-in clothes he'd come back in." Lyman takes it as a good sign that Henry smiled when Bonita asked him to, but it is only much later that Lyman sees in the photograph

what he overlooked at the time: that "the shadows on his face are deep as holes. . . . [and] curved like little hooks around the ends of his smile."

Lyman believes that the ride to the Red River in the convertible represents a new beginning. "The trip over there was beautiful," he recalls. "When everything starts changing, drying up, clearing off, you feel like your whole life is starting." They park at the river, a place where they can revel in "all this green growing earth." While at first Lyman thinks that Henry was "clear, more peaceful," he is wrong. Lyman comes to understand Henry's pain, for "I felt something squeezing inside me and tightening and trying to let it go all at the same time.... I knew I was feeling what Henry was going through at that moment." Despite the comforting presence of the car and his brother and the memory of the summer of the red convertible, Henry is haunted.

Henry has lost the will to live, which Lyman comes to understand when his brother says that "he wanted to give the car to me for good now." To lose the red convertible is to lose the ability to experience joy and freedom, but Lyman tries to reject this truth by refusing to take the car. He even tries to beat feelings of hope back into his brother, and the two men fight "for all we're worth." Lyman allows himself to be fooled by this altercation, which ends in mutual laughter. He and Henry carry on as they used to, pulling the beers out of the cooler in the cars trunk and throwing the empty cans into the river. "I think it's the old Henry again," says Lyman. "He throws off his jacket and starts springing his legs up from the knees." Trying to bring back the spirit of their previous summer, Lyman likens Henry to the natural world. "He's down doing something between a grass dance and a bunny hop."

When Henry commits suicide, he does so through the forces of nature—by jumping into the river. However, Henry's trajectory replicates that of the beer cans the brothers had thrown into the river to "see how far, how fast the current takes them before they fill up and sink." As Henry is carried halfway across the river and his boots fill with water, he becomes yet another pieces of useless debris. Lyman wants to prevent this from happening. He jumps into the river, in vain hopes of saving Henry. Unable to do so, he nevertheless refuses to give up and get out of the river until "the sun is down," signifying that the day has closed in on Henry. Lyman is embittered by the false hope the red convertible held out for him and his brother. He believed it represented good times, but the past no longer lives in the present, and the convertible cannot bring good times ever again. In his despair, Henry pushes the car into the river that took Henry. The car undergoes a sort of death, too. Lyman watches as it sinks in the water. "The headlights reach in as they go down, searching, still lighted even after the water swirls over the back end. I wait. The wires short out. It is all finally dark." Yet, even then, the red convertible manifests a greater will for life than its owner, and, at the same time, marks its presence on Lyman forever; for he is left with "only the water, [and] the sound of it going and running and going and running and running."

Source: Rena Korb, Critical Essay on "The Red Convertible," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #3

Kryhoski is currently working as a freelance writer. In this essay, Kryhoski considers Erdrich's work in relation to the author's heritage.

On the surface, Louise Erdrich's "The Red Convertible" is definably tragic. A closer examination of the story, however, reveals a work mirroring Erdrich' s background. Influences of a catholic upbringing abound, yet the body of the work is steeped in Anishinaabe tradition. These influences, in tandem, paint a different picture for the reader. With a little research into Erdrich's past, the reader uncovers a work with a spiritual, vibrant quality in the guise of what is really not a tragedy at all.

Fundamentally, the structure of "The Red Convertible" is in keeping with an oral tradition. Although the narrator (Lyman) clearly identifies himself in the first paragraph of the work, his account maintains an oral quality. Lyman's narrative follows a pattern Nancy Peterson, in her work *"History, Postmodernism and Louise Erdrich's Tracks,"* identifies as repetition with variations, rhetorical patterns associated with orality ("I was," "I owned," "I had"), in Erdrich's writing. The work is also out of synch or sequence, as if it was being recalled and then told by the narrator. This quality of a tale being recalled, rather than carefully recorded, is evident when Lyman mentions his purchase of the red convertible in the beginning of the narrative and makes a shift backward to recount the specific details of the purchase. In addition, the entire account is related as a series of memories. Lyman does not give readers a linear picture of the events surrounding his brother's life; rather, he provides the reader with snapshots, or moments, from the past. Specific breaks in time accentuate this quality. For example, Lyman takes a moment to digress from his narrative to recall a picture of his brother he is forced to put away due to the painful memories it evokes. Lyman also has a tendency to shift, or drift, from recalling the main events of the story to engaging in more personalized, involved descriptions of minutiae, or minor detail. It is these qualities of orality that conjure up the image of a storyteller in the mind of the reader.

The Anishinaabe culture, like many indigenous cultures, relies on stories and storytellers to communicate and therefore preserve cultural values. Erdrich claims her creative inspiration stems in part from her Native past. Members of her family historically have engaged in storytelling from time to time, and repeated exposure to this family tradition, Erdrich says, influences her writing style. It is not surprising, then, to discover an Anishinaabe oral tradition serving as the supporting framework for the story.

An important component of this framework is the interrelationship the narrator has, or the connection he feels, with the natural world. Native Americans have a deeply spiritual connection with Mother Earth. Implicit within the context of this relationship is a deep respect for creation, for nature, and a feeling of interconnectedness with Mother Earth. The individual does not exist, rather, the individual is within an interconnectedness, the Anishinaabe's place in Creation that brings balance and belonging to the world, according to D'Arcy Rheault, Anishinaabe scholar, in his work *The Circle of Life: Thoughts on Contemporary Native Life.* This sense of universality, of participation,

implies belief in a world consciousness, a responsibility to this planet as part of a universal collective. Simply put, Lyman is part of something bigger, namely Mother Earth. For instance, rather than taking personal credit for his accomplishments, Lyman attributes his material success with the restaurant along spiritual lines, claiming, "I had it all in my mother's name." And, Lyman gives a matter-of-fact response to a sensitive inquiry into the legitimacy of his relation to Henry, with a decided lack of concern, claiming "we had the same mother, anyway." A fraternity exists between the brothers that transcends traditional notions of relation; this fraternity is linked to Lyman's Anishinaabe beliefs.

One of the most powerful elements present within the work is the author's use of the color red. In the beginning of the story, the object of the narrator's affections is a bright red convertible. Juxtapose, or compare, this image, one of excitement and vitality, to the image of Henry, blood dripping down his chin as he chews on a piece of blood-soaked bread. The contrast is quite a powerful one. The color red is symbolically associated with love, passion, health, and vitality; however, red is also connected with the sun and all gods of war, anger, bloodlust, and vengeance. The author uses these images to create an interesting dichotomy.

For Lyman, images of a healthy, happy Henry are embodied in the spirit of the red convertible. He describes the vehicle in human terms, claiming, "There it was, parked large as life. Really as if it was alive." All of the memories related in the first half of the narrative are related to the convertible, to a Henry full of vitality, playfulness and life. To solidify this relationship, Lyman consistently mentions the vehicle belongs to Henry; from the outset of the story, when he states, "now Henry owns the whole car," until the story's end, when the question of ownership inspires a fight between the brothers. The car becomes a source of comfort and a connection for Lyman to his brother. A marked shift in tone occurs in the second half of the work, as Lyman's account moves from pleasant memories of a road trip to the dark days spent with a brother changed by the Vietnam War. Lyman recalls, "Henry had not even looked at the car since he'd gotten home, though it was in tip-top condition and ready to drive." All of Lyman's hopes for his brother subsequently become symbolically invested in the bright red convertible.

This parallel between the convertible and Henry is made clear with an act of desperation on the part of the narrator. In his efforts to reach his brother, Lyman invests in a belief in a happier past, stating, "I thought the car might bring the old Henry back somehow." The car is then violated, just as Henry has been violated, as Lyman smashes it with a sledgehammer. Erdrich uses this symbolic act as a vehicle for social commentary. A perfectly good car, a perfectly good life, both needlessly destroyed. But unlike the car, Henry cannot be repaired, and he realizes this: "I know it. I can't help it. It's no use." Lyman's attempts to revitalize and revive a glorious past for Henry fail. The final moments of the story support this connection when the narrator sees fit to send the car to a watery grave to join his brother. Again, Erdrich is commenting on the devastation and travesty of war and the hopeless artifice of Henry's attempt to evoke a more innocent, carefree past, as demonstrated by his efforts to repair the red convertible.

Juxtapose the image of the convertible and what it symbolizes in the story to the violent image of Henry chewing on blood-soaked bread. He is a shadow of his former carefree self and appears to be in a dream state. Lyman recalls the incident as he describes "blood going down Henry's chin, but he didn' t notice it" despite the fact that "every time he took a bite of his bread his blood fell onto it until he was eating his own blood mixed in with the food." This view of Henry, so dramatically transformed, alludes to Erdrich's Catholic upbringing. To Christians, blood represents not only human life, but also human frailty and mortality. Having blood upon one's hands relates directly to murder. The image of the Eucharist, the symbolic final meal amongst Christ and his disciples, also comes to mind. The bread and cup as symbols of Christ's body and blood are symbols starkly contrasted with the image of Henry. He has become the sacrificial lamb. His actions, however, have taken a queer turn, as he ingests his own blood. Erdrich purposely gives the reader this distorted view of Henry, and the conclusion to be drawn from this rather bizarre scene, this strange twist to a traditional story, is that Henry has been sacrificed for no good reason. Henry, as a result of his war experience, remains out of synch with the world until his death.

The author amplifies the notion of an exploited Henry on several levels. Henry is referred to within the course of the story as having a nose resembling that of "Red Tomahawk, the Indian who killed Sitting Bull, whose profile is on signs all along the North Dakota highways." Most historical accounts surrounding Sitting Bull's death recall the unjust-ness of the event, the brutality of his murder along with eight of his warriors, and the bloody carnage left behind that was formerly his band of people. This band was brutally massacred during their migration through the Badlands to the Pine Ridge Agency. In consideration of the Sitting Bull reference, the warrior image of Henry creates a strange irony implicit in the idea of the Native American serving or fighting for an enemy who has formerly defeated him. The author's use of this reference to Sitting Bull exacerbates the injury to Henry, a consequence of his experiences in Vietnam.

Erdrich's Christian as well as her Native American background, however, put into perspective what would otherwise have been a terrible incident in Lyman's view. At the conclusion of the story, Henry wades out into and is caught by the current of the river, his voice calmly reaching Lyman with the message "My boots are filling." Although Lyman's initial response to his brother's suicide attempt is to try to swim out to save him, he does not recall for the reader any desperate attempts made in the process of finding his brother, nor any frustration on the part of the narrator. Instead, there is a lapse of time in the narrative until the moment when Lyman "gets out of the river" and proceeds to calmly submerge the car in its murky depths.

The water imagery is a clever creative device hinting at an endless number of cultural and religious images. In the Catholic (Christian) faith, water symbolizes life. Christ's acts of transcendence involve turning water into wine, and walking on water, acts that transcend the earthly condition. Christians are also baptized in water in an admission of faith and to purify their souls. Recalling the blood image appearing earlier in the text, St. Paul identifies the ritual of baptism as being one of death and rebirth, simulating the death and resurrection of Christ. Flowing water in Western philosophy also represents change and the passage of time. Finally, for many cultures, the river symbolizes life, the

mouth of the river sharing meanings with a gate or a door, a passage to another world. Mythologist Mircea Eliade, as quoted in "Sacred Springs and Other Water Lore," expounds on water and its regenerative powers, stating,

Immersion in water symbolizes a return to the pre-formal, a total regeneration, a new birth, for immersion means dissolution of forms, a reintegration into the formlessness of pre-existence, and emerging from the water is a repetition of the act of creation in which form was first expressed.

The act of suicide, in these terms, is an act of transcendence for Henry. Lyman is able to calmly process Henry's suicide precisely because he is responding to a notion of a watery afterlife, his attitude exemplified in the act of submerging the car and betrayed in his statement at the outset of his narrative when he declares "now Henry owns the whole car."

It is difficult to read "The Red Convertible" as strictly a tragedy. Louise Erdrich not only uses the narrative to expose Henry's misfortune but to celebrate the promise of a spiritual life beyond the sound of the swirling water, "the sound of it going and running and going and running and running."

Source: Laura Kryhoski, Critical Essay on "The Red Convertible," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Topics for Further Study

Research assimilation and acculturation as they apply to Native Americans. What are the main differences between the two, and what are some examples of each? Relate your findings to the story and see what additional insights into the characters emerge.

Some critics do not believe that Henry's death is a suicide, while others feel certain that it is. What do you think, and why? Choose a member of your class who disagrees with you and conduct a debate. Let the class (or a panel) judge the debate.

Compare the Chippewa to two other tribes, such as the Cherokee, Sioux, Pawnee, Seminole, Navajo, Hopi, or Apache. What similarities and

differences do you find in the tribes' lifestyles, religions, dress, arts, traditions, social structures, etc.? Consider these cultural aspects in light of stereotypes that portray all Native Americans as being similar. Create a report on each tribe, comparing all three and presenting facts that will help dispel their stereotypes.

 Read about post-traumatic stress disorder in war veterans, especially veterans of the Vietnam War. Also, read about how Vietnam veterans were received upon returning home after the war. Write a journal as if you are a returning Vietnam veteran describing your homecoming, and record your feelings and thoughts about the future.

Compare and Contrast

1984: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., is completed. Dedicated in 1982, the wall displays the names of over fifty-eight thousand Americans who died or were never recovered in the war. In 1983, a bronze statue of three soldiers—one white, one African American, and one Hispanic—is added.

Today: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial attracts thousand of visitors and veterans every year. The site has become a place of meditation and somber reflection.

1984: Organizations such as the American Indian Movement and the National Congress of American Indians work to improve economic conditions on reservations. In the late 1960s, unemployment on reservations reached 80 percent, but with new programs in place more tribal members are finding work. On many reservations, gaming (bingo, casinos, and so on) is the primary industry.

Today: Unemployment on reservations remains high, at 46 percent, and the poverty rate is 30 percent, the highest in the country. Although gaming revenues may give the impression that tribes are wealthy, only 184 of the 557 federally recognized tribes conduct these businesses, and many of them run only small operations.

1984: Veterans of the Vietnam War still struggle with their experiences eleven years after the war ends. Symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder range from mild depression and sleep disturbances to severe chronic depression and inability to work and maintain relationships. As the public becomes more educated about post-traumatic stress disorder, veterans are more able to find the help they need.

Today: Many veterans of the 1991 Persian Gulf War still struggle with Gulf War Syndrome. Symptoms include abdominal pain, insomnia, memory loss, blurred vision, and aching joints. In 1997, the government acknowledges that a toxic gas used during the conflict may have spread farther than was realized, possibly reaching hundreds of thousands of American troops.

What Do I Read Next?

Sherman Alexie's screenplay *Smoke Signals* (1998) tells the story of Victor and Thomas, two young Native American men who take a journey to collect Victor's father's ashes. Along the way, these two very different men draw on their common heritage and learn from each other. *Smoke Signals* was made into a movie in 1998.

Jacklight (1984) is Erdrich's first collection of poetry and contains some poems she wrote in college. Through these poems, she explores themes of romantic love and her mixed heritage.

Erdrich's debut novel, *Love Medicine* (1984), contains fourteen chapters that also function as stand-alone stories. The stories are held together by common characters, themes, and setting, so each story has relevance to the others.

Edited by John L. Purdy and James Ruppert, *Nothing But the Truth: An Anthology of Native American Literature* (2001) includes selections from a wide variety of contemporary Native American writers. In addition to fiction, poetry, and drama, an entire chapter is devoted to essays about Native American literature.

Further Study

Brende, Joel Osler, and E. R. Parson, *Vietnam Veterans: The Road to Recovery,* Perseus Publishing, 1985.

Brende and Parson combine research and anecdotal information to provide an authoritative account of post-traumatic stress disorder in Vietnam veterans. This book is written to be more easily understood than other books on the subject, which are more clinical in language and tone.

Chavkin, Allan Richard, ed., *The Chippewa Landscape of Louise Erdrich,* University of Alabama Press, 1999.

This book contains essays analyzing the relevance of Erdrich's Chippewa heritage to her fiction. Topics include Erdrich's expansion *of Love Medicine* and her role as a storyteller.

Coltelli, Laura, ed., *Winged Words: American Indian Writers Speak,* University of Nebraska Press, 1990.

Coltelli presents interviews with a wide range of writers whose heritage is at least partly Native American. Included is a twelve-page chapter about Erdrich and her husband.

Nelson, Elizabeth Hoffman, and Malcolm A. Nelson, eds., *Telling the Stories: Essays on American Indian Literatures and Cultures,* Peter Lang Publishing, 2001.

Nelson and Nelson compile thirteen chapters exploring Native American identity and the important role literature plays in communicating and preserving it. Some chapters relate first-hand experiences, and others assess the works of major Native American authors, including Erdrich.

Bibliography

Barry, Nora, and Mary Prescott, "The Triumph of the Brave: *Love Medicine's* Holistic Vision," in *Critique,* Vol. 30, No. 2, Winter 1989, pp. 123-38.

Beidler, Peter G., "Erdrich, (Karen) Louise," in *Reference Guide to American Literature,* St. James Press, 1994.

Flavin, Louise, "Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine:* Loving over Time and Distance," in *Critique,* Vol. 31, No. 1, Fall 1989, pp. 55-64.

Jeffrey, David Lyle, ed., *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature,* William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992.

Moss, Joyce, and George Wilson, eds., "Louise Erdrich: *Love Medicine,"* in *Literature and Its Times: Profiles of 300 Notable Literary Works and the Historical Events That Influenced Them,* Vol. 5, Gale Research, 1997.

Peterson, Nancy J., "History, Postmodernism and Louise Erdrich's *Tracks,*" in*PMLA,* Vol. 109, No. 5, October 1994, pp. 982-94.

Rheault, D'Arcy, *The Circle of Life: Thoughts on Contemporary Native Life,* York University, 1995, pp. 1—6.

Rubenstein, Roberta, "Louise Erdrich Revisits the Complex World of the Chippewa," in *Chicago Tribune Books,* November 14, 1993, pp. 3, 11.

Ruppert, James, "Mediation and Multiple Narrative," in *North Dakota Quarterly,* Vol. 59, No. 4, Fall 1991, pp. 229-41.

Windling, Terry, "Sacred Springs and Other Water Lore," in *Realms of Fantasy,* 1997, and at http://www.endicott-/studio.com/forwatr.html (July 3, 2001).

BOOKRAGS

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Short Stories for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535