

## ENGL1102M

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### "The Impact of Catholicism on the Act of Making Chippewa Love Medicine"

The collection of stories that make up "Love Medicine" were Louise Erdrich's first attempt to deal with her Chippewa heritage in fictional form; it was an attempt she found difficult, saying, "My characters choose me, and once they do it's like standing in a field and hearing echoes" (Hall 26). Like a shaman who provides a sacred interpretation of tribal life and guides his peers into a world of power, Erdrich hears the voices of the past and creates a historical community of a people who are the least known of the surviving North American natives. A shaman receives his or her healing powers from spirits and, after personally experiencing these powers, brings the sustaining energy to the community. In "Love Medicine," Erdrich depicts some of the most powerful and encompassing mergers of ancient tribal ritual and modern religious trappings.

Erdrich's "Love Medicine" is told in first person by Lipsha Morrissey. Lipsha lives in the Senior citizens' home with his grandparents. "Love Medicine" pulls together the forces of Christianity and Shamanism in a delightfully ironic way. Although Grandpa loves Grandma, he has never given up his adulterous pursuit of Lulu Lamartine. Lipsha is stunned at the depth of Grandma's anger at Grandpa for chasing Lulu: "I thought love got easier over the years" (Erdrich 107). Because Lipsha is grateful that Grandma took him in when his mother wanted to throw him in a slough and because he has the "touch," he is perfectly primed to help Grandma rid herself of Lulu's distractions forever. Lipsha and Grandma conspire to concoct a love medicine. "Love medicines is something of an old Chippewa specialty. No other tribe has got them down so good," says Lipsha. He credits his grandma with the ability to "know things," and it is she who remembers "love medicines."

Lipsha credits a small voice telling him to "look up," as if towards the heavens, for providing the answer to his "love medicine" (Erdrich 112). Looking up, he sees two Canadian geese. He is reminded that geese mate for life and is seized with the solution. He will feed his grandparents geese hearts to cure their relationship. Unfortunately, Lipsha is unable to kill two geese. He buys turkey hearts from the local grocery, instead. As Lipsha justifies his substitution of the hearts, the subtle influences of Catholicism on his thoughts emerge. He decides to use faith to get the turkey hearts to work for his grandparents. While waiting for a good shot at the geese, he remembers Lulu's pet bird calling it a "paraclete" rather than a parakeet. His mispronunciation is indicative of his indoctrination into Catholicism. The Paraclete is the Holy Ghost in church doctrine. He tells himself the old ways are "superstitions" and heads down to the "Red Owl" store (Erdrich 113). He tries to justify his substitution of the switching of the hearts by using faith in the "Higher Power."

Lipsha thinks about faith on his way to deliver the turkey hearts because faith is "belief even when the good don't deliver" (Erdrich 114). "Faith could be called belief against all odds . . . How does that sound?" (Erdrich 114). He considers the promises made by the "Higher Power" and reasons, "Anybody ever go and slap a malpractice suit on God?" (Erdrich 114). He feels that by switching the hearts he is committing an improper practice because he would not be using his tribal traditions but faith instead: "I finally convinced myself that the real power to the love medicine was not the goose heart but in the faith of the cure" (Erdrich 114). Lipsha's fusion of

Shamanistic and Catholic beliefs has temporarily, at least, served his needs.

In an attempt to make sure his substitute hearts will work, Lipsha takes the turkey hearts to the mission for "blessing." The Father directs him to Sister Martin, but Lipsha fears "the blessing wouldn't be as powerful" coming from her rather than the Father (Erdrich 114). Lipsha hesitates in revealing to her that the hearts are for a love medicine. When he does, she refuses to bless them, misunderstanding the situation. Sister Martin believes that Lipsha is trying to use the hearts to find love for himself. In the absence of tribal blessing, Lipsha assumes the role of priest, blessing the hearts with holy water himself. Ironically, his actions undermine his previous assertion that it is faith, not practice of tribal traditions that empowers his medicine. It seems the mix of ritual is indicative of the way the Catholic religion has influenced the Chippewa, not replacing it but merging with it to form some new system of beliefs that conforms rather than reforms.

Lipsha takes Grandma the turkey hearts, and Grandma swallows her heart raw and prepares Grandpa's, telling him it is for his blood. Grandpa senses something is going on and teases Grandma, rolling the heart around in his mouth. Grandma slaps him on the back to force him to swallow the heart, but he chokes to death instead of swallowing the heart. Grandma becomes convinced that Grandpa's ghost remains near her, thereby proving the love medicine's potency. Even though Lipsha told her about the turkey hearts, Grandma is reassured of Grandpa's love when she sees his ghost. She then passes her rosary beads to Lipsha, the beads that she held when she first saw Grandpa's ghost. She no longer needs the beads, which are important for Catholic faith, because she believes that the "love medicine" has worked. Oddly, Lipsha's "touch" is even stronger after receiving the beads (Erdrich 121). The beads are not meant to replace the "touch" Lipsha has been given but to reinforce a Chippewa/Catholic merger of spiritualism, neither pure nor diluted but something else, whole in its own right.

Catholicism is a recurring theme throughout "Love Medicine." Erdrich does not pass judgment but rather depicts the absurdities inflicted on an already deeply religious group of people with a profound mix of sorrow and hilarity. "Love Medicine" reveals a group of people whose beliefs are not replaced by Christianity. They have merely assumed those religious trappings that appeal to their superstitious natures. "Love Medicine" in the Chippewa language, means literally "a mixture" (Landes 136). The story is just that - a mix of beliefs.

#### Works Cited

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