



FACULTY OF EDUCATION AND BUSINESS STUDIES
Department of Humanities

Nature is Everywhere

An Ecocritical Reading of Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*

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Abstract

This thesis paper illuminates nature and its relationship to the characters in Louise Erdrich's novel *Love Medicine*. Now more than ever, there is a need for literature analyses that explores nature with a critical lens; it is a need brought forth by the contemporary world, namely, the global environmental crisis. Nature is both precious and omnipresent, and some cultures have a deep respect for this simple truth. Such is the case with some of the Ojibwe people in *Love Medicine*. This thesis explores the close relationship with nature evinced by some of the Native American characters in *Love Medicine*. Moreover, it illustrates the construed idea and portrayal of western societies as destructive and exploitative.

Table of Contents

Abstract	1
Introduction	3
A theoretical and critical approach	4
Ecocriticism	4
Analysis	11
June Kashpaw's Demise.....	12
Lulu Lamartine's relationship with nature	16
Lipsha Morrisey's spiritual and magical relationship with nature	19
Conclusion.....	26
Works Cited.....	28

Introduction

Around the contemporary world, there are numerous pressing issues occurring at once; however, few issues have been brought to the attention of the public and have been the center of as much debate as environmental issues. It goes without saying that a critical literary approach such as ecocriticism which, in short, analyses the environment in literature from various viewpoints, is of great use to have and apply while analyzing literature. Within this thesis, the narrative to be studied and discussed is Louise Erdrich's novel *Love Medicine*.

Louise Erdrich is a contemporary American author, who is partially Native American. She has often found inspiration in the life and history of her ethnic community, and the principal subject of her writing is the Ojibwe Indians. The Ojibwe are a group of Native Americans who live in the northern Midwest of the United States of America ("Louise Erdrich"). Erdrich's debut novel *Love Medicine* was first published in 1984 as a continuation of her short story "The World's Greatest Fisherman", which also happens to be the introducing chapter in *Love Medicine*. In accordance with Erdrich's principal subject of writing, the fictional characters that are prominent within the novel are primarily Native American people. The novel's setting centers, for the most part, around an Ojibwe reservation in North Dakota; however, the cities of Fargo, North Dakota, as well as Minneapolis, Minnesota, are also included in the story. Even though the novel does not bring forth environmental issues explicitly, it illustrates nature as well as fictive Native Americans in a way that befits an analysis from an ecocritical approach. To further clarify, the fictional Ojibwe people and their lives are at the center of the novel, and Erdrich presents the old cultural ways of the Ojibwe, which highlights their relationship with nature. The relationship that many of the Ojibwe have with nature illustrates an ecological awareness that is present in the novel. Erdrich

brings attention to the exploitation of nature in tandem with political choices enforced by the United States government against Native Americans. As such, *Love Medicine* lends itself quite openly to be analyzed from an ecocritical perspective with the inclusion of the aforementioned topics. Therefore, this paper aims to gain insight into the characters and the purpose of the narrative's nature-related themes by applying ecocriticism.

A theoretical and critical approach

Ecocriticism

In this section, a theoretical ground for the paper will be established. First, a presentation of the history behind the emergence of ecocriticism is provided. Secondly, a few topic ideas that could be examined while looking through an ecocritical lens will be introduced. Thirdly, an exploration of how ecocriticism has been applied to an academic paper, achieved with the help of a published work, will be presented and analyzed. Lastly, a brief interweaving of parts of ecocriticism, *Love Medicine*, and the author is provided in order to help build a theoretical foundation for the thesis.

A surge of focus on the environment and environmental issues has come forth in recent years. Around the world, scientists, as well as laypeople, are discussing topics such as global warming. Global warming results from the emission of an abundance of greenhouse gas. There are multiple discussed causes for this emission that are said to be created by humans, like deforestation and the burning of fossil fuels. According to an intergovernmental body of the United Nations called The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, global warming will likely reach an increased average temperature of 1.5 degrees Celsius within the time span of 30 years resulting in rising sea levels and more extreme weather (“Summary For Policymakers of

IPCC Special Report On Global Warming of 1.5°C Approved by Governments — IPCC”). It is far too simple to assert that, just because climate change is often talked about, everyone cares about this topic. Instead, the prevalence of climate change discussions highlights how nuanced arguments on the topic can be—and how much work there is to be done.

What can be seen from the aforementioned environmental issues is that they are clearly caused by humankind’s greed and exploitative tendencies. Humans exploit nature, and because of this exploitation, the planet, nature, and ultimately all its inhabitants—including humans—suffer the consequences. Peter Barry promotes the idea that a new geological epoch named the Anthropocene has dawned as a result of humankind’s exploitation tendencies. (Barry 264). Furthermore, Barry states that “The notion of the Anthropocene has had a strong impact on ecocriticism, and its attributes and effects are worth debating” (265). It is not entirely clear when this epoch de facto started, but the current consensus is that it is thought to have begun around the 1950s. However, Barry states that this dating is a bit arbitrary since it “plays down the effects of at least a couple of hundred years of industrial, steam-powered pollution” (266). Regardless of the exact timeline, the philosophical viewpoint of anthropocentrism, on which the Anthropocene is based, is worth bringing forth in the reading of *Love Medicine*. One way to explain the perspective of anthropocentrism can be found in the following excerpt:

Anthropocentrism is a philosophical viewpoint arguing that human beings are the central or most significant entities in the world. This is a basic belief embedded in many Western religions and philosophies.

Anthropocentrism regards humans as separate from and superior to nature and holds that human life has intrinsic value while other entities (including animals, plants, mineral resources, and so on) are resources that may

justifiably be exploited for the benefit of humankind.

("Anthropocentrism")

Thus, the current environmental issues point to the fact that the symbiotic relationship between humans and nature is not one that is based upon mutualism, but rather something that could only be construed as parasitical. What will be further explored is how beautifully Erdrich conveys this point. In *Love Medicine*, it is clear that the Ojibwe culture commands a different respect for nature than Western culture. While non-natives and acculturated American Indians share the anthropocentric view of the world, at least a few of the Ojibwe characters in the novel have a relationship with nature that seems utterly harmonious in comparison.

Inasmuch as there exists a concern for the environment and nature in the real world, this ought also to be something that should and could be reflected in literary studies. Therefore, there is reason to approach and discuss the prominent environment and nature within literary works. Cheryll Glotfelty, one of the co-founders of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE), stipulates in her work *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, which was co-edited with Harold Fromm, that there was a lack of academic work that focused on ecology within studies of English. This lack of academic work is one of the reasons why ecocriticism first became conceptualized and arose as literary criticism. Glotfelty makes remarks on the fact that a published authoritative guide to contemporary literary studies which she had read, a guide that contained various theoretical approaches, did not, in fact, bring up any essay with an ecological approach:

Curiously enough, in this putatively comprehensive volume on the state of the profession, there is no essay on an ecological approach to literature.

Although scholarship claims to have “responded to contemporary

pressures,” it has apparently ignored the most pressing contemporary issue of all, namely, the global environmental crisis. (Glotfelty 15)

This criticism and concern that Glotfelty presents regarding the lack of ecological approaches within literature studies as a response to the global environmental crisis might hold true when she published her work, but as will be illustrated in the upcoming sections of this theory portion, an ecological approach within literary studies has become more popular since then.

Glotfelty defines ecocriticism simply as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (17). Furthermore, Glotfelty broadens the scope of ecocriticism by stating that “nature per se is not the only focus of ecocritical studies of representation” (23) but that other topics such as “animals, cities, specific geographical regions, rivers, mountains, deserts, Indians” (23) also can be included. *Love Medicine* does not only represent pristine nature but also specific geographical regions, cultures, and native people. Therefore, the novel provides a multitude of angles by which one could analyze it using an ecocritical lens.

The critical literary approach known as ecocriticism is multifaceted and less restrictive than other approaches. Supporting the idea that ecocriticism is methodologically less stringent than other approaches, Charles E. Bressler explains: “Unlike some other schools of literary criticism, ecocriticism embraces plurality and is somewhat free of theoretical disputes and infighting. Because ecocriticism welcomes multiple perspectives, there exists no single, dominant methodology by which ecocritics analyze texts” (Bressler 235). With this take on ecocriticism, one could treat the critical literary approach as a blank canvas that creates a base for the exploration of a multitude of questions. For example, one could look at how nature is portrayed in a narrative, how the actual physical setting of the text affects the plot, how race, class, and gender are illustrated in the text, and how they relate to nature and the land, and how human-made

concepts such as laws occur in the text and how they are made to seem as if they are natural, to name a few. *Love Medicine* makes way for a multitude of the previously mentioned types of analysis, as will be soon discussed.

Inasmuch as one can give hypothetical examples of various ideas that could be applied in an analysis of a text from an ecocritical point of view, it is also worth going to the extent of actualizing it in a more concrete setting. Two excerpts will be presented to create a better understanding of what ecocriticism entails and how it can be applied to literature. The first quotation is from Louise Erdrich's novel *Chickadee*.

It seemed to Chickadee that those houses held the powers of the world.

The ones who built and lived in those houses were making an outsized world.... Almost a spirit world, but one on earth. Chickadee could see that they used up forests of trees in making the houses. He could see that they had cut down every tree in sight. He could feel that they were pumping up the river and even using up the animals. He thought of the many animals whose dead hides were bound and sold in St. Paul in one day. Everything that Anishinabeg counted on in life, and loved, was going into this hungry city mouth. This mouth, this city, was wide and insatiable. It would never be satisfied, thought Chickadee dizzily, until everything was gone.

(*Chickadee* 155)

The second quotation is an analysis of the fragment above from an ecocritical point of view.

Chickadee can see how badly out of balance his world is about to become.

Now that he has spoken with the birds, and with their help learned to survive in the woods, he understands how to live in harmony with nature.

Perhaps it is because of this knowledge that he sees the growing city,

despite all its wonders, as a giant mouth that will never stop eating until everything is gone—the trees, the animals, the river. (Li-ping 155)

Li-ping's analysis and interpretation of *Chickadee* highlight the fictional character's perception that the world is getting badly out of balance. The city that the character encounters has separated itself from nature by the construction of unnatural buildings built by using "forests of trees" (Erdrich, *Chickadee* 155). The deforestation and destruction of nature can be explained by western culture's exploitation and the compulsion to continuously pursue expansion. Li-ping brings forth the fact that the character "understands how to live in harmony with nature." (Li-ping 155). This could be seen as an underlying idea of living within the realms of sustainability, more specifically, embracing a way of living that resembles a circle of life—which does not necessarily cause harm nor must have a linear end. However, a circle of life—or a way of living that is simply in better harmony with nature—is not possible under such urban and industrial circumstances.

Sometimes what is implied is more powerful than what is explicitly said. Erdrich manages to weave in the very notion of ecocentrism in her writing without explicitly mentioning it. Li-Ping explicitly points this out when analyzing the fragment from Erdrich's novel using terminologies such as balance, harmony, and sustainability. As a reader, one is given the opportunity to reflect on nature's role in life. This is made clear when Chickadee brings forth that "Everything that Anishinabeg counted on in life, and loved, was going into this hungry city mouth" (Erdrich, *Chickadee* 155). Clearing out forests of trees in order to expand the city and create greater comfort of living for the masses that live in it goes to show what western society's relationship with nature actually looks like. Nature, and all that falls within the realm of nature, whether it is biotic or abiotic, is for humankind to exploit and bend to their own benefit. The idea that nature is nothing but a mere commodity for humans to use is the very essence of

anthropocentrism. And while *Chickadee* lends itself to a discussion of anthropocentrism, *Love Medicine* provides the ecocritic with even more topics for analysis.

In *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, Slavoj Žižek is quoted in a way that contextualizes the analysis to come. "...Confronting ecological problems," he explains, "requires making choices and decisions—about what to produce, what to consume, on what energy to rely—which ultimately concern the very way of life of a people" (qtd. in Garrard 155). The Ojibwe people in *Love Medicine* are the focus of the narrative, and their old cultural way of life highlights their relationship with nature. Through these characters, the novel makes deliberate statements about western culture. The role of the Ojibwe in this fiction is, to borrow Žižek's words, "...eminently political in the most radical sense of involving fundamental social choices" (155). This is certainly deliberate on Erdrich's part; by highlighting the ecological awareness of the Ojibwe in *Love Medicine*, a political stance is being made quite clear.

In the chapter named Ecocriticism and the Politics of Representation in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, Cheryl Lousley brings forth "the web of life" (Lousley, 157). Some of the Ojibwe within *Love Medicine* proudly live within that web, willingly interweaving themselves with nature to create a relationship that is both symbiotic and indivisible. The oppressive nature of the US government, specifically in relation to the country's native population, will soon be explored through the lens of specific characters. However, it can be said that Erdrich juxtaposes some of the Ojibwe characters who live in tandem with nature with others who do not, and most of those who do not live in tandem with nature assert dominance over those who do. While there is debate about whether or not "it is historically inaccurate and politically dubious to propagate myths about [indigenous] people who dwell in perpetual harmony with nature," ecocritics agree that these people possess "indigenous ecological wisdom",

which is a significant part of their oral history (Adamson, 172). As such, and given Erdrich's Native American ancestry, it is fair to honor her background and analyze *Love Medicine* as a narrative written by an indigenous author who draws attention to various issues about the exploitation of nature in tandem with the US government's longstanding hostile policies against Native Americans—and how humans and their cultural subsets can choose to live in relation to nature either by respecting or disrespecting it.

Analysis

The setting of *Love Medicine* varies between reservations, cities, and states. Therefore, as a means to achieve a greater understanding of the treatment of the land and nature by its human inhabitants, as well as how nature and land are presented and affect a selected few of the characters, the first part of this analysis will focus on briefly introducing the primary setting and the actual physical land itself as it is in the real world. Thereafter, a closer reading of a few characters that are deemed to be of great importance for the analysis is to be presented. However, seeing as the characters of the novel have very complicated interwoven relationships with each other, it will not be possible to introduce the characters fully in this relatively short thesis.

The prominent locations presented in the novel are the states of North Dakota and Minnesota. These are northern Midwest states that have a continental climate, which means that there is a significant variance in temperature between daytime and nighttime and between seasons. Additionally, these states have something besides continental climate in common: being so close to one another, they also have similar rural landscapes. Perhaps the most broadly known of these shared landscapes are the Great Plains, which span all the way from west of the Mississippi River to east of

the Rocky Mountains in the United States of America and Canada. Moreover, most landscapes that are present in the novel can, in a sense, be understood as having the somewhat human, or animate, attributes of being wild and unforgiving, as well as life-giving and healing. In the upcoming sections of the analysis, while analyzing some of the characters of the novel, these attributes will come forth.

June Kashpaw's Demise

The coming section will illustrate and discuss a part of the novel where the character of June Kashpaw ventures out in the wilderness, which results in her demise. To create grounds for a better understanding of what will be illustrated and discussed, a brief introduction of the character will first be presented. June Kashpaw, also known as June Morrissey, is not a character who has a very active role in the novel; she is, however, of great importance for the story. Her involvement ebbs and flows in spirit throughout *Love Medicine* via many of the characters. June is depicted as a strong Native American woman who walks her own life path. She is the victim of abuse in many shapes and forms. This abuse is both inflicted by Native American characters, and by extension, the Ojibwe culture that is fictionally represented in *Love Medicine*, and, sexually, by a white man named Andy, who could be thought of as representing western societies' exploitation of Native American women. June is the adoptive daughter of the character Eli Kashpaw and the mother of Lipsha Morrissey and King Kashpaw.

In the chapter named The World's Greatest Fisherman, June is introduced as "a long-legged Chippewa woman, aged hard in every way except how she moved" (Erdrich 6). While strolling down the streets of an oil town in North Dakota in the spring, killing time waiting for the bus that would take her home, she catches a man's eye probably because of how she moved "easy as a young girl on slim hard legs" (6).

The man's name is Andy, and he is described as a man who "looked familiar, like a lot of people, looked familiar to her" (7). The first description of June, with her having aged hard in every way except how she moved, provides a base for representation that June has lived a rough life but is nonetheless proud of who she is. The confidence in June's stride, easy as a young girl on slim hard legs, highlights Andy's physical attraction to her. Lastly, the notion that Andy looked familiar to her and how many other people also look familiar to her hints at the implicit notion that June, in fact, could be a prostitute. After a brief interaction with the man in the bar, this notion becomes more plausible as she joins the same man in his car, driving away from the city to engage in sex. June and the man arrive in the rural land on a country road far out of town in a vehicle that manages to shield the two of them from the unforgiving cold weather outside of the vehicle in the natural environment. In this warm unnatural sphere of the car, the man and June have intercourse. After what seems to be no time at all, the man passes out drunk, pinning June down under his weight. One way to interpret and analyze this portion of the novel is to look at how everything that falls within the spheres of nature, as well as what is natural, is treated as mere commodities. The purchase of sexual relations is not something that is natural, and it sheds light on how humans' greed and exploitation tendencies know no boundaries: June is treated as nothing more than an object of lust, a mere commodity, by Andy. Moreover, the notion that June was pinned down under the weight of Andy, who is a white male of western descent, could be treated as a symbol that highlights western society's oppression of the Native Americans in the novel.

Scrambling to get out from beneath him, June manages to pry the car door open, which results in her falling out of the vehicle. When June falls out of the safe, warm sphere that the car provided, a sphere which can be considered as something unnatural in relation to the lands, the land and nature shock her with the cold and harsh

reality of the actual climate as it is in the biosphere; a shock which is described as “a shock like being born” (12).

After this takes place, June ventures away from the human-made roads out into the open ranchland because of the mere fact that she is trying to get back home, it is not clear what home entails for June. However, it could be interpreted as a place where humans and land co-exist in symbiosis, in contrast with the concrete city with structures that manipulate the reality of nature and the land it sits on. June’s home is somewhere away from that unnatural place that harbors people who treat the land and other people as mere commodities—only there for them to exploit. As a result of this interpretation, one could undertake the idea that June, one of several Native American women in the novel, has a different relationship with nature than that of many other people in general. The construction of big unnatural concrete cities illustrates an expansionistic need for comfort and highlights how disconnected Western civilization has been from what could be considered natural. The interpretation allows for the representation that can be connected to the old cultural ways of the fictional Native Americans of the story. It seemingly involves a struggle to live alongside nature in a fashion that more resembles a mutualistic beneficial symbiotic relationship rather than considering nature as a physical place for expansion or as a place with resources to exploit.

Toward the end of this first section of the novel, it is presented that “the snow fell deeper that Easter than it had in forty years, but June walked over it like water and came home” (13). Even though this section of the novel conveys a notion to the reader that June did, in fact, come home, she did this not in life but in death; this portrays the land and nature as not mere facilitators of commodities that give life to humans, but also as facilitators of death if not treated with the respect they deserve. In a sense, nature is reclaiming what came from it, which is life. It is made clear in the story by the narrative that June had to endure a toxic, abusive marriage, a marriage that she

had ended and escaped. However, even after she had left her abusive husband, her life continued to be filled with hardship. For reasons unknown other than earning an income, she sold her body to people, as illustrated when Andy purchased her body for his own gratification.

Analyzing June's death, one could highlight the fact that she grew up as a part of a tribe of Native Americans in the novel who lived in smaller communities in rural landscapes with close proximity and contact to nature. Because of this, June was likely aware of what could be considered as dangerous weather to venture out in. This idea is further supported by the narrative when the notion of a "Chinook wind" (12) is presented. The Chinook wind is described as mild and wet, and it is likely that June thought that warmer spring weather was approaching because of her preconceived notion of the Chinook wind. Therefore, it is feasible to assume that she might have misunderstood the implications of her actions when she ventured out into the wild, away from the safety of man-made structures and civilization, which ultimately resulted in her death.

Notably, abuse like that of what June endures throughout her life can be seen throughout many of the other relationships portrayed within *Love Medicine*. June's ultimate demise creates an interesting idea concerning death. Death could be perceived and considered as something that is as natural as life itself, for it is an unavoidable certainty all living will experience at one point in their lives. One could view June's demise as something beautiful, returning to and becoming one with nature, as can be supported by the notion that she "came home" (13). Furthermore, this illustrates that the land and nature hold attributes given by the narrative, such as being wild and unforgiving, takers of lives, something that cannot be tamed by a mere human who lacks the right resources to do so. In addition, if one were to consider the possibility that June strived to come home, to a place where humans and land could co-exist in a

mutualistic symbiotic relationship, this is something that cannot possibly be done in life. Because, as presented earlier, the relationship between earth and humans is more of a parasitical relationship, for the planet gains nothing positive from its human inhabitants.

Lulu Lamartine's relationship with nature

Like most characters in the novel, Lulu Lamartine fills an essential role in the story. Lulu is a strong independent proud fictive Native American woman and mother. Her beliefs are firm, and her stance against the United States government is clear. She considers the landmass that makes up the United States to be the Native Americans' birthright, as can be seen by her proclamation that "Every foot and inch you're standing on, even if it's on the top of the highest skyscraper, belongs to the Indians. That is the truth of the matter" (274). Lulu lives her life on her own terms, both for and to love. Via Lulu, Erdrich pushes through the fact that love can serve to enrich one's life and cause complications and grief at times.

The first part to be illustrated and discussed is a section of the novel where Lulu Lamartine presents her view on the natural land as a giver of life and strength. This notion can be seen in the following excerpt:

Sometimes I'd look out on my yard and the green leaves would be glowing. I'd see the oil slick on the wing of a grackle. I'd hear the wind rushing, rolling, like the far-off sound of waterfalls. Then I'd open my mouth wide, my ears wide, my heart, and I'd let everything inside. After some time I'd swing my door shut and walk back into the house with my eyes closed. I'd sit there like that in my house. I'd sit there with my eyes closed on beauty until it was time to make the pickle brine or smash the boiled berries or the boys came home. But for a while after letting the

world in I would be full. I wouldn't want anything more but what I had.

(216-217)

Unlike the grim first illustration and discussion of land and nature as a facilitator of death regarding June and her fate, the narrative from Lulu's perspective treats the subject of land and nature as a nurturer and giver of life. Lulu draws strength from the beauty of the pristine land and nature that co-exists within this land, nature mostly untouched by the greed of humankind's exploitation tendencies. In the first sentence of the quote, Lulu looks out on her yard, where the green leaves are presented as glowing. Analyzing this part from an ecocritical point of view, one could first look at the mere word green. In a way, green could represent life in nature; commonly around the world, the flora loses the color green as the temperature falls whilst autumn and winter press forth. With the reduction of light coming from the sun, the plants are unable to photosynthesize in an adequate amount during these seasons, causing the flora to wither. However, when springtime is upon nature, the flora experience a regrowth, with the color green returning.

Secondly, the notion of green leaves glowing could be seen as illustrating that nature, for Lulu, is a place that holds near-magical attributes; for although lush and exuberating life, green leaves do not glow in the natural world. The fact that she sees the oil slick on the wing of a grackle, with the oil slick being a metaphor for the grackles' natural iridescent bodies, could be treated as a subtle illustration by the narrative that juxtaposes nature with nature that has been polluted by its human inhabitants. Giving further support to this idea, one only has to bring forth the commonly known fact that oil spills, which are unnatural, repeatedly occur and cause harm to the natural environment in the contemporary world as a direct result of people's exploitation tendencies.

Lulu opens her mouth, ears, and heart wide and absorbs everything that nature has to give; the strength she receives from this experience is a strength that she craves, both in her mind and in her spirit. In a way, this experience is life-giving for Lulu. For when she leaves the pristine biome that is her yard and closes the door on it, entering the sphere of the unnatural building, the construction that is her house, this strength that she has built up inside of her slowly diminishes, much like the hibernation of the flora during autumn and winter. However, for a while, when the memory of the serene, almost untouched nature is fresh in her mind, Lulu has everything that she requires from the land and nature to feel alive at that very moment. With this notion, she is not exploiting the land and nature itself in an ordinary context, that is, with the removal of resources. Lulu is merely exploiting the natural world in a spiritual sense. Nonetheless, she treats the land and nature as hers for her gain and prosperity. It is feasible to assume that, with the help of the analysis of this excerpt, it goes to show that Lulu Lamartine has a much closer relationship to nature than that of most people in contemporary western societies.

Returning to the idea that death could be seen as something as natural as life itself, and further delving into Lulu's mind, the readers are presented with the fact that she stumbles upon a dead body in close proximity to her playhouse as a child. She states, "Death was something I had never come upon until then, but let me tell you, I knew it when I saw it. Death was him" (219). This experience with death incarnated has a significant impact on her; however, she is not impacted in the way that perhaps most people would be, that is, with feelings of terror. Instead, Lulu describes the experience and the body itself as "the best thing I'd ever discovered" (219). She returns to the body and even tries to cook a meal for it made up of things taken from nature. One could make the argument that this nurturing could be seen as an effort to turn the dead into something alive, much like how the flora returns from the dead during spring. For as the

flora requires the sun's light to come back from hibernation or stay alive, the fauna requires an intake of food to do the very same. However, the human that Lulu found was dead and not hibernating, and therefore, she could not bring the person back. Nonetheless, the fact that Lulu states that it is "the best thing" (219) she had ever discovered points to an overwhelmingly positive experience. These positive feelings are unusual if contrasted with how most people in western societies would feel had they stumbled across a dead body in the woods, which further supports the idea that Lulu has a different relationship with life, death, and nature than most people in western society.

Lipsha Morrissey's spiritual and magical relationship with nature

It becomes apparent throughout the novel that the Ojibwe have a close relationship with nature and the animals that reside there. This relationship is more than often symbolic or spiritual in its nature. Characters within the novel, as well as some animals and inanimate objects, hold supernatural, magical attributes. The purpose of this section of the paper is to shed light upon some of these culturally interwoven occurrences that are prominent within the story of *Love Medicine*.

A character within the novel that has a vital role in the story development and fills the criteria of having some magical powers is Lipsha Morrissey. Lipsha is a healer of sorts who, to some extent, possesses the power to aid with pain and heal with his bare touch, which can be seen in the following quote:

I know the tricks of mind and body inside and out without ever having trained for it, because I got the touch. It's a thing you got to be born with. I got secrets in my hands that nobody ever knew to ask. Take Grandma Kashpaw with her tired veins all knotted up in her legs like clumps of blue

snails. I take my fingers and I snap them knots. The medicine flows out of me. The touch. (190)

What can be understood from this section of the novel is that Lipsha does not have any medical training but rather was born with powers that can only be described and considered as being out of the ordinary world regarding what is considered natural from a western cultural point of view. How this could be interpreted is that the fictive Native Americans, and in extension their culture, within the novel, view magic as something that is natural, seeing as it occurs naturally among their people and in nature overall. Nonetheless, there is one individual in the novel that Lipsha is unable to mend with these supernatural, magical powers, namely, Nector Kashpaw, who also happens to be his grandfather. A former leader of the Ojibwe community, in his later years, he had developed Alzheimer's disease.

Continuing on the track of cultural symbolism and magic that occurs in the natural world for the Native American people of the novel, perhaps one of the most iconic animals must be brought up, namely, the Canada geese. Not only do the geese fill the purpose of sustenance for the people of the tribes, but they also have a principal symbolic value within the story. One pivotal moment in the story that brings forth geese with symbolic meaning involves the conjuring of love medicine. Lipsha's grandmother Marie asks him to conjure a love medicine for her and his grandfather with the ultimate purpose of causing his grandfather to love her again and, with that, also stop loving Lulu Lamartine. As a result, Lipsha ventures out to try to figure out what has a symbolic value in nature in connection to true love. This quest came out to be a meticulous process where, in the end, Lipsha figured that geese mate for life and, therefore, could be considered as a suitable ingredient for the requested love medicine. One possible interpretation speaks to the formative process of the fictive Native American tribe in the story attaching symbolic and magical attributes to nature. Moreover, it speaks for the

close relationship to nature amongst the Native Americans in the novel, where the binding factor in many cases is symbolic and therefore magical, as indicated in the following excerpt:

Love medicine is not for the layman to handle. You don't just go out and get one without paying for it. Before you get one, even, you should go through one hell of a lot of mental condensation. You got to think it over. Choose the right one. You could really mess up your life grinding up the wrong little thing. . . . It hits me, anyway. Them geese, they mate for life. And I think to myself, just what if I went out and got a pair? And just what if I fed some part – say the goose heart – of the female to Grandma and Grandpa ate the other heart? Wouldn't that work? (199-200)

The fact that love medicine is not for the layman to handle, in conjunction with the statement that “You could really mess up your life grinding the wrong little thing” (199), illustrates how seriously the Native Americans within the novel take the conjuring of these natural, mystical and magical remedies. The fact that Lipsha and Marie believe that these potions work for their intended purposes also illustrates that magic and mysticism are notions that naturally occur in their lives and nature. Even though Lipsha's plan was to shoot wild geese and make a love medicine with their hearts as the main ingredient, this did not become the case after all. He failed this task because he could not land his rifle shots. Instead, as a result of missing the shots, Lipsha took a shortcut, purchasing two frozen turkeys and using their hearts as the main ingredient for the love medicine. Lipsha proclaims, “here is what I did that made the medicine backfire” (203), and the result of the shortcut he took was that his grandfather, Nector Kashpaw, died whilst choking on the heart of the turkey. The reason why the medicine backfired could be the fact that Lipsha took a shortcut in the natural-mystical process of hunting and getting the ingredients to make the love medicine and instead

ventured down to the unnatural place that was the store in order to purchase the ingredients with unnatural currency. This interpretation highlights the notion that Lipsha partakes in the unnatural consumerist system.

Cementing the idea that wild geese and their hearts, hunted by traditional means, are suitable for making love potions, seemingly because they mate for life, one could go back in the novel to the scene where wild geese first make an appearance. In this scene, geese had a profound impact on the very character Lipsha conjured the love potion for, namely his grandfather Nector. The event unfolds in the chapter of the novel that is named Wild Geese. The chapter begins with the following introduction:

On Friday mornings, I go down to the slough with my brother Eli and wait for the birds to land. We have built ourselves a little blind. Eli has second sense and an aim I cannot match, but he is shy and doesn't like to talk. In this way it is a good partnership. Because I got sent to school, I am the one who always walks into town and sells what we shoot. (64)

Young Nector Kashpaw is venturing up a hill to a chapel with "two geese slung from either wrist" (64). He ventures there with the intention of selling said geese: however, this time around, Nector does not end up selling the geese for money and, consequently, does not partake in the unnatural consumerist system. It is presented to the reader that Nector has "already decided that Lulu Nanapush is the one" (64), that is, the love of his life. With the wild geese on either wrist, he encounters a young Marie Lazzare coming down from the chapel. Marie is presented as a girl coming from a family of thieves. Nector makes the assumption that she had stolen from the chapel and decides, there and then, that he will bring her back up the hill to the chapel with the stolen possessions for a reward. This reward would help him because he is "saving for the French-style wedding band" (65) that he intends to put on Lulu's finger. Nector and Marie got into a physical altercation and the "dead geese tied to my wrist swing against her hip" (65).

Their fighting quickly turns into what can only be described as a love quarrel or a moment of ‘falling in love’. Judging by how much the geese are mentioned in the altercation, it is not unjust to assume that they, in themselves, with their naturally occurring magical attributes, cause the falling in love to happen. When their scuffle ends, Nector proclaims, “You can take these birds home. You can roast them ... I am giving them to you” (68). The giving of the wild geese from Nector to Marie could be perceived as a symbol of giving one’s love to another, something which could only happen if Nector had not sold the geese to the residents of the chapel.

Forward to the moment when Lipsha missed the shots he took at the geese, one possible reason for this occurring could be that he is not living in the traditional fictive Native American way like, for example, Nector and his brother did when they were young. Therefore, he lacks the necessary skills that he would have possessed had he lived in a more traditional way. Even though it is easier for an individual to go to a retail grocery store and buy food rather than having to hunt it in nature by traditional means, that is a direct result of western people taking over the Native Americans’ land. Native Americans have hunted and gathered in nature and not in retail grocery stores prior to the whitewashing of their culture. Despite the convenience of grocery stores, some individuals in the novel still live the traditional life of the Ojibwe people.

King Kashpaw, the acculturated Native American

A character who is the polar opposite of the characters that live the traditional Ojibwe lifestyle is King Kashpaw. He is the son of June and the half-brother of Lipsha, and regardless of them being kin, he bears little to no resemblance to them. King does not have a close relationship with anything that is natural, and he is portrayed as a greedy

and destructive force, much like how Western society is depicted in the novel. He is a man who has no problem terrorizing and abusing the ones that could be considered the closest to him. In a segment of the novel, Lipsha proclaims that King has made him feel like a “beggar at the table of life” (311). King had made him feel this way because of how he treated and stole from him when they were growing up. With King treating Lipsha poorly and stealing from him, making him feel like a beggar at the table of life, one could argue that King, with his befitting name, is the embodiment of the oppressive western society. Further supporting this idea, the one thing King truly cares about is something unnatural and material, namely, a red Firebird that he had bought using the insurance money from June’s death. For him, the car is his birthright. The purchase of the car with money from June’s death does not sit well with the rest of the family. The reason why they feel this way is that King reduces her life and memory to something merely material that is closely connected to Western society.

King lives in an apartment in Minneapolis-Saint Paul, also known as the Twin Cities. Towards the end of the novel, Lipsha visits this apartment and describes it as the most depressing place he has ever come across. He describes the place as a “long dark closet” (312), for it has no windows that let in the natural light, and the air inside is “smoky and thick” (312), unlike the fresh air in pristine nature. Much of what makes it so depressing in his eyes is that it lacks everything that could be construed as natural or part of nature. This solidifies the idea of King as being disconnected from his heritage and what is natural, and it highlights how important nature is for Lipsha. Further strengthening the idea that the lack of presence of nature in the apartment is what bothers Lipsha, he proclaims that there are a few things about the apartment’s décor that act as redeeming factors, thus making the place a little less depressing. The first thing is “[a] corn plant in a flour bucket sagged like a drunk propped up a wall” (312), and the second item is a “chubby little cactus” that looked like “a fist in a glass”, which

“threatened you to touch it” (312). The apartments florae are presented in a way that creates opportunity for one to justifiably argue that these items are not well taken care of by the occupants of the apartment. Corn plants that grow and flourish in nature, or those that are well taken care of, do not sag, but rather stand tall with strength so that they can hold up the corn itself. Furthermore, the fact that the plant is presented with human attributes, such as a drunk propped up a wall, could point to a subtle hint towards alcoholism and how this unnatural occurrence plague people and communities. For even if alcohol occurs in the natural world through the fermenting of plants, alcoholism only occurs as a direct result of individuals’ overconsumption tendencies, and King himself is presented in the novel as having problems with alcohol. The way that the cactus is described, as threatening one to touch it, further hints at how disconnected to nature this space of living is. The idea that a cactus threatened someone to touch it is the exact opposite of how a cactus, had it been able to feel a desire for anything, would feel in nature. The glochids of a cactus have multiple purposes, where one would be to act as a defense: it would therefore be a deterrent rather than an invite to touch. By presenting the cactus in this manner, it is feasible that the threatening appearance symbolizes King’s aggressive behavior.

Bringing forth the annexation of the Native American peoples’ land highlights perhaps the most prominent theme of the novel, namely that of communal identity loss. To be more specific, the communal identity loss, in this case, refers to the native people of the United States of America in the novel and their loss of heritage and ability to live in symbiosis with the land. One could make the claim that the biggest of the antagonists present in the novel, together with the acculturated character of King that is perceived to be the embodiment of the same, is the government of the United States. Historically, the native people of the United States of America have been forced into reservations where they were expected to live like people in contemporary western

society. They have been alienated from the land and the nature that they, in a long-forgotten and lost past, used to co-exist with.

Conclusion

An ecocritical reading of Louise Erdrich's novel *Love Medicine* has shown that three of the fictional Ojibwe characters in the narrative have an almost commensal relationship with nature. An idea has been presented that the character of June strives to come home to a place where land and humans co-exist. Although this does not necessarily mean commensal, it is far from the almost parasitic and destructive relationship on which Western society is built. Further supporting the notion of having a commensal relationship with nature is the character of Lulu. She is described via Erdrich as a person who takes energy from nature without de facto using up any of the resources in a traditional sense. Instead of removing resources physically, she absorbs them spiritually. Moreover, throughout the analysis, the fictive, true colors of Western society have been exposed both via the abuse of Native American people in the novel, as well as the destruction of the natural world through the expansion of concrete cities. The concrete cities are built upon the body of pristine nature. Moreover, Erdrich brings forth pollution of nature, as can be seen by the metaphorical usage of an oil slick on the wing of the grackle which could be treated as a juxtaposition with unnaturally occurring oil spills caused by humankind's greed and expansionistic tendencies.

For most of the highlighted characters of this thesis paper, the respect for nature is seemingly deeply rooted and furthermore provides the idea that it also is integrated within the older fictive Native American culture of the novel. The traditional older ways of the Native Americans enable them to live off the land without destroying

it. For example, they hunt geese for food and remedies, but that does not mean that they destabilize the population of geese to the extreme extent that they almost go extinct.

The relationship between the Obiwje people and nature is undoubtedly complex: a relationship where symbolism and magic play a big role. The plot of the novel reveals that the search for symbols and magic is a formative process as can be seen where, to name one example, the character Lipsha looks for connections in nature that match the remedy, or love potion, of which he is trying to concoct. He figured that there was enough symbolism in geese, with them mating for life, that eating parts of them would result in similar effects of feelings for humans. When analyzing what went wrong with his love potion, he did not question if magical concoctions worked overall but merely blamed himself for the fact that he had wronged nature by taking shortcuts in the process of producing his own love medicine. His reaction to the failure of the love medicine provides a greater understanding of the fact that he has a deeply rooted respect for nature.

This paper aimed to shed light on the relationship between the Obiwje people and nature by applying an ecocritical perspective to the works of Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*. It has been highlighted that a few of the Native Americans in the novel share a close and somewhat mutualistic relationship with nature, something which often also included a symbolic or spiritual undertone. These presented Ojibwe people also seemingly respect nature and the dangers that nature poses. Nature could be thought to be considered by them as life and death, as well as everything in between. Nature is, to them, almost something that is all and everything—perhaps even a living entity with animate attributes. Therefore, a concept such as death is seen as a natural part of life. It could be thought of as a circle of life, forever ongoing, unlike how it is perceived in much of western civilization, by having a linear end, as when you die you die.

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