

## Longman Lecture on Louise Erdrich's "The Red Convertible" with Questions and Sample Answers

by Diane Thiel

### Part I – Reading

Louise Erdrich, born in Little Falls, Minnesota, grew up near the Turtle Mountain Reservation where her grandfather had been a Chippewa tribal leader. Her parents encouraged her early on to write stories. Erdrich described her early writing in *Contemporary Authors*: "My father used to give me a nickel for every story I wrote, and my mother wove strips of construction paper together and stapled them into book covers. So at an early age I felt myself to be a published author earning substantial royalties."

"The Red Convertible," one of Erdrich's best-known stories, is the second chapter of her novel *Love Medicine*, a collection of fourteen connected stories. In addition to her many novels, Erdrich has also published books of poetry. Literary critics have often noted the poetic quality of Erdrich's fiction. There is a lyricism, as well as a nonlinear quality to her narratives, that creates a unique charge in her work. Erdrich has said about her process that "the writing doesn't start out and proceed chronologically. It never seems to start in the beginning. Rather, it's as though we are building something around a center, but that center can be anywhere."

The purchase of the car in "The Red Convertible" has an almost magical quality to it. Erdrich's writing has sometimes been likened to Gabriel Garcia Marquez's magical realism, because of the way seemingly common events can take on an otherworldly quality:

"The first time we saw it! I'll tell you when we first saw it. We had gotten a ride up to Winnipeg, and both of us had money. Don't ask me why, because we never mentioned a car or anything, we just had all our money. Mine was cash, a big bankroll from the Joliet's insurance. Henry had two checks -- a week's extra pay for being laid off, and his regular check from the Jewel Bearing Plant.

We were walking down Portage anyway, seeing the sights, when we saw it. There it was, parked, large as life. Really, as *if* it was alive. I thought of the word *repose*, because the car wasn't simply stopped, parked or whatever. That car reposed, calm and gleaming, a FOR SALE sign in its left front window. Then, before we had thought it over at all, the car belonged to us and our pockets were empty. We had just enough for gas back home."

## Part II -- Interpreting

In Part I, the magically real quality of the car is discussed. The car is a central symbol in the story. It opens up a new world for the boys, who feel the freedom of the open road, which Erdrich describes quite succinctly: “We went places in that car, me and Henry. We took off driving all one whole summer.”

The story is aptly titled “The Red Convertible,” given the multi-layered importance of the car. The newfound freedom is emphasized in the way they are able to travel where the road leads them. This is perhaps most poignant in the scene where they meet Susy, the hitchhiker they pick up on the road:

“Hop on in,” says Henry. So she climbs in between us.  
“We’ll take you home,” I says. “Where do you live?”  
“Chicken” she says.  
“Where the hell’s that?”: I ask her.  
“Alaska.”  
“Okay,” says Henry, and we drive.

This passage emphasizes the freedom the boys now have to make such choices. Its compression gives the moment a humorous quality too. Few of us are in the position to make such a split second decision to drive on to Alaska. It also highlights a stylistic approach Erdrich often uses. This compression is one reason Erdrich’s work has been likened to the way poetry functions.

Later, Erdrich sums up Henry’s being drafted for the Vietnam War in a similar, understated way: “We got home just in time, it turned out, for the army to remember Henry had signed up to join it.” Erdrich’s use of compression allows for such touches of humor, sometimes dark humor. In other places in the story, where there seems to be no room for humor, the compression and juxtaposition still speak volumes.

Erdrich leaves a great deal unsaid in her writing, a quality important in fiction, but often considered crucial to poetry as well.

Erdrich chooses to describe Henry’s post traumatic stress disorder in an understated way as well, focusing on the visceral reality of Henry’s changed behavior. Her directness captures this: “When he came home, though, Henry was very different, and I’ll say this: the change was no good.” The effect of war and trauma emerges as a central theme in the story, but Erdrich’s handling of the subject has more than stylistic significance. It subtly points to the psychological trauma that is one lasting effect of war.

When Henry goes into the river at the end of the story, he says, simply, “my boots are filling.” He says this “in a normal voice, like he just noticed and he doesn’t know what to think of it. Then he’s gone. A branch comes by. Another branch. And I go in.”

The scenes that might have followed this are left unwritten and have to be imagined. One has to imagine that Lyman must have looked frantically for Henry in the water, before finally accepting

that he was gone.

The next paragraph begins with Lyman climbing out of the river. The images of the final paragraph are chilling in their matter-of-factness, as Lyman sinks the car into the river with Henry. Erdrich's choice to leave so much unsaid makes the ending of the story even more highly charged.

### Part III – Writing

In Parts I and II, we mentioned Erdrich's stylistic approach – her quick juxtapositions, as well as the way she deliberately leaves so much unsaid. She uses such techniques to build tension in the story.

One interesting approach to writing about “The Red Convertible” could be to trace the various ways Erdrich builds the tension in her story, with the use of foreshadowing as well as irony.

The story contains such foreshadowing from the very first paragraph, where Lyman states that “We owned it together until his boots filled with water on a windy night and he bought out my share. Now Henry owns the whole car, and his youngest brother Lyman (that's myself), Lyman walks everywhere he goes.”

Erdrich's phrasing of “he bought out my share” makes us think differently about a statement like “his boots filled with water.” Though it feels ominous, it doesn't let us know how grim the ending of the story will be. The event is foreshadowed, but it also serves to create dramatic irony as well, as we don't really expect such an extreme conclusion.

You might also consider comparing the story to another one you are reading for class. T.C. Boyle's “Greasy Lake” could offer intriguing possibilities for comparison, because while the two stories have a number of symbols in common, including the car and the body of water, and while both are coming-of-age stories in their own ways, they also offer a number of points to contrast.

Another approach would be to focus on all the different ways the car figures in the story. In Part I, we discussed the magically real dimension of the car. In Part II, we emphasized the ways the car is vital to the theme, plot, and setting of the story. The red convertible is important to these boys, Lyman and Henry, but such a car is also a kind of universal, far-reaching symbol, particularly in the lives of adolescents. By the end of the story, it has taken on yet another layer of meaning, as a symbol of grief. The magnitude of Lyman's grief over the loss of his brother is starkly revealed by his sinking the car into the river.

## **Part I – Reading**

### **Questions and Sample Answers**

1.

As mentioned in Professor Thiel’s lecture, Erdrich’s writing is often likened to the magic realism of writers like Gabriel Garcia Marquez. What are some ordinary events that seem to take on an otherworldly quality in this story?

#### **Sample Answer:**

Erdrich’s story has a number of examples of what could be called magic realism. The car itself takes on a kind of magical quality. It is described almost as a character, early in the story, which is representative of Erdrich’s magical realism, albeit with an understated approach. The lines “There it was, parked, large as life. Really, as if it were alive” make this clear. Later in the story, Henry’s photo seems to come alive. Lyman states “I looked up at the wall and Henry was staring at me I don’t know what it was, but his smile had changed, or maybe it was gone.” Such examples in Erdrich’s story contribute to the mysterious tone of the piece.

2.

How does Erdrich’s own cultural history factor into this story? Discuss some of the direct or more subtle cultural details in the story.

#### **Sample Answer:**

Erdrich’s characters are Chippewa. This detail is explicitly stated in the second paragraph. However, the story also subtly references this cultural history throughout. At times, the references are less direct, such as the scene when Susy, the girl they meet on the road, takes her hair down. She climbs on Henry’s shoulders and “her long hair flung out from side to side.” Henry says he always wondered what it would be like to have long hair, hinting at his thinking about his cultural past, even indirectly. The encounter with Susy also allows the boys to reconnect with their heritage through paying more attention to details of the natural world: “And things would grow up there. One day just dirt or moss, the next day flowers and long grass.” Erdrich writes stories of her own people, the Chippewa, often emphasizing the way they have become distanced from their heritage, as well as their connection to it.

## **Part II – Interpreting**

### **Questions and Sample Answers**

1.

In Professor Thiel’s lecture, a few examples of Erdrich’s compression are highlighted. Discuss the effect of such compression throughout the story. Why do you think Erdrich chooses not to name Henry’s condition as post-traumatic stress disorder?

#### **Sample Answer:**

From the liberating travels of the boys to Henry’s later being drafted, Erdrich leaves much unsaid in the story. The compression of events gives the story a poetic quality throughout. After Henry’s return, Erdrich never names Henry’s condition as post-traumatic stress disorder. Leaving it unsaid is likely the way the matter would have been approached. Everyone would clearly see how he had changed, but given the circumstances of the time and Henry’s socioeconomic status, it would not have been described in terms of a scientific diagnosis. At the end of the story, Lyman’s grief is left entirely unexpressed; instead it is simply depicted in action, in his choice to sink the car along with his brother. Such omissions work to heighten the tension and intensify the stark reality of the events.

2.

The magically real quality of the car is mentioned in Part I. Its symbolic importance is discussed in the lecture in Part II. What other purposes does the car seem to serve in the story? For instance, how does it become an essential detail in building the tension and plot of the story?

#### **Sample Answer:**

The car is important on a number of levels in “The Red Convertible.” Initially, it frees the boys, offering them opportunities for travel, adventure and self-discovery. Later, it sits on blocks in symbolic stasis, waiting for Henry’s return from Vietnam. When Henry returns, showing clear signs of post traumatic stress disorder, Lyman tries to help him find his old self again by damaging the car, in hopes that Henry might become enthusiastic about fixing it. By the end of the story, the car becomes an even more significant figure, as Lyman sinks the car, after losing his brother to the river. Erdrich simply describes this scene; instead of discussing Lyman’s grief, she shows it through his “burial” of the car.

## Part III - Writing

### Questions and Sample Answers

1.

In addition to those already mentioned in the lecture, find some further examples of foreshadowing in the story. How do these help build the tension in the story?

#### Sample Answer:

Erdrich uses foreshadowing to build the tension in the story, from the very first paragraph and the early reference to Henry's boots filling with water. She continues such references throughout, such as the description of having "luck with numbers" in the draft. Lyman adds that "Henry was never lucky in the same way as me." Later in the story, when Lyman describes the picture his sister took, he says Henry "might have drawn back, because the shadows on his face are deep as holes." Such references contribute to the charged intensity of the story. Though we don't quite anticipate the actual ending, early in the story, we do feel that Henry has a hard, unlucky, road ahead of him.

2.

Compare the story to T.C. Boyle's "Greasy Lake," a story discussed elsewhere on this Web site. What are some striking elements the stories have in common? How are they dramatically different?

#### Sample Answer:

Louise Erdrich's "The Red Convertible" and T.C. Boyle's "Greasy Lake" are both stories of young men reaching significant thresholds in their lives, both stories that include an aspect of memento mori, a recognition of mortality or of human failures and mistakes. In both stories, the car takes on a symbolic value. It gives the boys freedom and the ability to push the limits in their lives. Both contain an emphasis on the man-made world in opposition to the natural world.

While the stories have some striking similarities, the boys in "Greasy Lake," elaborate posers, are plunged into Greasy Lake, thinking they have killed a man that night, but then emerge the next morning, able to use what almost happened as a guide to change their directions in life. In contrast, Henry, in "The Red Convertible," goes into the river after having been to war, having been a P.O.W., and having had his psyche ravaged (likely in ways the posers in "Greasy Lake" can only begin to imagine). Henry goes into the river never to return.