The Role of Narrative Structure
in the Fictional Works
of Louise Erdrich

by

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Introduction

In questioning whether or not an author's personal history has a place in his/her creative works, I have found that the link between the historical and the creative is an "unbreakable one." Louise Erdrich exemplifies this distinction in her trilogy, Love Medicine, The Beet Queen, and Tracks. The issues discussed in these works, and the narrative format in which they are discussed, challenge the reader to try and distinguish the underlying words of the author as her characters speak them from page to page. From a close analysis of Erdrich's style and its continuity, we can see her make a gradual progression toward unveiling the true questions which lie in her mind—those of acceptance, a sense of her own history, and possibly how her characters can unravel the mystery for her.

This thesis will provide insight as to the background of Louise Erdrich's life as a writer. It will discuss the familial links apparent throughout her trilogy. And lastly, it will question the role of the narrative structure as a tool in Erdrich's rewriting of her own history into the lives of her characters.

Systematic Influences of Louise Erdrich's Works

"Karen Louise Erdrich was born on July 6, 1954 in Little Falls, Minnesota" (Biography 163). Her father was of German descent and her mother, a Chippewa Indian. She grew up in Wahpeton, a small town in North Dakota near the Minnesota border (163). She was the oldest of seven children and
claims that, "It was a small-town life--lots of kids living on a teacher's salary, and we were quite a chaotic, pretty typical family" (Biography 163). Louise dabbled in writing as a teenager, but it wasn't until entering Dartmouth College in 1972 that Erdrich began to take her writing seriously. She began to write with a purpose.

"Louise Erdrich is plumbing the rich history and folklore of her Native American heritage" (Biography 162). Her works reflect happenings of the Chippewa Indians in North Dakota over a span of about seventy years. From 1912 through 1984, Erdrich's characters show the unalterable ties of tradition and ancestry which cannot be escaped (162). Being part-Chippewa herself, Louise Erdrich has a connection with her characters which is interjected into her style of writing. She says, "My characters choose me and once they do it's like standing in a field and hearing echoes. All I can do is trace their passage" (162). Her chapters each hold thoughts of a specific character, as the characters pass to each other the task of narration. Not only is Louise Erdrich relating her story, but also her characters are assigned stories of their own to tell.

Her first novel, Love Medicine, has an intriguing format. Each chapter is its own short story. There are connections running throughout the entire book, and yet there is a separate and unique part of each character and his/her opinion of the storyline which emerges in every chapter. This book is a saga of two Native American families--the Kashpaws and the Lamartines--in their struggle to maintain a heritage that is constantly both fighting and accepting assimilation. Through the characters Marie, Nector, Lulu, Sister Leopolda, Eli and June, along with many others, we are brought to an understanding of these two families. The closeness they share gives us an idea of how valuable the concept of family is to them. And the
relationships between the characters carry out the same tribal tensions which have existed for generations. Intense beliefs in love potions and folk medicines create thematic inferences throughout this book (Biography 164).

"Critics singled out for special praise the lyrical prose with which she narrated her stories of love, poverty, courage, and tragedy" (164). Some critics feel that this lyrical style gives a poetic flow so that even the most ordinary of images becomes beautiful under the hand of Louise Erdrich. Others are bothered by the attentiveness to detail imagistically, and not factually. These critics feel that there is too much of Erdrich's self put into her work, that there is no way to form their own interpretation of meaning and content; furthermore, "no central action unifies the narrative, and the voices all sound pretty much the same--making it difficult to recall sometimes who's talking and what they're talking about" (Biography 164).

These opinions seem to cover the extremes. Louise Erdrich is either a lyrical icon, or she is random and scarce in her presentation of ideas. If nothing else, such an extremist interpretation must entice a reader into what is coming next.

The novel released after Love Medicine was The Beet Queen. The most evident difference in this novel from the first is that the characters are non or part-Indians rather than full-blooded inhabitants of a tribal community (Biography 164). From this change, we can see Erdrich beginning to deal with issues of assimilation--issues which will eventually encompass her entire trilogy. The format for this book again uses the changing of narrators for each chapter. The chapters are then named after whoever is speaking in each (164). This book discusses the lives of Karl and Mary Adare as they are abandoned by their mother and seek refuge from an aunt living in an off-reservation town--Argus--in North Dakota. Other unforgettable characters
such as Sita, Wallace, Celestine, Dot, Eli, Russell, and Fleur generate significant effects in Karl and Mary's lives and provide us with connections to both the Indian tradition and white culture. As we watch many of these characters grow up over the years, we see certain inherited traits being passed on from generation to generation. And yet just as Karl and Mary's past was somewhat lost with the disappearance of their mother, so do many of the characters feel lost in between two cultures. Erdrich uses humor in this book as an outlet for the characters. They can laugh at their situations in order to get through the struggles. "Overall, the novel was well received" (Biography 164). In fact, "this is a rare second novel, one that makes it seem as if the first, impressive as it was, promised too little, not too much" (164). In comparing these two works, we can see that Erdrich made a shift to a "lighter mood" in the second (165). She states the purpose of this shift by saying, "I really believe that to get a reader to respond deeply to something that's very difficult or sad or tragic, you have to have the opposite quality in the book" (165).

Her third novel, Tracks, takes up the story of the characters from Love Medicine, only it places them earlier in life, during a time of hardship and starvation—the power of the white man is made evident (Biography 165). This book responds to the time period when Indian tribes were struggling to keep what little land remained theirs. Through characters Nanapush, Margaret, Fleur, Pauline, Eli, Nector, and youngsters Lulu and Marie, we see what began the Native American's need to assimilate. There are tales of harsh weather conditions, health problems, mistrust, and many other significant causes for help from the white men. It is in this novel that we find the root of the generational feud between the Kashpaws and the Lamartines which has laid its undertones in the novels preceding. But,
"critics appeared to be less impressed with Tracks than with Louise Erdrich's two previous novels" (Biography 165). The interplay between the characters was seemingly not as effective, for the force behind the characters showed itself more than it had in the other works (165). The style of writing in this novel was commented on by critics also. "Despite its confident lyricism and clear passions, Tracks bears the marks of the academic writer's workshop" (Biography 165). On a more positive note, other critics feel that "this is a stunning story about people caught in the grip of passion and in the inexorable flow of history" (166).

An interesting facet of Louise Erdrich's writings that has aided in her success is the close collaboration she has with her husband, Michael Dorris. He is also part-Indian and taught Louise at the undergraduate level, at Dartmouth College, before they took interest in each other. She says of his teachings and many others at the time that "it took years of experiencing life firsthand before she really understood what she had learned in class" (Biography 163). Erdrich started out considering a career in the academic field, but after winning prizes for her writings, she changed her course. In 1978, she attended Johns Hopkins University for her masters program, and thus began the initial phases of her career as a writer (163).

Since then, she has become a great success, but not without the help of her former teacher, who turned into a friend, colleague, and husband, Michael Dorris. Erdrich and Dorris were married in October of 1981 (Biography 163). Erdrich feels that, "Marriage is a process of coming to trust the other person over the years, and it's the same thing with our writing" (Schumacher 31). She really values the time her husband takes and the involvement he shares with her in her books. "It's terribly important to have someone who cares about the work as much as I do" (31). The
constructive criticisms they get from each other are well-received because they both realize that ultimately the objections will better the creation at hand. The collaboration of these two individuals creates "levels of interaction" which are almost "uncanny" (Schumacher 28). "They will finish each other's thoughts, embellish or clarify ideas, banter back and forth—all in a way that makes their answers to a question seem to come from one person" (28).

Both Erdrich and Dorris have mixed backgrounds. This adds to their collective writing in that they more fully understand the confusion of identity which is being expressed in Erdrich's novels, and thus, can help each other come to terms with it. Many times the couple "talks out" stories before setting to the task of writing them. Louise says, as far as her own preference is concerned, that she reads for the enjoyment of the story (Schumacher 29). "I want everything in a book—I want the language and the ideas—but I want the story, too. I'm hooked on narrative" (29).

She grew up in a family where everything was made into a story. One person would start to relate something, and then another, and then it was as though each person would pick up where the last left off. This becomes an interesting part of Erdrich's past when you look at the style of her books. The way that each chapter is told by a different character is very similar to the familial storytelling that occurred in her past and that is now a part of her marital relationship—each one building off the other and becoming a story of its own. In further support of this idea, many of her novels are compilations of short stories that when put together yield information about an entire tribal community, family, or time period. Erdrich states, "It's like collecting scraps of thought and material. I'll piece together memories, stories, bits of conversation—everything" (Schumacher 30). The
conversational method between Erdrich and Dorris is the basis of their contribution to one another, and yet, there is so much more. At times they can't even remember who individually suggested what. In the end, the books are so much a part of each of them that they even admit, "In a way, these books are like our children" (Schumacher 30).

In speaking of how they create these "children," Erdrich and Dorris say that the characters are talked out and created in their minds before written on paper. Dorris even lets us in on the intimate details:

   Every time we look at a catalogue, we decide what each of our current characters would select. Or if we go to a restaurant, we decide what clothes they'd wear, what each of them would choose from the menu, what they would say to the waitress. When we go through an airport, we sort of pick out people who look like the characters. We're constantly trying to get a three-dimensional picture, and then we just put down a fraction of that when we actually write. (Schumacher 59)

The time and care which Erdrich and her husband take to develop these characters is evident when we see examples such as this. And it is obvious why, as a reader, you are able to really connect with the characters in their search for identity, in their search to find a place for themselves in a tradition that barely still exists. It is as though Erdrich is rewriting an existence for them, and even more poignantly, for herself.

The History of a Fictional Family

The next issue we seem to be faced with is how well we, as readers, are able to get to know these characters whom Erdrich creates. The knowledge we gain about the families in Louise Erdrich's books is only given to us
if we follow one book with the next. This trilogy, in its separate parts, tells very different stories about many different families--so that each book can be read as individual from the others. However, what I have found is that an incredible historical viewpoint of these families is detailed in the creative constructs of Erdrich's works if we start with *Tracks*, then read *The Beet Queen*, and finally *Love Medicine*. Now, this order is reverse of the publishing dates, but nonetheless starts us at the core of the families and branches us out as they grow.

In speaking of her trilogy, Erdrich claims, "If we'd known that these were going to be interrelated books, I suppose we would have started at the beginning" (Schumacher 59). She is referring to the fact that the characters, in the beginning of the trilogy, are discussed during the time period of 1934-1983. The second book takes hold of many of the same characters from 1932-1972. And the third book returns with the years 1912-1919 (Ruoff 85-87). Erdrich claims that this happened because "rather than having a plan beforehand, we figured out who people were afterward" (Schumacher 59). This is an interesting approach to writing, in that by leaving yourself open like this, you are more free to let your creativity flow and then simply pinpoint what it means afterward.

In much the same way as Louise Erdrich's writing techniques differ from the norm, so do her characters' lives revolve around a sense of non-traditional time. When looking at the time scheme in these novels (particularly *Love Medicine*), we see that "the text is encoded simultaneously with mechanical and ceremonial time" (Rainwater 414). It is with this chaotic time pattern that we see Erdrich use the linear dates to show the reality of time moving on at a natural pace. Then with her use of flashbacks and "lateral narrational pursuits," we can understand the difficulties of the
characters to come to an understanding of themselves...and thus Erdrich's understanding of her heritage(414). Therefore, not only do we see the reference to time on the larger scale with the trilogy, but we also see an internal use of "chaos" as Erdrich creates a sense of the real and unreal for her characters. The random timings reiterate that things don't always happen when we expect them to, in the order that we expect them to.

Throughout the trilogy, we are able to see many of the same characters in all three books, so as to watch them grow and mature. In an intriguing sense, we see them at their oldest first in Love Medicine, but it is not until we come to know the hardships they faced in younger years that we begin to realize how much they've grown. When concentrating on the publishing dates and their contrast to the history of the family that lies in the novels, it is understandable why Erdrich composed a new edition of Love Medicine after all the other books were released. She seemingly started at the end, moved on to the beginning, and then understood who and what she had created, so she felt she had to enrich their portrayals in the first novel.

It is difficult to look at specific characters and explain their growth throughout the trilogy; however, I have chosen four such characters with which to work, Nector Kashpaw, Marie Lazarre-Kashpaw, Sister Leopolda/Pauline Puyat, and Fleur Pillager. To begin with Love Medicine, we see Nector as an old man—a grandpa—who depends on (but cheats on) his wife Marie. We discover that Nector and Marie, at one point, sold the Pillager land and betrayed Fleur by doing so. We see Nector as the tribal chairman who is set into a way of life which withers away, as does his spirit. This is the first impression we receive of this man, and it remains much the same throughout the entire book. It is not until we venture into Erdrich's third published book of the trilogy, Tracks, that we get an entirely different
notion of Nector as a younger man. We find out that he was married a few
times before Marie, and we begin to develop a sense that there is more to
the character, Nector, whom we met in Love Medicine. There is a young man,
a dreamer with so many memories hidden in the depths of the old man he's
become.

The second instance in which we see a character gain more distinguishing
qualities throughout the trilogy is through Marie Lazarre-Kashpaw. We first
see Marie as Nector's wife, a mother and a grandmother. She begins to relate
stories of her childhood when she was mysteriously drawn to a certain nun
named Sister Leopolda. Upon hearing that the Sacred Heart Convent took nuns
that belonged nowhere else, Marie says of the Sister,

I'll always wonder now, after hearing that, where they picked up
Sister Leopolda. Perhaps she had scarred someone else, the way
she left a mark on me. Perhaps she was just sent around to test
her Sisters' faith, here and there, like the spot-checker in a
factory. For she was the definite most-hard trial to anyone's
endurance, even when they started out with veils of wretched
love upon their eyes.(Erdrich IM 42)

And later, in relation to her own experiences with Sister Leopolda, Marie
states, "She always said the Dark One wanted me most of all, and I believed
this. I stood out"(IM 43). We get a sense in Love Medicine that Marie is
a target of Sister Leopolda's own "unspiritual" childhood, so that the Sister
takes the young child on as a conquest for her own unresolved evils.

It is not until we read Tracks that we discover why Sister Leopolda
acted so vehemently in relation to Marie...she is Marie's mother. It is
in this third novel where we find out that Sister Leopolda is actually a
reborn spiritual person—born out of a woman named Pauline Puyat. After
Pauline's difficult life of never seeming to fit in and searching to find a place and purpose for herself, she throws away the oppression of her birth name and takes on a name given her by God. She becomes Sister Leopolda by the advice of her Superior. She relates the experience by saying,

I prayed before I spread the scrap of paper in air. I asked for the grace to accept, to leave Pauline behind, to remember that my name, any name, was no more than a crumbling skin.

Leopolda. I tried out the unfamiliar syllables. They fit.

They cracked in my ears like a fist through ice. (Erdrich T 205)

She eventually was given the opportunity to teach (though not fond of children), so that she could "set an example for other girls from this region" (205). She says, "I have vowed to use my influence to guide them, to purify their minds, to mold them in my own image" (205).

In the character of Fleur Pillager, we find the connection between all of the novels. Her early life, as depicted in Tracks, is one of rugged survival. She faces the hardships of the tribal community but stands strong in her heritage. She marries Eli but, because of a "love potion" which Pauline created, he cheats on Fleur with another woman. There is a definite "feud" induced by Pauline's actions, and this feud, between Pauline and Fleur, is made evident throughout the novels. Fleur's daughter, Lulu, and Pauline's daughter, Marie, both love Nector in Love Medicine. Lulu seems to have assimilated best to the white culture but remains "uncontrollable," just like her mother. Marie never finds out her true identity, and it is somehow befitting that she becomes mother to Eli's daughter in Love Medicine. It is in the end of Love Medicine that we see Marie and Lulu making peace, and thus, we gain significant closure to the struggles which began in Tracks.
In Love Medicine, we are given the idea of Nector and Marie as an old, married couple, and we see through Marie's storytelling that she once had a powerful connection with a woman named Sister Leopolda. But it is not until we move forward to the last novel of the trilogy, Tracks, (though backward in this family's history) that we see the hardships Nector faced in dealing with the loss of traditional Indian ways, as the white Americans advanced into the reservations. We can more fully understand his position as tribal chairman and how much that means to him, especially as he sees his children and grandchildren moving away from tradition.

And though we are first introduced to Sister Leopolda in Love Medicine, we cannot really comprehend her stubborn attitude in teaching Marie until we read Tracks and see the hardships and changes "Pauline" went through as a young woman trying to find an identity. Her strict manner of discipline is evident, just as she had claimed it would be. And we can better understand that discipline when we discover that Marie is actually her daughter.

In looking at Fleur's life throughout Erdrich's works, we are able to connect the present actions to those of the past. We understand that the tensions seen in Love Medicine between Lulu and Marie are evidence of the ongoing struggle between Fleur and Pauline which began in Tracks. And more importantly, we are able to conclude such a feud and begin a friendship.

The four characters I chose exemplify the way Erdrich's novels detail this family in reverse order. By watching these characters' lives change throughout the trilogy, we can see the depth which grows into the family's experiences as we read the books in their published order. For even though we get a glimpse of the characters in Love Medicine, it is when they are reintroduced to us in Tracks that we more fully understand to what degree this family extends.
Narration as a Contributing Factor

In looking at Louise Erdrich's use of the narrative style, we can see that our knowledge of her characters and our interaction with them is intensified with this format. The vast opinions that are expressed by each character's narrative voice throughout the trilogy give us a broader sense of the relationships which are occurring and the history being divulged. Furthermore, this structural format allows Erdrich to step out of the spotlight and listen to the messages of the characters also. In a way, the author herself is discovering, or re-discovering, her history as the stories unfold.

When discussing the effect of an author's personal history on his/her creative constructs, we can see Louise Erdrich working our her own ideas of identity through her characters. An essay by Catherine Rainwater, "Reading between Worlds: Narrativity in the Fiction of Louise Erdrich," points at some details in the form of Erdrich's writing. For example, Rainwater speaks of Erdrich's references to outside influences in her books.

In all three novels, encoded biblical material is juxtaposed with encoded data from the American Indian shamanic tradition. These religions are epistemologically, experientially, and technologically different. Their simultaneous presence as cultural codes vexes the reader's effort to decide upon an un-ambiguous, epistemologically consistent interpretive framework. Encoded "undecidability" leads to the marginalization of the reader by the text.

(Rainwater 407)

I see Erdrich's format as relative to her personal struggles, thus making her books even more pronounced in their opinions of self-disclosure. Now, I can understand the surface of the argument by Rainwater here; however,
I feel that it is when the reader digs deep into the "subtext," that he/she understands why Erdrich played with so much ambiguity. She wanted to show the turmoil faced by people of dual cultural backgrounds and their need to face these differences head on. By making the reader experience some of this confusion, he/she is better able to get into the political aspect of the books. The "undecidability" makes us uniquely related to the characters.

Many times, Rainwater argues, the reader is taken "into a permanent state of irresolution"(409). I believe that this was the specific intent of Erdrich with her style, for she has been in an "irresolved" state her entire life due to her attempt to combine two cultures and find her place within such a history.

There are also "several avenues of meaning remaining open"(Rainwater 410). On one hand, these avenues could be construed as "many conflicting narrative points of view"(411). Or, on the other hand, Erdrich could be revealing all possible opinions and then letting us choose to believe which one we want to. An example of such narration is seen in The Beet Queen. One of the characters, Karl Adare, as a young child, fell face-first into the snow. The different ideas of what the impression of his face in the snow was comparable to were himself, Christ, and the Devil. "The way he is presented depends upon which narrator is speaking at any given time"(Rainwater 410). For me, the "conflicting narrative points of view" bring a more intense reality into Erdrich's works.(411)

Rainwater's essay also discusses the difficulty she had at locating a "conventional plot...the notion of a plot as consisting of beginning, conflict, rising action, resolution, ending. Erdrich's novels conspicuously lack plot in this traditional sense of the term"(415). And yet, when we look at her concentration on the day-to-day existence of these characters,
the style with which she portrays them only creates a more intensely realistic experience for the reader, because he/she is not weighted down with contrived notions of forced profundity. The setting Erdrich places her characters in is conducive to the complacent existence they are living through tradition. I felt as though, as an author, Erdrich was trying to stay away from concrete terms or traditional terms, for she could not set up a group of characters in a selected pattern of action when they were living and learning day by day—it would have contradicted her entire intention.

Part of the aforementioned "plot problem," according to Rainwater, was the use of different narrators throughout each book. The fact that "once a story is told it can be recreated in a recognizable way by a totally new set of words" reminds us of our own inclinations to tell everything the way we understand it (Rainwater 415). The intriguing aspect of this in Erdrich's work is that the stories are asking you to believe them, and yet they really don't force you to commit to a specific opinion, but rather, to keep your mind open to all the different ideas that surround you. In Erdrich's works, the vastness of the narration makes the texts much more full...more complete.

**Textual Merit: The Correlation of Personal History and Creativity**

So, what is the function of the text? On one hand, a text should provide adequate transmission of information, and on the other hand, it should generate new meanings to its readers (Lotman 377). In looking at Louise Erdrich's texts, it seems that her narrative structure provides us a "code" by which we can better understand the depth of meaning she is trying to convey. Yury M. Lotman suggests in his essay, "The Text Within the Text," that basic processes of codification that are usually unconscious and,
as a result, imperceptible emerge in the sphere of structural consciousness and become significant at the conscious level. (378).

Therefore, we are made to realize that there can be underlying identifications made if we let them rise to the surface of noticeability. Furthermore, the text is not a passive container, a mere receptacle for content introduced into it from the outside, but has itself become a generator of further texts. (Lotman 378)

In this way, Erdrich has opened her stories up for further meaning. By allowing her characters to narrate the story, she has given them the ability to be better understood, and thus allows the subtext to emerge. Though it is Erdrich's hand creating the characters and the words the characters speak, her ability to let them take on an existence of their own and grow and change with time (as we see in the trilogy) gives them a significance they could not otherwise attain.

The various subtexts that constitute the mother text begin to differentiate and transform themselves...a text becomes capable of self-development. (Lotman 379)

We, as readers of Louise Erdrich's works, are better able to understand the meaning in such works because rather than having us look at her narration of the characters' story, she has made each of the characters respectable narrators and thus brought us closer to the actual content.

And yet, though she is separating herself from her works in many ways, she is also very much a part of what is being said.

The signifying nature of the artistic text is dual. On the one hand, the text acquires an autonomous existence, independent of the author, and thus becomes a real thing, among the things of
the real world. On the other hand, the text continuously reminds us that it is the creation of someone and signifies something.

(Lotman 382)

This duality between the text Louise Erdrich has written and the stories her characters tell is a definite connection she wanted us to face. The constant intermingling of her own words and her characters' words shows us a somewhat hidden conflict which she was made to deal with her entire life --that is, a conflict of history, heritage, the story of her own dual cultural background.

She is constantly trying to find ways of acceptance and "connectedness" for her characters. For example, in Love Medicine, Marie Kashpaw takes in June (actually Marie's niece) and Lipsha (June's son). The idea that biological children are somehow superior or preferred over other children who belong in a nuclear family is a Western-European, not a Native-American, concept. (Rainwater 418)

Through her portrayal of Marie's accepting nature, is Erdrich leaning toward the Native American idea of family because she, being part-Chippewa, is more likely to find a place there?

To take the idea of Erdrich's quest to find a place for herself in history a little further, we could begin by questioning "whether historical narratives can be objective representations or are (merely) subjective constructions of a researcher's and a culture's ideologies" (Peterson 982). Can a person, namely a woman, truly work with a history that is only known to them through "no direct access to the past, only recourse to texts about the past" (Peterson 983)?

Now, in defense of Erdrich's writings and experiences, her life as a part-Chippewa woman connects her very strongly to the ties of the past.
And yet, we must wonder if her use of characters like Fleur Pillager (as a woman we encounter in both Tracks and The Beet Queen who is so self-sufficient that most men are even scared of her) is a wishful representation rather than an honest one. For,

'since women as historical objects are rarely included in 'History' to begin with, the strong feminist interest in forging a new historicity that moves across and against 'his story' is not surprising.' (Peterson 983)

So, if Louise Erdrich struggled with her cultural history, it is understandable that she would want to come to some conclusions through her writings. As Nancy J. Peterson says in her essay on Erdrich and Tracks, "Writing history (as historical novels and in other forms) has thus become one way for marginalized peoples to counter their invisibility"(983). This could be what Erdrich was trying to do. In characters such as Fleur, Erdrich could give women a strength and control which they had really never known. She could identify women as significant members of the culture even though "history" had never recognized them as such.

And yet, somehow, when reading Erdrich's novels, we get a sense that she's just trying to reiterate as best she can the history of her people. In Tracks, Nanapush, a central character in this novel, begins to tell the story of the winter of 1912 to Lulu, and even he begins by saying "My girl, I saw the passing of times you will never know"(Erdrich T 2). He is saying that "the complexity of the past exceeds his (and anyone else's) ability to represent it fully"(Peterson 985). By letting her character make such a statement, Erdrich precedes her own storytelling with the idea that history can never be completely captured, simply commented upon.

Another contradiction Erdrich faced when beginning this historical
venture was two competing frames of reference: one associated with orality, a seasonal or cyclic approach to history, a precontact culture; the other linked with textuality, a linear or progressive approach to history, a postcontact culture. (Peterson 986)

Erdrich handles this contradiction well. For, though she is writing textual material, she is using an oral/narrative structure to do so. The reader is made to "listen" as well as read because each chapter is composed of a story told by a character.

Arising from this insight is a vexing theoretical issue: if history is just a story, how is it possible (or is it possible at all) to discriminate between one account of the past and other accounts? (Peterson 988)

This makes us question whether history is purely fictional--simply a story. E.L. Doctorow discusses this issue and "argues that there is no difference between history and fiction, that both are narratives constructing the only world that can be known" (Peterson 988). While history tries to account for truths from the past, fiction creates a means through which we can write our own ideas into the past.

In this sense, we can truly see the connection between Erdrich's life and her works. The style with which she writes tells stories similar to those she heard from her own family. The inter-textual development exemplifies the duality of Erdrich's own history. And the way we see the story of the trilogy being written from the end to the beginning reiterates the fact that while stories are constantly being told, the meaning emerges when we look back into the history in order to distinguish the present. Erdrich evokes in us a distinction about history and the narrative--"the
world takes on the shape of the stories we tell" (Rainwater 422).

Conclusion

There is an assimilation of Louise Erdrich's own life into her texts. The conflicts faced by the characters and the causes of those conflicts show us a striking similarity to the hardships Erdrich has dealt with throughout her own life. The main issue Erdrich has worked through in her writings is that of being "misplaced" in between two cultures. The way that her trilogy continuously brings characters in and out of the present and the past shows Erdrich's need to link historical meaning into her works. The narrative structure she uses distances her from the material and makes the characters the focal point—the "storytellers."

Whether from the intensely personal approach she and her husband take in creating their characters, or from the inter-"connectedness" of each book with the next, or even from the fact that "Erdrich's language has a bizarre but always perfect pitch, capable of conveying profound and complicated emotions, startling in their purity" (Biography 162), Erdrich is able to provide for her readers an intriguing look at the way narrative connects an author's history with his/her creativity. The story says it all.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


