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Chapter One

Love Medicine, the first book in Louise Erdrich's much-acclaimed tetralogy, is a book about the struggles and triumphs of "five Chippewa and mixed-blood families, all struggling in different ways to attain a sense of belonging through love, religion, home, and family" (Andrews 1066). Love Medicine was an instant success, winning the National Book Critic Circle Award for Fiction for 1984. However, some may argue that Erdrich's style of writing is somewhat confusing, to say the least. Peter G. Beidler, a Professor of English at Lehigh University, argues that "Love Medicine does not always make a good impression on readers who encounter it for the first time. It strikes them as being made up of a vast sea of partially delineated characters taking part in a wild array of events that span a too-long period of time" (168).

Beidler's argument does have some foundation because Love Medicine was first published as a series of short stories. However, this criticism doesn't take away from Love Medicine's popularity and uniqueness. Edrich's novel is unique in that the reader's senses are assaulted at every turn of the page. First, there is the novel itself, with its shifts in time and setting (from 1934 to 1981, from the city to the reservation); then, there is the ever-prevalent theme of love and what it means to

the characters that offer a challenge to the discerning reader and researcher. There is also Erdrich's sad commentary on reservation life. The reader sees the eroding effects of alcoholism and poverty through Erdrich's use of vivid, mind-blowing descriptions.

But perhaps the most intriguing puzzle to be found in Love Medicine is the two female protagonists--Lulu Lamartine and Marie Kashpaw. Thomas Matchie, in his essay, "Love Medicine: A Female Moby-Dick", refers to the two women as "the two female giants of Love Medicine" (487). The two matriarchal figures are very different and yet so alike that it is almost uncanny. Both are offered to the reader, not as paragons of virtue, but as fallible human beings. The two women are not ideal they are, instead, tragically flawed in some fundamental way. If neither Lulu nor Marie are the untainted ideal woman, then who is? Who is portrayed in an ideal manner?

Erdrich's answer to this question is rather bizarre; however, the twisted logic somehow makes complete sense. Erdrich's answer to the complete woman, whole and unblemished, is not an easy one to explain. Instead of a complete woman, Erdrich presents the reader with half-women. In Love Medicine, Lulu and Marie are these half-women. If one were to go searching for the ideal woman in Erdrich's book, one would instead find half-women. However, instead of searching for the ideal woman in two separate figures, the reader must look at a combination of the two, a joining or bonding, so to speak. Though seemingly an impossible

task, the ideal woman can be found in Erdrich's Love Medicine.

Lulu Lamartine, the first matriarch under discussion, is what some would call an earth mother. Lulu could not say no to the opposite sex she was bound by some incomprehensible need to be, sexually, a part of a man's life. She derives great pleasure from the opposite sex, and is not afraid to show it, as evidenced by her nine children, all of whom were fathered by different men. Yet one would never call Lulu a slut, or any of the other euphemisms used for a woman of loose morals, simply because she is Lulu, a woman of proud existence, a woman that demands respect. Indomitable, spirited and proud, Lulu is unlike any other female character in the book.

As a child, Lulu had a rough beginning. Deserted by her mother, she was forced to go away a government school, where she ran away repeatedly, wishing for the freedom of the reservation and the people who she knew so well. When she returned to the reservation, it was obvious almost immediately that the school did not break her spirit, only held it in check. Once at home, Lulu is restless, searching for an unknown, receiving no solace from her demanding, frantic heart. Lulu began to assuage this unknown yearning in the most fundamental way. She began to partake quite indiscriminately in pleasures of the flesh. An intense study into Lulu's relationships will elicit one of two responses from readers: they either recoil from Lulu's lax morals or they applaud the strength and courage she must possess in order to live her life the way she does.

Lulu's first romantic encounter is with Moses Pillager, a strange man who happens to be her cousin. She is discouraged from pursuing Moses by her family, but headstrong Lulu has already decided that Moses, with his infinite wisdom, is the man who was created for her. So she leaves the comfort of her home once again, but this time she embarks on her own journey of self-discovery, not one the government forces her to take. She goes to the island where Moses lives and for a while Lulu is satisfied. However, she soon realizes that her decision to leave civilization, and in turn socialization, was a rather rash one. She tries to persuade Moses to come back with her but he refuses. Some women, feeling bound to their loved ones, would decide to stay with the men, burying their own feelings. However, Lulu would have laughed at the mere thought of giving up her own happiness for her husband's. She decides to leave Moses and take with her the son they have created. This ends one era in Lulu's life, an era that could be labeled Lulu's "faithful era".

When Lulu leaves Moses and comes back to the reservation, she begins another era, an era that is not as unblemished as the time that she spent with Moses. When she is back with her kinfolk, Lulu meets and marries Henry Lamartine. Child after child is born to the married couple, and not one of them even remotely resembles the man that Lulu has made her second husband. Lulu "makes her own babies--eight boys, each by a different father, who grow up supporting, fighting, and caring for one another" (Mitchell 585). The state of Lulu's affairs (no pun

intended), is bound to stir up malicious, maligning gossip. In one section of the book, Marie sums up quite nicely the gossip about Lulu's life. Marie offers to the reader these thoughts: "I thought of Henry Lamartine. Before he was killed on the tracks, he surely knew that his wife went with anybody in the bushes. When she had the boys, all colors of human, he could tell they were not his. He took care of them. I understood Henry, and I felt for him as I sat. I knew why he had parked his Dodge square on the tracks and let the train bear down" (161-62).

It is hard to understand why one woman would need so many men, why she felt the compunction to share something considered sacred with almost a whole community of men. However, the section entitled "The Good Tears" in Love Medicine, perhaps offers an explanation of Lulu's behavior. Lulu, a seemingly carefree, nonchalant person, offers this excuse for her sexual practices: "I'm going to tell you about the men. There were times I let them in just for being part of the world. I believe that angels in the body make us foreign to ourselves when touching. In this way I'd slip my body to earth, like a heavy sack, and for a few moments I would blend in with all that forced my heart" (277). It is an excuse so poetic that it is easy to dispel the image of Lulu as a whore, but see her instead as a woman of earthiness and a gentle heart. However, to say that this was not a serious vice would be looking at Lulu through rose-colored glasses. Her behavior cannot be overlooked or excused. Something important is obviously lacking in her nature for her to need so many men. But just to

look at Lulu's careless affairs would be unfair because Lulu offers more to the reader than love affairs.

Indeed, there are certain incidents in the book where one would say that Lulu, though weak towards the opposite sex, is in no way a weak woman in the other aspects of her life. For example, one of her ex-lovers (Marie's husband to be exact) burns her house down, leaving Lulu and her nine children completely homeless and in dire straits. Lulu is also left physically scarred from the fire, for she must live with the fact that she will always be bald. However, Lulu does not completely break down because she has lost her home and, because of her hair loss, the ability to attract men. She perseveres, refusing any help, preferring instead to rely on her own powers and strength. Some people offer her a chance to stay with them, but Lulu refuses. She chooses to stay in the same place where her house had stood before Nector's rash act destroyed it. Lulu says,"For two months we camped there in a shack made out of bent sheets of tin siding, busted boards, burnt wood. We hauled water in cans. The summer was dry and hot. In the hulks of our busted-down cars my boys slept comfortably and well" (LM 287). Roughing it, so to speak, is not something that a weak woman would do, especially a woman with so many children. However, Lulu did rough it, proving that she was as strong and as proud as the most moralistic person.

Another example of Lulu's bravery and high spirit is her confrontation with the tribal council. The people in the Chippewa tribe wanted Lulu to give up her land so that they could build a

factory. "A factory" Lulu says, "that made equipment of false value. Keepsake things like bangle beads and plastic war clubs" (283). Lulu refuses to give up her land for something so trivial. She is brought before the tribal council, and everyone is encouraging Lulu to hand her land over with no hassles. Lulu is insistent and refuses to give up what is rightfully hers. Feeling pushed into a corner, Lulu uses her one trump card--she threatens to name the fathers of all her children. There is almost a collective, audible gasp from the tribal council. Suddenly, the council backs off, realizing that if they push Lulu any more, their past transgressions will emerge from the dark to bite at their seemingly moral existence. It is a powerful moment for Lulu. She finally has some semblance of control over the people who have lain with her in the Biblical sense and then talked about her promiscuous ways the very next day. Ah, revenge is sweet.

Lulu is a likeable character whose spirited and indefatigable attitude towards life makes her an endearing character. But does she represent an ideal woman, a paragon of virtue and womanhood? The answer to this question is a resounding "no." Her character does not evoke images of those other paragons of womanhood such as Mary, Jesus's mother.

Since Lulu is not representative of an ideal woman, perhaps Marie, the other matriarchal figure in Love Medicine, will be. Like Lulu, Marie has a rough beginning as a child. But unlike Lulu, she did not have caring relatives. As a young adult, Marie,

a white woman whose family was known as "poor white trash," decides that she wants nothing more out of life than to become a nun and attain the almost unattainable--saintly status. She begins her search in a convent and encounters her one obstacle, Sister Leopolda, a woman she hates and uncontrollably loves, a woman that will become the torment in her very existence.

Marie's weakness is quite different from Lulu's. She stays with one man all her life and that, especially after knowing Lulu's history, is commendable. Marie takes her drunkard husband and turns him into a tribal leader, and she becomes "respectable." However, the road to this respectability comes with its drawbacks. Marie's husband has to be prodded and pushed by Marie into the role of tribal leader. Louise Flavin, in her essay, "Louise Erdrich's Love Medicine: Loving Over Time and Distance," points out that "it is Marie who nominates him and keeps him sober so he can perform his duties" (57). But it is a hard-won fight that Marie relishes, especially after being known as "poor white trash" all her life. Marie perhaps could fill the void, could become the ideal woman in Love Medicine, if it were not for the fact that all of her actions are suited to one purpose: to gain approval from Sister Leopolda, a woman who has plagued Marie all of her young and adult life. Marie joins the Sacred Heart in 1934, and it is here that she meets Sister Leopolda, the woman who will forever haunt her life. While she is here the two "embark on a violent Love-hate relationship" (Andrews 1067). Marie is weak in that she feels an overwhelming

urge to seek and receive approval from a who that has literally terrorized Marie when she was nothing but a young, gauche child. The time that she spent at the convent left its indelible mark on Marie.

To call Sister Leopolda a crazed woman out of control would be a bit shy of the truth. The woman is insane and she places Marie, a young teen-age girl, in the midst of her insanity. Marie has no control over her situation and she is manipulated and hurt by a woman caught up in the struggle of overcoming evil, never realizing that Sister Leopolda was the ultimate evil, the devil disguised by a nun's habit.

There were many scenes between Marie and Sister Leopolda in which Sister Leopolda tells Marie how evil she was and how she needs to refuse to let the devil into her life. The most riveting of these scenes takes place in the kitchen of the convent. Sister Leopolda was again in the grasp of something incomprehensible and unrecognizable to human kind, and her unfortunate victim was the young, impressionable Marie. Marie had just been scalded by water thrown by Sister Leopolda and she was almost in a shocked state. While in this state she saw Sister Leopolda with clarity. She saw the reason for the nun's craziness. She saw that the devil had a unbreakable grip on her. Marie attempts to push Sister Leopolda into an open oven and fails--miserably. After her attempt fails, Sister Leopolda, being the crazed woman that she is, seeks retaliation for what she believes is a heinous crime. Marie, perhaps a bit insane herself at this time, shouts at Sister

Leopolda: "`Bitch of Jesus Christ!' Kneel and beg! Lick the floor!'" After this outburst, Marie states, "`that was when she stabbed me through the hand with the fork, then took the poker up alongside my head, and knocked me out'" (57).

After this incident, Marie meets and marries Nector. She begins another life totally alien from the convent. But Sister Leopolda continues to influence Marie, in effect shaping and controlling her life. Everything Marie does, it seems, is for the benefit of Sister Leopolda. The woman still has Marie's life in her hands even though she is miles away from the convent. Because of the obvious hold that the past has on her, Marie cannot be the ideal woman in Love Medicine. She lets Sister Leopolda, a crazed nun, play too prominent a role in her life.

If neither Lulu nor Marie can pass the test of becoming the ideal woman, which character can? The answer to this question is "none." So one must pause and ponder on this dilemma: Did Erdrich forget about the ideal woman, a paragon? Did she not want to place a woman above reproach in Love Medicine? The answers to these questions are not simple to digest. First, the ideal woman must be complete and full.(This is an established fact.) Although Marie and Lulu could be considered half-women when the two are taken separately, it is suddenly obvious that the two half-women become whole and, in effect, ideal.

My theory is that the two women cannot function alone as the ideal, but together they can represent an ideal woman. Lyman Lamartine, Lulu's youngest son puts it best with these powerful

insights into the two women after they've become friends: "'It was in age that they came into their own. With Nector Kashpaw gone, the two of them were now free to concentrate their powers, and once they got together they developed strong and hotheaded followings among our local agitating group of hard-eyes, a determined bunch who grew out their hair in braids or ponytails and dressed in ribbon shirts and calico to make their point'"(303). Powerful and strong, the two women begin to rally their tribe, shaking things up even in their old age. The ideal woman is finally realized. The two matriarch figures are willing to share in a power that brings so much influence into the tribal community. They do not get bogged down by meaningless things such as power struggles. Lulu and Marie are ecstatic that they can stir a community to action with their combined energy.

The ideal doesn't last long, though, for it is no time when these two volatile women are at each other's throats again. But their ideal, even though it was short, served a function. The two women each took some small grain of knowledge back with them to their prospective lives. The joining of the two was not in vain.

Erdrich has a peculiar, roundabout way of introducing the ideal woman in Love Medicine. Instead of offering her existence straight away, Erdrich forces the reader to think, to ponder, to ruminate. Her unique idea of the ideal woman should be applauded because the ideal requires joining and understanding of one another. Without other people, a woman's existence would be in question; she needs others to reaffirm, to offer support.

Chapter Two

The Beet Queen, the second book in Louise Erdrich's nationally acclaimed tetralogy, chronicles the lives of two women, Mary Adare and Celestine James. The novel is similar to Erdrich's first one, Love Medicine, in that the reader is left wondering about the polar opposites that Erdrich places in the novel. This novel is different from Love Medicine in that the two main female protagonists start off as friends but eventually grow apart because of their vast differences. The two women have certain characteristics that embody the vision of the ideal but they are too trapped by their own limitations to be considered ideal. Just as in Love Medicine, the ideal woman can be realized for a short period of time, but like in Love Medicine the ideal doesn't last very long.

Mary Adare is perhaps the easiest of the two women to analyze. Mary Adare is not a sociable person, and that's putting it mildly. She is strange in manner and dress. She fits the mold for one of Erdrich's female characters, though. She is flamboyant and doesn't give a damn what anyone says about her. She is reminiscent of Lulu Lamartine without the obvious promiscuity. Mary "develops into an exotically dressed eccentric who is obsessed with predicting the future and controlling others"

(1069). However, one could argue that just because Mary was anti-social that does mean she is not candidate for an ideal woman. Just because one is ornery does not mean they cannot in some form or fashion be an ideal person. Perhaps it would be better to offer some more observations about Mary Adare and give a little of her background.

Mary Adare has a very strange upbringing, at least for the first eleven years. She is raised by a mother that ignores her and cannot understand her because she is too busy petting her older boy child, giving in to his every whim and ignoring the needs of her second child. Mary is almost, in a sense, ostracized from the family circle. She has no real father and that adds to Mary's confusion as a child. Her mother was a "kept woman." She only saw her father on occasion, and his visits were certainly not of the parental nature. One could say that, as a child, Mary had no supportive parental guidance. Mary's first years perhaps shaped the rest of her existence, teaching her that she could depend on no one but herself. This lesson, learned as a child, would perhaps have been acceptable. Life is after-all full of letdowns and traumas, and we need a little backbone to get through it all. Unfortunately, this was not to become the only hard lesson Mary learned because Mary's young life was to come to a shattering halt, leaving her feeling abandoned and hopeless.

Mary's inability to love and form strong attachments may be traced back to her childhood, particularly to one traumatic experience. The reader is introduced to Mary when she is eleven

and a lot can be gleaned from the mind of this child. She feels as if she is always being placed on the back burner and as if her needs are never seen to. However, the one incident that destroys Mary's life is the death of her mother's male friend and financial provider. Being a "kept woman" has its advantages and its disadvantages, as Adelaide, Mary's mother, was to find out. Life had been pretty good for the whole family. They had food on the table, expensive clothes, and a nice house. The whole setup was beneficial to all. Unfortunately, Adelaide had not planned on the untimely demise of her boyfriend. His death brings chaos and confusion. Suddenly, Adelaide is not the pampered woman kept by a rich man. She is now beginning to knock on poverty's door and nothing could keep its reaching tentacles at bay. To add insult to injury, Adelaide discovers that she is expecting a third child. Life begins to lose its golden sheen, and Adelaide begins to look for ways out of her predicament.

The family is forced to leave home and begin to travel with the vague idea of going to Adelaide's sister's house for help. Along the way, after being thrown out of an apartment for theft, the family begins to innocently partake in the fun at a local county fair. By this time, Adelaide is desperate. She has just had her third child and life has become a grim challenge. She has no money, no prospects, and even providing food for the children has become a chore. While at the fair, Adelaide is drawn to the airplane rides, probably seeing this as her escape, thinking that some heavenly figure decided to intervene in her life and offer a

golden opportunity. She pulls out a wrinkled bill, hands it over to the man flying the plane and steps on board. The reader isn't aware of what Adelaide says to the pilot, but it must have been heady, to say the least, because he flies into the great wide open and does not come back to finish his fair gig. And so, Adelaide makes her dramatic exit from her children's lives, never turning a hair at leaving them behind.

After Adelaide's abrupt departure, the children are in a perpetual state of shock. Mary is left holding the crying baby and holds onto the child like a life line. Finally, a stranger comes and takes the child, saying that he will feed the crying baby boy. At first, Mary refuses to give the child up, but she realizes the futility of keeping a hungry child, and so she reluctantly hands over the newborn baby. Now, Karl and Mary are left to fend for themselves. Though Karl is the oldest he has always been sickly and as a result a "mama's boy." So, Mary is, in effect, on her own. She has no support in Karl and she is alone. The two begin to travel towards Argus in the hopes of finding their sister's mother, Fritzie. With no money, they must stowaway on a train. It is during this train ride that Mary is accosted by dreams and visions of her mother:

> She was still on the plane, flying close to the pulsing stars, when suddenly Omar noticed that the fuel was getting low. He did not love Adelaide at first sight or even care what happened to her. He had to save himself.

> Somehow he had to lighten his load. So he sat at his controls. He stood up in his cockpit. Then in one sudden motion he plucked my mother out of her seat and dropped her overboard. At night she fell through the awful cold. Her coat flapped open and her black dress wrapped tightly around her legs. Her red hair flowed straight upward like a flame. She was a candle that gave no warmth. My heart froze. I had no love for her. That is why, by morning, I allowed her to hit the earth. (16)

Mary had effectively killed her mother, at least in her mind and heart. In the essay, "Reading Between Worlds: Narrativity in the Fiction of Louise Erdrich," Catherine Rainwater explains Mary's vision as this: "For Mary, Adelaide is mythologized, frozen into an eternal moment of falling back out of the sky" (417). Mary will forever carry this vision of her mother in her mind, symbolizing that she can never forgive this act of cruelness by Adelaide. One cannot argue with the fact, though, that Mary's heart has begun to harden after her mother's desertion. This, to some extent, explains Mary's next act. Karl is still asleep and the train stops in Argus. Mary jumps out and leaves Karl asleep on the train, never looking back. It is almost as if she is ridding herself of everything her mother had created. Mary says about the situation: "But I didn't help him. I ran to the end of town. I couldn't stand how his face glowed in

the blossom's reflected light, pink and radiant, so like the way he sat beneath our mother's stroking hand" (16). And so Mary begins her life in Argus.

Mary's life in Argus is marked by her relationship with Celestine James, a mixed-blood Chippewa, the other main female protagonist. Like Mary, Celestine is a strong, determined woman willing to fight for what she wants in life. Erdrich does not provide much family background for Celestine, only introducing her older brother Russell into the novel. There isn't a chance to delve into Celestine's past as is the case with Mary. All that is known about Celestine is what the reader witnesses in the novel. It is as if she is a woman without a past. To me, Erdrich distances herself from Celestine's character, and the reader is given a sterile view of the character of Celestine. This is a sharp contrast to Mary. With Mary the reader felt and understood Mary's myriad of emotions.

Celestine is hard to pinpoint as a character. As children, she and Mary were so much alike that it is difficult to separate the two. Celestine begins to change toward Mary after a love affair with Karl Adare, Mary's brother. This affair is a shock, because up until this point the reader is presented with a gruff, business like woman and the reader is not aware of her romantic side until she comes into contact with Karl.

Karl and Celestine's first sexual encounter is odd, to say the least. Karl drops by Kozka's Meats and runs into Celestine. There's a weird sexual tension between the two from the first.

Celestine is motivated more by curiosity than anything else because she has never had sex. No one seems to know what motivates Karl to initiate sex with Celestine, not even Erdrich. The little information known about Karl reveals that he is a homosexual. So their sexual coupling is a stunning surprise to the reader. Celestine describes their first encounter in one succinct paragraph.

> I lunge from his grip, but he comes right with me. I lose my balance. He is fighting me for the upper hand, straining down with all his might, but I am more than equal to his weight-lifting arms and thrashing
>
> legs. I could throw him to the side, I know, but I grow curious. There is the smell of corn mash, something Mary has dropped that morning. That's what I notice even when it happens and we are together, rolling over, clasped bumping into the legs of the table. I move by instinct, lurching under him, my mind held up like a glass in which I see my own face, amused, embarrassed, and relieved. It is not so complicated, not even as painful, as I feared and it doesn't last long either. (128)

In Erdrich's odd, off-beat style, the two get up and drink coffee. Karl begins to pitch a sale for a knife that he is promoting. There's no acknowledgment of what has just taken place between the two and the reader is left wondering about what did

just happen. This sexual act is the beginning of the troubles between Celestine and Mary, and it is also the start of Celstine's worries.

Karl moves in with Celestine and begins a campaign to control and manipulate her. There is a hint that Karl loves Celestine, but with Karl the reader is always left wondering. For Celestine, the relationship isn't what she expected: Karl stifles her and leaves her no room for privacy. Celestine says, "love wears on me. Mary or no Mary, I am tired of coming home to Karl's heavy breathing and even his touch has begun to oppress me" (135). Celestine hates being in a relationship with Karl. Her head had been filled with romantic notions from love stories, and Karl just didn't live up to her expectations. However, Celestine is a woman with needs, and so, at first, she tries to make things work between her and Karl. Susan Meisenhelder, in her essay "Race and Gender in Louise Erdrich's The Beet Queen," states that "Although Celestine intuitively senses that female strength and traditional love relationships may be incompatible, she feels the lure of romance and, in her relationship with Karl, faces the same temptation to passivity and self-annihilation that Sita [Mary's beautiful cousin who falls in and out of relationships] experiences in her marriages" (52). In the end, though, Celestine cannot stay in the relationship with Karl. When he proposes marriage, she recoils from a life commitment to a man whom she can barely stand. In response to his marriage proposal she says:

"It's not just you. . . . I don't want

to get married. With you around I get no sleep. I'm tired all the time. All day I'm giving wrong change and I don't have any dreams. I'm the kind of person that likes having dreams. Now I have to see you every morning when I wake up and I forget if I dreamed anything or even slept at all, because right away you're on me with your hot breath." (136)

Karl is stifling the one part of Celestine that she always had: her dreams. It is as if she would rather have her dreams than the unbearable reality that Karl brings into her life.

She pushes him out of her life, but unfortunately, fate has other plans in mind. Celestine finds out she's pregnant, and she ends up marrying Karl anyway for the sake of the child. But Celestine makes sure that Karl understands that he is not to be in her life anymore, though they are married. It is a marriage in name only. After her experience with Karl, Celestine decides to dodge relationships the rest of her life. There is no more romance for Celestine, except in her dreams. She was burned by her experience with Karl and refuses to trust another man. Instead, she becomes wrapped up in the child that they created. She turns all her love toward Dot, in much the same way Mary eventually does. Celestine states: "Sometimes, watching the baby as she slept or reaching for her in the dark, it was passion that Celestine felt, even stronger than with Karl. She stole time to be with Dot as if they were lovers" (175). So Celestine begins to

live her life without Karl, avoiding him at all costs, raising their daughter with a smothering kind of love.

The reader must remember, however, that Mary was not always a queer, unapproachable individual and Celestine wasn't always running away from Karl and what he stood for. There was an innocent period in the two women's lives, a period before life's realities intruded. After Mary's arrival in Argus, she begins to receive unconditional love for the first time in her life from her aunt and uncle. To make things even better she discovers a friend for the first time in her life. When she first meets Celestine as a child, things clicked between the two. According to Sita this is what happened on their first meeting:

> Mary and Celestine smiled into each other's eyes. I could see that it was like two people meeting in a crowd, who knew each other from a long time before. And what was also odd, they looked suddenly alike. It was only when they were together. You'd never notice it when they weren't. Celestine's hair was a tarnished red brown. Her skin was olive, her eyes a burning black. Mary's eyes were light brown and her hair was dark and lank. Together, like I said, they looked similar. It wasn't even their build. Mary was short and stocky, while Celestine was tall. It was something else, either in the way they acted or the way they talked. Maybe it was a common sort of fierceness. (32-33)

From the first meeting the two were inseparable, joined at the hip in almost everything. As they got older, they became even closer, and, for the first time in her life, Mary gave and received love. It was a given that she loved her aunt and uncle and in return they loved her but with Celestine, Mary earned the love that she and Celestine shared. It was a mutually satisfying relationship, the two women together representing the ideal woman. However, as in Love Medicine, the ideal doesn't last for long.

For Mary and Celestine, the ideal lasted roughly a decade. They grew up together, sharing the same experiences, and there always remained that tenuous connection, unmistakable in its power. Unfortunately, the two drifted apart after Celestine's first and only love affair. Suddenly, Mary pushes Celestine away. Perhaps Mary no longer understands her friend because Celestine has made a leap into the world of sexual giving and taking, something that Mary has never experienced. Or more likely, Mary was angry with her friend's decision to take Karl, Mary's brother, for her first lover. This decision was probably fatal to Mary and Celestine's relationship because in Mary's mind's eye, she was being left out again, with Karl receiving all the attention just like he had with their mother. Mary is left out in the dark looking into a circle of love. Whatever reason, things are never the same between the Celestine and Mary. They remain friends, but it is only out of a sense of habit. Celestine feels sorry for Mary because, as she says, "Mary is alone, I know"

(219). They lose that inexplicable bond that has held them together for so long, and suddenly they are almost strangers.

After the split between the two women, Mary begins to turn toward the future almost as if she can't focus on the painful and unbearable present. She reads palms and tarot cards, becomes obsessed with robots, and then she unfairly turns all the love left in her towards Dot, Celestine's child by Karl. In Mary's eyes, Dot can do no wrong, and Mary goes to any lengths for the child, spoiling her unmercifully. The love that Mary has for the child is not healthy, almost as if she is turning all her hurt and anger at being betrayed and abandoned by a mother and a best friend towards an innocent child, heaping on Dot an unhealthy love. Celestine does not seem to be affected by the loss of friendship as does Mary. She has a child and has discovered a friend in Wallace Pfef, a man from Argus who once had an affair with Karl.

The loss of the friendship is traumatic to Mary. Emotionally, she is not able to try and discover a more healthy and thriving relationship. It is as if she has given up on humans and, instead, turns toward intangible and incomprehensible things. The ideal woman is lost because of the interference of a male outsider. The bond of womanhood shared by Mary and Celestine can never be retrieved because it has been tainted, spoiled forever. Again, the ideal woman perishes, leaving behind two shells that used to be one whole, functioning woman.

Chapter Three

Tracks, the third book in Erdrich's celebrated tetralogy, spans twelve years, from the winter of 1912 to the spring of 1924. Terry Andrews describes Tracks as Erdrich's "most concentrated, intense, and mystical" (1070). Tracks is different from Erdrich's two previous novels in that there are only two narrators, an old Chippewa by the name of Nanapush and a mixed-blood named Pauline. The "two storytellers alternate chapters, in separate, very distinct voices; Pauline, a young mixed-blood who is confused and psychologically damaged by her unbalanced commitment to Catholic martyrdom and Chippewa tradition and Nanapush, a wise old tribal leader gifted in the ancient art of storytelling" (Sergi 280). It is through these two narrators that the reader is introduced to Fleur Pillager and Margaret Kashpaw, the two women that fall into the category that I have labeled "Erdrich's list of half, incomplete women." The two fit perfectly, Fleur because of her affiliations with the supernatural and her pride, Margaret because of her selfish pride.

In the first chapter of the book, Nanapush is the narrator. It is through him that the reader learns of seventeen year old Fleur Pillager's amazing escape from the fever that left many on the Chippewa reservation dead. Nanapush is relating the story to Fleur's young daughter Lulu, the girl who later becomes popular

for her promiscuity on the Chippewa reservation. The reader can almost hear the love and admiration in Nanapush's voice as he relates the tale of Fleur's almost impossible survival against the odds. Nanapush describes how he and his friend, Pukwan, found the sick and feverish Fleur in their family's cabin near Matchimanito Lake:

> It was the eldest daughter, Fleur, about seventeen years old then. She was so feverish that she'd thrown off her covers, and now she huddled against the cold wood range, staring and shaking. She was wild as a filthy wold, a big bony girl whose sudden bursts of strength and snarling cries terrified the listening Pukwan. (3)

The rest of Fleur's family--her mother, father, little brother, and two little sisters--had already succumbed to the fever, leaving Fleur alone in the world to survive on her own. The first chapter offers a look at a determined girl able to survive even the most horrific of circumstances. Nanapush gives a glimpse of the woman that the girl named Fleur was to become.

With the image of pitiful Fleur in the reader's mind, it is difficult to grasp the supernatural Fleur that Pauline, the mixed-blood Chippewa, gives the reader. Nanapush only offered one side to the many facets of Fleur, the survival side. Pauline only reaffirms the fact that Fleur is a survivor, but she takes the reader to the other side, the supernatural realm. The second

chapter starts off with Pauline saying: "The first time she drowned in the cold and glassy waters of Matchimanito, Fleur Pillager was only a child" (10). I was so amazed by this first sentence that I found myself re-reading it, thinking that perhaps I had made a mistake. I had not. Pauline finishes the first paragraph by saying that Fleur was saved by two men. In the second paragraph, which is composed of only two sentences, Pauline boldly states that the two men who saved Fleur's life died shortly after because "by saving Fleur Pillager, those two had lost themselves" (10). Some readers may say that Pauline had a jaundiced view of Fleur, that she was perhaps scared of Fleur and blamed it on something as far-fetched as the supernatural. However, after reading on in this chapter, the reader begins to dispel that image of a pitiful waif that Nanapush managed to create with his searing tale of how Fleur was orphaned at seventeen and left near death's door.

The first sentence in the third paragraph and what follows it definitely confirms that perhaps Fleur was operating on a different level than those around her, that maybe, just maybe, Fleur had a grasp on other-worldly things. Pauline recites:

> The next time she fell in the lake, Fleur Pillager was fifteen years old and no one touched her. She washed on shore, her skin a dull dead gray, but when George Many Women bent to look closer, he saw her chest move. Then her eyes spun open,

> clear black agate, and she looked at him. "You take my place," she hissed. Everybody scattered and left her there, so no one knows how she dragged herself home. Soon after that we noticed Many Women changed, grew afraid, wouldn't leave his house and would not be forced to go near water or guide the mappers back into the bush. For his caution, he lived until the day his sons brought him a new tin bathtub. Then the first time he used it he slipped, got knocked out, and breathed water while his wife stood in the other room frying breakfast (11).

Pauline's observations on Fleur Pillager are enough to make the hair on the back of one's neck stand on end. Her story is similar to a Stephen King novel with its thought-provoking and spine-chilling messages. Pauline explains Fleur's ability to survive two drownings from an old Chippewa belief. She thinks that "Misshepeshu, the water man, the monster, wanted her for himself. He's a devil, that one, love hungry with desire and maddened for the touch of young girls, the strong and daring especially, the ones like Fleur" (11). Suddenly, Fleur is not only a supernatural being, but she's also entangled in a love affair with a water

monster. Pauline's stories are wild to say the least, but when Fleur goes away to work in Argus, her revengeful wrath on two men is enough to prove to even the most hard-core realist that Fleur is a woman trapped in the natural world, but obviously with a hold on the powers of the unknown.

Pauline is again narrator for the story of how Fleur destroys three men through an act of ultimate revenge. Pauline happened to be working at Kozka's Meats (the setting for Mary in The Beet Queen) when Fleur Pillager came on the scene searching for a job. She received one, working for Fritzie and Pete helping them clean and dress the meat that they were so popular for in Argus. For a while, things went by alright. Fleur kept to herself and caused no rips and tears in the fabric of Kozka's Meats. Three men worked for Pete: Lily, Tor, and Dutch, likeable men with a penchant for playing cards and gambling. One day, Fleur asks to join in the game. As men tend to do, they doubted Fleur's ability to play such a "man's game" with any kind of skill. They were mistaken, for Fleur did win, a dollar every game, no more no less, always a dollar. This frustrated Lily to no end. He could not for the life of him figure out how she managed to do it every game. Pauline says: "More than anything now, he wanted Fleur to come away with something but a dollar. Two bits less or more, the sum didn't matter just so he broke her streak" (21). It was a sore that nagged at Lily. Every day he became more and more frustrated. Finally, while Pete and Fritzie were away, the men decide to rig the game in their favor. As luck would have it,

Witch Fleur still managed to come away with one dollar against all the odds. After this game, the men, especially Lily, were so frustrated that they hated the thought of Fleur.

Fleur walked away from the game, refusing their offer for another game. If anything, this flippant gesture by Fleur merely added to their anger. They go after her and proceed to rape her. She fights, but she is no competition against three big, beefy men. The next morning, according to Pauline's narration " the sky was so low, witch teats, a tornado's green-brown cones, and as I watched, one flicked out and became a delicate probing thumb" (27). Everything is a mass of confusion, Pauline is running to and fro for cover and she spies the three men going into the meat locker, leaving her to perish on the outside. By this time, Pauline firmly believes that the wrath of Fleur Pillager has come down and no one can hide from the furies that she has called up to avenge her gang rape.

The town survives, barely, but in all the confusion, it is days before any one remembers the three men. Everyone heads toward the meat locker and begin to clear away the debris blocking the meat locker. When they finally reach it, they are shocked at their inhumane discovery:

> The three had hunched around a barrel
> where the game was still laid out,
> and a dead lantern and an empty
> bottle too. But they had thrown
> down their last hands and hunkered

tight, clutching one another, knuckles
raw from beating at the door they
had also attacked with hooks.
Frost stars gleamed off their eyelashes
and the stubble of their beards.
Their faces were set in concentration,
mouths open as if to speak some careful
thought, some agreement they'd come
to in each other's arms (30).

There is again that feeling of disbelief, the feeling that Fleur Pillager is not of the natural but of the supernatural. However, as a discerning reader I must also realize that Pauline has recited both of these incidents and perhaps her mind is somehow tainted against Fleur.

As I read on, though, I realize that Nanapush also believed these things about Fleur. Granted, he had no spine tingling stories to recite as Pauline did, but he made subtle, off-hand remarks about Fleur. For instance, when Fleur came back from Argus, Nanapush said: "there were some who declared they were glad Fleur had come back because--we didn't like to think how she did this--she kept the lake thing controlled" (35). There is again that reference to Fleur and the lake monster somehow being involved. Nanapush also offered sage advice to Eli Kashpaw, the one man who was brave enough to consider courting the off-putting Fleur Pillager. Even though he had considered Fleur something of a daughter, Nanapush was willing to admit that Fleur was a

possibly dangerous woman. In response to Eli's advice about how to approach the half-woman, Nanapush says "Forget that thing so heavy in your pocket," I said, "or put it somewhere else. Go town way and find yourself a tamed woman" (45). Even though Nanapush does love Fleur, he has become aware of her lack of humanness, that indescribable quality that suggests that Fleur is not of this world.

Fleur is a half-woman in the literal sense of the word, a character that lacks any true connection to the natural world. To offset Fleur, Erdrich creates Margaret Kashpaw, mother to the philandering Nector Kashpaw first introduced in Love Medicine and Eli Kashpaw, suitor to the witch Fleur Pillager. Margaret is the only woman in the book can come even close to tangling with Fleur and having a chance of coming out the winner. Pauline is too emotionally unbalanced to provide any female stimulation for Fleur and too afraid of Fleur for the two women to become friends, so Erdrich introduces the old woman Margaret Kashpaw, also a half-woman. The two women never truly become friends but there is a sense of grudging respect and admiration between the two, a kind of recognition of the other's capabilities and flaws.

At first, Margaret Kashpaw is unwilling to accept the relationship of Fleur Pillager and her son Eli Kashpaw. Though independent and resourceful, she is well aware that she is getting old and that soon it will be difficult to survive the harsh life that a Chippewa Indian must endure. So, as a kind of insurance, she has pinned all her hopes on Eli. In her mind's eye

he will take care of her in her dotage. Her plans go awry when she finds out that Eli is involved with Fleur Pillager. For months, Margaret pouted about the situation because she had "wanted a simpleminded daughter-in-law she could boss, a girl who would take advice and not bar her from the house. Everyone knew Fleur Pillager wasn't like that, did not need a second mother. Ogimaakwe had raised her daughters to boss themselves. Or so Margaret thought until Pauline came knocking, months later, when Fleur's child was finally ready to be born" (57). Suddenly, after being shut out of her son and daughter-in-law's life, Margaret was finally needed. Forgetting her irritation with her daughter-in-law, Margaret rushes to her bedside, her only thought to help with the birth of her grandchild. For two days, Margaret is the willing mid-wife, helping the struggling Fleur with a difficult birth. Finally, the child is born and Margaret is hooked. All her anger at Fleur drains, and she becomes nothing more that the doting grandmother. Fleur also accepts the woman, trusts her, something that she had only done with two people since the death of her parents: Eli Kashpaw and Nanapush.

The four of them, along with little Lulu, began to stay together for days. "They formed a kind of clan, the new made up of bits of the old, some religious in the old way and some in the new" (70). For a while, there was some peace in the life of Fleur Pillager. Though people were still afraid of her and cursed her very name, she did begin to have some semblance of a normal life, along with her mother-in-law, husband and Nanapush. But as from

previous Erdrich novels, the reader should be well aware by now that the sense of peacefulness can only last so long before it is unfortunately shattered. Before the big blow-up that forever separates Fleur Pillager and Margaret Kashpaw, Fleur becomes pregnant and nearly dies. However, it was Margaret Kashpaw that again saved the witch's life vigilantly working with the medicine she had to save to woman that she once hated. After her recovery, Fleur seemed to be even more indebted to the old woman, and although they could never be called bosom buddies under any situation, there was a mutual, caring respect between the two. It was after her recovery that the problem between the two women began.

It was time to pay the taxes on the land that the women owned. Fleur owed money on Matchimanito Lake and Margaret had to pay money on the land that she owned. They had just barely made it out of a long, hard winter, and had come close to starving, and the thought of having to come up with any money seemed almost impossible. However, the four of them began to diligently work saving every bit of money that they could scrap and save. Finally, they had enough money, but only for one piece of land. It was understood that since Margaret spent all of her time at Fleur's home they would pay the taxes on Matchimanito Lake and forget about Margaret's little piece of land. Margaret is sent to pay the taxes, but being the stubborn, determined woman she is, she pays her own taxes instead. Fleur finds out about it and is highly upset about the whole situation. She is so upset that she

attempts suicide, filling her skirts with rocks and plunging to the bottom of Matchimanito Lake. Eli pulls her out, saving her physical life, but destroying the emotional stability that Fleur had finally managed to gain after a long, hard struggle. After this incident she finally becomes the wild, supernatural being that she had been accused of being for so long. She gives up her daughter and her husband because of the act of one selfish woman. Her parting words to Nanapush are:

> "Go to her. She saved my life twice and now she's taken it twice back, so there are no more debts. But you, whom I consider my father, I still owe. I will not harm your wife. But I never will go to Kashpaw land" (214).

And so begins Fleur Pillager's life of isolation, away from any kind of civilization, even cutting herself off from the daughter she loved and cared for so much. She never has a chance to become truly human, in the end, because of Margaret's selfish pride, she finally realizes her true supernatural potential. She has lost her first family because of uncontrollable circumstances; she has lost her second family because she chose to trust the wrong person.

Chapter Four

After reading Erdrich's third novel, Tracks, I despaired of finding one woman in her last novel who would even come close to being the integrated, whole woman who was the object of my research. I had given close scrutiny to the novels Love Medicine and The Beet Queen and had still come up empty-handed, because the women in these novels were too extreme to be complete, full women. So, one can imagine the trepidation I felt when picking up Erdrich's last novel in her tetralogy, The Bingo Palace. Its flamboyant cover intimated to me that it perhaps held stranger women than I had yet to encounter in Erdrich's previous novels. By now, I've become well aware of Erdrich's unique way of shocking the reader. She did it with Lulu's promiscuity in Love Medicine, Mary's outrageous attitudes about life and the people in it in The Beet Queen, and to top things off she added a supernatural being to Tracks. Erdrich's imagination, rich in culture, seems almost endless, so The Bingo Palace, even before I cracked open the first page, began to represent my birthday and Christmas all rolled into one. I was anxious and afraid to find what surprises awaited me with the beginning of this book.

And what a surprise! Not only was the book somewhat tame after reading the previous novels concocted by the brilliant Erdrich, but I managed to find the one woman who I had been searching for. She is normal, and is unlike any of Erdrich's

previous female characters. The Bingo Palace is about Lipsha Morrissey, his search for fame and fortune, and his hopes of conquering the love of Shawnee Ray, the first truly integrated woman encountered in Erdrich's books. What makes Shawnee Ray so special? She has the caregiving qualities of Marie, the spice and vinegar of Lulu, the wiliness of Fleur Pillager, and the stubbornness of Mary Adare. It is almost as if Erdrich has managed to capture the positive characteristics of her previous characters and combine them into one woman: Shawnee Ray.

Shawnee Ray is not the unblemished woman that my previous diatribe would lead you to believe. I guess I became sentimental after discovering that there was some hope to be found in Erdrich's female characters. Shawnee Ray's past is spotted, and it is because of this blemished past and her determination to gain some semblance of control in her life that Shawnee Ray has become the whole, complete woman that I have so valiantly searched for. Shawnee Ray has a child out-of-wedlock, a child who is Marie's great-grandson. Though she is young, Shawnee Ray's whole refrain throughout the story is "getting an education." To some people Shawnee Ray would seem to have it made. Her son is with Lyman Lamartine, the richest man on the reservation, a man who has asked for her hand in marriage. She has been accepted by Zelda, Lyman's mother, and is even living with her.

However, Shawnee Ray comes to realize that she is only being held back by Zelda, that Zelda is smothering her with her overprotectedness. Shawnee Ray is an excellent mother; her child

comes first. As a matter-of-fact, after reading about Erdrich's previous female character's lives, Shawnee Ray is somewhat boring. I didn't realize that my search would lead me to the ideal, especially after I had come to the realization that perhaps Erdrich couldn't create, even with her vast scope of imagination, a woman who could embody the vision of the ideal. Shawnee Ray manages to pull herself out of a family situation that proves dangerous for those living on a reservation. Her two sisters are alcoholics and it would be easy for Shawnee Ray to fall into that same trap.

The reader is first introduced to Shawnee Ray through the eyes of Lipsha Morrisey, a young man who is smitten with Shawnee Ray. She is a beautiful girl, but Lipsha bemoans the fact that her child is the product of her and his half-brother's union. Lipsha's commentary on Shawnee Ray provides the audience with a truly unique picture. Becuase of his long diatribes on the love he has for this extradordinary girl, it is easy to see why I should pick Shawnee Ray as a truly whole woman. She has spunk and is determined to rise above her situation in life. However, the one line that incorporates all of Shawnee Ray's capabilities, the one where I realize that my search is finally over for the integrated woman is when Lipsha says of Shawnee Ray: "Shawnee Ray, she is the best of our past, our present, our hope of a future" (13). The sentence reminds me of something that would be said about someone who is going to do great things with her life, someone who is willing to take all that life offers. Later on in

the novel Lipsha admits that: "She is two years younger, yet she has direction while I am aimless, lost in Hyperspace, using up my talents which are already fading from my hands" (73). Lipsha senses that special quality in Shawnee Ray, the one that will get her off the reservation, the one that will let her make something of herself.

Shawnee Ray is the first one of Erdrich's main female characters even to consider college, much less go. It is also ironic that Shawnee Ray gets the first of her money for college by dancing in a pow-wow. She uses a traditional Chippewa pow-wow to gain money, money that eventually takes her off the reservation and out of Lyman and Zelda's life. It also takes her out of the life of Lipsha, the man she has come to love. Shawnee Ray could have easily joined Lipsha, became married, and had a houseful of children. But she wants more for herself, realizes that she must get an education for herself and her child. In the beginning of the book, Lipsha, in a fit of inspiration, proclaims that Shawnee Ray "is our hope of the future," and she is. Erdrich ends the book on a positive note, even though the reader is aware of Shawnee Ray's struggle with money while trying to attain her education. I believe Shawnee Ray will make it and perhaps she will be a shining beacon for other Chippewa youth, youth like Lipsha, who has no direction in his life.

The search for the ideal woman in Erdrich's books was a hard ordeal. But Shawnee Ray made the search that much more gratifying and rewarding. She embodies all the characteristics of the ideal

and she is well aware of how she must struggle for any of her dreams.

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