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Katherine Howard

Loyola Marymount University, khowar18@lion.lmu.edu

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Loyola Marymount University

Humor as non-Reactive:

Analysis of Indigenous Myth and Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*

Katie Howard

ENGL 6600: Critical Methodologies

Dr. Robin Miskolcze

Humor serves various functions in literature; it humanizes the complex characters, allows the reader to identify with their struggles and joys, and sometimes satirically comments on complex social systems. This is no different for Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*; Erdrich's use of humor works against colonial narratives of perpetual struggle and deprecation in Indigenous communities and is worth investigation. Analysis of the use of humor in this novel unveils both new understandings of Ojibwe people, the sacred stories they tell, and new levels of wholeness. Humor as a lens of interpretation in both Erdrich's work and Indigenous literature in general is not an entirely new concept; critics often conclude that humor is one way of reacting to colonialism and other oppressive forces, which is a valid lens and argument. However, where there seems to be a gap in scholarship is in an examination of the multiplicity causing the humor in *Love Medicine*; scholars often choose moments that are outright humorous without leaving room for the subtleties and nuanced experiences of humor. Therefore, study of the link between Ojibwe myth and humor adds to a reader's appreciation of *Love Medicine* and works to create a more holistic image of Ojibwe people, demonstrating that they are humorous in their own right, not solely as a reaction.

A survey of the current scholarship on humor in contemporary Indigenous literature demonstrates a reliance on the idea of humor as reactive, specifically in reaction to oppressive forces like colonialism, Catholicism, and other structures that dehumanize Indigenous cultures and people. While this approach is valid and essential, scholars often fail to understand the complexities and humanness of Indigenous characters, therefore reducing people to stereotyped versions of themselves. In chapter four of her book, titled, "Humor at Work in Contemporary Native Writings: Issues and Effects," author Eva Gruber attempts to understand the function and inspiration behind humor in Indigenous literature, writing that "Native humor has inevitably

been influenced by this legacy of decimation and cultural disruption” (Gruber 117). While noting the “influence” of colonialism on Native humor is worth investigating, Gruber continues by correlating humor with colonialism, suggesting that because it has “inevitably been influenced” by oppression that it could not exist in the way that it does without colonialism. Gruber continues by writing:

Humor...can essentially be analyzed from two angles. From a Native perspective, humor works as a successful strategy for coping with a traumatic past and handling oppression and tragedy...[Secondly] humor in this context...may figure as a kind of “Trojan horse”: Sneaking up on readers through shared laughter, humor can align their empathy with Native viewpoints, obscuring conflicts and hierarchies. (Gruber 118)

While humor as a “strategy for coping with a traumatic past” seems possible and worth further note, the purpose of this section seems to be more aimed at relating Indigenous humor to colonialism as a reactive measure, not as a function in and of itself. Additionally, the second lens Gruber offers reads as if she is suggesting that humor is used by Native writers to bridge Indigenous peoples with (often oppressive) structures and peoples; I see this lens as harmful and reductive, allowing for this narrative to continue in which Native people are wholly dependent and associated with white America. It is valid to state that colonialism has affected Native peoples, yet the relation between humor in contemporary Native fiction to oppressive structures reduces their culture and people to ideas digestible by white Americans. Additionally, Gruber remarks about the function of humor in Erdrich’s work, specifically her combined novel with Michael Dorris titled *The Crown of Columbus*; Gruber writes that both authors “make their novel an amusing puzzle rather than a righteous accusation, a playfully chaotic rather than finger-pointing encounter with history...Instead...they open up a liminal space for renegotiation in which tragic aspects of Native-White contact are neither neglected nor accusingly dwelt upon” (Gruber 122). Here, Gruber seems to suggest that, because of the humor present in the novel, the

authors managed to write a contemporary Native fiction that was not a “righteous accusation,” as if that would be uncalled for. Gruber redeems herself by noting that colonialism is “neither neglected nor accusingly dwelt upon,” though she again does not leave room for the complexities found in the writing alone. In contrast, Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair, in his article titled “Responsible and Ethical Criticism of Indigenous Literature, writes, “Native writers write about more than resistances to colonialism.... European invasion of our territories is a branch on [our] tree, albeit a heavy one, but ultimately only a branch. Criticism should take up all struggles of our intellectual traditions that embody the entire spectrum of Native existences” (Sinclair 305). This quote perfectly confronts a common idea held by scholars that Native peoples are not whole in and of themselves, that they are always related to the oppressive structures of colonialism; Sinclair states the importance of recognizing the other facets of Native identity and life, which many scholars fail to do. Overall, while the examination of humor as a coping mechanism or reaction to colonialism is valid, the reliance on this trope reduces the authors and characters to functions of white America.

To continue examining critics’ focus on colonialism with regards to Indigenous humor, I turn to a moment in *Love Medicine* in which I see critics missing humorous elements. One moment is in the “Saint Marie” chapter. While Erdrich is clearly mocking (or at least reframing) the saints of Catholicism, as seen through the title, little has been said about the humor present in this chapter. In Dennis Walsh’s article titled, “Catholicism in Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine* and *Tracks*,” he begins by citing another predominant writer on the subject, Catherine Rainwater; synthesizing her article he writes, “Chapter titles, such as ‘Saint Marie,’ ‘require the reader to recognize and assimilate a host of biblical references.’ In turn, the reader is cued ‘to expect the story to unfold within an intertextual framework of references...within a Judeo-Christian value

system” (Walsh 109). Marie is not a saint, and Erdrich is being hyperbolic and satirical in this title, yet Walsh and Rainwater are supremely interested in how the story is wholly situated in a “Judeo-Christian” context, and how certain cues help the reader understand this. While I am not arguing for a complete abandoning of this analysis, for the linkage between Catholicism and Marie here is an integral part of the chapter, I am pointing to a lack in scholarship on what I see as humorous moments of the novel. Clearly, Marie suffered significant physical and mental abuse at the hands of Sister Leopolda, but Erdrich is writing in a tone that suggests Marie’s point of view is unique in the way she reframed her trauma. While this tone could be viewed as a reaction to the oppressiveness of Catholicism, like many scholars suggest, the specific tone and twisted logic Marie used to outwit the old woman is humorous in its own right. For example, one moment where I see this is when Marie reflects on Sister Leopolda’s cruelty, thinking, “The real way to overcome Leopolda was this: I’d get to heaven first. And then, when I saw her coming, I’d shut the gate...That is why...I wanted to sit on the altar as a saint” (Erdrich 48). Marie, through her own voice, is being funny here; by claiming she wants to “sit on the altar as a saint” (Erdrich 48) just so she can shut Leopolda out of heaven is humorous. Erdrich created a complex character who clearly suffered abuse, and who is at least somewhat reacting to the oppressive force of Catholicism, but who is also funny in her tone of voice and manipulation of the situation. Marie is able to outwit an old nun, and she does this both through her unique perspective and her humorous outlook on how one can manipulate situations and make jokes about it, even at a young age.

To demonstrate how a scholar might talk about humor in *Love Medicine* and Indigenous literature without relying on the concept of humor as reactionary, I will now turn to the article, “*Gikenmaadizo miinwaa Gikenmaa ’aan: Patterns of Identity in the Writing of Louise Erdrich*”

written by Margaret Noodin. In discussing Catholicism in *Love Medicine*, Noodin writes about Lipsha and his love medicine. Beginning with a quote from Lipsha, who reflects, “Our God’s aren’t perfect...but at least they come around...if you ask them right” (Erdrich 232), Noodin synthesizes, “Of course, the implications of forgetting how to ‘ask them right’ are clear...In fact the darkly comedic outcome of Lipsha’s love medicine is a parable about how tradition cannot be altered too much” (Noodin 64). Here, Noodin attempts to understand why this scene is “darkly comedic” and does not immediately suggest he is reacting to Catholicism but rather meditating on tradition. While this comment is only related to humor on the surface, Noodin’s analysis manages to refrain from relying on narratives of colonialism to explain Lipsha’s humor. In the same passage from *Love Medicine*, Lipsha is both meditative on why the Chippewa gods sometimes fail to listen and how the Catholic God stopped listening, and his reflective process is humorous given the situation he is reflecting on from the previous scene. Lipsha synthesizes his meditation after he describes how Grandpa Kashpaw was yelling in Church; when Lipsha asks him why, Nector responds, “God don’t hear me otherwise,” (Erdrich 231). This scene, with both the introspection about the deafening of the Catholic God and the implication of failing to call to the Chippewa gods properly, is uniquely humorous, and is not necessarily simply humorous in reaction to Catholicism’s harmful pressures; I see the comparison of the two religions as humorous without claiming Lipsha’s reflection to be reactive.

Noodin continues by articulating how humor functions in traditional Anishinaabe myths, particularly in the trickster story of the Nanabozho; Noodin mentions that Lipsha is one of the characters that can be viewed through this lens, and this analysis participates in a complex investigation of humor in Indigenous literature. While Noodin’s analysis of the Nanabozho story is lacking in a complete review of the whimsical elements present, she does mention the

complexity of the narrative by writing, “Somewhere between the good and bad in Anishinaabe stories is Nanabozho, the Anishinaabe version of a trickster, jester, and prophet” (Noodin 66). The jester in traditional American folklore is known to be a humorous figure, and a comparison between the two, even if slight, suggests an awareness of a comic element located in the Nanabozho myth. Additionally, an acknowledgement of the complexities of the narrative, a figure who is “somewhere between the good and the bad,” (Noodin 66) works against a reductive viewing of Anishinaabe stories, allowing space for intricacies and nuance. She relates Nanabozho to Lipsha by listing the various characters who could embody the narrative’s framework, stating, “Nanabozho...[is] a name that connects a wider group of people...[including] Lipsha Morrissey. All of them exhibit characteristics often attributed to the mythic Nanabozho. They all have an inexplicable power to transform themselves or escape any situation needed” (Noodin 67). The ability to “escape any situation needed” is applicable to Lipsha and his concocted love medicine, even if its outcome was not as expected. The humor is in this tragic outcome, for, much like the Nanabozho, Lipsha uses trickster characteristics and “inexplicable power” in trying to fix his love medicine (67). Through this, the reader is reminded of Lipsha’s humanity; Noodin notes this element is consistent with traditional stories of the Nanabozho by stating, “Nanabozho’s human nature is reflected in [his] faults and failures, but also in his...teasing sense of humor, which was often part of traditional stories” (Noodin 67). Noodin’s analysis here, in both her unpacking of the complexities of the Nanabozho legend and its relation to Lipsha, does in fact participate in the analysis of humor without relying on its reactivity, as many scholars do. What I most appreciate about Noodin’s analysis here is its foregrounding in Indigenous myth; this demonstrates that Anishinaabe stories have *always* been

complex and humorous, as the stories were around before colonialism, suggesting we can therefore read Lipsha as a Nanabozho-type figure who is comedic.

Another significant contribution to the scholarship of Indigenous humor was made by Lawrence Gross, who published various articles on Anishinaabe culture, humor, and religion; Gross, who sometimes analyzes how humor is a survival tactic, overall adheres to Sinclair's suggestions of ethical criticisms. In his article, "The Comic Vision of Anishinaabe Culture and Religion," Gross begins by noting a lack of scholarship on humor in Indigenous stories, and he therefore seeks to correct this; he begins by stating, "Although the sacred stories of the Anishinaabe are wide ranging, one common element is that many of the stories are funny. What happens if the humorous nature of Anishinaabe tales is taken seriously?" (Gross 436). This question seems pertinent to analysis of *Love Medicine*, as a lack of discussion around its humorous elements infers scholars do not find it complex enough to analyze. Gross' analysis is useful because it is grounded in Anishinaabe myth, much like Noodin's work; through his discussion of the Nanabozho myth (spelled Wenabozho in his article), readers learn that humor has always been a factor in Indigenous stories. Gross writes, "Wenabozho often goes against prevailing social norms... The nonseriousness of Wenabozho myths is clear enough.... The tales encourage us to live by our wits and not be tied down by any one set way of doing things" (Gross 447). This idea of working "against prevailing social norms" through humor is applicable to *Love Medicine*; one example of this is when Marie reads the letter from Nector about his infidelity. Instead of outright confronting Nector, she places the letter under the salt jar instead of the sugar jar, where he initially placed it; she reflects, "I did this for a reason. I would never talk about this letter but instead let him wonder. Sometimes he'd look at me, I'd smile, and he'd think to himself: salt or sugar? But he would never be sure" (Erdrich 161-62). Marie is obviously

being humorous here, for she is telling the audience how she plans to taunt Nector. Using Gross' analysis, this move suggests Marie is acting "by [her] wits" and is even working "against prevailing social norms," (Gross 447) for the female character is often portrayed as the victim in infidelity scenarios. The humor in this scene is also found in the audience's awareness of her choice through her narrative voice; this scene gives the reader knowledge of something another character is oblivious to, and Marie can be seen as embodying the Nanabozho trickster framework. Erdrich's employment of humor, through the inclusion of the audience and through Marie's snide tone, is punctuated by Gross' analysis.

What is unique about Lipsha and Marie is that we hear from them in their own point of view; both characters reflect upon things with an unapologetically humorous tone, and the choice to both provide us with these specific points of view and to make it comedic is intentional on Erdrich's part. Another example of this humor (out of many) is found in the eponymous chapter when Lipsha attempts to shoot the geese for his love medicine, meant to bring his Grandparents back together. Lipsha recounts this scene from his own point of view, reflecting:

I lifted Grandpa's gun to my shoulder and I aimed perfectly, and *blam! Blam!* I delivered two accurate shots. But the thing is, them shots missed....Whether it was that the stock had warped or the barrel got bent someways, I don't quite know, but anyway...Lipsha Morrissey was left there...and the thought of it got him depressed. Now it isn't my style, in no way, to get depressed. (Erdrich 240)

This scene is undeniably comedic, for he says he "delivered two accurate shots" which were not accurate at all, as he missed the geese. This humorous tone continues when Lipsha refers to himself in the third person, and then remarks that "it isn't my style... to get depressed", as if one can simply develop the personality trait of not being depressed (240). This comic scene continues when Lipsha decides to buy the hearts instead of hunting them; to preface this scene, Lipsha states, "All right. So now I guess you will say, 'Slap a malpractice suit on Lipsha

Morrissey.’ I heard of those suits. I used to think it was a color clothing quack doctors had to wear so you could tell them from the good ones. Now I know better that it’s law” (Erdrich 241). Lipsha is being humorous here, both in his suggestion that using the store-bought hearts warrants a malpractice suit, and in his discussion of the meaning of a “malpractice suit” and how he now “know[s] better that it’s law” (Erdrich 241). Yet, there is a lack of scholarship on his comedic reflections and voice; Lipsha’s humor here is not in reaction to anything, for it is just his personality, developed through Erdrich’s characterization of him, that makes the reader laugh. Erdrich wittily has Lipsha talk to the reader by saying “so now I guess you will say...” (241), which is a humorous literary device that often causes the reader to stop and chuckle, and continues by having Lipsha say he used to not know what malpractice meant; this is a creative way to have a character make fun of themselves, for Lipsha’s humor is not fully self-deprecating but more saturated around an awareness of his own comedic misfortunes and ironies.

In conclusion, scholarship on contemporary Indigenous literature is lacking in analysis of humor present in both traditional Indigenous stories and modern fiction. A reliance on colonialism-centered narratives which state that humor is purely reactionary deprioritizes Indigenous myths and culture, which often contain nuanced humorous moments and complexities. This approach risks a flattening of Indigenous life, people, and stories, and reduces their stories to colonial narratives of deprecation, which ultimately needs to be corrected.

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