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“Her Laugh an Ace”: The Function of Humor in Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine*

WILLIAM GLEASON

We have one priceless universal
trait, we Americans. That trait
is our humor. What a pity it is
that it is not more prevalent in
our art.

—William Faulkner

Many early reviewers of Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine* treat the novel as though it were at heart a tragic account of pain. They see Erdrich as merely a recorder of contemporary Indian suffering, as an evoker of her characters’ “conflicting feelings of pride and shame, guilt and rage—the disorderly intimacies of their lives on the reservation and their longings to escape.”¹ These critics classify *Love Medicine* as “a tribal chronicle of defeat,”² a “unique evocation of a culture in severe social ruin,”³ and an “appalling account of . . . impoverished, feckless lives far gone in alcoholism and promiscuity.”⁴ Each of these descriptions betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the novel; any reckoning of *Love Medicine* as an ultimately tragic text begs contradiction.

To be sure, the book contains much that is painful. Its unifying vision, however, is one of redemption—accomplished through an expert and caring use of humor. Erdrich’s characters by novel’s end are not far gone, but close to home; she evokes a culture not in severe ruin, but about to rise; she chronicles not defeat, but survival. Love, assisted by humor, triumphs over pain.

The humor in *Love Medicine* is protean. Laughter leaks from

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phrase, gesture, incident, situation, and narrative comment equally. Much of what is funny seems subtly so, but farce, slapstick, and outright joke-telling by no means remain absent. In many ways, humor mirrors hurt in this novel, broad or sharp. After King and Lynette wheel up to Aurelia's house with King Jr. bundled in the front seat and Grandma and Grandpa Kashpaw stuffed into the tiny back, for example, we quickly understand that Grandpa's perceptive powers have precipitously diminished. He does not realize that the car has stopped, does not notice things that happen right in front of him, and does not recognize his own house or granddaughter:

Lynette rolled out the door, shedding cloth and pins, packing the bare-bottomed child on her hip, and I couldn't tell what had happened.

Grandpa hadn't noticed, whatever it was. He turned to the open door and stared at his house.

"This reminds me of something," he said.

"Well, it should. It's your house!" Mama barreled out the door, grabbed both of his hands, and pulled him out of the little backseat.

"You have your granddaughter here, Daddy!" Zelda shrieked carefully into Grandpa's face. "Zelda's daughter. She came all the way up here to visit from school."

"Zelda . . . born September fourteenth, nineteen forty-one . . ."

"No, Daddy. This here is my daughter, Albertine. Your granddaughter."

I took his hand.⁵

"Shrieked carefully" here is delightful, as is the deadpan understatement of "This reminds me of something." Indeed, much humor threatens to slip by unnoticed. King buys a "big pink gravestone" for his mother's plot before purchasing his blue Firebird with the insurance money (page 21). And Dot's hair must be ferociously comic. Albertine mentions that "by the cold months it had grown out in thick quills—brown at the shank, orange at the tip. The orange dye job had not suited her coloring" (page 159). Gerry Nanapush is a "six-foot plus, two-hundred-and-fifty pound Indian" who nevertheless tries to hide behind a "yellow tennis player's visor" in a dimly lit bar (pages

160, 156). When Gerry later escapes from the local cops by squeezing through a hospital window and jumping three stories onto the police car hood, he is sufficiently emboldened to "pop a wheelie" on his motorcycle before disappearing (page 169).

Words play games in this novel, too. Albertine's nursing student textbook is "spread out to the section on 'Patient Abuse'" (page 7). We are not quite sure how funny this is intended to be; narratively we have just found out that June is dead. But by the time we reach Nector's ("Grandpa" in the first chapter) recounting of his pose for *Plunge of the Brave*, we know that words—especially when they lead to Indian-white confusions—can be very playful. "Disrobe," commands the "snaggletoothed" painter with "a little black pancake on her head" (page 90). Nector "pretended not to understand her. 'What robe?' (he) asked" (page 90). Another "famous misunderstanding" occurs when Nector tells Rushes Bear about *Moby Dick*:

"You're always reading that book," my mother said once. "What's in it?"

"The story of the great white whale."

She could not believe it. After a while, she said, "What do they got to wail about, those whites?" (page 91).

Lipsha's word perversions entertain. For example, regarding malpractice suits: "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" (page 203). When Marie ("Grandma" in the first chapter) tells the children at Nector's funeral that "she had been stepping out onto the road of death," Lipsha asks "was there any stop signs or dividing markers on that road" (page 210). And when he relates the story of the "little blue tweety bird" that flew up Lulu's dress and got lost (never, apparently, to come out alive), he christens it a "paraclete" (page 201).

Much humor is slyly sexual. When Beverly Lamartine recalls the strip poker game that he, his brother Henry, and Lulu once played, Lulu tells him something he never knew: "It was after I won your shorts with my pair of deuces and Henry's with my eights, and you were naked, that I decided which one to marry" (page 82). And moments later: "'Some men react in that situation and some don't," she told him. 'It was reaction I looked for, if you know what I mean'" (page 83). After Nector and Marie

couple on the slope between the convent and the town (we are never quite sure who seduces whom) she sneers, "I've had better" (page 61). Dot and Gerry beget little Shawn "in a visiting room at the state prison. Dot had straddled Gerry's lap in a corner the closed-circuit TV did not quite scan. Through a hole ripped in her pantyhose and a hole ripped in Gerry's jeans they somehow managed to join and, miraculously, to conceive" (page 160).

Two other forms of humor deserve attention: slapstick and sarcasm. Examples of the former cavort throughout the novel, though often in contexts that are not entirely humorous. Lipsha's moment of revelation concerning his father, for instance, is triggered—without comment—by an empty bottle of rotgut flipped over someone's shoulder that hits him "smack between the eyes" (page 247). When Marie is a young girl at the convent and decides to treat Sister Leopolda to an ovenlike taste of hell, things backfire comically: "She bent forward with her fork held out. I kicked her with all my might. She flew in. But the outstretched poker hit the back wall first, so she rebounded. The oven was not so deep as I had thought" (page 53). In the midst of Lulu and Nector's laundry tryst, washers and dryers shaking and moaning in the background, Lulu's poodle-like wig jumps off her head and spoils the moment. "Not only that," Lipsha tells us, "but her wig was almost with a life of its own. Grandpa's eyes were bugging out at the change already, and swear to God if the thing didn't rear up and pop him in the face like it was going to start something" (page 197). Lipsha terms Lulu (now bald, but somehow elegant) an "alien queen" (page 197). Had he told her to her face it might be insulting; here it is merely quick (and slick) description, to modify Clifford Geertz for a moment.

Sharp barbs, however, do fly through *Love Medicine*, and they can be crudely amusing. For example, Zelda, rather pointedly to Lynette, concerning Albertine: "'She's not married yet,' said Zelda, dangling a bright plastic bundle of keys down to the baby. 'She thinks she'll wait for her baby until *after* she's married'" (page 23; italics Zelda's). Or Marie to Leopolda, post-oven fiasco: "'Bitch of Jesus Christ!' I shouted. 'Kneel and beg! Lick the floor!'" (page 53). And Marie, teasing the neighborhood gossip-cows with their own bad lives: "'How's your son? Too bad he crossed the border. I heard he had to go. Are you taking in his newborn?'" (page 70).

Mary Douglas suggests that humor always contains an element of aggression, that jokes subvert, and therefore comedy attacks control.⁶ Though she is critical of Henri Bergson's theory of laughter for failing to account for certain types of humor, she would likely agree with him that some humor is "above all, a corrective. Being intended to humiliate, it must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed."⁷ But surely vengeance and intimidation are not at the root of all humor in *Love Medicine*.

To consider other explanations for what I have been offering as funny in the novel, let us turn first to John Huizinga. In *Homo Ludens* Huizinga argues that play structures inform nearly all human activity, including law, religion, philosophy, and art. "Play," he explains, "is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is 'different' from 'ordinary life.'"⁸ when Beverly creates a fantasy world in which Lulu's boy Henry Jr. becomes his son, he is engaged in almost pure play. Though he has never seen Henry Jr. in person, Beverly believes he is, biologically, his son (having slept with Lulu, his brother's widow, a week after Henry Senior's death). He uses a single prop—the boy's photograph, willingly supplied each year by Lulu—to weave a persuasive daydream that doubles as a shrewd marketing pitch. Beverly convinces working-class parents around Minneapolis to buy enrichment workbooks for their kids by telling tales of Henry Jr.'s self-initiated success. In fact, "with every picture Beverly grew more familiar with his son and more inspired in the invention of tales he embroidered, day after day, on front porches that were to him the innocent stages for his routine" (page 78).

The fabled Henry Jr. succeeds as student, athlete, and social climber, clearing "the hurdles of class and intellect with an ease astonishing to Beverly" (page 78). Unfortunately, Henry Jr. becomes too real, and the boundary between fantasy and reality blurs perceptibly in Beverly's mind. When he drives back to the reservation to claim the boy he is at first unable to pick him out from among Lulu's shuffling octet. Each child "was Henry Junior in a different daydream, at a different age" (page 80).

When play becomes too "real," confusion intrudes. June's

mock-hanging—at best darkly comic—is nearly the novel’s most tragic scene. June, Gordie, Aurelia, and Zelda are out “playing in the woods,” when Zelda runs shrieking back to Marie: “‘It’s June,’ she gasped. ‘Mama, they’re hanging June out in the woods!’” (page 67). When Marie arrives at the place on a dead run, she “saw Gordie was standing there with one end of the rope that was looped high around a branch. The other end was tied in a loose loop around June’s neck” (page 67). They protest that they were only *playing*, but Marie refuses to believe their “lies.” Until June speaks up:

“You ruined it.” Her eyes blinked at me, dry, as she choked it out. “I stole their horse. So I was supposed to be hanged.”

I gaped at her.

“Child,” I said, “you don’t know how to play. It’s a game, but if they hang you they would hang you for real.”

She put her head down. I could almost have sworn she knew what was real and what was not real, and that I’d still ruined it (pages 67–8).

The tension dissipates a moment later when June mutters “damn old bitch” under her breath and Marie summarily packs her mouth with soap flakes (page 68).

Henry Jr. as an adult is a character for whom non-play displaces the ludic. When we first see him as a boy, he is engaged in mock-play, learning to “cradle, aim, and squeeze-fire” a .22, with a jug as his target (page 85). Later we discover he has been to Vietnam, where, after nine months of jungle combat, he is captured by the NVA. And although Huizinga cogently argues that a rooted element of play is *agon*, or competitive struggle, and that war therefore can still be a game, he admits that “modern warfare has, on the face of it, lost all contact with play” (*Homo Ludens*, page 210). It certainly has for Henry Jr., an American Indian with “almost Asian-looking eyes” sent to the Orient to kill Asians (page 83). In “A Bridge,” Henry is bitter, violent, jumpy. He relives confused Vietnam scenarios in the real world of Fargo. Albertine with her runaway’s bundle looks to him like a Vietnamese refugee—or is she a terrorist?—carrying a loosely wrapped package of possessions or, potentially, explosives. Henry still wears his “dull green army jacket” (page 132). In the

hotel where he and Albertine rent a room for the night he takes a "violent dislike" to the "lazy motherfucker" clerk: "I could off this fat shit," he told himself" (page 136). When he sees Albertine crouching over her belongings in the bathroom, he imagines her as the hemorrhaging village woman he was once supposed to interrogate. And he has told Albertine, apparently, about the war: "He said those men took trophies. Skin pressed in the pages of a book" (page 135). War as contest here has gone perversely evil. "When the combat has an ethical value," Huizinga points out, "it ceases to be play" (*Homo Ludens*, page 210). No longer capable of restful sleep, let alone meaningful play, Henry explodes, shrieking, when Albertine touches him the next morning. Inside of a year he will commit suicide.

King Kashpaw's own "Vietnam" experience is comically chiasitic to Henry's. "He's no vet," Lipsha assures us in the first chapter (page 36). But King seems to think he is: "Like I was telling you, I was in the Marines. You can't run from them bastards, man. They'll get you every time. I was in Nam" (page 253). King's daydream is, in fact, quite elaborate, in spite of Lipsha's skepticism:

"BINH," he popped his lips. "BINH, BINH."

That was the sound of incoming fire exploding next to his head.

"Apple, Apple?"

"What, Banana?"

"Over here, Apple!"

That was what he and his buddy, who King said was a Kentucky Boy, used to call each other, in code.

"How come you didn't just use names?" I asked between gulps. "What difference?"

"The enemy." He glared at me. He was getting into the fantasy.

"They're a small people." He put his hand out at Howard's height. "Hard to see" (pages 253-4).

"There is yet another use of the word 'play,'" Huizinga suggests, "which is just as widespread and just as fundamental as the equation of play with serious strife, namely, in relation to the erotic" (*Homo Ludens*, page 43). Sexual play frisks through this novel, but the edges between eroticism and war frequently blur. During June's roadside encounter with slick-vested Andy, "she

let him wrestle with her clothing," and then ends up with the crown of her head "wedged . . . against the driver's seat" (pages 4-5). King and Lynette, after a drunken evening in which he nearly drowns her in the kitchen sink, instinctively modulate from rage to sex: "They got into the car soon after that. Doors slammed. But they traveled just a few yards and then stopped. The horn blared softly. I suppose they knocked against it in passion" (page 39). Roaring car heaters, moreover, accompany the "auto" eroticisms of both June and her son. When Lulu and Beverly make love after Henry Sr.'s funeral, we sense the agonistic component for both parties:

Then passion overtook them. She hung onto him like they were riding the tossing ground, her teeth grinding in his ear. . . . Afterward they lay together, breathing the dark in and out. He had wept the one other time in his life besides post combat, and after a while he came into her again, tasting his own miraculous continuance (page 87).

Henry Jr. and Albertine's love-making is nearly brutal; after ejaculating "helplessly, pressed against her, before he was even hard"—excited by Albertine's fear, we are told—Henry pins her face down on the bed and takes her harshly from behind (pages 140-1). Sex can become ritualized (as when Nector follows the same routine with Lulu—meat to dogs, in through window, wash hands, make love, leave before dawn: a veritable "clockwork precision of timing"—for five years (page 101). Or passion can turn into the repressed rage of latent lesbianism (as in Leopolda, whose vicious scalding of Marie as an example of Satan's "hellish embrace" is followed by "slow, wide circles" of ointment rubbed into Marie's naked back (pages 49, 51).

Sigmund Freud believes that all love objects serve as "mother-surrogates," and he argues for a model of humor as a release, or free discharge of emotional energy.⁹ Jokes can occasion freedom from anxiety, or simply from the burden of being grown up. Many Indian societies feature comic figures whose roles work precisely in this way: the Western Pueblo kachinas, for example, or the *heyokas* of the Lakota. The reversing humor of the latter is especially prevalent in *Love Medicine*. According to John Fire Lame Deer, a *heyoka* "is an upside-down, backward-forward,

yes-and-no man, a contrary-wise.”¹⁰ “A *heyoka* does strange things,” acknowledges Lame Deer. “He says ‘yes’ when he means ‘no.’ He rides his horse backward. He wears his moccasins or boots the wrong way. When he’s coming, he’s really going.” Lyman Lamartine tries to renew his brother Henry’s interest in their red convertible by taking a hammer to its underside and “making it look as beat up as (he) could” (page 149). Howard Kashpaw (King Jr.) curiously inverts proper cereal-making sequence, pouring the milk into the bowl first, then the cereal. “‘He does it all backwards,’ observed King” (page 252). Lipsha even sees Howard as a sort of sacred clown: “Howard didn’t say nothing. He carried the bowl and the box of cereal very carefully in to the television. It was like he was going to make a religious offering” (page 252).

Lipsha, who later prepares himself a backwards bowl of cereal, is in his own way a holy fool. He is a modern pinball medicine man, who believes he has “the touch” (page 190). “I know the tricks of mind and body inside out without ever having trained for it,” he asserts. “It’s a thing you got to be born with. I got secrets in my hands that nobody ever knew to ask” (pages 189–90). In the Lakota system a man need merely dream of lightning, “the thunderbirds,” to become a *heyoka*. Lipsha doesn’t exactly do this, but early in the novel he does lay out under the night sky with Albertine, watching the Northern lights: “At times the whole sky was ringed in shooting points and puckers of light gathering and falling, pulsing, fading, rhythmical as breathing” (page 34).

But he’s not especially diligent about his medicine, particularly in acquiring the two goose hearts for Marie’s love charm. (Lipsha is probably better at Space Invaders than ritual healing.) And the medicine he does provide—two frozen turkey hearts—misfires horribly, killing Nector in a ludicrously sad choking scene. When Marie tells Lipsha that Nector had come back to her after death, Lipsha says his “head felt screwed on backwards” (page 212). Even some of Lipsha’s diction recalls Lame Deer’s earthy phrasings, as in “I don’t got the cold hard potatoes it takes to understand everything” (page 195).

Nector himself is another candidate for *heyoka* status, although more as someone affected by contraries than in the strictly magical sense. He is a man trapped by opposites, caught between the

conflicting worlds of Marie and Lulu. Sitting hand in hand with Marie, after their co-seduction on the hill, he narrates his internal contradiction: "I don't want her, but I want her, and I cannot let go" (*Love Medicine*, page 62). He feels the same toward Lulu after deciding to leave her forever: "No sooner had I given her up than I wanted Lulu back" (page 104). He is a marvelously inappropriate churchgoer, who turns the normally hushed tone of the Catholic sanctuary into an evangelical shouting contest. "He shrieked to heaven," Lipsha says, "and he pleaded like a movie actor and he pounded his chest like Tarzan in the Lord I Am Not Worthies. I thought he might hurt himself" (page 194). He even converts the Virgin's name to his wife's: "HAIL MARIE FULL OF GRACE" (page 194). And in true *heyoka* fashion, on the topic of his "second childhood," he tells Lipsha "I been chosen for it. I couldn't say no" (page 190).

Another pan-Indian character who pops up in the novel is the untiring Trickster. Paul Radin terms Trickster the oldest of all figures in American Indian mythologies, perhaps in all mythologies.¹¹ He (or she) is typically depicted as wandering, hungry, highly sexed, ageless, and animal-named. Many characters in *Love Medicine* act Tricksterian; the men in particular roam, eat, and love their way through the book. King warms up the topic by relating a little Trickster-style tale. First he claims that he once "shot a fox sleeping" through "that little black hole underneath (his) tail" with a bow and arrow, no less (page 29). Then: "But I heard of this guy once who put his arrow through a fox then left it thrash around in the bush until he thought it was dead. He went in there after it. You know what he found? That fox had chewed the arrow off either side of its body and it was gone" (page 30). Though the details Lyman offers from the summer trip he and Henry make to the Northwest are scanty, they suggest a typical Trickster journey. Henry and Lyman simply wander, stopping to eat and sleep, or, say, pick up a girl from Chicken, Alaska. And drive her home. When it gets cold, they leave. Marie is moderately mischievous when she tries to drop-kick Leopolda into the oven, and more so when she switches Nector's farewell note from the salt can to the sugar jar. Nector fantasizes playing Trickster after he poses for *Plunge of the Brave*, imagining himself surviving the jump and being washed to safety. He also revels in the way that loving Lulu lets him assume different forms: "I could twist like a rope. I could disappear beneath the surface. I

could run to a halt and Lulu would have been there every moment” (page 100).

Lulu herself is a critical nexus for Trickster behavior. She sleeps with Old Man Pillager (Trickster is also known as “Old Man,”¹² and “Pillager” is as good a tag as any for his scavenging ways), and their union spawns Gerry Nanapush, a paradigmatic modern Trickster figure. Lulu’s no prankish slouch herself; in her “secret wildness” she dallies with men for the sheer exhilarating pleasure of it (page 218). When Beverly visits her he is bewildered by her magical homemaker’s touch, noting her pin-neat rooms and particularly her preparation of dinner: “She seemed to fill pots with food by pointing at them and take things from the oven that she’d never put in. The table jumped to set itself. The pop foamed into glasses, and the milk sighed to the lip” (page 86).

But Gerry is Trickster, literally. Alan R. Velie records that “the Chippewa Trickster is called Wenebojo, Manabozho, or Nanabush, depending on how authors recorded the Anishinabe word.”¹³ This Trickster (as is true for most tribes) is able to alter his shape as he wishes, and, says Gerald Vizenor, “wanders in mythic time and transformational space.”¹⁴ He is, Vizenor explains, a “teacher and healer in various personalities,” but is also capable of “violence, deceptions, and cruelties: the realities of human imperfections” (*The People Named The Chippewa*, page 4). The first time we meet the adult Gerry he performs a miraculous escape: though spotted by Officer Lovchik in the confines of a “cramped and littered bar. . . . Gerry was over the backside of the booth and out the door before Lovchik got close enough to make a positive identification” (pages 155–6). But even as a boy, we are told, Gerry had Lulu’s ways in him:

He laughed at everything, or seemed barely to be keeping amusement in. His eyes were black, sly, snapping with sparks. He led the rest in play without a hint of effort, just like Lulu, whose gestures worked as subtle magnets. He was a big boy, a born leader, light on his feet and powerful. His mind seemed quick. It would not surprise Bev to hear, after many years passed on, that this Gerry grew up to be both a natural criminal and a hero whose face appeared on the six-o’clock news (page 85).

Early in his career as natural criminal Gerry gets arrested, breaks out of prison, gets re-arrested, and so on. "He broke out time after time," Albertine tells us, "and was caught each time he did it, regular as clockwork" (page 160). He seems to escape primarily because he can, so skilled are his metamorphic abilities, and the escape-recapture cycle becomes ritualized Trickster play. "He boasted that no steel or concrete shitbarn could hold a Chippewa, and he had eel-like properties in spite of his enormous size. Greased with lard once, he squirmed into a six-foot-thick prison wall and vanished" (page 160). He shows up at Dot and Albertine's weigh shack without a sound and "cat-quick for all his mass" (page 165). Then he and Dot "by mysterious means, slipped their bodies into Dot's compact car" (page 166). While the two reunited behemoths are absent, Albertine daydreams an indulgent Trickster scene, combining food, animals, and sex:

I pictured them in Dot's long tan trailer house, both hungry. Heads swaying, clasped hands swinging between them like hooked trunks, they moved through the kitchen feeding casually from boxes and bags on the counters, like ponderous animals alone in a forest. When they had fed, they moved on to the bedroom and settled themselves upon Dot's kingsize and sateen-quilted spread. They rubbed together, locked and unlocked their parts (page 167).

At the end of the novel, supposedly up to three-hundred-twenty pounds, Gerry noiselessly (except to Lipsha, who senses him) scabbles his way up the skylight shaft into King and Lynette's grubby Twin Cities kitchen. By then teaming with Lipsha to defeat King in a quick card game ("five-card punk," Gerry says), Gerry unwittingly re-enacts a classic Chippewa Trickster story. For, according to legend, Manabozho/Nanabush journeys until he meets his principle enemy, "the great gambler," whom he defeats, saving his own life and the spirit of the woodland tribes from "the land of darkness" (*The People Named The Chippewa*, pages 4-6). Is it any surprise that a Road Runner cartoon has been playing in the apartment? Or that Lipsha roots for "old Wiley Coyote?" (*Love Medicine*, 251). Gerry then vanishes without a trace when the police barge in. As Lipsha drives off in his newly-won car, he gets to "waxing eloquent" about Gerry as Trickster:

I knew my dad would get away. He could fly. He could strip and flee and change into shapes of swift release. Owls and bees, two-toned Ramblers, buzzards, cotton-tails, and motes of dust. These forms was interchangeable with his. He was the clouds scudding over the moon, the wings of ducks banging in the slough (page 266).

Gerry can take on animal forms, but animals that ludicrously enact human activity—such as the poker-playing bulldogs pictured in King’s garish velvet wall-hanging—seem to me a particularly “white” touch in the novel. To be sure, red and white paths do cross, at times with humorous results. Zelda, whose rule is “never marry a Swedish,” has undone herself by marrying two (page 14). The Morrissey who fathers June and brings her to Marie when his wife dies is a white trash “whining no-good” (page 63). Dot delights in telling the fooled Lovchik that “no one’s been through all night,” and then asks him in mock seriousness what he thinks of “Ketchup Face” as a name for her child (page 156). “Making sense of other people is never easy,” Keith Basso opens *Portraits of “The Whiteman”*, “and making sense of how other people make sense can be very difficult indeed.”¹⁵ Thus Nector pretends not to understand the painter’s instructions to disrobe, and is about to help *her* undress when she starts “to demonstrate by clawing at her buttons” (page 90). Nector, updating Custer’s opinion of the value of Indians to accommodate modern cinema, declaims, “the only interesting Indian is dead, or dying by falling backwards off a horse” (page 91).

Gerry has a particularly hard time making sense of the United States judicial system, getting convicted in a case he thought

would blow over if it ever reached court. But there is nothing more vengeful and determined in this world than a cowboy with sore balls, and Gerry soon found this out. He also found out that white people are good witnesses to have on your side, because they have names, addresses, social security numbers, and work phones. But they are terrible witnesses to have against you, almost as bad as having Indian witnesses for you (page 162).

Lyman, having smashed up the red convertible, acidly recalls the joke about what reservation roads and government promises have in common—holes. And Lulu, perhaps echoing Vine Deloria's suggestion that what Indians really need from whites is a "cultural leave-us-alone agreement," refuses to let the United States census in her door: "I say that every time they counted us they knew the precise number to get rid of" (page 221).¹⁶

Armed, then, with some notions of what gives humor its torque in *Love Medicine*, key questions remain: Why is Erdrich writing a humorous book? How does laughter relate to what the novel tries to accomplish? To formulate answers we need first to contextualize the novel's aims. "I don't know what purpose I had in mind," says Erdrich herself in a 1985 interview, "except to write as honestly as possible, and to resolve things for a few characters. I wanted to tell a story, so if I told it, that's done."¹⁷ But in a subsequent article on a writer's "sense of place" for the *New York Times Book Review*, she elaborates the duty of her fellow Indian authors: "Contemporary Native American writers have . . . a task quite different from that of other writers I've mentioned. In the light of enormous loss, they must tell stories of contemporary survivors while protecting and celebrating the cores of cultures left in the wake of the catastrophe."¹⁸

Love Medicine is a redemptive, regenerative, celebratory text that begins with characters separated by time and space and family relationships and gradually pulls some of them home. The novel opens off the reservation with June "walking down the clogged main street of oil boomtown Williston, North Dakota, killing time before the noon bus arrived that would take her home" (page 1). June is "aged hard," but feeling fragile: she is liable to "fall apart at the slightest touch" (pages 1, 4). But she pulls herself back together and by the end of the first section, as snow falls, she "walked over it like water and came home" (page 6). What of her comes home, though, is problematic, because she dies on the way in a sudden storm. Apparently her spirit endures, for the image of June the survivor returning home—in spite of death—pervades the book. Right up, in fact, to the closing scene, in which Lipsha, June's son, discovers "there was nothing to do but cross the water, and bring her home" (page 272).

A passel of interrelated stories brings the reader home in the novel. Five not-so-distinct clans (Nanapush, Lamartine, Lazarre, Morrissey, Kashpaw) vie for narrative dominance until coales-

cing—literally as well as figuratively—in Lipsha. *Love Medicine* spans fifty years and four generations, played out by a sometimes bewildering array of characters; but the themes of survival, endurance, redemption, and regeneration prevail. June, we discover, was a quintessential survivor: as a child alone in the bush she sucked pine sap to stay alive. Marie survives Leopolda’s scalding and vengeful stabbing and is even transformed, briefly, into a saint. She later survives Nector’s attempt to throw her over for Lulu, redeeming him with her love; “I did for Nector Kashpaw what I learned from the nun. I put my hand through what scared him. I held it out there for him. And when he took it with all the strength of his arms, I pulled him in” (page 129).

But this enduring is a difficult business. The weight of adversity, of heartache, of sorrow threaten to crush hope flat, or at least wear it down by degrees. Marie sees an analogy in the action of waves when she touches June’s beads:

It’s a rare time when I do this. I touch them, and every time I do I think of small stones. At the bottom of the lake, rolled aimless by the waves, I think of them polished. To many people it would be a kindness. But I see no kindness in how the waves are grinding them smaller and smaller until they finally disappear (page 73).

And Lipsha, when he believes Marie has herself crumpled under the pressure of Nector’s death, expresses the same idea in similar terms: “You think a person you know has got through death and illness and being broke and living on commodity rice will get through everything. Then they fold and you see how fragile were the stones that underpinned them. You see how instantly the ground can shift you thought was solid” (page 209).

A legacy of devastation menaces *Love Medicine*’s characters, and some succumb. Henry Jr., for example, epitomizes those Indians Paula Gunn Allen describes in *The Sacred Hoop* as victims of alienation: “These are the most likely to be suicidal, inarticulate, almost paralyzed in their inability to direct their energies toward resolving what seems to them an insoluble conflict.”¹⁹ Allen identifies the principle literary symbol of this lack of power as “tonguelessness” (*The Sacred Hoop*, page 138); Henry, we recall, approximates this when he silently bites through his lip while watching television. And yet, Allen says, Indians do survive:

We survive war and conquest. We survive colonization, acculturation, assimilation; we survive beating, rape, starvation, mutilation, sterilization, abandonment, neglect, death of our children, our loved ones, destruction of our land, our homes, our past, and our future. We survive, and we do more than just survive. We bond, we care, we fight, we teach, we nurse, we bear, we feed, we earn, we laugh, we love, we hang in there, no matter what (*The Sacred Hoop*, page 190).

Laughter is not merely a by-product of survival, it is a critical force behind it. Northrop Frye, pointing out humor's regenerative effect, notes that "something gets born at the end of comedy."²⁰ Freud approaches this differently, describing humor as a defense mechanism and suggesting that we use it to "withdraw the energy from the ready held pain release, and through discharge change the same into pleasure."²¹ Julia Kristeva argues that "laughing is a way of placing or displacing abjection."²² Yet each of these theories buttresses Tim Giago's simple observations at the end of a column on Indian humor in *The Lakota Times*: "It has been said that humor pulled the Jewish and Black people through the hard times. It is said they could not have survived without it. Well, the moral of this column is, if you want to see some real survivors, just sit in on an Indian joke session. There's nothing in this world that can top it!"²³

How *does* humor promote endurance? The explanation seems twinned to humor's binate nature. Laughter can wound, or it can bond. One power destroys, the other builds up. Faced with five hundred years of physical, cultural, and spiritual genocide, Indians seek to steal power from their aggressors through inversion: by turning hatred to humor, the weakness of suffering is transformed into the strength of laughter. This *a-versive* power, according to Allen, is not only infinitely renewable but discoverable in the natural world:

For however painful and futile our struggle becomes, we have but to look outside at the birds, the deer, and the seasons to understand that change does not mean destruction, that life, however painful and even elusive it is at times, contains much joy and hilarity, pleasure and beauty for those who live within its requirements of grace (*The Sacred Hoop*, page 163).

What Allen finds interesting about the use of humor in American Indian poetry (and I believe her comments apply to fiction as well) “is its integrating effect: it makes tolerable what is otherwise unthinkable; it allows a sort of breathing space in which an entire race can take stock of itself and its future” (*The Sacred Hoop*, page 159).

In *Love Medicine* certain scenes yield dramatic instances of such “breathing space.” Consider those which hover precipitously between comedy and tragedy. Erdrich graphically prefigures these moments during Gordie’s telling of the Norwegian joke. An absurd variant on a standard joke pattern, it relates the stupidity of the Norwegian during the French Revolution who explains to his executioners how to repair their guillotine. But each section of the joke is interrupted by King’s screams at Lynette outside. The evening is already tainted with a certain sad ugliness (King has earlier announced “You’d eat shit” to Lynette, page 29), but now it teeters toward violence. Each time King screams, Gordie pauses. After the second round of “Fuckin’ bitch!” Albertine wonders whether they should stop the joke and go out (page 32). But Gordie continues to the joke’s end, and only then does he, Albertine, and Lipsha investigate.

Comedy and tragedy each have their say, but only the development of the novel will uncover a victor. The gallows humor is nearly played for keeps during June’s lynching (although chronologically it precedes the Norwegian joke). As Gordie and Aurelia hang June, the child in apparent earnest says, “you got to tighten it . . . before you hoist me up” (page 67). Though we as readers know that June survives, the situation is still potentially horrible. By the end of the scene, however, comedy supplants tragedy.

This is not always the case. Before Henry Jr. drowns himself, he and Lyman oscillate between laughter and anger. They fight when Henry rips the arm off Lyman’s “class act” jacket; then, punch-drunk, they dissolve into hysterics (page 152). The brothers drain a cooler of beers, but Henry’s mood turns again. Lyman tries to bring him around with more humor:

“You’re crazy too,” I say, to jolly him up. “Crazy Lamartine boys!”

He looks as though he will take this wrong at first. His face twists, then clears, and he jumps up on his

feet. "That's right!" he says. "Crazier 'n hell. Crazy Indians!"

I think it's the old Henry again. He throws off his jacket and starts swinging his legs out from under the knees like a fancy dancer. He's down doing something between a grouse dance and a bunny hop, no kind of dance I ever saw before, but neither has anyone else on all this green growing earth. He's wild. He wants to pitch whoopee! He's up and at me and all over. All this time I'm laughing so hard, so hard my belly is getting tied up in a knot (page 153).

As Lyman experiences the pleasure (and pain) of intense laughter, Henry decides to jump in the water to "cool me off!" (page 154). Lyman soon realizes that his brother is being taken away, without apparent resistance, by the current. Henry's last words, spoken in a normal voice across half a river under a darkening sky, devastated: "'My boots are filling,' he says" (page 154). And then he's gone.

Humor doesn't help Henry endure, at least not long enough. It does, however, help Marie and Lipsha after Nector dies at the end of his tragi-comic choking scene. (The novel's other choker is Henry, who *laughs* like "a man choking" when he comes back from Vietnam, page 148). Nector gags when Marie slugs his back to get him to eat the love medicine. Lipsha narrates this esophageal misfire as pure stand-up comedy: "You ever sit down at a restaurant table and up above you there is a list of instructions what to do if something slides down the wrong pipe? It sure makes you chew slow, that's for damn sure" (page 207). Even as his restorative powers fail, Lipsha jests with death: "Time was flashing back and forth like a pinball machine. Lights blinked and balls hopped and rubber bands chirped, until suddenly I realized the last ball had gone down the drain and there was nothing" (page 208). But when Marie stumbles, Lipsha's heart and mind short-circuit: he thinks she's going to die too. She does not, and his humor reconnects.

At Nector's funeral, the family reconnects, leading Lipsha to a redemptive understanding of tragedy: "Once you greet death," he says, "you wear your life like a garment from the mission bundle sale ever after—lightly because you realize you never paid nothing for it, cherishing because you know you won't ever come by such a bargain again" (pages 213-4). As the chapter

closes, Lipsha is digging dandelions—and reconnects powerfully with the ground: “I felt (the sun) flow down my arms, out my fingers, arrowing through the ends of the fork into the earth” (page 215). Each dandelion is “a globe of frail seeds that’s indestructible” (page 215). But what else is laughter? Or life? In Chippewa mythology a dandelion is a reminder of something lost. When a chief named Shawandasse waited too long to court a lovely girl, she became a spirit maiden, whose dissipating halo turned into the seeds of this “yellow-crowned flower.”²⁴ Thus Lipsha sees his new perspective on life confirmed in the “secret lesson” of a dandelion, which to others is merely a weedy nuisance (page 215).

Other images in the novel are similarly double-acting. Water, and its cognate, the color blue, both share humor’s ability to cut two ways. Blue can be a positive color (a “blue day” is a good day for the Chippewa, and blue is the North Dakota Indian color for the moon, thunder, water, and the west),²⁵ or it can be negative (the “blues”). Both, like humor, are curiously connected with displacement. Objects viewed through “blue” water become distorted, while Kristeva points out in *Desire in Language* that blue may have a perceptual “noncentered or decentering effect.”²⁶ Water, furthermore (which Erdrich calls *Love Medicine’s* “main image”²⁷), can cleanse or drown. Water claims a few victims in this novel, notably June (in the form of snow) and Henry Jr., and attempts to grab a few more, including Gordie (in the form of alcohol) and Hector (in both “Plunge of the Brave” and “Flesh and Blood”). But water is for Erdrich ultimately a symbol of “transformation (walking over snow or water)” and “transcendence,” because it allows life to go on.²⁸ Allen notes that “the most important theme in Native American novels is . . . transformation and continuance” (*The Sacred Hoop*, page 101). She goes on to explain water’s role: “The nature of the cosmos, of the human, the creaturely, and the supernatural universe is like water. It takes numerous forms; it evaporates and it gathers. Survival and continuance are contingent on its presence. Whether it is in a cup, or a jar, or an underground river, it nourishes life” (*The Sacred Hoop*, page 101). Water properly navigated can bring one safely home. Thus Marie (whose name encodes the sea: *mare*) pulls Nector in over the deepening lake between them at the end of “Flesh and Blood.” And Lipsha crosses the water and brings the novel home.

Erdrich reinforces the novel’s movement through her narrative

style. She playfully and coherently blends Indian and Western technique to produce a work of swirling, singing prose. Many contemporary Indian novelists have crafted their writing to reflect tribal concepts of time (timelessness) and space (multi-dimensionality). Allen points out, for example, that "achronicity is the favored structuring device of American Indian novelists since N. Scott Momaday selected it for organizing *House Made of Dawn*" (*The Sacred Hoop*, page 147). There are many ways to describe traditional tribal narrative, several of which suit *Love Medicine*. For example, Thomas B. Leckley writes in *The World of Manabozho*:

Indian folklore is a great collection of anecdotes, episodes, jokes, and fables, and storytellers constantly combined and recombined these elements in different ways. We seldom find a plotted story of the kind we know. Instead, the interest is usually in a single episode; if this is linked to another, the relationship is that of *two beads on one string*, seldom that of two bricks in one building²⁹ (*italics mine*).

Or Allen argues in *The Sacred Hoop*:

Traditional American Indian stories work dynamically among *clusters of loosely connected circles*. The focus of action shifts from one character to another as the story unfolds. There is no "point of view" as the term is generally understood, unless the action itself, the story's purpose, can be termed "point of view" (pages 241-2; *italics mine*).

Or:

The *patchwork quilt* is the best material example I can think of to describe the plot and process of a traditional tribal narrative (page 243; *italics mine*).

Erdrich, the contemporary Western artist, plays these traditional patterns into a narrative that doubles back and darts forward, recalling Cree storyteller Jacob Nibènegenesábe's conventional tale opening: "*Usá puyew usu wapiw*" ("I go backward, look forward").³⁰ For Erdrich begins her novel in 1981, then shifts to 1934. The rest of the book proceeds fairly chronologically (in the end circling back to and beyond its beginning), but within tales events are told and re-told (or pre-told) until the meaning flows in all directions at once. Thus in *Love Medicine*

what M. M. Bakhtin called "double-voiced discourse" becomes double-vision; a traditional patchwork becomes a powerful and sacred star quilt.³¹

Within this fabric, place and naming become very important. These concepts link in the Cree world, as Howard Norman points out in *Wishing Bone Cycle*; "To say the name is to begin the story."³² Names bring alive what has happened; names affect behavior. In *Love Medicine* characters' names place them in their own history and in relation to other characters. Thus in "The World's Greatest Fisherman"—set in 1981—Marie is "Grandma," exclusively. In "Saint Marie" she becomes her 1934 mail-order Catholic soul Marie self, squaring off against Leopolda. But the reader cannot know that Grandma is Marie until she encounters Nector on the convent slope in "Wild Geese." And Albertine, in "A Bridge," sees an Indian-looking soldier who remains anonymous for three pages until he emerges as Henry Jr., back from Nam. In such ways Erdrich tangles the skein of lives in the novel a little, then shakes it loose, then tangles it again. By the end the web is smoothed out and traceable: ends reconnect, patterns are relaid. Achronicity plays an important role here, since, Allen says, it "connects pain and praise through timely movement, knitting person and surroundings into one" (*The Sacred Hoop*, page 150).

"We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time," writes T. S. Eliot in *Four Quartets*.³³ We began with an invocation of critics, literary folk who seem to misread *Love Medicine*, unlike the tribal people who, Erdrich points out, tend to focus first on its humor.³⁴ Perhaps the latter group reacts as do many people in the novel, and laughs out of place, or in "inappropriate" spots. Erdrich's characters keep chuckling, especially when—by rights—they shouldn't. But that is precisely the nature and function of *Love Medicine*'s compassionate humor: it heals, it renews, it integrates, it balances. It *belongs*, in short, where it should not. "Belonging is a basic assumption for traditional Indians," comments Allen, and "narratives . . . that restore the estranged to his or her place within the cultural matrix abound" (page 127). For Lipsha, "belonging was a matter of deciding to," and *Love Medicine* thus restores an estranged son to his mother and grandmother (page 255). Finally, Erdrich herself, through the project of this novel, demonstrates a special kinship to one of her own favorite authors: William Faulkner. For

it is Faulkner—no stranger to humor—who accepted the 1949 Nobel Prize for Literature by noting that a writer's aim is "to help man endure by lifting his heart."³⁵

NOTES

1. Gene Lyons, "In Indian Territory," *Newsweek* 105, no. 6 (Feb. 11, 1985): 70-1, reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism* 39 (1986): 132.
2. Kirkus Reviews 52, no. 16 (Aug. 15, 1984): 765-6, reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism* 39 (1986): 128.
3. *Ibid.*, 128.
4. Robert Towers, "Uprooted," *The New York Review of Books* 32, no. 6 (April 11, 1985): 36-7; in *Contemporary Literary Criticism* 39 (1986): 133.
5. Louise Erdrich, *Love Medicine* (1984: reprint New York: Bantam, 1985), 16.
6. Mary Douglas, "The Social Control of Cognition: Some Factors in Joke Perception," *Man* 3 (1968): 361-76.
7. Henry Bergson, "Laughter," in *Comedy*, ed. Wylie Sypher (New York: Doubleday, 1956), 187.
8. John Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon, 1972), 28.
9. Sigmund Freud, "A Special Type of Choice of Object Made by Men," *Jar-buch*, BD. II (1910); reprinted in Benjamin Nelson, ed., *On Creativity and the Unconscious* (New York: Harper, 1958), 166.
10. John Fire (Lame Deer) and Richard Erdoes, *Lame Deer, Seeker of Visions: The Life of a Sioux Medicine Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), 225.
11. Paul Radin, "The Wakdjunkaga Cycle and Its Relation to Other North American Indian Trickster Cycles," in *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (New York: Schocken, 1972), 164.
12. Kenneth Lincoln, *Native American Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 122.
13. William Jones and Truman Michelson, eds., *Ojibway Texts* (Leyden: E. J. Bruss, 1917), and Basil Johnson, *Ojibway Heritage* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), cited in Alan R. Velie, "Beyond the Novel Chippewa-Style: Gerald Vizenor's Post-Modern Fiction," in *Four American Literary Masters* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982), 131.
14. Gerald Vizenor, *The People Named the Chippewa: Narrative Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 3.
15. Keith Basso, *Portraits of "The Whiteman"* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 3.
16. Vine Deloria, Jr., *Custer Died For Your Sins* (London: Collier-Macmillan Ltd., 1969), 27.
17. Jan George, "Interview with Louise Erdrich," in *North Dakota Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (Spring 1985): 246.
18. Louise Erdrich, "Where I Ought to Be: A Writer's Sense of Place," in *New York Times Book Review* (July 28, 1985): 25.
19. Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 135.

20. Northrop Frye, “The Mythos of Spring: Comedy,” in *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 170.
21. Sigmund Freud, “Wit and the Various Forms of the Comic,” in *Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious*, reprinted in A. A. Brill, ed., *Sigmund Freud: The Basic Writings* (New York: Random House, 1938), 802.
22. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 8.
23. Tim Giago, “Nothing Can Top Indian Joke Session,” in *Notes From Indian Country 1* (Pierre: State Publishing Co., 1984), 238.
24. *Chippewa Tales*, retold by Wa-be-no O-pee-chee, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: Wetzel Publishing Co., 1930), 38.
25. Gertrude Jobs, ed., *Dictionary of Mythology Folklore and Symbols*. (New York: Scarecrow Press, 1962), vol. 1, 229.
26. Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez, ed. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 225.
27. Hertha D. Wong, “An Interview With Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris,” in *North Dakota Quarterly* (Winter 1987): 210.
28. *Ibid.*, 210.
29. Thomas B. Leckley, *The World of Manabozho* (New York: Vanguard, 1965), 7–8.
30. Howard A. Norman, trans. *The Wishing Bone Cycle; Narrative Poems from the Swampy Cree Indians*, 2nd ed. (Santa Barbara: Ross-Erikson, 1982), 135. For a further discussion of “*Usá puyew usu wapiw*,” see Kenneth Lincoln, *Native American Renaissance*, 127.
31. M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 324.
32. Howard A. Norman, trans. *The Wishing Bone Cycle: Narrative Poems from the Swampy Cree Indians*, 2nd ed. (Santa Barbara: Ross-Erikson, 1982), 49. Norman here is quoting Samuel Makidemewabe, a Swampy Cree elder.
33. T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1952), 145. These lines are from part five of the “Little Gidding” section.
34. Hertha D. Wong, “An Interview with Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris,” 214.
35. William Faulkner, “Address Upon Receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature,” *New York Herald Tribune Book Review* (Jan. 14, 1951); reprinted in *Essays, Speeches & Public Lectures by William Faulkner*, ed. James B. Meriweather (New York: Random House, 1965), 120.