

Hope, Redemption, Ferrying - Interpreting "Water" Metaphor in *Love Medicine*

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Abstract: *Love Medicine* is the renowned and representative work of Louise Erdrich, an American Native female writer. Erdrich delves into the emotions of individuals against the backdrop of history, narrating the stories of three generations from three families within the Chippewa tribe and vividly showcasing the resilient vitality of Native American culture. In *Love Medicine*, the imagery of "water" recurs throughout the narrative, with almost every character having some connection, either direct or indirect, to "water", imbuing "water" with profound symbolism. Therefore, a comprehensive analysis of the "water" imagery becomes essential for understanding and interpreting this novel. This paper interprets the content-related meaning of the "water" from the conceptual metaphor perspective and explores its structural role from a narrative standpoint. Through textual analysis, it becomes evident that "water" plays a crucial role in interpreting such themes as "life and death", "love and affection", "redemption", and "time and space" in *Love Medicine*, thereby elevating the motif of this Native American novel, which centers around the theme of "homecoming". Furthermore, "water" streams throughout the entire novel like a babbling brook, creating a seamless narrative that is cohesive and thematically-rich.

Keywords: Water; Conceptual metaphor; *Love Medicine*; Homecoming.

1. INTRODUCTION

For Native Americans, "water" serves as both the life-giving source as well as a spiritual cornerstone of worship. Primarily dwelling beside rivers or lakes, Native Americans view earth, fire, water, and wind as the four fundamental elements with which the Creator shaped the world. Earth sustains life, fire emanates from the sun providing light and warmth, water is indispensable for life and also symbolizes blood. The Huron people, who inhabit the Great Lakes region of America, believe in the spirits of water. Furthermore, Huron fishermen offer tobacco to rivers in prayer for the protection and blessing of these deities. Moreover, tribes residing along waterways engage in summer fishing and autumn rice-harvesting traditions. Numerous references in *Love Medicine* illustrate this connection, like describing the boundary river as "that once had covered the Dakotas and solved all our problems." This suggests that the local Chippewa people rely on and reside by water for their sustenance and life, underscoring their dependence on and connection to water. Meanwhile, the mystical power attributed to "water" instills a profound reverence among tribal members towards water-related things. In this novel, Eli is earned the title as "the World's Greatest Fisherman" for catching a "fourteen-inch trout".

The natural resource of "water" recurs throughout the novel, and Erdrich ingeniously incorporates inanimate natural and "water"-related elements like water, snow, lakes, and rivers with vibrant characters, creating a seamless narrative. This paper will focus on elucidating the "water" imagery in this novel, exploring its metaphorical expressions within the narrative.

2. CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR THEORY

Metaphor, as a linguistic phenomenon, is ubiquitous in our daily lives. Studies on "metaphor" can date back to the discussion on the rhetorical function of metaphors within the field of philosophy in Aristotle's (1954) *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*, which set the foundation for traditional metaphor studies. According to Aristotle (1952), "metaphor" was defined as "giving the thing a name that belongs to something else." This viewpoint had an influence on subsequent metaphor studies for a long period. In the 1980s, the joint publication of *Metaphors We Live By* by American scholars George Lakoff and Mark Johnson inaugurated systematic research into the cognitive aspects of metaphor. In their book, Lakoff and Johnson proposed Conceptual Metaphor Theory, which explores how language is applied from one domain or context to another, namely a cross-domain phenomenon. Richards have discussed elements and characteristics of metaphor, presenting it as a rhetorical device devoid of practical purpose, with no loss of meaning when replaced by literal language. In *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson introduced the metaphorical conceptual system of "source domain," "target domain," and "mappings," opening up a new avenue for studying metaphor from a cognitive perspective and proposing the concept of conceptual metaphor.

3. METAPHORICAL INTERPRETATION OF "WATER"

3.1 "Water" in the Motif of "Life and Death"

3.1.1 "Water" in the Motif of "Life"

In *Metaphor and Reality*, American philosopher Philip Wheelwright mentions the archetypal symbol of "water", stating that "water serves as both a medium of cleanliness or purification and a sustainer of life. Thus, 'water' symbolizes purity and new life." (Ye Shuxian, 2011) As the source of life, water nurtures life, symbolizing rebirth and hope. In the story *The World's Greatest Fisherman* of *Love Medicine*, water symbolizes the continuity of the tribe with its continuous flow. On his way back to the reservation, Albertine sees the lands which originally belonged to the Indians as "Everything else was dull tan - the dry ditches, the dying crops," Nevertheless, Albertine still hopes that "Rain would come just in time that year." and "There would be water in the hills when there wasn't any on the plains, because the hollows saved it, collected runoff from the low slopes, and the dense trees held it, too." The perpetual and inexhaustible nature of "water" symbolizes the resilience, unity, unceasing vitality and enduring spirit of the Indians under the suppression of government.

In the story *Beads of Love Medicine*, "water" imagery connects ancient traditions of native American with the birth of new life. Every time Mary gives birth, she relies on charms to overcome difficulties. The charms, not in English, but in ancient words from Mary's childhood and memory, means "to rely on the power of waves." During childbirth, Mary feels herself "being pushed by waves and floating peacefully," "like a boat approaching shore, a person swimming towards a faint light," that is the water "letting her body go with the flow." "Water" helps boats reach the shore, guides people towards the light, and brings the hope of life. With the charms, the child is born safely. In this story, "water" is endowed with the power of hope, bringing forth new life. On a deeper level, new life which is influenced by ancient traditions also symbolizes the continuation of the old traditions.

3.1.2 "Water" in the Motif of "Death"

In *Love Medicine*, the death of characters all bears the traces of "water".

The opening of the novel foreshadows darkness and death, describing that "Although the day was overcast, the snow itself reflected such light that she was momentarily blinded." Ultimately, June came home as if "it was like going underwater", and June died on her way back home amidst a snowstorm. Returning home in "water", and dying in "water" symbolizes a return to the origin of life. Furthermore, this novel also employs "snow", another form of "water", to portray June's life. "After that false spring, when the storm blew in covering the state, all the snow melted off and it was summer." Snow, as a form of water's death, symbolizes beauty and death. Snow is white and pure, like the pure part of June's heart, yet it also melts easily and is just like June's short life with its fleeting existence.

Additionally, Gordie reminisces the time he spent with June before he died, recalling their honeymoon by the lake.

Before Nector's accidental death, Lipsha seems to see Nick fishing in the middle of the lake and Nick gradually losing his consciousness, and the bobber sinking deeper and deeper until it disappearing below the surface of water.

Before Henry's death, he proposes to go see the "river in flood", but the river is "swollen to bursting, shining like an old gray scar", a scene that intensifies Henry's feelings to the out - breaking point. It can also be inferred that Henry chose to drown himself in the water, allowing the water to fill his boots.

From the above mentioned, it can be concluded that "water", as the source of life, not only nourishes the Chippewa people but also serves as their spiritual refuge and the ultimate destination. This destination is a terrifying death for some while a spiritual release for others.

3.2 "Water" in the Motif of "Redemption" - "Charon" to the Hell or a "Ferryman" for the Soul Redemption?

The metaphorical significance of "water" in the motif of life and death in the novel essentially represents the success or failure of "homecoming".

Louise Erdrich has remarked that "water" in *Love Medicine* fundamentally symbolizes "transformation" and "transcendence". Water possesses both the power to purify and the power to destroy, and it also facilitates the journey of "homecoming" (Gleason, 2000).

This novel begins with bleak descriptions foreshadowing darkness and death, portraying that "the day was overcast, the snow itself reflected such light that she was momentarily blinded." June eventually came home as if "it was like going underwater", dying on her journey amidst a snowstorm. This depiction makes this novel be shrouded with a dead gloom. However, an overview of the entire novel, it can be found there is a thematic symmetry: June's death at the beginning resonates with the sunny and hopeful descriptions in the end: "The morning was clear. A good road led on. So there was nothing to do but cross the water, and bring her home." This implies that June has returned home spiritually. Superficially, it seems that June failed to cross the river and return home on that blizzard night, but actually, she achieved a true "spiritual homecoming". It can be found traces in the opening story, where June trudges through the snowstorm, not feeling burdened but rather walking "over it like water and came home." and "even when her heart clenched and her skin turned crackling cold it didn't matter, because the pure and naked part of her went on." In this sense, June has accomplished a true spiritual redemption. For June, "water" can clean her past painful experiences, baptizes her, and guides her to her home. Consequently, "water" assists June in accomplishing her homecoming and her spiritual redemption.

Lipsha has also accomplished the spiritual redemption from his initial confusion about his identity and beliefs to the eventual complete acceptance of his origins. Facing the boundary river and standing on the bridge that metaphorically connects two worlds, Lipsha recalls traditional Indian customs. He has realized that he has to cross the boundary river to bridge the gap between the white and Indian cultures and return to his own tribe, through which he can find the sense of belonging and complete the true "homecoming". At the same time, Lipsha thinks of his birth mother June. From the initial resentment to forgiveness and acceptance towards June, he is determined to cross the river and bring June home, bridging the emotional gap that existed between them for many years. Furthermore, this marks Lipsha's farewell to his past self after finding the sense of identity and belonging. The bridge over the boundary river connects the two shores, helping him successfully cross the river.

Water also serves as a boundary line in *Love Medicine*. Confused native Americans live under the water. Some of them find their identity and sense of belonging, preserve the traditions and successfully come out of the surface and come to the shore, while others lose themselves, struggling under the water and accepting the death.

Nector left the reservation when he was young and came to the white world, but he was hit hard and sank to the "bottom of water". In the story *Plunge of the Brave* in *Love Medicine*, Nector thinks that he survives "the raging water" and "I'd hold my breath when I hit and let the current pull me toward the surface, around jagged rocks. I wouldn't fight it, and in that way I'd get to shore.". Disappointed, Nector returned to the reservation and started his new life.

However, Henry, who returned from the Vietnam War, was unable to get over the trauma of war and became silent and solitary all day. With depression, he chose to drown himself. According to the Chippewa custom, drowning is the worst way to die, for the drowning person will become a pitiful ghost that can never be freed or reincarnated, and the soul, with no home to return to, will be forced to wander forever. For Henry, ever since he returned from the Vietnam War, he had been experiencing spiritual struggles and confusion, even unsure of his own belonging after death. Perhaps drowning was a kind of liberation for him. Henry did not complete the "homecoming" in the true sense, for he struggled underwater and accepted death.

3.3 "Water" in the Motif of "Time and Space" - the fleeting time

The water in nature flows constantly without cessation, just like the passage of time, which never returns once gone. In *Plunge of the Brave* in *Love Medicine*, Nector has a deeper perception about the passage of time. The seventeen-year marriage of Nector and Mary is full of trivia, which has long eroded their relations. During a brief tranquility, Nector realized the world "was going by, full of wonders and creatures" and lamented the fast movement of time like the water flowing: "water under the bridge" was "rapids, a swirl that carried me so swift that I could not look to either side but had to keep my eyes trained on what was coming." For Nector, time rushes fast like a torrent eroding stones, eroding him. Fed up with his present life, Nick yearns to find Lulu, which he thinks that "to ever get back I'd have to swim against the movement of time".

Just as the water wears down stones, it also wears away people's beliefs. Every time Marie touches June's beads, she thinks that "the waves are grinding them (stones) smaller and smaller until they finally disappear." (p.82) The beads symbolizes religious beliefs, the constant touching gradually wears them down, just like the original religious beliefs are gradually eroded by the beliefs of white society.

3.4 "Water" in the Motif of "Kinship and Love"

Many novels of Erdrich focus extensively on the emotional, spiritual, and cultural suffering of children and descendants (Kurup 14). In *Love Medicine*, water is also endowed with complex emotions including familial and romantic love by different protagonists.

3.4.1 "Water" in the Motif of "Kinship"

In the story Beads in *Love Medicine*, Marie's relationship with her mother in law Rushes Bear was tense before her delivery. And Marie disapproved of Rushes Bear's demeanor and sought to assert her authority over her. However, Rushes Bear's encouragement during Marie's delivery and her subsequent help in restoring Marie's life to normal changed Marie's perception of her. For Marie, both of them have been enduring the same loneliness, both being on the same "boat" during Marie's delivery, with Rushes Bear "floating up and down in the black waves" and struggling to keep moving forward. Marie and Rushes Bear share similar experiences in their respective marriage. Rushes Bear's care for Marie brought warmth of familial affection to her, reminding her that they navigated the ups and downs of marital life on the same boat, which was the root of Mary's changed attitude towards Rushes Bear. Therefore, "water" here is attached with the familial warmth.

Lipsha harbored resentment towards his mother initially, for abandoning him. However, upon learning about his true lineage and seeing water by the boundary, Lipsha changed his perception towards June. He forgave June, and crossed the river to bring June home on that clear morning. Here, "water" symbolizes a sense of forgiveness.

3.4.2 "Water" in the Motif of "Love"

In *Love Medicine*, the "water" imagery related to love represents passion as well as forgiveness. After seventeen years of marriage, Nector encounters Lulu again and finds true love in her, feeling "warm and sweet water in his veins". Later, Nector swims in the lake, attempting to forget Lulu. Additionally, Gordie recalls honeymoon with June by the lakeside. Therefore, water witnesses their love.

The lake formed by the convergence of "water" may be an obstacle but also can connect shores through the bridge. In the story of Flesh and Blood in *Love Medicine*, there's a description: there seems to be "a fine lake" between Marie and Nector, and the lake "deepened" This scene occurs after Nector returns after burning down Lulu's house. By this time, Mary has already seen the farewell letter Nector left but puts it back in its place. However, a rift has already formed in their hearts, like this deepened "lake". Despite the emotional distance represented by the "lake", Mary calls it "a fine lake", rolling and gleaming. It can be seen that Marie still loves Nector and is relieved when he comes back. When Nector hesitates to move forward, Mary reaches out and pulls him back. Marie makes a concession and chooses to forgive Nector. Here, "water" is endowed with the motif of love and forgiveness.

4. PERFECTLY NATURAL AND FLAWLESSLY EXECUTED

Water in *Love Medicine* not only holds profound symbolic significance in content but also binds the novel together seamlessly in structure, ensuring a coherent and uninterrupted narrative like a flowing stream. Throughout the novel, "water" connects Nector's life, forming a linear narrative, and also connects June's life, forming a circular narrative.

At each significant stage of Nector's life, traces of "water" can be identified. "Water" follows Nector's footsteps along the river of his life. Nector's life resembles drifting in a river: sometimes serene, sometimes tumultuous with rapids and hazards. He is pushed forward by many things, trying to control them but often finds himself powerless. As the last hereditary chief of the tribe, he is wryly labeled by Erdrich as "the vanishing American". After growing up, Nector left the Indian reservation and came to a small white town, eager to occupy his own place in the white society. He worked as a temporary film actor in Hollywood, portraying the image of a native Indian. However, death or being conquered by whites is usually the end of Indians in movies. The director asked him to act death because in their movies, Indians are usually dead or hanging behind a horse in a dying state. He also worked as a

human model for whites, and the painting was named "Plunge of the Brave", which shows Nector jumping into the river to commit suicide naked. According to the custom of the Chippewa tribe, the soul of an Indian who drowned will not have a reincarnation, but will only wander between the two worlds and cannot rest. Nector realized the tragic role that white society had left for Indians, and finally said, "the greater world was only interested in my doom". Therefore, Nector realized that returning home, returning to the reservation, returning to the tribe, or just keeping Indian identity is the choice of Native Americans. Here, through the painting "Plunge of the Brave" related to "water", Nector's thoughts has changed, which has changed Nector's life trajectory. Seventeen years after returning to the reservation, Nector lamented that time passes like water. His memories of the past made him feel more and more bored with his life with his wife Marie, and he thought of Lulu. Later, when he reunited with Lulu, Nector felt "my veins full of warm, sweet water." The first time he decided to forget Lulu, Nector went to the lake to swim and wash away the past and troubles. For Nector, "water" here is a temporary escape from the real world, but "the lake bounced me up", and Nector had to return to the "heavy life". Later, Nector lost his memory, and his memory in his mind was "like the color of water", as if Nector himself chose to enter the "second childhood", and was liberated from the pain of the past by losing his memory. Finally, before Nector's accidental death, Lipsha seemed to see Nector fishing in the middle of the lake. Nector gradually lost consciousness, and the float gradually sank until it "sank below the water surface".

Through the analysis of the previous subsections, June "walked over it like water and came home".(p.8) and she died in the water eventually, and has accomplished her "homecoming" in water, underscoring how "water" intricately intertwines with June's entire life.

From the above analysis, we can see that viewing Nector's and June's lives through the prism of "water" facilitates a clearer understanding of the narrative's coherence.

5. CONCLUSION

The novel *Love Medicine* spans fifty years and consists of twenty interrelated stories, which is the best inheritance and promotion of Indian oral narrative tradition (Zhang, 2014). The recurring imagery "water" has profound meanings both in content and in structure. "Water" signifies the power of rebirth and renewal as well as the continuation of the Indian tribes; "water" embodies redemption of faith, assisting the tribal members in accomplishing their "homecoming"; "water" also foreshadows death; "water" symbolizes the movement and passage of time like flowing water wearing away the time; "water" and has the ability to imbue familial and romantic bonds with strength, subliming such themes as "life and death", "love and affection", "redemption", and "time and space" in *Love Medicine*. Additionally, Erdrich's adept employment of the "water" seamlessly weaves together initially disparate narratives, creating a cohesive and flawless novel.

For a nation intimately bonded with the land, Indians experience the ebb and flow of time, with some sinking beneath the waters while others strive to ford the river, but all seeking their own sense of belongings.

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