
The Concept of Home in Love Medicine

“Nothing?’ said Mama piercingly, ‘Nothing to come home to?’ She gave me a short glance full of meaning. I had, after all, come home, even husbandless, childless, driving a fall-apart car” (Erdrich, 13).

This moment from Louis Erdrich’s *Love Medicine* captures the life of Albertine Johnson in a memory after the death of her aunt, June, while she sits in a kitchen with her mother and aunt, Aurelia. Albertine, like many in her generation, has attempted to move away from the reservation, receive an education off the reservation, and sustain a means for living and new life among a more stereotypical American lifestyle – not that of a Chippewa Native American. Aurelia and Zelda, Albertine’s mother, debate as to why June was out in the middle of nowhere on the winter evening that she froze to death. They confront her death by searching for the why and the how behind it. Aurelia simply states that there is no reason that June should have been walking home, as life on the reservation held nothing for her. Offended by the implication that a life could be nonexistent without reciprocal love from a husband or great successes to share Zelda retorts with the simple question of “Nothing to come home to?” (Erdrich, 13). For her daughter has come back despite having seemingly no reason to return home. The aforementioned passage holds significance in this novel as it introduces the characters’ constant struggle to define home and their reasons for returning or staying in the place they call home.

The characters of *Love Medicine* are complicated, vastly different, and full of surprises. However there is one constant in all of their lives: the reservation and the subsequent familial community they find there. Some characters are estranged from their birth parents but taken in by others, some characters remain with a birth parent or two, others attempt to leave family behind and forge a path for themselves. No matter the course their lives have taken, an escape from the reservation’s community is practically impossible. The people are extremely interconnected through their heritage, sexual relations, subsequent adoptions, and marriages. The younger generations of Chippewa children attempt to make a life outside of the reservation. Albertine, as one example, has led an adequate life in American society. She is educated, living on her own, and sustaining a job. However, the news of her dead aunt brings her running home. She has not returned for a specific reason, but needs to cope with the loss of one of her own. This aunt, her role model and inspiration has perished, so a part of how she defines life has perished as well. Only by returning to the place that formed her, the people that can relate to her loss, can she come to terms with it and leave again a sustainable and completely formed individual. She, like others in her generation relies on the constancy of the Chippewa community in order to allow her experiential life to exist.

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Not unlike Albertine, Marie Lazarre, her grandmother experimented with leaving the reservation. Marie had a desire to disband from her wildly untamed and savage family reputation by joining the nuns on the hill. Here, she could transform into a Saint, a person that was worshipped and glorified instead being the girl who is associated with not only Indians, but low-class Indians. She wanted a new life elsewhere. However, when life in the convent got tough, when she felt threatened and abused by the nuns, she came running home. Marie, after forging her way up the hill to assume a new persona took mere seconds to decide that the reservation, that home, was a much better option than the one she had chosen. On the reservation she may not be considered high-class, but she had choice as to what direction her life would turn. Marie, in her element and in the place knew and understood, was able to create a world in which a Lazarre became the wife of tribal chairman, a woman of power and control. Marie, stable in her personage as a mother, wife, and leader in her community returned to the hill to gloat in the face of the dying nun who once scorned her. Marie had to prove to this nun that she was a success despite the nun's satanic attempts to destroy her. Marie understands herself in a context that ties control, power, and family back to the reservation, back to home. This is the place she knows and the place that knows her, therefore she returns and even remains after her husband decides to leave her. Even in that dark moment, she remains home with her children, continuing what she knows how to do. Home provides stability, the reservation provides constancy by which Marie and the other characters come to know themselves, others, and the interconnectedness of life.

Each chapter in this story depicts the life of a character at various moments in his or her life. Each time the reader is invited into the character's life it becomes obvious that this character is not alone. Each chapter defines an individual, reveals a life, by establishing a life in relation to the reservation and to home. Each individual's story is told through his or her relationship to the reservation or to someone from the reservation. They are never alone. Even June, who opens the novel in a solitary journey through life, ends her chapter by attempting to return to home. She, like all the others, needs to return home to the reservation where she can surround herself with familiarity and the confidence to understand her place in the world and the place her family plays in her life. The reservation, the home of these Chippewa families is the only constant they have, that is why they always will return. Constancy, family, and history are far from the nothing that Aurelia accuses the reservation of being at the start of the novel.

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