

Louise Erdrich's "The Red Convertible" from her novel *Love Medicine*

Although the story creates a plot that develops the significance of the red convertible and reflects a credible setting as the backdrop of the story is the reservation and the Viet Nam war, this story focuses on the methods of characterization.

Lyman is the narrator. He displays a dynamic character. He is characterized as someone who takes initiative by "managing the Joliet"; he has charm "only kid they let in the American Legion Hall to shine shoes"; he has a talent "to always make money. ...unusual in a Chippewa." With his brother Henry, they buy the red Olds convertible. They spent the summer traveling and all over the northern United States, including Canada and Alaska.

At this juncture, no mention of Henry is noticed other than being laid off from his job. We also learn a couple of times that Lyman and Henry looked different, so it was difficult for others to accept them as brothers. After their trip to Alaska with Susy, "the season was changing"—"time for us to go." This scene ends with Henry laughing.

Upon their return, Henry is drafted. Now we get a physical description of him: "He was built like a brick outhouse anyway. We like to tease him that they really wanted him for his Indian nose. He had a nose big and sharp as a hatchet, like the nose on Red Tomahawk, the Indian who killed Sitting Bull, whose profile is on signs all along the North Dakota highways." When he returns, we learn that Henry had been a POW and he is described as "very different" "jumpy" "mean" "quiet" "never comfortable" so that the "change was no good." One scene that illustrates this is when he is watching television and bites his lip until blood "was going down his chin."

Life in the reservation reflects the negative side of life marked by deprivation and disrepair. One important aspect is that health care is lacking. Henry received no care on the reservation and the regular hospital would have simply drugged him into quietude.

The other character clearly is the car, the red convertible. It represents freedom, carefreeness. The car is described in opening "as if it was alive" and "repose"—a state of rest, sleep, or tranquility. To Lyman, the car represents his youth, his happy relationship with Henry, joy at being free, a fantasy car. For Henry, the red convertible cannot "right what is wrong" with him as he psychologically scarred.

In the final scene by the river—remember in the opening scene, their reservation is located near some areas of wild natural beauty like the high running Red River and Little Knife River and Montana. Little Knife River was also the place where the willow trees bent down so protectively around the brothers "so comfortably"—Lyman feels "something squeezing inside me and tightening and trying to let go all at the same time," and the brothers have fist fight, a response to the emotional situation. The wild dance parallels the dance with Susy.

The story ends with the clarifying what Lyman states in the opening paragraph—"We owned it [the car] together until his [Henry] boots filled with water on a windy night and he bought out my share." Is Henry's death a suicide or an accidental drowning? What does "my boots are filling" mean figuratively? Why did Lyman send the red convertible into the river with its lights on? What does the car represent?