“The Shawl” by Louise Erdrich

Louise Erdrich is a member of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa band. She was born in Minnesota in 1954, and grew up in North Dakota where her parents taught at the Wahpeton Indian School. She received her Master's degree from John Hopkins University in 1977. Louise Erdrich won a series of awards for her first novel, a best seller, Love Medicine, published in 1984. Later books include The Beet Queen (1986); Tracks (1988); The Bingo Palace (1994); Tales of Burning Love (1996); and The Antelope Wife (1998). Her writing explores themes of abandonment, isolation, marginalization of Aboriginal people, and complex familial relationships.

Journal: Responding to “The Shawl”

After you’ve read “The Shawl,” respond to the following prompts in your journal.

Your Personal Response: How did you feel at the end of the story? Make a note of it. Record any unanswered questions you have about the story, or anything you still find confusing.

Diction: Diction is about choosing the best words to express what you want to communicate. What can you observe about Erdrich’s use of language and choice of words? What is the effect of her inclusion of actual Chippewa words?

Making Connections: How do your personal experiences compare, if at all, to the experience of the characters in the story?

Characters: In the second part of the story, after the boy fights his father, the father asks him, “Did you know I had a sister once?” What is the connection between the father of part two and the boy of part one?

It is quite common, even necessary, to read a story several times in order to receive its full meaning. The first time we are often anxious to learn the outcome. Read the story again, more slowly this time, to notice the precise language, any images or metaphors, or any phrase or passage that particularly appeals to you. If you noted any questions, on the second or third reading, try to answer them.

Elements of Fiction: “The Shawl”
Title

Before you read any story, stop and think about the title. Let your mind wander freely and make connections with images and memories. What does a shawl represent to you? Do you associate it with comfort and warmth perhaps, or something more? Reading is an interactive process; every reader brings her or his own experiences and expectations to a story, and that affects what the story means for that person.

Point of View

Louise Erdrich commonly uses multiple narrators in her stories, including “The Shawl.” This can make her stories initially confusing. The first part of the story is told from a first person (“I”) point of view. The narrator, however, knows the thoughts and feelings of Aanakwad, the father and the boy, so is also omniscient. Omniscient means all knowing. The story is told from the point of view of an objective community member, someone with distance, a witness or observer, a storyteller. As the story progresses, the narrator focuses on the thoughts and feelings of one character, the boy; this is a limited omniscient point of view.

In the second and third parts, the point of view is first person protagonist, where the "I" is the main character. It is from the point of view of the son of the boy from part one. Consider the difference and value of the various points of view. A first person narrative conveys immediacy and intimacy, but seeing events in relation to the community provides a broader perspective and brings to mind the symbolism of the spider web, and the connectedness of all things.

Setting

Setting helps to define the limits of what events can take place in a story. When setting is described with great attention to detail, a vivid portrait of time and place is presented to the reader. When setting remains spacious and vague, the reader's imagination is free to conjure up those details that complete each scene.

The presence of the natural world is a common thread throughout Aboriginal fiction. In the Aboriginal world view, the gift of creation and the Earth Mother nurtures all life on the planet. The Earth may be attributed human or animal qualities, or may be treated as an all-knowing, unseen force. It is important to recognize that for Aboriginal peoples practicing the spiritual traditions of their ancestors, these qualities are not metaphorical, but literal.

Plot

The plot is what happens in a story. When examining plot it's helpful to consider what drives the story, what keeps it going and brings it to an end. Traditional stories build to a climax, but the structures of Aboriginal literature may be different, and don't necessarily follow a linear or chronological sequence of events. The central action or progression of events will vary greatly and may include a series of digressions, flashbacks, or loops back to an earlier point. To understand the structure of a story's plot, consider where the conflict or tension is, and if there is a turning point.
Theme

Theme is arguably the most important element of a story and is inextricably tied to the writer's purpose. The theme of a work is the statement the writing makes about some aspect of the human experience. It is the main idea being explored in a literary work and it may be explicitly stated, or more commonly, simply implied by the text. A short story or a novel may have several themes. To figure out the theme, ask yourself what the story is about, and then try to deduce what the author is saying about that subject.

Symbolism

A symbol always has a range of possible meanings and interpretations. Consider the symbol of the white flag, for example; it could mean "don't shoot," "I give up," or "we come in peace." Rarely is there a straightforward, singular interpretation of a symbol.

Some symbols come from a shared universal experience: for example, light is often associated with knowledge, water with fertility and renewal, darkness with the unknown or ignorance.

Some symbols have a special, personal meaning for the author that is connected to the author's experience and culture. Consider for a moment what an eagle symbolizes, or represents in your culture. It could be a number of things including wisdom, vision, or new awareness.

Literary symbols have a range of possible associations. Consider the tree. It spans generations of humans, and so it becomes a symbol of the family tree, branching outward, generation-to-generation. The tree points to the sky and so it is an ancient symbol of the upward ascent. The rings in the trees could be seen as a storehouse of the past, rippling outwards from its core, and the sap of the tree seen as the sap of life.

It is important to differentiate between the symbol and the metaphor. A symbol always stands for itself, (e.g., a tree is a tree) but also holds some deeper meaning or significance (e.g., a tree is a symbol of family ancestry). A metaphor is a comparison between two seemingly different things. A metaphor might read "She was an ancient Sequoia redwood, watching over her children and grandchildren down below." The redwood on its own might be understood as a symbol of longevity and age-old wisdom.

Colours are often symbolic but the range of interpretation is so broad that what they stand for is ambiguous. Green can represent vegetation, all of nature, but also money; blue might symbolize the sky and eternity and freedom or, the emotion blue, representing depression. The colour red might stand for fire, blood, anger, or the red dawn. It all depends. The point is that the symbols must be considered in the context of the story.

Character and Characterization

As in life, so in literature: different types of people and characters inhabit the pages of our books. The technique the writer uses to portray character is called characterization. Some are stereotypes, or stock characters, such as the meddling mother-in-law, computer nerd, or trailer park boys. Flat characters are people with a one-track mind, like a womanizer or a braggart. Round characters are more complex, with varied and conflicting traits, and are thus more real. Static or unchanging characters also people the pages of our lives and books, as well as dynamic characters, who learn, grow and change as a result of experiences.

One way to focus on character is to determine what function that character plays in the story; the main character of the story is called the protagonist. The character of force that is the rival, opponent, or enemy of the protagonist is the antagonist. A character, who by contrast, highlights the distinctive traits of another character, is called a foil.

As you are reading a story and getting to know the characters, consider what motivates them to act as they do, what challenges put them to the test, and how the author directly or indirectly manipulates or steers your reactions. With whom do you sympathize and why?