

Louise Erdrich's use of Metaphor
in her Essay, "The Wild Kitten"

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CMP 272
English Comp
June 12, 2004

A Shaman descends into the terrifying underworld to answer the herald's call, experiences a shamanic death and rebirth, then reemerges into the world of sunlight and day-to-day experiences. Award winning¹ Ojibway author and storyteller² Louise Erdrich uses metaphor and modern language³ to retell this ancient mystical transformative experience in her essay "Wild kitten".

Born of a Chippewa Indian mother and a German-American father, Erdrich has developed a style of writing that bridges the gap between two cultures.⁴ She also bridges a time gap, connecting the past to the present. In 1987 Louise Erdrich gives us a hint to look for this when she says, "It's not easy to find the old as it is to find the new." Her use of metaphor has been the subject of numerous essays. Poet Robert Bly, New York Times Book Review, notes that Erdrich's "genius is in metaphor." Louise Erdrich also demonstrates extensive knowledge of the Ojibway shamanic "Medewiwin"⁵ or Grand Medicine Society with her novels *Tracks*, *Love Medicine*⁶, and *The Antelope Wife*.⁷ Mary Magoulick writes that *The Antelope's Wife* with its "clear mythic tendencies within the novel direct the reader to consider it in terms of scholarship on myth."⁸

"Wild kitten" is an essay taken from Erdrich's first major work of nonfiction "The Blue Jay's Dance". The story begins with Erdrich's description of a lost kitten's cry, "It was as if the house itself had given birth. One day the floor cried where I stepped on it..." A mythological shamanic journey begins with what is known as the "call". Joseph Campbell uses the phrase "call to adventure".⁹ The "call" cannot be refused.¹⁰ The cry of

the kitten, a sound we all can relate to, is the call that heralds Erdrich into an ancient shamanic pursuit.

"I went down looking for it with a flashlight..." Louise Erdrich answers the call and begins her descent into the basement. In effect, she uses this modern personal adventure to retell an ancient story. The shamanic "hero" leaves the comfort of the everyday light world of normal reality and enters the underworld in order to pursue their adventures, whatever they may be.¹¹ Erdrich writes in another essay, "A woman needs to tell her own story, to tell the bloody version of the fairy tale. A woman has to be her own hero."¹²

Louise Erdrich's initial attempt to rescue the kitten was unsuccessful and this requires her to completely leave the safety of the light world for the dark and unknown regions below. "I went after her..." Now deep into the basement, Erdrich describes how she crawled past cobwebs and spiders and how she "forced" her mind shut and concentrated on the "cry of the little animal". She reaches a point where she says, "This was no crawl space anymore. I could hardly raise my shoulders to creep forward, could only move by shifting my hips up and down. On the edge of sickening panic, I had never been in a space so tight..." Robert E. Ryan, Ph.D. writes that the shamanic transformative experiences of traveling through caves, which is amazingly similar to the experience Erdrich is describing, "were only to be initially entered by passing through a long, low, and extremely constricting passageway, immediately exposing the entrant to darkness, sensory deprivation, and restricted mobility, often for prolonged periods of time."¹³ If we recognize the story Erdrich is telling, we soon understand that when she plainly says, "This was no crawl space anymore," she is actually using metaphor to hint at a much

deeper concept.¹⁴ In fact, we may consider that she is alluding to a symbolic experience of passing through the womb.

Louise Erdrich continues her adventure and reaches for the kitten. Several attempts are made, and then she says, "I tried to breathe, to be patient. I waited, put myself into suspended animation." She entered a trance, the shamanic death.¹⁵ Campbell tells us, "This is the highest and ultimate crucifixion, not only of the hero, but of his god as well." Shamanic death leads to the transformation of consciousness and the regenerative return to the source of cosmic creative power. The shaman enters the womb and dies to be reborn. Erdrich then grabs the kitten. "Out it came with a squeak of terror..." The song of birth.

The shamanic hero's death/rebirth adventure is not complete until they return to the everyday world.¹⁶ In reflection the following day, Louise Erdrich puts her experience in perspective for us, "I'd swum weightlessly into a smaller and smaller place. What the body remembers of birth it anticipates as death."

Erdrich received the herald's "call", answered the call by descending into the underworld where she had to crawl deep into the unconscious womb to die. At that time she entered the shamanic "death" trance state of "suspended animation". The next event was the mythological rescue and sound of a squeak to signify the rebirth and retrieval of the lost soul.¹⁷ The following evening Erdrich shares, "It was like being dead, or unborn. I hadn't thought about it then, but now I could clearly see part of me, the husk of myself, still buried against the east wall: a person sacrificed to ensure the good luck of the temple, a kind of house god, a woman lying down there, still, an empty double." The old Louise Erdrich had died, a new transformed Louise Erdrich was reborn. It is clear that

Erdrich is relating through metaphor the simple experience of rescuing the kitten to the ancient and universal shamanic journey; the traditional hero adventure to rescue a lost soul, for the common good of the tribe, or "temple", in which she left the "husk" of herself below like the shed skin of a snake, an ancient symbol of death/rebirth. According to Erdrich, transfiguration is the myth by which we structure our life.¹⁸

¹ Erdrich's novel *Love Medicine* earned numerous awards, including the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1984. (http://www.english.uic.edu/maps/poets/a_f/erdrich/interviews.htm)

² In a 1985 interview with Laura Coltelli, when asked by her if Erdrich considers herself a poet or storyteller, Erdrich replied, "Oh, a storyteller, a writer."
(http://www.english.uic.edu/maps/poets/a_f/erdrich/interviews.htm)

³ In a review of Lisa Carey's novel *Love in the Asylum*, HaperCollins.com states "Erdrich writes beautifully about Native American people and mythology, and juxtaposes the modern and the Traditional in an interesting way." (http://harpercollins.com/catalog/book_interview_xml.asp?isbn=006621288X)

⁴ In an interview with Katie Bacon in *Atlantic Unbound*, 1-17-2002, entitled *An Emissary of the Between-World*, Louise Erdrich is quoted as saying, "I write in English, and so I suppose I function as an emissary of the between-world, that increasingly common margin where cultures mix and collide. That is in fact where many of my stories occur." (http://www.english.uic.edu/maps/poets/a_f/erdrich/interviews.htm)

⁵ According to Shawn Vidmar in his essay, "The Bear and the Owl: Finding Imagery in Louise Erdrich's Novel Tracks", *Medewiwin* is a general reference that can be applied to the Ojibway shamanic society, the description of the ceremony of the Medi Society, and/or Ojibway tradition taught by the Medi Society. (http://www.wdog.com/svid/writings/essays/erdrich_1997.htm)

⁶ Diane Beavers in "The Impact of Catholicism on the Act of Making Chippewa Love Medicine" states that Erdrich's novel *Love Medicine* "pulls together the forces of Christianity and Shamanism in a delightfully ironic way." (http://www.english.uga.edu/freshcomp/1102M_Beavers.htm)

⁷ An article titled "Revisioning Woman in America: A Study of Louise Erdrich's Novel *The Antelope Wife*" by Elaine Kleiner and Angela Vlaicu, states there are four major parts of the *Medewiwin* mythology contained in *The Antelope Wife*. (<http://www.femspec.org/fs22/fs22abstracts.htm>)

⁸ Mary Magoulick describes at length how Louise Erdrich uses ancient mythical themes in *The Antelope's Wife*. In the intro to her article, "Women Weaving the World, Louise Erdrich's *The Antelope's Wife* as Myth", Magoulick tells us, "Erdrich's title proclaims her work 'a novel', a literary genre which is usually considered distinct from the oral myth, though novels often intentionally involve mythological elements. Yet this work fulfills many of the definitions of myth, as a story or re-birth which provides order symbolically for the Ojibway universe today, and even involves heroes and supernatural aspects (all considered characteristically mythic elements). At the very least this is a novel which is 'highly mythically tinged'" (Schremp 1992: 25). Blending and blurring generic categories, this work should be considered a novel and a myth at once, or a hybrid form unique to this narrative event, a myth/novel."
<http://www.faculty.de.gcsu.edu/~mmagouli/antwife.htm>

⁹ "As a preliminary manifestation of the powers that are breaking into play, the frog, coming up as it were by miracle, can be termed the 'herald'; the crisis of his appearance is the 'call to adventure.' The herald's summons may be to live, as in the present instance, or at a later moment of the biography, to die. It may sound the call to some high historical undertaking. Or it may mark the dawn of religious illumination. As apprehended by the mystic, it marks what is termed 'the awakening of the self.' ...whether small or great, and no matter what the stage or grade of life, the call rings up the curtain, always, on a mystery of transfiguration—a rite, or moment, of spiritual passage, which when complete, amounts to a dying and birth. The familiar life horizon has been outgrown; the old concepts, ideals, and emotional patterns no longer fit; the time for passage of a threshold is at hand." ("The Call to Adventure", from *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, by Joseph Campbell, 1968)

¹⁰ "Shamans throughout the world report that refusal of the call results in sickness or even death. 'A shamanic vocation is obligatory,' Eliade (Mircea) emphasizes; 'one cannot refuse it.'" ("The Inward Journey" from *The Strong Eye of Shamanism, A Journey into the Caves of Consciousness*, by Robert E. Ryan, Ph.D. 1999)

¹¹ "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder..." (Campbell, *The Hero...*)

¹² From "Fairy Tales. Love, grief, and invisible seeds" in *Blue Jay's Dance*.

¹³ "The dark, labyrinthine, and disconcerting nature of the cave journey naturally helps effect the disorientation evoked in the liminal phase of shamanic initiation and has the same structural and functional values as does this inceptional phase in shamanic initiations elsewhere. As we have discussed, the cave itself is the perfect natural analogue to the journey inward. Its entry is, indeed, 'a break with the universe of daily life,' the light world of the 'outward Creation,' and the human being's obsessive involvement with the world of everyday values and pressing needs. Being swallowed into the earth both reflects and effects the ego death of shamanic initiation and simultaneously suggests the larger process of a return to the womb of rebirth." (Ryan, *The Strong Eye...*)

¹⁴ Louise Erdrich in her interview with Katie Bacon says "I love stories whether they function to reclaim old narratives or occur spontaneously. Often, to my surprise, they do both. I'll follow an inner thread of a plot and find that I am actually retelling a very old story, often in a contemporary setting." (http://www.english.uic.edu/maps/poets/a_f/erdrich/interviews.htm)

¹⁵ "But the death is paradoxically a rebirth on a consecrated level, as we have seen, and it is interpreted not as an actual death but as a trance state opening the portal of our world to its essential reality. Thus the dark cave paradoxically becomes luminescent, and the shaman devoured by the Wonambi serpent learns that 'he and Wonambi are friends.' Symbols of descent into the interior give way to symbols of transcendence." (Ryan, *The Strong Eye...*)

¹⁶ "When the hero-quest has been accomplished, through penetration to the source, or through the grace of some male or female, human or animal, personification, the adventurer still must return with his life-transmuting trophy." (Campbell, *The Hero...*)

¹⁷ J. Timothy Green, Ph.D., in the article "Near-Death Experiences, Shamanism, and the Scientific Method" gives us this brief description of the "soul retrieval" adventure, "In retrieving a soul, the shaman's task is to enter into nonordinary reality and first locate the soul. Once the soul has been located, the shaman must then convince it to return to ordinary reality and reintegrate with the individual involved." (<http://www.daurelia.com/spirit/ndeshamn.htm>)

¹⁸ From "Constant Conversion: The Myth of Transfiguration" by Andrew Casad. (http://www.nd.edu/~acasad/papers/THEO_544_2.pdf)

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Use of English Part 2. For this part, you have to express a message in different ways showing flexibility and resource in the use of language. B2 Key Word Transformation 1. B2 Key Word Transformation 10. B2 First Writing Section. Video. Essay. Article. Story. that Erdrich's "genius is in metaphor," and that the characters "show a convincing ability to feel an image with their whole bodies." Josh Rubins, writing in *New York Review of Books*, called *The Beet Queen* "a rare second novel, one that makes it seem as if the first, impressive as it was, promised too little, not too much." Other reviewers had problems with *The Beet Queen*, but they tended to dismiss the novel's flaws in light of its positive qualities. After Erdrich completed *The Beet Queen*, she was uncertain as to what her next project should be. The four-hundred-page manuscript that would eventually become *Tracks* had remained untouched for ten years; the author referred to it as her "burden." Louise Erdrich Essay - Louise Erdrich Poetry: American Poets Analysis. Louise Erdrich's interest in writing can be traced to her childhood and her heritage. She told *Writers Digest* contributor Michael Schumacher, "People in [Native American] families make everything into a story. . . . People just sit and the stories start coming, one after another." She prescribes the literary challenge for herself and other contemporary American Indian writers in her essay *Where I Ought to Be: A Writer's Sense of Place*, published in a 1985 issue of *The New York Times Book Review*: "In the light of enormous loss, American Indians must tell the stories of contemporary survivors while protecting and celebrating the cores of cultures left in."