



The Detection of Characterization in Erdrich's Narrative Fiction Style

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Abstract: Fiction writers develop their own style and mode of presentation in their literary endeavor. For sure, what they want to convey in their artistic attempt forms the basis of the special style they want to utilize in their storytelling. Each writer focuses on special elements of the genre he/she is writing with. This paper, via the content and context analysis, deals with Erdrich's special style of narrative fiction. The paper shows she has done her best to revolutionize the structure of characterization and theme development to complement plot and setting elements of fiction on the line of her idiosyncratic style of fiction narration. The paper's illumination of these aspects of fiction, for certain, paves the way for the better understanding of her mode of presentation and the way she has been able to introduce her desired theme of maintaining and reviving tribal literature and community through her unique style of fiction narration.

Keywords: Characterization, Narration Fiction, Erdrich, Detection, Style, Theme, Native Literature.

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INTRODUCTION

Many writers turn to new modes of presentation in their literary endeavor. Upon clear presentation and justification of his/her developed style, her/his style is appreciated and approved in literary circles. As Stock (2016, 120) has put it Erdrich has written "several novels that form a series centering on several families residing on an American Indian reservation around Matchimanito Lake. These novels are clearly related, containing at least some of the same characters and being set in or near the same locations. The novels have spread across different times, but often different generations of the same families are featured". Among the many elements of fiction, plot has proved to be the most working and organizing element. Making any changes in the orientation of the mode of presentation of fiction proves highly demanding on the part of the writer if he/she wishes to be innovative and systematic in his/her newly

developed style. Louise Erdrich, in her fiction narration, has turned to a mode of presentation which mainly highlighted the element of characterization at the favor of deploying the desired plot and point of view. This research has tried, via content analysis and search in the library, to reveal how she has endeavored to elevate and develop fiction narration on the line of introduction of her intended themes and messages and what fiction elements she has most deployed to give rise to the creation of her unique mode of fiction presentation.

DISCUSSION

James Phelan (1989, p. xi) reveals that he was not successful in his endeavor to write a book on characterization in narration genre. He asserts that "I set out to write a book about character in narrative. It seemed to me that ... the study of character had always gotten too mixed up with

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discussions of plot or action ... I intended to isolate the element, analyze its nature, and report my findings to a breathlessly waiting critical world. As the title of this book indicates, however, I too have ended by mixing up the study of character with the study of plot – what is here called progression”.

What has mostly been known as the formal style of fiction narration started with the composure of the very first formally acceptable novel in eighteenth century written by Samuel Richardson who mainly favored sequential and serial plot. Thereafter, intellectuals modified and altered the elements of fiction to capture different manifestations of fiction narration. A story, as it has come to be known, is introduced as a narration of incidents occurred over a special time span which let the incidents get connected to form a meaningful whole. This has led to hot arguments over the question of story versus plot. While many intellectuals favor the superiority of plot over the other elements, many others declare that a story in narration is a sort of semantically acceptable connections between incidents in a narration which sound theoretically acceptable from any acceptable viewpoint to the reader.

Among the many writers, we can refer to Peter Brooks (1992, p.4) as a good example of someone who highlights the significance of element of plot. In *Reading for the Plot*, he indicates that if we want to provide a definition for narration “it may be useful and valuable to think about the kinds of ordering it uses and creates, about the figures of design it makes. Here, I think, we can find our most useful object of attention in what has for centuries gone by the name of plot”. Some intellectuals come up with inefficiency of plot and the contribution which has been paid to it due to the fact that the provision of samples of stories which miss the appropriate connection between the incidents which are narrated and presented. The introduction of narrative fictions of this type would be out of question as it becomes crucial for the readers who are unable to build any relationships of the incidents in the story. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan (1983, p. 17), an innovator, in *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* has tried to set plot aside knowing the fact that his book has endeavored to detect narrative theory. On this line, he refers to Rimmon-Kenan who has tried to define plot in the fiction based on E. M. Forster’s differentiation of “two types of narrative which he called respectively ‘story’ and ‘plot’”. Such a definition leaves the burden of discovery of the connections between the incidents to the reader who finds himself/herself at the mercy of dangling between the inner and the outer elements and signs of inner and outer text information. Hence, he indicates more that “there is nothing to prevent a

causally-minded reader from supplementing Forster’s first example [story] with the causal link that would make it into an implicit plot”. Gradually, this takes us to the achievement of the cognizance of the significance of characterization in the process of story and its events’ analysis which sheds light on how and why characterization is a crucial element and how characters can be deployed in the stream of the events and incidents in the narration. Story telling conveys its message via the framework of appropriate characterization. This inspires the researchers and, more confidentially, clarifies Erdrich’s special style and her unique adherence to characterization far above the other elements of fiction. Through her maneuver over the elements of characterization, she has been able to target many desired concepts, convey many concealed and hidden ideas, project upon the minds of the readers’ ideas of different types, and pass on intended themes and values. These are what she has tried to reflect via her fiction regarding the introduction and manifestation of Native American literature and the role of literature in the enlightenment of the commonly practiced correct or false trends in the society. A great example which is introduced here is the phenomenon of colonialism in her fiction *Tracks (1988)* in which she has delicately revealed many devastating side effects of this phenomenon in Indian-white interchanges and relationships.

Erdrich in *Tracks* has tried to reflect via the framework of characterization the clash of identity and Indian-white connections which has proved to be one of the dominating themes of the society of her time. In this way, she implicitly desires to attribute it to the commonly practiced colonization as one of the most common phenomenon in the society. Additionally, she tries to detect the differences through which native Indians are distinguished to highlight the outcomes of the formation of colonization in the mixed societies.

More to the point example can be found in chapter two of this fiction where Pauline, the second narrator, suspects of Fleur as an outcast. “I live quiet, stop killing men off by drowning in the lake. [...] But then after the second return, and after old Nanapush nursed her through the sickness, we knew that we were dealing with something more serious.[...] She laid the heart of an owl on her tongue so she could see at night, and went out, hunting, not even in her own body.

We know for sure because the next morning, in the snow or dust we followed the tracks of her bare feet and saw where they changed” (*Tracks*, p.12).

The main characters of her work like the introduced one in the above extract are dislocated and driven to the corner in the society because of the status she has designed on them in the plot of the story. The author tries to talk through the mouth of the main characters to convey her ideas more effectively. Pauline "gained attention by telling odd tales that created damage. There was some question if she wasn't afflicted, touched in the mind"(Tracks, p. 39). In the behavior of the characters, one can see that what is happening in the course of the story happens more vividly in the society. Erdrich characterizes Nanapush in a way that she is trying to rob Pauline of any membership in the society which stands as a vivid paragon of colonization and slavery. What Nanapush asserts about Pauline strikes the mind the idea of those who have lost their life reflected through the trace of Pauline's life. Nanapush directly calls her "an unknown mixture of ingredients, like pale bannock that sagged or hardened. We never knew what to call her, or where she fit or how to think when she was around" (Tracks, p.39). Erdrich in this way is trying to project upon the mind of the reader the symptoms of the significance of storytelling and the tribal customs and characteristics. Moreover, she has a tendency to illuminate the Chippewa cultural customs and principles to both the reader and the viewer on the line of maintaining and resurrecting the cultural manifestations. A point which adds to the creativity of Erdrich's literary intellectuality is the idea of whether she has already faced or experienced the stories in her childhood or heard them from somebody else. However, her maneuver over them on the line of reviving the cultural values and counter supporting the tribal culture is highly appreciated. She has characterized, for example, Nanapush both as a character and as a story teller to serve her intended purpose in the course of her fiction to capture the desired theme and convey her expected implications.

Her special mode of characterization consummates the theory of character which has recently received focal consideration. I guess, she has practically and pragmatically touched upon the element of characterization to deploy plot and other elements of fiction at the mercy of characters. In *Painted Drum* (2006), she subtly mixes up everything and leaves the burden of decoding the theme of the novel to the reader. In this novel, as a good example, "the transformation of the protagonist, the process central to this novel, is not described at all. Rather, the narrative structure, with its unexplained breaks and juxtapositions, conveys the means of the protagonist's change" (Wyatt, 2011, p.33). She has also introduced new roles alongside story telling for her characters to help readers achieve implicational hunches about the events of

the narrative fiction which reveal new outlooks of special ethnic literatures in the mind of the reader by motivating and intriguing his/ her ambitions for their counterparts in the society. The reader, therefore, is left alone and bombarded indirectly by clues and mode of presentation and narration of the fiction in *Tracks*. Such an approach can be detected in the *Reader Response Theory* of literary criticism which to the researcher's best recollection is best crystalized in Erdrich's narrative style, the way she dislocate the characters, the way she involves the reader in the process of the stream of the novel, and finally the way she implicitly projects her intended message upon the mind of the readers all reveal this idea that she has a tendency to leave the readers like her characters amidst uncertainty and dilemma. The characters pave the way to detect the origin of the events and make meaningful connection between the incidents in *Tracks*. One interesting point is the title of Track which may stand as tracking the tribal legends, customs, cultures, and literatures.

For Erdrich, characters carry the major portion of implicating what she has been in pursuit of. That is why she has prioritized characterization in her style. This agenda is not something new. It has already been tried out by animal stories in which animals are humanized or vice versa for the purpose of counter implicating and narrating the unfathomable ideas and ideals which may sound unnatural in fictional organization viewpoint. This is because as Albert et al (2010) have asserted "unnatural narratology" highlights the nature of this composure in storytelling and its final formation of relationship with the human reader to indulge himself or herself in what is going on in the course of the story. Human-like characters have got to exist in story so that humans would be able to build their understanding upon the ongoing relationships in the story, there upon, the author would be able to create and expand the intended messages via the framework of fiction. This makes the significance of characters even more penetrating and crucial. A story cannot follow its streams if it does not enjoy the presence of a protagonist and it cannot create the required antagonist. Upon this paradox, Erdrich has tried to direct the attention towards her intended tribal features and practices which are at the threshold of being discarded or violated. Many other writers, who have tried to condemn or elevate the status of a phenomenon, have turned to special characters to let the reader understand what the reality of the nature of the problem is. A good example can be Richard Powers's characterization of a corporation or to better call it a system in *Gain* (1998). Powers' personification of a corporation enables the reader to learn more about the role of that character that forms the major plot of the story

in scope. This character is accompanied by minor characters that each contribute its share in the reflection of the main theme and has its own area of subplots in the whole story as well. The nature of such narrative fiction and storytelling procedure whose best implementation can be seen in Erdrich's works has inaugurated a new style of composure for tailoring fiction to capture mega themes. The building block of this school of fiction narration is as mentioned the new assigned roles of the characters that act both in linear in its own scope of coverage and nonlinear mode of its contribution to the whole.

In *love Medicine* (1984), although the story begins and terminates with June and the majority of the trends revolve around this character, she cannot stand as the protagonist of the fiction. Alongside June, she makes four to seven characters that prove to be focal in significance but none of them can stand as protagonist reminding one of the reality that there is no single character as protagonist in *Love Medicine* as each lacks the requirements for occupying this status in the course of narration fiction.

This presence and disappearance and unstable status of the character does not allure the attention of the reader to the sheer status of the main character but is left amidst a host of possible interpretation. Such an approach paves the way for Erdrich to highlight some higher layers of realities of the society as well as the existential obsession of people around her. This technique equip her to indicate what seems infathomable, inaccessible, and out of disposal. No research, for certain, has introduced June as the protagonist of *Love Medicine* which adds to the high tact of the author in the creation of loose status of the main character. Unlike the film director, the novelist has no command of sending the main character on a temporary exile without shattering the main stream of narration, but via this special assignment of the status of the characters, Erdrich has vividly captured this power of cinema in her narrative fiction.

One can see that June appears in the fiction even after her death to highlight the existence of other characters. In so doing, if Erdrich omit other characters or replace them with some others, the overall meaning of the fiction is not violated; therefore, she continues narration via the reappearance of the dead June as she is the main character and narrator. It becomes clear that Erdrich has prioritized characterization over the other elements of fiction. Scheick (1999, p.134) has confirmed this by asserting that "*Love Medicine* (and other related novels) lack a conventional structure comprised of a beginning, middle, and end. And instead of decidedly central protagonists, these

works present many characters whose memories and identities are as loosely connected as are the stories in which they appear". Among the many characters in *Love Medicine*, the one that proves to be respected most in the course of narration as protagonist would be June Kashpaw whose role and status organizes the plot and even the roles of other characters in the story. What elevates Erdrich's power in characterization is the fact that at first it is not apparent who the protagonist is but upon close scrutiny and appraisal of other characters, the most probable choice would be June as the protagonist. While this claim has been confirmed by many other researchers who have introduced June as the protagonist, some others keep away from the introducing June as the main character of Erdrich's work. This suspicion comes from the fact that most of the fiction is narrated from third person point of view but contrasts with the report of June's death which smashes all the possible inductions about the main character. Gragually, it becomes clear that most of the narration is about the events of one night of the life of June Kashpaw.

Indeed, Erdrich's characters try to highlight the significance of the land, land violation, individuals' dislocation, children's abandonment by their parents, and tribe extinction which are the dominating themes of many of her novels. For example, Sands (1985, p.17) asserts that through the creation of her selected characters like June "allows us to penetrate the chaotic and contradictory world of the Kashpaw and Lamartine families and to bring a sense of history and order to the story, to bring art out of anecdote and gossip". Regarding this technique of narrative presentation, Erdrich explains that "her technique reflects a traditional Chippewa motif in storytelling" (Stookey, 1999, p.33).

To convey these themes in her fiction, she centralizes certain characters for the reflection of the intended message and theme in her novels. Above all, she sugarcoats the stream of fiction narration in the majority of her works by Ojibwe words, phrases, and expressions to provide tangible and alluring tips for the readers. This mode of narration sheds illuminating light on the implicational meaning of her novels for nonnative and naive readers on the way of her spoon feeding her readers to absorb her ideas and ideals.

When there is a plan for revolutionizing a nation and civilization, for certain, the main targets for the violation would be the families and the individuals. Erdrich implicitly picks up certain characters to illustrate the real nature of the plan behind the decision makers' opinions and the reality of what is being practiced in the society. Specially

orientated trends can be detected in some communities which are cried out in storytelling mode and are illustrated in words and images of the contents of the fiction works. Mc Kegney (2009, p. 265) regarding the experience of entering the residential school at Spanish and the feelings of dislocation accompanying it asserts that “the little ones suffered the most, thrown into the schools, as they were when they were still really babies. They were outcasts — cast out of their communities, families and homes and what was worse, they were made to feel unloved and unwanted”. Hence, storytelling genre has got to turn to psychoanalysis procedures to open up the suppressed and alienated souls of the fiction characters in order to reveal the pain and panic in Native communities.

From this new view point, characterization deals with the introduction of special type and groups of individuals such as children who are dealt with in another Erdrich’s work. Many teachers take many ideas for granted when they pick up her works to teach. They are well aware of this fact that her works are good indicators of Native literature as well as Native phenomenon. To achieve this, she has done her best to clarify these two implications in most of her works herself. In *Shado Tag* (2011), she deliberately deals with the crisis of children as the building blocks of tribal culture and literature and as the carriers of the passage of these heritage sources to the succeeding generations. Her selection of children and this special class of tribal societies indicate her great tact of the selection of the best possible characterization for the manifestation of the great theme of culture and ethnicity attrition. The confrontation of the white and the black, the history of racism, and the bitter colonization practices in the society of her time has inspired her to be tactful character seeker and creator for the insertion in the mainstream of her narration fiction. Indeed, Erdrich’s “skill in creating and developing fictional characters is a central aspect of her success as a character” (Blader and Barton, 2006, p.2).

In *Shadow Tag*, many Native children have to leave their parents due to the force of the government against tribal culture. This brutal action against the children and their families has directly and indirectly minimalized the status of the tribal communities and local traditions. Accordingly, Erdrich has tried to reflect it in her fiction as the threat towards her admired Native community. Consequently, the inequality of the behavior of the government towards children as the heritors of culture and civilization penetrates into Erdrich’s prose and stands as the dominating threat in the whole stream of the majority of her novels. If a culture and civilization loses its followers and

successors, then its violation is prone to be done right away.

Erdrich, in her later fiction, tries to focus on special customs, individuals, and traditions to make the crisis of threatened culture and tribal groups known to the reader as much as possible. That is why “the theme of homing in is one of the central themes throughout Erdrich’s work; it is expressed over and over again in the quests of her characters to find or to return to the place where they belong, a place they call home” (Tookey, 1999, p.9). Margaret in *Four Souls*(2004, p.205) explains to Fluer the significance of one of the tribal customs to preserve the endangered customs and traditions: “mourn your dead properly so you can live properly”. In this way, Erdrich tries to add more additional voices to her storytelling to save the endangered culture and tribal values. She technically modifies the elements of fiction in a delicate manner to harmonize them for the incorporation of some special modes of presentation.

On the line of condemning the eradication of the Native communities, Erdrich tries to locate and pinpoint the exact tact of the system in minimizing the structure of tribal traditions. According to Child (2000, p.6) “the institution was designed to separate children from all that was familiar to them— their families, tribes, languages, traditions, their very identities”. Indeed, the state boarding schools were inaugurated by the aim of putting an end to Native American cultures and tribal traditions. “This was an educational experiment intended to demonstrate that separating members of the younger generation from their home environment and intensively schooling them in white ways offered a means of obliterating tribal cultures and acculturating a whole race”(Segal, 2009, p.26).

Although the prime aim of the boarding schools were the deformation of Native communities and the violation of their initial forms and principles, what panned out later was the transformation of the threat to tribal cultures to the opportunity of saving and preserving the local communities. Erdrich implicitly tries to highlight these threats in her fiction by touching upon the unconscious zone of human minds. Such ideas “inspired awe and terror, as well as reverence, and was thought to be responsible for both malicious and good deed” (Sergi, 1992, p.281). The brutalities seen, experienced, and later on narrated by real people and victims, in their pedantic functions oriented the attention of the public towards what was in progress in Native communities.

The clash of ideas and the challenge of what is being narrated in her fiction reveal her great

artistic commitment to the nature of storytelling art for enlightenment purpose. This strikes the mind is the idea of what Charles Dickens did in England on the line of revealing some harrowing conditions which were practiced in the society of that time has happened exactly in Erdrich's works and her great contribution to the preservation of tribal values and native communities in America. They revealed some sort of the works of art conveying some ideas of different types and contributing some sorts of special meaning and attributions. Erdrich highlights the emptiness of the tribal communities when children are removed from the local communities. Thereupon, children's missing left a great impact on the people, the structure of the community drastically altered, familial and tribal connections smashed, and the families found that they were responsible and regretful for what had happened to them. Erdrich hurls out their voices to soothe them and enable them understand what was being practiced in their societies. She highlights the emptiness and absurdity hovering over the Native communities and their endangered and assimilated identities. The point to be incorporated in appraising her style and works is the fact that she has centralized the novel settings and points of view of her fiction to highlight this idea that they have originated from roughly similar and, to a great extent, single region. Although upon a bird's eye view of her novels one can come up with this outlook, her works differ significantly in structure and characterization. Meanwhile, certain obsessions and manifestations can be deduced in the majority of her works which comprehensively target her desired and intended ones which has come to prove her fiction narration style unique and stable.

CONCLUSION

Louise Erdrich, the great novelist, has tried to cast new outlooks on the organization of fiction in her mode of presentation of storytelling. Her idiosyncratic deployment of multiple narrators endowed with alluring characters and stuck in various relationships are introduced via diverse perspectives which has stabilized her unique fiction presentation as a powerful resurrector of tribal cultures and communities. Her novels have sold impressively in Europe and the United States for different reasons. One plausible reason is the endowment of her books "with their multiple narrators, poetic language, experimental structures, and intricate blending of myth and realism, can be difficult. In fact, her departure from conventional realism and her deliberate artifice occasionally remind one of the abstruse Meta fictions of some postmodernist writers" (Stock, 2016, p.2). What Erdrich implicitly tells in her story is the fact that for the Native Americans the question of survival and existence proves to be highly significance. She tries

to maintain, pass on the historiographical picture of Native communities. To achieve this, she has mainly incorporated the elements of theme and characterization in her style. On her literary commitment as a storyteller, she jots down her literary voice, narrates her historical observation of human connections to reflect what is being done and going on in the society mainly through her special tact of characterization as her idiosyncratic mode of her narrative fiction and storytelling. She has tried to dislocate the protagonist and orientate plot in accordance with characterization to be able to reveal technical threats on the way Native communities and local literature in the society of America. Because of endowment with these features, she has introduced new manifestation of characterization for the reflection of more abstract ideas and ideals of her society. This privilege has made her texts to be read at schools and interpreted for theme analysis purposes.

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