THE MULTIFACETED NATURE OF DEATH AND ITS TRANSFORMATIVE POWER IN ERDRICH'S THE ANTELOPE WIFE

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Abstract: The present study aims at exploring the different forms of death in Louise Erdrich's "The Antelope Wife". The focus is laid upon the impact of death on the relationship between Rozin and Richard. Through accessible language, it examines the multifaceted nature of death and its profound emotional consequences. The narrative delves into Rozin's experience of grief, shock and guilt following Richard's suicide, shedding light on the intricate interplay between love, loss and the enduring presence of death. By exploring the transformative power of grief, this paper offers insights into the complex human experience and the ways in which death shapes personal relationships.

Keywords: death, suicide, grief, guilt, trauma, unanswered questions, human experience.

In Louise Erdrich's novel *The Antelope Wife,* the theme of death is central, permeating the lives of the characters, thus having a great impact on their relationships. "The world Erdrich has summoned in prose is one of the layered human complexity, poetic beauty, historical breadth, bawdy humor, and *tragic wisdom* that, while immersing us in the rich emotional worlds of her protagonists, also presents a lucid and often biting perspective on what it means to claim a Native identity in America today" (Lopenzina, 2020:1).

Through the lenses of Rozin and Richard's agitated union, Erdrich explores the multifaceted nature of death, its multiple forms, its far-reaching consequences as well as the very deep emotions it evokes. According to Neil Thompson, "issues relating to death, dying, and grief are generally examined in predominantly psychological terms, with a focus on the experience of the individual. Important though these psychological factors are, they tell only part of the story. This is because death, dying, and grief arise in a social context and that context will be highly significant in shaping how such phenomena are experienced by individuals, groups, and whole communities. Psychological perspectives therefore need to be counterbalanced by sociological understandings" (quoted by Cox, 2022:IX).

Rozin and Richard's relationship serves as a disturbing backdrop for the exploration of the various forms of death as they are presented in Erdrich's book. When Richard takes his own life, the narrative delves into the aftermath of this tragic event, triggering the complex emotions experienced by Rozin, his devastated wife.

According to Zimmerman, "The Native Americans believed that the soul never dies" (Zimmerman, 2020) and death was perceived as a kind of bridge across two worlds, the existing one and the next world.

Erdrich's emotional portrayal of Rozin's grief, shock and guilt paints a vivid picture of the profound impact that death can have on personal relationships. As the readers accompany Rozin throughout her journey, they witness the burden of unanswered questions, the search for meaning and the struggle to rebuild shattered lives.

Louise Erdrich's masterful storytelling compels us to examine death beyond its physical manifestation as it impregnates the emotional woven pattern of Rozin and Richard's bond. By

delving into the depths of their relationship, Erdrich invites us to contemplate the intricate interplay between love and loss touched by the enduring presence of death.

The character Frank Shawano confronts a significant challenge when he is diagnosed with cancer. This diagnosis has a profound impact on Frank's life and the lives of those around him. As the narrative unfolds, Erdrich portrays Frank's experience with cancer using accessible language that allows the readers to empathize with his struggle. Through her storytelling, Erdrich conveys the gravity of the situation and the uncertainty which comes with a cancer diagnosis. She depicts Frank's journey as he sails by looking for medical treatments, he confronts his mortality and tries to cope with the impact of his illness on his relationships.

The portrayal of Frank's struggle with cancer underscores the emotional challenges he faces. Erdrich explores the price taken by his illness on his body, describing the exhausting effects of treatments and their impact on his well-being. Frank's cancer stands for a metaphor for the fragility of the human existence, highlighting the vulnerability of the nature of life itself.

Moreover, Erdrich looks into the emotional anxiety which accompanies Frank's diagnosis. She dives into his fears, anxieties and moments of despair demonstrating the emotional impact of living with a life threatening disease. Through her accessible vocabulary, Erdrich invites the readers to empathize with Frank's emotional journey allowing them to connect with his fears and hopes as he confronts the realities of his condition.

Frank's battle with cancer also influences his relationships with those around him. The sickness can be perceived as a test. The bonds between him and his loved ones are tested creating moments of both closeness and tension.

Erdrich explores the ways in which the disease affects Frank's interactions with family and friends, shedding light on the dynamics emerging when faced with a life-altering diagnosis: "...even after she informs him that her old lover, Frank Shawano, is dying of cancer, has been given a five to ten percent chance of surviving the next nine months, and that she is going to him now, leaving their marriage, to be with this man until he dies because after all she truly loves him. Loves him, she says" (Erdrich, 2002:61-62).

Rozin finds herself torn between her duties and desires, ultimately leading her to make the difficult decision to leave her family for Frank Shawano. Rozin's departure is driven by a complex interplay of circumstances and emotions that shape her path. One significant factor that contributes to Rozin's separation is her connection with Frank Shawano. As their relationship unfolds, Rozin becomes deeply linked with Frank, drawn to his magnetic presence and the seense of liberation he represents.

Erdrich portrays the connection between Rozin and Frank in a way that suggests an irresistible pull between them, creating a powerful emotional bond that becomes increasingly difficult for Rozin to resist.

Another aspect that influences Rozin's decision is her longing for personal freedom and a life unconstrained by the expectations of the society. Throughout the novel, Erdrich hints at Rozin's dissatisfaction with the confines of her traditional role within her family and community. Rozin yearns for a sense of autonomy and a chance to explore her own desires and passions, which she believes she can find with Frank. Her separation is also motivated by a sense of self-discovery and the pursuit of personal fulfillment. She seeks to uncover her own identity and harmonize her past experiences with her present desires. Rozin's decision to leave is a personal one, driven by the need to confront her inner conflicts and seek a path that aligns with her true self.

Additionally, Rozin's separation can be seen as an act of self-sacrifice in an attempt to protect her family from the potential consequences of her choices. She recognizes the potential disruption and pain her departure may cause, but she believes that by leaving, she can shield her loved ones from the turmoil that would inevitably follow if she were to stay and pursue her relationship with Frank. Rozin's decision to leave for Frank Shawano is a complex and

multifaceted one. It is driven by her emotional connection with Frank, her longing for personal freedom, her pursuit of self-discovery, and her desire to protect her family. Erdrich's portrayal of Rozin's journey highlights the internal struggles and external forces that shape her path, evoking empathy and understanding for her choices.

Richard Whiteheart Beads, on the other side, is a central character who undergoes a significant emotional journey. He is portrayed as a complex and introspective individual fighting with the challenges of love, loss, and personal growth. Richard's character is marked by his deep connection to his Native American heritage and his search for identity and belonging. Richard is initially introduced as a devoted husband to his wife and their relationship is portrayed as stable and loving. However, when his wife leaves him for another man named Frank Shawano, Richard's world is shattered and he embarks upon a quest to understand the reasons behind her separation.

Rozin has twin daughters with Richard Whiteheart Beads: Deanna, who died in childhood, and Cally. When Frank Shawano develops cancer and is not expected to live, Rozin plans to live with Frank and care for him during his illness. Her husband, Richard, who is grief stricken tries to commit suicide by breathing the carbon monoxide from his truck. Although Richard changes his mind, Deanna, their daughter, crawls into the truck when he abandons it, she falls asleep and dies: "Quickly, quietly, before he comes back, Deanna pulls herself into the space behind the seat, just right for a child… And the inside of the truck is cozy with the heater on, blowing warm air, and she is suddenly so comfortable" (Erdrich,2002:69).

While Rozin blames Richard for Deanna's death, she blames herself as well. She not only separates herself from Richard, but from Frank, who recovers from cancer. Many years later, Rozin marries Frank, but on her wedding night, Richard shoots and kills himself. Despite so many shocks caused by her daughter's death and Richard's suicide, Rozin's marriage to Frank works. For both of the men who love her, Rozin evokes the kind of passion felt by the men who love the antelope women.

Richard's grief covers a wide range of emotions, such as: agony, heartbreak, despair. The depth of his sorrow is a legacy to the profound impact that the absence of his loved ones has on his life. It leaves him dealing with a sense of emptiness and a deep craving for what once was: "Richard was crying again. (…) 'How long has he been going for this time?' 'Two days.' (…) There are griefs beyond their dosage limit. Richard's hand in what happened to his little girl was that kind of untouchable sorrow where you can't even drink it off, no matter how long and hard you try. (…) Now, going sober, Richard was flashing on the loss once more" (Erdrich, 2002:149-150).

Throughout the novel, Richard's grief is portrayed as a deeply personal and individual experience. He struggles to make sense of his loss, questioning his own actions and searching for meaning amidst the pain. His grief becomes a constant companion, shaping his thoughts, actions and interactions with others. "With all his strength he then lunged away over the lip of stone. For a moment he hung beyond in air, straight as a statue, and then he crashed headfirst directly onto the other side of the wall. For although yanked against the rough stone and nearly over, the Reverend had not let go and still held Richard two-handed by the ankle, a deadweight, unconscious" (Erdrich, 2002:169).

As we had witnessed Richard's second suicide attempt, we can understand that he wants to end his suffering by putting an end to his life. He tried to jump off a cliff but did not succeed. The Reverend saved him grabbing his ankle and holding him tight. He was found unconscious by the ambulance technicians who took Richard to the hospital.

"Framed in the doorway stood Richard Whiteheart Beads. (…) He was holding a gun. (…) As she came close still holding on to his eyes, she saw from the corner of her vision his first finger press the trigger. Just as she knocked his elbow, there was a loud noise. (…) She

lay holding him against her naked and uncaring as people filled the hallway" (Erdrich, 2002:180).

On the night of Rozin and Frank's wedding, Richard finally succeeds in killing himself: he shoots himself in front of the hotel door of the newlyweds. Rozin's mind was immediately rushed with all kinds of memories about Richard and her life with him.

In the aftermath of Richard's suicide, Rozin is overwhelmed by a sense of guilt and regret. She blames herself for not being able to prevent Richard from taking his own life and she is haunted by memories of their troubled relationship. Rozin is also deeply affected by the loss of her husband and struggles to come to terms with his death.

The Native American "traditional ways still exist today to varying degrees across Native tribes, nations, and bands. Native identity spans a wide and complex arc from very traditional to complete immersion in the broader Western culture. Within one family, there might be those who take up the traditional life, carrying on rituals, dances, ceremonies, and religious doings, and others who fully engage within the broader Western culture. The complicated forces of biculturalism challenge every contemporary Native American person" (Barrow, 2021:12-13).

In Louise Erdrich's *The Antelope Wife*, death emerges as an omnipresent force, leaving a profound impact on the relationship between Rozin and Richard. Through the lenses of their experiences, Erdrich skillfully illustrates the important consequences of death, exploring the emotional depths it can dive individuals into.

"Life is larger than language. Any discussion or writing should be prefaced with this warning. The topic of death and the American Indian cannot be discussed without attention to the broader social context of secondary others or community reacting to significant others in the dying and death situations. The community of the secondary other is the culture-creating and culture-perpetuating group" (Cox, 2022:1-2).

The exploration of grief, guilt and the struggle for healing serves as a reminder of the complexities surrounding death in its many forms. By researching into these themes, Erdrich invites the readers to contemplate the fragile nature of human connections and the flexibility required to navigate the aftermath of loss. Ultimately, *The Antelope Wife* illuminates the enduring presence of death and the transformative power it wields over our lives.

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