



Text "The Red Convertible," Louise Erdrich

In "The Red Convertible," Louise Erdrich uses a first person narrator, Lyman, to recount a narrative with a poignant and ironic resolution. To heighten the mystery of the story as it unfolds and to foreshadow the dramatic irony of its ending, Erdrich plays with time within her episodic narrative structure.

The reader experiences the story of "The Red Convertible" through the eyes of Lyman, one of its chief characters and the brother of Henry Junior. Lyman recounts the narrative as a series of (sometimes disconnected) episodes - moving backward in time following the opening paragraph to tell a story that unfolds in a sequence of scenes: the buying of the car, the brothers' unexpected trip to Alaska, Henry's induction into the Marines and then return from Vietnam, Lyman's intentional destruction of the red convertible and Henry's subsequent restoration of the car, Bonita taking the photo of the two of them before their final drive, and the moments before and after Henry's drowning. While these incidents are mostly presented in chronological sequence, there are many leaps forward in time, and at three key points the narration actually shifts in its time frame. The first of these occurs in paragraph 1, when Lyman initially says, "We owned it together..." (past tense) and then, "Now Henry owns the whole car" (present tense). This shift mirrors one that introduces its final, climactic sequence of events, when Lyman first poetically describes Henry using the past tense: "His face was totally white and hard. Then it broke, like stones break all of a sudden when water boils up inside of them" then immediately shifts to present when Henry replies: "'I know it,' he says. 'I know it. I can't help it. It's no use.'" (paragraphs 49-50)

Erdrich's manipulation of time in her first person narrative is underscored by her presentation, through Lyman's eyes and voice, of images and words which are at first cryptic and puzzling and finally chilling and ironic - creating a circular structure to both the narrative and its language. In paragraph 1, Lyman tells the reader, "We owned it together until his boots filled with water on a windy night and he bought out my share.," a mysterious early detail in the story. At the story's climactic moment, Lyman then sparsely reports Henry's last words: "'My boots are filling,' he says. He says this in a normal voice, like he just noticed and he doesn't know what to think of it. Then he's gone. A branch comes by." (paragraphs 67-8). Moments later, Lyman sends the car into the river, with its headlights "reach[ing] in as they go down, searching..." He then ends the story with a final stark description: "It is all finally dark. And then there is only the water, the sound of it going and running and going and running and running," with the repetition of the word "running" ironically circling back to the final sentence of the narrative's first paragraph: "Lyman walks everywhere he goes" -the only time he refers to himself in the third person.

Louise Erdrich's "The Red Convertible" is a poignant story that can be read many ways. Her use of foreshadowing, manipulation of time, and ironic resolution cause a reader to be at first puzzled and later uncertain if the story of Lyman, Henry, and the Red Convertible is inevitably one of destruction or salvation.