

The Painted Drum

by

Louise Erdrich

Surprise, Coincidence and Dramatic Irony in
Three Loosely Connected Stories

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Louise Erdrich is an extremely innovated contemporary writer, and her various novels and short stories, often different from each other, testify to the many ways in which she is uniquely gifted. On the other hand, she is a student of the history of creative writing and the ways other writers operate as storytellers.

In the following unpublished essay, I want to call attention to a few of the ways she looks back technically to other writers in telling her own tales. In short, **surprise**, **coincidence** and **dramatic irony** are not new techniques. Different writers simply employ them differently, and Erdrich is no exception.

But what is new in **The Painted Drum** is how this author brings together three stories, separate in place and time, that nevertheless seem to contribute to and explain each other. My contention is that one telling key to this overall unity lies in the fact that underpinning all three of them are three “age old” devices which Ms. Erdrich then employs to create something “amazingly new.”

**The Painted Drum: Surprise, Coincidence,
and Dramatic Irony in Three Loosely Connected Stories**

In many ways Louise Erdrich's use of literary techniques in The Painted Drum reminds one of the nineteenth century realist, Ambrose Bierce. The author of numerous war time short stories, he is noted for employing such techniques as surprise, coincidence, and dramatic irony in a single story. In "Coup de Grace," for instance, a story about the Civil War, Sargent Helcrow is mortally wounded to the extent that stomach is hanging out. His friend Captain Madwell surprisingly decides to limit his suffering by deliberately taking his life with a sword. Coincidentally, at that precise moment, Capt. Helcrow's brother, Major Helcrow, appears on the scene. The dramatic irony comes in when we as readers see the different perspectives on the killing, one a supposed act of compassion, the other what looks like murder. On that note the story ends and we are left pondering the dilemma of what today would be called "mercy killing."

In The Painted Drum, I would argue that Erdrich operates in much the same way, though with her own mystical twist. "Surprise," as I see it, involves for the reader an unexpected choice on the part of a character, whereas "coincidental" events simply happen, not by choice. Though Erdrich like Bierce is a realist of distances, what is different with her is that

she combines a kind of mysticism in expanding what for her is dramatic irony, or what the reader observes above and beyond the immediate comprehension of an individual character.

In the first part, narrated by Faye Travers, we are surprised when, given the character of Faye, she uncharacteristically lets a neighborhood sculptor, Kurt Krahe, come into her bedroom by night where, observes Livesay, “the two physically amaze each other.” Uncharacteristic because in her “day self” she is detached, a rigid person recovering from drug addiction and still grieving over the mysterious death of her sister, who possibly jumped (as we learn later) instead of falling from a tree. So in contrast to her night self Faye is strictly professional and often alone. “The more I come to know people,” she says, “the better I like ravens.” Ravens, like wolves and wise little girls in the novel, says Goldberg, function as icons of wisdom, loyalty and unkillable spirits.”

At the present Faye is living with her mother Elsie where both work evaluating estates. Then, coincidentally, Kurt’s daughter is killed in his car driven by a working assistant Davan Eyke. Now he becomes more openly aggressive, even mowing her lawn and pruning her apple trees—an act which, also by coincidence, disturbs her because that is where her sister died. So ironically, whether they realize it or not, the two are somehow

bound together in grief, each mourning the death of a young woman whom they loved. Marjorie Kehe notes the book is about the “loss or the fear of loss of a child or young sibling.” What is also unknown to the two, but which ironically comes clear in the second section, is that a little girl—yes, another girl--gives, or historically gave, her life in a transcendent way that emerges as more joyful than tragic. Here the mystical quality of Erdrich’s prose emerges in ways which distinguish her as an author. Faye’s epiphany, however, does not occur till the end of the novel.

In the same story, Faye and her mother seek to appraise the estate of an Ojibway man named John Jewett Tatro, who was also killed in the fatal accident involving Kurt’s daughter. In the process Faye discovers, indeed steals, a painted drum the sound of which she mysteriously hears. Given the professional nature of her job, this is indeed surprising. By coincidence, however, Faye happens to be part Ojibway. Till this moment, “frozen in time,” says Shires, she has ignored her past. Now, however, she decides to take the drum back to the Midwest reservation to determine its origin. For Diamant, ancestors’ impact on the lives of the living is a major theme of the novel. Again, after reading the second story, narrated by Bernard Schwaano, who knows about the drum, we see that it relates to a little girl who dies—much as do the young women in the first story—but

also that it is that her bones have been used to fashion the mystical drum. The irony involves our making connections between the girls and the drum that Faye (who is instinctively moved by the drum) does not. Again, surprise, coincidence, dramatic irony.

The second section begins with Bernard welcoming Faye and Elsie back to the reservation. Here we are surprised when Chook, Bernard's neighbor and the mother of two sons, John and Morris, whom we will meet in section three, asks Bernard to help her dig up her late husband because his grave contains songs related to the drum. By coincidence Chook's son Morris is a military veteran and a drummer related to those songs. Ogle points out that Chook, in talking of her son's bout with Agent Orange from Mr. Bush's Desert Storm, expresses better than anybody else "the drum's purpose and place in the world:"

. . . what I'm telling you is you wear down these sorrows using what you have, what comes to hand. You talk them over, you live them through, you don't let them sit inside. See, that what the drum was good for. Letting sorrows out, into the open, where those songs could bear them away. (105)

As readers, however, we are yet to discover—in both parts two and three--the ironic connection of such sorrows to the dramatic experiences of two more young girls. As a way of healing himself (he has also lost his wife and daughter), says Upshaw, Bernard tells to the two eastern women a tragic Ojibway tale. Set in the past, it embodies marital betrayal and two strange deaths related to the drum. Markovitz says that its mythical tone--Erdrich notes in an afterword it is taken from a legend (277)--contrasts with the Faye's pragmatic narration in the first story. Bernard is himself a mystic, and the grandson of Old Shaawano, who sold the drum in a drunken stupor to an Indian agent named Tatro. In the tale Shaawano's Ojibway wife Anaquot betrays him by relating to and having a baby by a man named Jack Simon of another tribe. It is, of course, quite surprising when as a mother of three she leaves home in a wagon with the child and a daughter, leaving a son behind, to live with Simon's people. But then to Anaquot's own surprise, as well as to ours, she learns that Simon's wife has arranged the getaway as a trap.

By coincidence, however, in what is unpredictable to either, the two women become friends, indeed "sisters" (135). Both have been betrayed, and Simon's wife is "compelled" by Anaquot's directness and understanding of Ziigwanaage's love of Simon and her family. Simon

thinks he can still relate to Anaquot, sneaking into her blanket at night (143), but she quietly but firmly refuses his gesture. So he is caught in his own trap. Here the reader knows what Simon does not, that both women have rejected his plan, having “purged themselves of any pity or attraction” (137). The drama further unfurls when together the two women sew a garment in which Simon, in what should be a joyous occasion, ironically dances to his death to the music of the drum. This is the one place in the novel when the drum does not function as a positive spiritual guide—at least in Simon’s case.

What connects the story more directly to Faye Travers, however, is more related to Anaquot’s daughter, who we learn sacrifices herself to the wolves pursuing the runaway wagon, a fate her father witnesses along with the ravens “attending to the bitter small leavings of the wolves” (111). Though it first appears that she is pushed, Bernard later surmises in talking to his father, that she actually “jumped.” She literally “lifted her shawl and flew” (117), he proposes, that her mother and the new baby might live. If so, this was indeed a surprisingly heroic choice. For Divakaruni Bernard’s conjecture represents the most memorable moment in the novel. After the girl’s death Old Shaawano in a drunken stupor follows the wagon, apparently visited by a “wolf girl” in a dream, much as Faye in the first story

mysteriously follows her instinct to bring the drum to the reservation. By coincidence, he finds the bones of the girl with which he fashions a painted drum. This is the drum which the Indian agent named Tatro bought from Old Schaawano's son (whom Anaquot had left behind), took it to New Hampshire, and later passed it onto his ancestors, including John Jewett Tatro, killed in the first story. Rifkind notes that for Erdrich the dead, through the conduit of the drum, become caretakers of the living. At this point the reader cannot but relate the drum and its mysterious power (and this is dramatic irony) not only to the life and death of the girl whose bones inform it, but to Faye and Kurt in the contemporary story, both of whom grieve for lost female kin.

In the third story, set on a poor contemporary reservation, the plot thickens as Ira, a mother of three young children, leaves them alone at home on the reservation in the dead of winter to hitch hike twenty miles to buy food that they might not starve. Though surprising (actually it is illegal to leave underage children alone), her effort to find food might be justified. But it is more of a surprise when in the process she goes to a bar where she meets and spends time with a married man named John, one of Chook's sons. Goldberg says Ira, "brash and beaten by poverty and temptation, adds grit to the story" while part one might be too staid, and the part two too

otherworldly. While Ira is away, the oil coincidentally runs out, whereupon the oldest child Shawnee struggles to light a fire inside the house with wood. Again by coincidence, the house catches on fire, whereupon Shawnee acts to save her younger brother and sister, only to find the three are helplessly caught outside in the cold and snow.

At this point Shawnee mysteriously hears, much as did Faye in the opening story, a drum by which she leads the other two children to the safety of Bernard's house. For Danford the repetition of the drum "drains much of the lifeblood" from the tale, while Shawna Seed claims that the characters here are "sketchy and unbelievable," the plot "creaky, and the coincidences "clunky." Others, however, adeptly find the characters "unforgettable" (Ogle, Donovan), the text "lyrical and harshly beautiful" (Diamant), indeed Erdrich "at her most accomplished (Goldberg). Later, Bernard confesses to Ira that at the time the drum was packed away, far from anybody's use.

Ironically, the reader rather than the children see in Shawnee's dramatic act its connection to the painted drum, including the girl whose bones inform it, but also to the girls in Faye's original tale. Is it any wonder, as Freeman suggests, that the drum functions thematically as a "way station between the living and the dead," as it simultaneously "beats out the rhythms of Erdrich's prose."

But that is not all. So Ira negligently and surprisingly leaves the children alone to drink and share male company at a bar, much as Anaquot deliberately and surprisingly shakes her husband in the second story. But more surprising is that Ira gets drunk and even suggests selling her body to get money for food and fuel. Though some find no humor in the novel (Seton), this is to miss the long conversation between Ira and John, where they tongue in cheek bait each other regarding having mutual sex; it is an example of what Kehe calls “flashes of wisdom and wit.” But after this exchange, John kindly gives her money for food and lines up his brother Morris to take her home. After finding out about the fire, Ira might have lost her children, except that Seraphine, a social worker (and John’s wife) is by coincidence the product of the white boarding school, where for using her Native language she received a telling scar at the hand of her white educators. In this context, the woman transcends the rules and refuses to punish Ira.

But a further irony in this story involves the legally blind Morris whom John calls on to drive Ira home and about whom she knows nothing. He is a product of the Persian Gulf War, and suffers from Popeye, or the inability to close his eyes. Though he should not be driving, he surprisingly does and in the process falls in love with Ira. He offers her money and

wants to kiss her, which really surprises, indeed scares, her. After they arrive at the burned house and find the children in custody, Ira (who narrates the 7th part of the 3rd section; parts 1-6 are third person), comes to know and love Morris. Coincidentally, she discovers that her father, a spiritual man who loved wolves, named Morris, and left to Morris “the drum songs” (248).

In the end Morris tells John he wants to marry Ira: “I’m going to raise her kids” (249), he says. The union of Ira and Morris—who is accused of “seeing too much”—represents a dramatic turnabout that ironically has the potential for creating a whole family, in spite of Ira’s negligence and the guilt Shawnee feels lest others think she started the fire. The double irony, of course, is that Shawnee is a young heroine, and that her deliberate choice has been mystically but really rewarding; rooted in the drum it has brought joy out of tragedy. In a larger sense, says Rickert, the drum represents “the heartbeat of mother earth,” capturing the “teaching of old ancestral ways, and symbolizing the circle—and therefore the strength—of the community.” As such, it “brings order, world order,” and, that is implicit in the simple action of a girl striving to save her brother and sister and the union of Ira and Morris, which creates rather than destroy a family.

The fourth section is again narrated by Faye. She and Elsie are again at home in New Hampshire, where they speak of selling the business and parting ways. But Faye is still caught between still protecting her mother and responding to Kurt, when he visits them. As before, she coldly rejects him in public, though she knows Elsie knows of their affair, and Kurt simply cannot understand the personal abandonment. Then, after he leaves, the two women talk on a “deeper level,” and Faye is boldly surprised to discover from Elsie that Netta had truly “stepped from the branch “ (263). Moreover, Elsie, the one she has been protecting all these years, surprisingly admits she was away at the time of Netta’s death having a secret affair. Hence, Faye concludes Elsie should be the one forgiving her, not the other way around. That is a defining moment for Faye; on her “the sun is shining directly” (264) even though she now feels utterly alone.

By coincidence, however, Kurt’s studio is then ravished, all his artifacts destroyed. It is a colossal destruction that should have crushed him, but it does not. Ironically, it “frees the two of us, “ says Faye, and “he seems more excited than horrified by the trashed scene.” Now the larger irony of the novel emerges—what it means to accept one’s grief and move on. Says Ogle, “grief is stanchied and hope revived through the drum.” The two link arms, and walk away

as if there had been no other accidents or grief in the world,
but only this one retribution from an unseen hand, which seemed to
wreck with more joy than malice, the way a child does, wondering at
the breakage and startled to laughter by the noise (273).

That night they stay at Kurt's house and she calls Elsie to tell her she "won't be back till morning." Now Faye is no longer "locked in," and the drama for the reader ironically comes full circle, much as drum is a circle, symbolic of the Ojibwe world she had originally ignored. Says Chook, sorrows need to be brought into the open where "the songs can bear them away." In effect, what the reader sees in a larger sense is that Faye in discovering and following the drum, has metaphorically "jumped from the tree." If there is grief in the story of the legendary "wolf girl," or in Shawnee's heroic act, Faye has now made those acts her own, as has Kurt, and all the grief involved in their history has now "seemed to wreck with more joy than malice."

There are other surprises in this section, including a short section which functions as kind of counter motif for Faye's story. Kit Tatro, for instance, wants to be more than an Indian wanabe, but surprisingly when he visits a shaman, "instead of tracking his bloodline through dusty genealogies" (264), he has no vision. But then, he does have an epiphany.

When driving his car a Jeep Cherokee “comes barreling at him out of nowhere;” Kit swerves and “to his surprise”—that is by coincidence—“a space had opened” bringing him a “singular joy.” After this he finds himself and develops a genuine Native presence. For Faye, now “he is someone ” (267). Ironically, what the reader may gather from this dramatic episode is that revelations come in strange ways, much as they have for Faye, as when the drum forces her to go back into her heritage to find herself. But unlike Kit, she does eventually connect with her “dusty genealogies,” including the legend of the wolf-girl, and the tragic circumstances of the reservation as found in Ira and Shawnee’s story. For Livsey, the notion that “life is change” and not fearing to experience it is the heart of the novel “rather than the talismanic drum.”

Also important are the experiences Faye has in nature. After the Kit episode she walks in the woods, where by coincidence she discovers, not a dead deer, but the bones of a dog. To her surprise, it is the same “lovely creature” the family of Davan Eckes had for many years tied to a tree on a “short chain, ” forcing it to live in a “tiny radius,” enduring each “dull moment of life” without “going mean” (12). Now she observes that a chain hangs around its neck, no doubt the cause of its death. But then she muses to herself that “if the collar had been leather, I think, there would

have been more give,” and it could have slipped it over its head and escaped (cf. 270). In spite of the decay—the ravens picking the bones—she observes a beauty in the color of the eyes and the “hungry smile.” (271). Ironically, one might see in the episode a similar pattern in Faye’s life. Formerly lacking in flexibility, she now senses a joy emerging out of destruction and pain. After this she meets a bear but surprisingly she is not frightened. By coincidence, it then turns and vanishes. So the pattern continues. In nature what is destructive ironically may emerge as creative and beautiful.

The novel begins and ends in the cemetery, with Faye visiting the grave of her sister. But it is a new Faye. Here she notices the carved angel over Netta’s plot which surprisingly brings her not sorrow but a “breathless delight” (275). Then she contemplates Kendra’s stone sculptured of white marble, a simple circular form, by coincidence, circular like the drum. We are surprised that it is the only thing he has made that has moved her. On it she sets a tooth which, by coincidence, she has picked up, thinking that it would have made a nice ear ring for Kendra. Again, as the irony continues, we might see in the presence of something from a dead animal an artifact related to beauty. Finally, Faye is surprised by the presence of ravens, one of which by coincidence appears to laugh. Ravens, of course, like wolves, are

icons of destruction and rebirth, which ironically is Faye's overall psychic, spiritual, mystical growth within the loosely connected stories which make up Erdrich's tenth novel.

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The Painted Drum

Part One (Revival Road)

philosopher = Elsie (Pillager)

Netta

Faye Traverse

Kurt Krahe =

Kendra
(easterner)

Mrs. Eyke =

Davan Eyke

Lonnie Germaine

Jewel Parker Tatro =

Kit Tatro (squaw man)

Sarah

Part Four (Revival Road)

wolf

Kit's discovery

Bernard's letter

dead dog, bear, fallen apples

ravaged art studio; the chain

Netta's gravestone, tooth

dog

wolf

spider

ravan

Authors's Note

Part Two (North of Hoopdance)

Chook = Mike

Two ladies (Pillagers)

John Morris (DS)

Judge = Geraldine
(new Mrs. Nanapush)

Old Schwaawno = Anaquot -- Simon Jack = Ziigaanaage Doosh

baby

boy Niibinaage boy

girl
(drum) boy =fights father
thinks sister is s. lamb

boy girl Bernard S = (to Fargo)

baby

wolves

A – direct, adopted

OS – drum

Geeshik, Albert (cousin of G), Chickie

frozen leg
shy
children loveA & Z -- sew costume
SJ - - danceA, Z, & OS die later
F & N survive

Part Three (The Little Drum Girl)

= father (names Morris)

Ira =

Chook = Mike

Shawnee Alice Apitchi
(hears
drum)

Morris John
(helps, loves Ira,
wants to dig
up songs)

Seraphine (Pillager
social worker
Carlisle scar

Bernard S =

hospital job
nursed Ira's father
worked with Morris on songs