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Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Themes are the central, recurring subjects of a novel. As characters grapple with circumstances such as racism, class, or unrequited love, profound questions will arise in the reader's mind about human life, social pressures, and societal expectations. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, the relationship between one's personal moral code and larger political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational considerations. A novel often reconsiders these age-old debates by presenting them in new contexts or from new points of view.



Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



Use the following questions to stimulate discussion or provide writing exercises. Ask students to explore what *Love Medicine* suggests about the following themes by providing specific textual references. Students may also identify their own themes.

Abandonment

Many characters in the book are abandoned by their parents, and others are uncertain, or even mistaken, about who their biological parents were. Lulu has children by several different men. Marie ends up at the convent after living with her aunt; her mother's identity will be revealed to readers of the subsequent novels in this series. But Lipsha Morrissey, perhaps more than any other character, wants to understand his own origins, and by the end of the book his search is successful. Why are so many characters in the novel disconnected from their birth families? How does this knowledge contribute, or fail to contribute, to each character's sense of identity?

Tradition

Lyman is a businessman, focused on material success, while Lipsha carries the special gift of healing and insight from his true family, the Pillagers, who are descended from medicine men and women. Ask your students which character they identify with more. Do students feel that Erdrich is more sympathetic to one character, and therefore a particular way of life? Why or why not?

Love

Nector Kashpaw claims to love both Marie and Lulu. This love triangle is complicated by the fact that each woman is aware of the other's importance to him, and by the sweet friendship that develops between them after Nector's death. Do students find the long-term affair, and the friendship that blooms in its aftermath, credible? Does the women's acceptance of Nector's double life make them more or less sympathetic to the reader? Why or why not?



Homework

Ask students to begin their essays using the essay topics in this guide, the discussion questions in the Reader's Guide, or their own ideas. Students should use their journal entries as a resource while writing the essays. Outlines are due at the next class period.