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## Lesson Six

### FOCUS: Symbols

Symbols are persons, places, or things in a narrative that have significance beyond a literal understanding. The craft of storytelling depends on symbols to present ideas and point toward new meanings. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to refer to (or symbolize) a more abstract concept. The repeated appearance of an object suggests a non-literal, or figurative, meaning attached to the object. Symbols are often found in the book's title, at the beginning and end of the story, within a profound action, or in the name or personality of a character. The life of a novel is perpetuated by generations of readers interpreting and re-interpreting the main symbols. By identifying and understanding symbols, readers can reveal new interpretations of the novel.

Food—of many types, and in various stages of preparation—appears regularly throughout *Love Medicine*. The pies, prepared with so much care by Marie and her daughters in the middle pages of the first chapter, are ruined in the drunken fight at the end of the chapter. Later, Nector attributes the rekindling of his affair with Lulu to their delivery of surplus butter to dozens of neighbors on a hot day. Food is not only a necessity of life, it is also an intrinsic part of human celebration and mourning. The idea of food is at once festive and common, large and particular—strong enough to carry within itself many of the novel's largest ideas.

### Discussion Activities

Ask students to identify two or three other instances where food appears in the novel. Ask them to describe the larger ideas about the characters, and the novel's setting, that emerge from these scenes. Are some foods good and others bad? How does food serve as a symbol in the novel?

Have students consider the red convertible. Review the interview with Louise Erdrich in the Reader's Guide. Is the car a symbol, and if so, of what? Is it linked to other cars that have appeared in the novel so far? Why or why not?

### Writing Exercise

Ask students to identify another important symbol that appears throughout the novel such as water, fire, or fish. Students should write a short essay about how the symbol serves the larger purposes of the novel, citing specific examples.

### Homework

Students should read “Scales” and “Crown of Thorns” (pp. 190–225). They should continue to identify the narrators of each chapter in their reader's journals. Also ask students to write a short essay on the ways Gordie Kashpaw changes in “Crown of Thorns.”