
Native American Culture In Sherman Alexie's Poems

Screeching, chanting, stomping, murderous, barbaric, savages. Portrayed in *The Last of the Mohicans*, *A Man Called Horse*, *Windwalker*, *Cheyenne Autumn*, and countless others, these are the American Indians that Hollywood has created for viewers across the country since the 1960s. In movies and novels, the same brutish men wearing colossal feathered headdresses protecting the one beautiful Native girl from their tribe, the American explorer triumphantly rescuing her and giving her what her people never could--this is how Sherman Alexie depicts the widespread view of his culture in his poem, "How to Write the Great American Indian Novel". In it, he hyperbolizes Native American culture, thus employing the use of verbal irony to imply that the opposite of what he states is true. Alexie uses this sardonic poem to portray the dichotomy between the Hollywood depiction of Native Americans, and the actuality of their culture.

Alexie is exceptionally credible regarding Native American culture and sympathizing with the endeavors that the people faced; however, to be sure of this, the reader must have a knowledge of his personal life. Born a full-blooded Salish Indian, he was born in 1966 on the Alexie grew up on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington (Poetry Foundation, 2010), before eventually moving out to high school and then college, later earning his bachelor's degree. At a young age, he fell victim to drinking as many Indians on reservations do as well; thankfully, he quit shortly after and has maintained his sobriety since. When he began writing, his Native American roots became the driving force of all his works, in defense and commemoration of his culture (Britannica, 2019). Not only an author, Alexie also became a distinguished poet, novelist, performer and filmmaker (Poetry Foundation, 2010). As opposed to what he expressed as misleading films and novels about Native American life, and objective historical books of such, Alexie was renowned for modernizing accounts of reservation life. His work allowed those lacking credible knowledge on present-day American Indian life to not only understand the culture objectively but also instilled a respect for his culture in those who viewed it. Common themes within all of Alexie's works are verbal irony, often expressed through dark humor, and deeply troubled characters that struggle with anything from poverty, to alcoholism, to self-destruction, to unjust abuse (Britannica). Through these repeated elements, Alexie evokes great empathy for the character that is representative of all Native American culture. In his writing, the reader is left feeling indignant, and prompted to help the struggling character. Alexie does not fail to provide the reader with every aspect of Indian history. Whether a historical approach, modern-day life, or his own personal experiences, the reader is given a well-rounded view of Alexie's culture throughout time (Poetry Foundation). As stated by an editor named Ian Jack, "fiction, if it's any good, should persuade you of individual and inner lives. Alexie's book wasn't sanctimonious or pious or a piece of political pleading—it introduced you to characters who were native American and made them as complex and odd as everyone else."

Sherman Alexie's poem, "How to Write the Great American Indian Novel" is an audacious work, not only taking a jab at authors but at Hollywood by exposing its embellishment and discourtesy toward Native American culture. Alexie begins the poem, writing, "All of the Indians must have tragic features: tragic noses, eyes, and arms. / Their hands and fingers must be tragic when they reach for tragic food (1-2)." This powerful opening to the poem immediately addresses a prevalent belief about Native Americans, painting them as inferior people. Alexie's

sardonic tone throughout the poem communicates to the reader that the more incessant the repetition of certain words and phrases, the more he contradicts them. His repetition of the word “tragic” robs the culture of their pride in heritage, of joy, of beauty, and of their capabilities. Written off as tragic, those viewing the film are instantly met this preconceived notion, regarding the Native peoples as less than the average person.

Alexie further perpetuates the concept of tragic Indians, by continuing, “The hero must be a half-breed, half white and half Indian, preferably / from a horse culture. He should often weep alone. That is mandatory (3-4).” In two short lines, Alexie addresses two major issues. In line three, he writes that the hero must be half-breed. As the viewer already understands that to be a Native American is to be tragic, the hero being classified as half white means that he is given a sliver of hope from his white side, the side that is not totally tragic. The hero has inner turmoil over his opposing cultures, but once he can overcome his Native American side, only then is he empowered to save the story. Alexie argues that Hollywood instills in viewers that an Indian could never be a hero, in and of himself. A large majority of the poem beyond these lines is spent describing Hollywood production of Indians, how the hero must be half white, how a Native American woman can only fall in love with a man at least half white, and that a Native American is never sufficient on his or her own. The lines that best summarize this say, “An Indian man can be hidden inside a white woman. An Indian woman / can be hidden inside a white man. In these rare instances, / everybody is a half-breed... (22-23).” He concludes by saying that, at the end of the novel, “all of the white people will be Indians and all of the Indians will be ghosts (28).”

In the beginning of line four, Alexie argues the second issue. When he writes, “from a horse culture”, this is addressing only a few tribes of Native American culture. According to the NCAI (National Congress of American Indians) in 2019, there 573 Indian Nations federally recognized by the United States today. Very few tribes at the time were centered around horses, and in this, Hollywood not only fails to represent more than a few tribes but stereotypes all Indian Nations as one. This key issue is repeated throughout the rest of the poem. “But if she loves an Indian man / then he must be a half-breed, preferably from a horse culture”, “White women dream about half-breed Indian men from horse cultures”, and again, “Those interior Indians are half-breed / and obviously from horse cultures.” The phrase “horse cultures” is yet another instance of the employment of verbal irony, conveying how ridiculous he finds the lack of variety of Indian Nations provided by films and novels.

Alexie’s satirical poem was not written as a mere jest but is purposed to encourage the reader to uncover the truth of Native American culture. One of the first stereotypes that Alexie opposes is that Native Americans are “tragic”. Indians in fact, have been an extraordinarily prosperous group of people. Despite being “behind” on the times and being far outnumbered by the U.S., Indians were and continue to take great pride in their achievements and their history.

Although a humorous poem, Alexie’s “How to Write the Great American Indian Novel” is a compelling proposal about the issue of nullifying Native American history through Hollywood portrayal. As Charlie Hill stated in film *Reel Injun*, “We’re creative natives. And we’re like the Energizer Bunny. The mightiest nation in the world tried to exterminate us, anglicize us, Christianize us, Americanize us, but we just keep going and going. And I think that Energizer Bunny must be Indian. He’s got that little water drum he plays. And I always say, ‘Next time you have a powwow, have the Energizer Bunny lead the grand entry, and after a few rounds then we can get together and EAT him’, because we never waste anything.”

edubirdie.com