

Sample Sherman Alexie Analysis

Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* from 2005 is a collection of short stories centered around Indian life on a reservation in Spokane, Washington. Alexie, an Indian from the reservation himself, has received many awards for his work. Alcoholism, violence, drug use, poverty, racism, and broken families are portrayed as a way of life in many of these stories. The cathartic and paradoxical nature of humor is used as a coping mechanism and as a framing device to overcome trauma, to illustrate the various triumphs and tragedies the characters face in these stories. Alexie uses imagery and colloquial language to give us an imprint of who the characters are and to illustrate the hardships and love they encounter. Humor proves to be particularly important throughout the collection because it serves as such an effective method for Alexie to portray his characters as real people doing the difficult work of coming to terms with who they are, the tragedies they face, the humiliation they encounter, and their various attempts to mask their underlying emotions.

In the story "Because My Father Always Said He Was The Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play The 'Star Spangled Banner' at Woodstock," the narrator Victor describes his parents' relationship of love and hate. The narrator's father is described as an alcoholic who has developed a deep respect for 60s rock icon Jimi Hendrix after forming an emotional connection with him at Woodstock, an infamous rock concert in upstate New York in '69. His parents eventually become divorced due to his father's alcoholism. His father leaves them and Victor is left with a deep longing for his father to return. In "The Fun House," the story around the narrator's Aunt Nezzy as she comes to terms with her unhappy life and her desperate desire for change. The story straddles a very thin line between tragedy and humor as the aunt is described as being a strong woman who has worked hard to try to and make a better life for herself. Her son and her husband make fun of her after a mouse crawls up her leg. She feels insulted and humiliated and, in response, goes for a swim and returns with the motivation to change and make her dreams a reality. "The Approximate Size of My Favorite Tumor," another story in the collection, is about James Many Horses, who has terminal cancer, and his wife Norma, who leaves him because all he does is continue to make jokes about his condition rather than accepting treatment for it. In this story, James is portrayed as always being the funny guy; Norma eventually realizes, after leaving him, that she misses his sense of humor.

Alexie uses lots of humorous imagery and colloquial language to portray the characters in these stories as we witness them gradually coming to terms, or not, with who they are as Indians on the “rez.” In “Because My Father Always Said He Was The Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play The ‘Star Spangled Banner’ at Woodstock,” Victor describes the relationship his parents have with each other and uses humor to accept the fact that they are alcoholics, and that he is still nevertheless the product of their drunken union. “I was conceived during one of those drunken nights, half of me formed by my father’s whiskey sperm, the other half formed by my mother’s vodka egg. I was born a goofy reservation mixed drink, and my father needed me just as much as he needed every other kind of drink” (27). Victor knows that his parents are alcoholics but rather than hate them for it, he still loves them and never says anything disrespectful toward them. He also knows that their alcoholism does not affect the love they have for him. But despite the fact that his father completely removes himself from Victor’s life after his parent’s divorce, Victor still has love for his father, and mixes condemnation with wistful remembrance: “my father didn’t talk much when he was sober” (28). Victor’s mother is also very fond of his father but decides to leave him after realizing that he is incurably “messed up” and needs his alcohol more than he needs his own family. But again, she highlights this sad realization through the lens of humor: “Your father was always half crazy...and the other half was on medication” (27). The narrator (and the reader) is left with a good, warm feeling toward his father and uses his father’s advice as a life lesson, dispensing a fatherly kind of wisdom of his own: “If you don’t like the things you remember, then all you have to do is change the memories. Instead of remembering the bad things, remember what happened immediately before” (34). As a result, the character tells of the way his life is when his parents *are* in love, and then uses humor to keep the good memories alive in order to come to terms with the sometimes tragic directions his life has taken after his father is gone. Humor serves here as a way for Victor to come to terms with his life and with the fact that his father is not coming home.

Many other of the characters in the collection of stories also use humor as a way of coping with the tragedies they face, though in different ways. In “The Approximate Size of My Favorite Tumor,” James is dying of terminal cancer and his wife Norma gets fed up with his constant joking and eventually leaves him. James uses humor to cope with the fact that he is dying rather than torture himself with pity. This makes sense as coping device – it is common now for humor to be employed as a form of therapy to patients and family members of those who

are hospitalized and ill: laughter releases endorphins that bring about a state of tranquility and relieves internal stress. Though untrained in the therapeutic arts, James still uses humor as his own form of therapy for coping with the fact that he is dying. He is not ignoring the fact that he is dying – he is just trying to deal with it the only way he seems to know how, and this ultimately makes him that much more human, and his impending death that much more tragic. Sometimes laughter is all one has left. “And we laughed, you know, because sometimes you’d rather cry...” (162). Indian men are often stereotyped as the brave warrior; James does not want to disappoint in this regard, nor does he want to be pitied or to appear weak. So he uses humor to buttress his faltering strength, to stave off the inevitable breakdown, to hold onto what is real, to keep himself from breaking down in tears and from succumbing to his fear of dying. When James’s cousin is caricatured in an imagined funeral eulogy, really his own wedding, he recalls the time when James started singing a song after news broke out that ten Indians had died in a tragic car accident, “*One little, two little, three little Indians...eight little, nine little Indians, ten little Indian boys*” (161). James has always used humor and laughter as a way to cope with tragedy. Humor and tragedy are so closely intertwined in this story as humor is again used as a vital coping mechanism for the characters within it.

In “The Fun House,” humor is predictably deployed as a means of humiliation, but reservation trauma and family tragedies are still being played out in the fabric of the story. The narrator’s Aunt Nezzy is described as a beautiful dancer who gives lessons to pay her way through community college and dances topless to support her family. She gives up her chances at finishing school so that she can raise her family, and because she simply can no longer afford to go to school. From their first date, she and her husband do not fight, sharing as they do an enduringly simple, wordless love for one another – they were truly happy once, we come to understand: “all they needed to survive was the drive home after closing time” (78). But, as a young woman, she did still have dreams of “making a difference” in her life and becoming something other than a housewife. But those dreams get sidelined as becomes cornered and held down by the pressures of family and constraints of life on the reservation. She sees her life now as a tragedy and is not at all happy with the way her life has turned out. Aunt Nezzy walks out in anger after her son and husband laugh at her when a mouse crawls up her leg, joking about what the mouse must have thought was a very odd looking “mousetrap.”

The moment in the story is highly comical, though still very sad. Humor here is used as a

form of disrespectful humiliation rather than as coping mechanism as we have seen it used in other Alexie stories. Although Nezzzy is angered by her family's wickedly insensitive sense of humor, the incident allows her time and space for a kind of epiphany, a transformative moment that allows her reclaim some of the self-determination she has lost in the intervening years. She is shocked back into a kind of outsider's awareness of her own entrapment, and comes to some empowering conclusions about her capabilities as she finally stands up for herself. There is a moment in the story where she actually designs a headdress that symbolizes her own burden as a woman and the burden of the wider Indian community she finds herself an inexplicable part of: "She made a full-length beaded dress that was too heavy for anyone to wear...when a woman comes along who can carry the weight of this dress on her back, then we'll have found the one who will save us" (76). Up until the hysterical mouse incident, she understands that she has always been waiting for change to come to her, all the while not realizing that it will likely never in fact come. After the incident, she has the courage to be the one to *make* change, the woman who would save everyone as she dons the unbearable burden of the heavy beaded headdress: "She stood, weakly. But she had the strength to take the first step, then another quick one" (82). As Frederick Busch of the New York Times writes, "there is wonderful humor and profound sorrow in these stories, and brilliant renditions of each. There is not enough structure to [contain] the dreams and tales that Mr. Alexie needs to portray and that we need to read..." (63). Alexie makes a remarkably successful attempt at connecting the dots here, at completing the thin, thin delicate line between humor and tragedy, humiliation and awakening.

Humor is also used as a way to mask the underlying emotions that many of the characters possess. In "The Approximate Size of my Favorite Tumor," James deploys humor as a way to hide the pain he harbors from Norma, his girlfriend, leaving him: "You have to realize that laughter saved Norma and me from pain, too. Humor was an antiseptic that cleaned the deepest of personal wounds"(164). He ties the sentiment in this quote to most of the events presented in this story, especially the incident when he and Norma go out to dinner and a movie and then stopped by a (white) highway patrolman on the way home. The patrolman does not have a legitimate reason to stop them but harasses anyway, simply because they are Indian and so must be hiding *something*. James is the jokester throughout the entire highway incident, making sarcastic comments as the cop takes all the money they have: "That extra dollar is a tip, you know, your service has been excellent" (166). They do not show the patrolman that they are

scared, hurt, or mad; instead they mask their emotions with laughter. It is painful to read, and just enough to make anybody in that position upset, but they laugh through it all. Later in the same story, Norma leaves James and then later returns unexpectedly. James asks where she has been. After revealing that she has been with another man, James finally expresses his pain to her, again with humor: "Believe me, nothing ever hurt more. Not even my tumors which are the approximate size of baseballs" (170). Even though he is clearly hurt, they both immediately break out in laughter, once again masking their true emotions. As the Kirkus Review notes, "With wrenching pain and wry humor, the talented Alexie... presents contemporary life on the Spokane Indian Reservation...Irony, grim humor, and forgiveness help characters transcend pain, anger and loss..." (189). Humor serves as a way to release the emotional tensions that many of the characters suffocate deep within themselves.

Although humor and tragedy are closely linked in many of the stories, humor seems to prevail over tragedy throughout these stories because it conveys an image of who these characters are despite their alcoholism, poverty, violence, and racism. Humor is used to portray the characters as they come to terms with who they are, the tragedies they face, the humiliations they encounter, and their attempt to mask their underlying emotions. Alexie's use of imagery and colloquial language throughout the story is a successful attempt at making the characters come to life in words and deeds alike. One can easily imagine the conversations taking place between the characters that people this book. As stated by Devon Mihesuah, Alexie has been criticized for appearing to exploit his own people for the sake of mere artistic expression or financial gain, inadvertently harming himself and his heritage in the process. He is also attacked for writing only "what America wants to hear." But *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* stands in clear contradiction to these reproaches because it provides a vital window into authentic Indian experience, and a unique understanding of the issues the Indian people from the reservation have to face in a humorous, not humiliating way.