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English 203-02

13 April 2016

The Prominence of the Native American Race in Sherman Alexie’s *Flight*

In Sherman Alexie’s novel *Flight*, the main character, Zits, is transported through time to experience the many different ways Native Americans have been portrayed. He assumes the role of various people throughout time periods in history in order to truly understand that there are different perspectives on issues. The author includes many details about Native Americans that were true in history, and tries to illustrate the problems of Indians today. Throughout the story, Zits becomes closer to the heritage he strives to have, and Sherman Alexie attempts to illustrate what it was like to be an Indian throughout history, and today. While Sherman Alexie tries to show what a modern-day Native American’s life is like, he does not do enough to shed light on this problem.

Sherman Alexie portrays the normality of the alcoholic Native American throughout the novel. From the very beginning of the novel, Zits already has a preconceived opinion of the Native American race, because of the influence of his father, or lack thereof. Zits describes his own father, who has been absent all of his life, as “a drunk…more in love with beer and vodka than with my mother and me” (Alexie 4). Many Indians throughout the story are shown as battling addiction to alcohol. In an NPR interview, Alexie stated, “I certainly get tired of people calling the alcoholic Indian a stereotype. It’s not. It’s a cold, damp reality. We have a major problem with alcoholism among Native Americans” (Alexie). He states that many of his family members struggle with, or are recovering from alcohol addiction. Sherman Alexie attempts to show what effects alcoholism can have on a family; however, it simply is not enough. He tries to show that alcoholism is not just a stereotype that is wrongfully assigned to Indians, but rather, it is a real problem that many struggle with every day. In this novel, Alexie does not do enough to emphasize the true problems of modern-day Native Americans.

Towards the end of the novel, Zits is actually transported into his father’s body. For his whole life, Zits has assumed his father left because he didn’t care about himself or his mother. Once it is apparent that he is in his father’s body, Zits tries to see what really happened when his father left, “I push against my father’s mind and soul. I crash through his fortifications and rampage into his memory…until I see it” (Alexie 152). Zits learns that his father left the hospital because he did not think he could be the kind of father a child deserved. While in the hospital, Zits’ father has a flashback to when he was younger and constantly being told, “You aint worth shit” (Alexie 155) by his father. Despite not wanting to be like his own father, he goes down the dark path of an alcoholic. Zits’ father realizes that the drunken Indian is a continuous cycle that is hard to break. He thinks that by leaving his son and wife that the cycle will be broken, and Zits and his mother will not have to suffer from the outbursts, heartbreak, and physical abuse he once had to suffer. Sherman Alexie portrays this never ending cycle and its effects very well, but it simply is not enough.

Because of his preconceived opinions about Indians due to his father’s influence, and the distinction between races in today’s society, Zits is shocked when he sees his Native American hero, Crazy Horse. This sighting occurs when Zits has been transported to the Indian camp that was the sight of Custer’s Last Stand. While at the camp, Zits notices a very pale Indian man, “almost white-skinned…This Indian is so white he gets sunburned…His hair isn’t black at all…and some strands are blond” (Alexie 67). In noticing this person, Zits is confused as to why a white man would be in this Indian camp. Then, he realizes who this ‘white man’ is, “Oh, my God! This pale little dude is Crazy Horse” (Alexie 67). This is a very shocking fact for Zits. He has always assume that the Native American who defeated Custer was a huge, macho leader. In reality, Crazy Horse is a small half white, half Native American, “I think the greatest warrior in Sioux history is a half breed mystery” (Alexie 68). Sherman Alexie includes this part about Crazy Horse in attempt to show there are still racial barriers and stigmas towards Native Americans. Zits having this encounter is Alexie’s way of trying to show that the separation between whites and Native Americans still exists in today’s society.

Throughout history, Native Americans have been seen as not having a voice. Sherman Alexie barely touches on this subject when talking about the camp and Custer’s Last Stand. In this part of the book, Zits is in the body of an Indian that does not have a voice. He tries to speak but nothing comes out, “I reach up, touch my throat, and feel a huge fleshy knot. It’s on my voice box. I don’t know if I was attacked by a person or by a disease, but my voice has been taken away” (Alexie 64). While the Indian boy in this part of the story literally did not have a voice, Sherman Alexie is basing this on a wider view of Native Americans. Later on, the boy’s father tries to get him to harm a white solider, because that is who hurt him. He wants him to seek revenge for the harm that was done to him. Zits, in the body of this young Indian boy, does not want to invoke harm on others, but cannot speak because he has no voice. Sherman Alexie tries to assert the real problem of Native Americans not having a voice on one small boy. This is Alexie’s attempt to shed light on the Indians’ problems.

By describing this “typical Native American,” Sherman Alexie attempts to paint a picture that most people have not seen before. However, in history class, we learn that the white people brought alcohol to the Indians hundreds of years ago, and it is also well known that alcoholism is still running rampant within the native populations today. We also learn about how the white people used and abused the Native Americans. Sherman Alexie tries to show the struggles Native Americans face and have faced for centuries, but the fact is, none of it is new to the reader. By writing this novel, Sherman Alexie is attempting to explain the real problems that are faced by Indians everyday due to issues that began many years ago when Europeans first came to America.

Works Cited

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