
UNIT 4 ALEXIE SHERMAN ALEXIE ‘CROW TESTAMENT’ & ‘EVOLUTION’

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we shall study the core features of Alexi Sherman poetry in general and take up two of his poems for detailed study. Winner of the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, the PEN/Malamud Award for Short Fiction, a PEN/Hemingway Citation for Best First Fiction, and the National Book Award for Young People's Literature, Sherman Alexie is a poet, short story writer, novelist, and performer. Alexie's poetry and the entire body of works explore themes of despair, poverty, violence and alcoholism among the lives of Native American people, both on and off the reservation. We will examine all these issues and themes.

After reading this Unit, you should be able to interpret the prescribed poems of Alexie Sherman in terms of Indian thought.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Alexi Sherman has published 26 books including his recently released memoir, *You Don't Have to Say You Love Me*, his first picture book, *Thunder Boy Jr*, and young adult novel, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, all from Little, Brown Books; *What I've Stolen, What I've Earned*, a book of poetry, from Hanging Loose Press; and *Blasphemy: New and Selected Stories*, from Grove Press. We will try to examine the fundamental questions across all of his works: "What does it mean to live as an Indian in this time? What does it mean to be an Indian man? Finally, what does it mean to live on an Indian reservation?" The protagonists in most of his literary works exhibit a constant struggle with themselves and their own sense of powerlessness in white American society. The two poems selected for detailed discussions allow all the scope that we need to understand. We take up a para wise discussion to underline the significant issues related to Native American identity in relation to the larger framework of American literature.

4.2 ALEXIE SHERMAN: LIFE AND WORKS

Sherman Alexie was born in 1966 in Spokane, Washington. He is a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene tribal member and grew up on the Spoken Indian Reservation. After a childhood plagued with illness, he attended Jesuit Gonzaga University before transferring to Washington State University in 1987. It was here that he first began to write poetry and prose.

Alexie has published a number of prize winning books that detail the lives of Native Americans living on reservations. One of his most well-known works, the collection of short stories, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, won a PEN/Hemingway Award. Additionally, his poetic works earned him the World Heavyweight Poetry title, which he held for four years.

4.3 ALEXIE SHERMAN: CROW TESTAMENT

Analysis of *Crow Testament*

1

Cain lifts Crow, that heavy black bird
and strikes down Abel.
Damn, says Crow, I guess
this is just the beginning.

In the first section of this piece the speaker begins with the sons of Adam and Eve. Cain uses “Crow” to kill his brother Abel. Right from the beginning of the poem “Crow” is being used by the white man without his consent. In this case, Alexie has chosen to portray Crow as a weapon.

In the second half of the section Crow exclaims, professing his understanding that his mistreatment is just beginning. Crow will stand in as a symbol for the Native populations of the Americas and Alexie will take the reader through varying symbols representing the white settlers, and the present white majority of America. Crow knows, from this first brutal action that,
This is just the beginning.

2

The white man, disguised
as a falcon, swoops in
and yet again steals a salmon
from Crow's talons.
Damn, says Crow, if I could swim

I would have fled this country years ago. The second section is written in a similar fashion to the first in which Crow finds himself taken advantage of.

Alexie has chosen to portray the “white man” as a “falcon.” The embodiment of the white man doesn’t just appear as a falcon, he is “disguised” as one. This adds an additional level of cunning to the scene.

The falcon swoops down from the sky and steals directly from Crow’s hands, or “talons.” This theft is a clear reference to the endless damage done to Native Americans, from the theft of land to the mass exterminations that took place at the hands of the United States government and all leaders in North and South America.

In the shorter second half Crow reflects that if he was able to “swim” he could have “fled this country years ago.” If he had been born with this ability, he could have let himself be taken out to sea, and away from the damage he is living in.

3

The Crow God as depicted
in all of the reliable Crow bibles
looks exactly like a Crow.

Damn, says Crow, this makes it so much easier to worship myself. The speaker takes a different approach in the third section in which he further reflects on the role of religion in modern society. The poet presents for the reader “The Crow God” that appears identical to the crows that worship him.

He then provides commentary that leads to an explanation of this shift. Crow is considering the absurdity of worshipping a god that looks like you. At the same time he is pointing out the vanity in this depiction. Only the “White Man” would make a god such as this, as the familiar image makes worship, so much easier...

4

Among the ashes of Jericho, Crow sacrifices his firstborn son.
Damn, says Crow, a million nests are soaked with blood.

In this section the speaker continues to describe the place of Native Americans, through the Crow metaphor. The narrative is now expanding to include other events from the bible, such as the Battle of Jericho. During this pivotal Biblical moment, the Israelites destroy the city of Jericho. In Alexie’s narrative the city stands in for the entire population of native people who were decimated by the arrival of the white man. In this case, the “ashes of Jericho” are home to the son of Crow” and,

...a million nests...soaked with blood. This destruction is their inheritance and is home to their futures.

5

When Crows fight Crows
the sky fills with beaks and talons.
Damn, says Crow, it's raining feathers.

Not only does Crow have to be cautious of the white man in his many forms, Crow often “fights Crow.” It is in these instances that the most damage is done and the sky seems to “rain feathers.”

It is clear that any division between the Native peoples further hurts their chances of finding a way out from under, or a way to stand up against, the white man.

6

Crow flies around the reservation
and collects empty beer bottles
but they are so heavy
he can only carry one at a time.

So, one by one, he returns them
but gets only five cents a bottle.
Damn, says Crow, redemption
is not easy.

The sixth section of this piece is the longest, and takes the speaker into the present day in

which the suffering of the Native American people has not abated, but only changed forms.

On a contemporary reservation, Crow, still seen as a representative of the Native peoples, is flying around searching for, “empty beer bottles.” The collection of these bottles provides him with a very limited income, but also serves as commentary on the health of the reservation. Alcoholism is one of the most rampant diseases on reservations and the poet’s choice to have beer bottles provide Crow with a small stipend is quite poignant.

Crow battles through poverty, alcoholism, and even then, the transportation of the bottles is impossible. He is only able to carry one at a time, making his journeys back and forth endless.

7

Crow rides a pale horse
into a crowded powwow
but none of the Indian panic.
Damn, says Crow, I guess

they already live near the end of the world. In the final section of the poem Alexie brings the narrative to a close by referencing the end times as portrayed in Revelations. Crow rides into a “crowded powwow” on a “pale horse.”

In the scene Crow has come to represent death itself. In Revelations, during the coming of the four horsemen, one rides a pale horse. This rider is Death who now finds himself within the body of a Crow. While in other circumstances this entrance would be shocking to all who observed it, in this case “none of the Indian panic.”

None of the attendees are shocked to see this rider on his pale horse, it is as if they all knew what was coming and had learned to expect it a long time ago. Perhaps, as long ago as the days of Cain and Abel when Crow first understood his destiny.

4.4 ALEXIE SHERMAN: EVOLUTION

Poem Evolution

Buffalo Bill opens a pawn shop on the reservation
right across the border from the liquor store
and he stays open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week

and the Indians come running in with jewelry
television sets, a VCR, a full-length beaded buckskin outfit
It took Inez Muse 12 years to finish. Buffalo Bill

takes everything the Indians have to offer, keeps it
all catalogues and filed in a storage room. The Indians
pawn their hands, saving the thumbs for last, they pawn

their skeletons, falling endlessly from the skin
and when the last Indian has pawned everything

but his heart, Buffalo Bill takes that for twenty bucks

closes up the pawn shop, paints a new sign over the old
calls his venture THE MUSEUM OF NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURES
charges the Indians five bucks a head to enter.

The systematic oppression of the Native American People

Evolution is a powerful poem in which Sherman Alexie illustrates the systematic degradation of the Native American people and their culture. A character in the poem, Buffalo Bill sets up a pawn shop along the border of a Native American reservation. This pawn shop was intentionally set up in right across a liquor store. Buffalo Bill manages to take many valuables from the Native Americans in exchange for some money that the Native American people will eventually spend on the liquor store. The Native American people pawn away so many things that they are left with nothing but their hearts which is eventually sold to Buffalo Bill. Once all has been taken from the Native American community Buffalo Bill renames the shop and makes it a museum for Native American culture. Ironically, he then charges the Native Americans five dollars a person to enter.

Alexie's use of Buffalo Bill is significant in that it embodies imagery and reactions from both White Americans and Native Americans. Buffalo Bill is a historically significant character in that he was known to help "civilize the west". He was prominent in that sense. However, in this poem Sherman uses Buffalo Bill as a symbol that embodies America namely the American government and white people, in their ideals and most importantly in their actions. Through this poem, Alexie manages to create an extended metaphor that highlights the deceit that the American government played against the Native American community and the subsequent usurpation of land, identity, and self that they had to endure. Although this poem is written in a historical light, what occurred in the Native American community is still affecting them to this day. Indeed the Native American people are still suffering from the Buffalo Bills of today, also known as the American government, its oppressing laws and people. Native Americans are in a current oppressed state because they have had their land, their culture /traditions, and most importantly their sense of self (identity) systematically taken away from them.

It is a well-known fact that the Native American people had their land taken away from them by the European settlers that came here in the 17th century. It's a tale that many children hear in their history classes. But what many of them don't know (and what the American government is not teaching) is the way in which their lands have been taken away. There is no doubt that there have been some violent struggles for land between Native Americans and the European settlers but what is not shown is how mainly trickery (not violence) was used to steal their lands from them. The main trick that was used to get Native Americans to sign off their lands to the Europeans was the act of introducing alcohol. The Europeans knew about alcohol's ability to create addiction, intoxication, and impair a person's mind. So they used this as a tool to take away the valuables that Native Americans owned. Alexie illustrates this point when he writes the story of how "Buffalo Bill opens up a pawn shop on the reservation right across the border from the liquor store". Buffalo Bill knows that the Native American can't resist alcohol and systematically sets up a shop right across a liquor store so that the Native American people will feel tempted to go to the liquor stores after pawning their "jewelry, Television sets, VCR[s], and beaded buckskin outfits." He manages to make money from them "taking everything [they] have to offer" but we don't see how the Native American people benefit from this. Another thing worth noting is that Buffalo Bill "stays open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week". Alexie is showing how those who are plotting against the

Native Americans don't take a break, they seek to gain profit in any way they could at any time of the day.

Little by little the Native Americans begin to lose all they have. A dynamic shift can be seen in what the Native American people begin to pawn to Buffalo Bill. They start off with pawning material goods such as jewelry and electronics. This is symbolizing the land that was given to the American Government. But then we begin to see how artifacts of their culture are pawned away. Once all of the material belongings have been given away, Alexie shows the Native Americans pawning their "pawn their hands, saving the thumbs for last ...their skeletons, falling endlessly from the skin". The Native American people begin to sell their body parts, but it doesn't stop there. When everything, including their physical bodies have been lost "the last Indian pawn[s] everything but his heart, [and] Buffalo Bill takes that for twenty bucks". This is showing how after the Native Americans lost everything to the American government they ended up giving up their "hearts". Heart," here can be read as a core of the Native American identity.)The fact that the Buffalo Bill put a monetary value on the "heart" of Native Americans shows the lack of respect the American Government had for Native Americans as a people. To the American Government the identity of Native Americans was an item that they sought to profit from. We can still see this today.

Many aspects of the Native American culture are in-authentically displayed by Americans today. We can see this in movies, such as Disney's *Pocahontas*, in which a young Native American woman falls in love with a European settler. Although Pocahontas was an actual person in history the story of her falling in love with John Smith is a complete fabrication that John Smith (one of the European Settlers) made up himself.

In addition, there are Native American themed festivals and ceremonies that are run by whites in an effort to show "appreciation" and gain an "understanding" of the Native American culture when in reality this is nothing but an insult to the Native American culture. This is briefly discussed in the novel *Ceremony* by Leslie Silko, in which the mayor in the city of Gallup organizes a yearly Gallup Ceremonial in which Native American dancers (from different tribes) come and perform.

Also the issue of the term "Redskins" has come to light in recent news. Redskins is a derogatory term that the Native American community as a whole agrees on. Yet, the football team named after this term defends its name and says its name is an honor to the Native American tribesmen. The American people can't seem to fathom that there are some things Native American culture that they don't understand and that some things are downright offensive. Their insistence that they are honoring the Native American culture and that they are trying to show respect is a form of denial. Denial that there stripped these people of everything they had and are now slowly taking away their true identity.

These inaccurate representations of Native American culture portrayed in books, the media, and festivals creates an identity crisis in the Native American community in that they are not given a say in what their true heritage really is. This is an unusual but powerful form of oppression. The media and the government is the current driving force of the oppression and silencing of the Native American people. It is the modern day Buffalo Bill and although it's not clear what measures should be taken to put an end to this, it is necessary for the Native American to reclaim their identity and show the world who they truly are.

Pawn shops tend to represent sites of unorganized accumulation, places that gather anything and everything with the prospect of profiting from the vulnerability of others.

By enticing patrons with quick cash--an instantaneous materialization of value--the pawn shop successfully confiscates living objects only to deprive them of meaning by re-offering them for sale. Sherman Alexie adapts this story poignantly in "Evolution." Alexie centers the enterprise of objectification in the figure of Buffalo Bill. Also known as William F. Cody (1846-1917), Buffalo Bill, no longer just an historical figure but rather an icon now synonymous with the American West, did at least his share in exploiting Native Americans. An honorary website credits him with helping "his West to make the transition from a wild past to a progressive future." The establishment of a binary between "wild" and "progressive" subjugates Indians by placing them in the role of savages, a representation that American history has repeatedly thrust upon them. Despite supposedly championing the rights of Indians, Buffalo Bill certainly contributed to their cultural confinement in his "Wild West" shows, performances that "contained elements of the circus, the drama of the times, and the rodeo," offering a "unique form of theatrical entertainment. The Wild West Show had as its theoretical aim the presentation of a pageant of the settling and the taming of the West" (Kramer 87). Beyond mere amusement, the shows also served as advertising campaigns to lure settlers to the West to help further tame the "uncivilized" region:

The Wild West show was inaugurated in Omaha in 1883 with real cowboys and real Indians portraying the "real West." The show spent ten of its thirty years in Europe. In 1887 Buffalo Bill was a feature attraction at Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee. At the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893, only Egypt's gyrations rivaled the Wild West as the talk of Chicago. By the turn of the century, Buffalo Bill was probably the most famous and most recognizable man in the world. (American West)

Given the legendary status history has accorded him, Buffalo Bill may be compared to other colonizing heroes in Western culture, especially those who circulated a dominant ideology as their role in enhancing domination. His ability to disseminate representations stems not only from his ubiquitous stage presence but also from the extensive publicity that presented his image. "Certainly no individual, before the days of movies and radio, ever had such effective personal exploitation. For nearly half a century he was continuously held before the public, in the pages of nickel and dime novels, on the boards in blood and thunder melodrama and in that astounding Wild West Show which toured from the tank towns to the very thrones of Europe" (Walsh 18). The title of a 1928 book, *The Making of Buffalo Bill: A Study in Heroics*, suggests that the phenomenon of Buffalo Bill was as much created by an eager audience as it was by Bill Cody. Its collective gaze, like the gaze performed by museum-goers, constructed an impervious ideal: "When they gazed upon the man himself they saw that he looked the part of hero" (Walsh 17). Empowered with the iconic eminence of a hero, Buffalo Bill possesses the capacity and authority to reproduce and distribute cultural myths. His conception of the "real West" extends from his imaginary relation to American ideals that have themselves been formed by such hegemonic historical representations as Manifest Destiny. The posters advertising Buffalo Bill contribute to the representational subjugation of Indians, portraying them as features of a crude land that the military must rehabilitate and civilize.

The illustration depicts Buffalo Bill and his entourage riding in a "civilized" wagon through a tumultuous landscape. As the central focus, they marginalize the Indians on the borders of the painting, indeed cutting some of them off as they forcibly split the factions on both sides of their procession. The white riders stand taller than the encroaching Indians, a force that the advertisement construes as a threat to American progress. Such a hazard, the painting declares, must be vanquished by the collective gaze of American discourse, a gaze that restricts Native American culture to a territory of enclosure.

In "Evolution," Alexie addresses the compartmentalization and commodification of culture by supplanting Buffalo Bill's stage antics with a business venture:

Buffalo Bill opens up a pawn shop on the reservation Right across the border from the liquor store and he stays open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and the Indians come running in with jewelry, Television sets, a VCR, a full-length beaded buckskin outfit it took Inez Muse 12 years to finish. (1-6)

Alexie re-appropriates history to fit the mold of a "24 hours a day, 7 days a week" contemporaneity. Placing it across the "border," rather than across the street from the liquor store, Alexie reminds us of the laws forbidding the sale of alcohol on many Indian reservations and the physical and cultural boundaries that continue to encircle them. The liquor store further calls attention to the use of alcohol as a device of suppression. Numerous historical accounts tell of white residents getting Indians drunk as a negotiation strategy to convince them to sign treaties that would yield land (Barr 7). The high rate of alcoholism that persists among Native Americans occupies a prominent position throughout all of Alexie's work. In "Evolution," Alexie intimates that the money the Indians obtain from pawning themselves evaporates when they cross the street to purchase liquor. This vicious cycle in which everyone stands to profit from Indians except Indians themselves sustains itself because "Buffalo Bill / takes everything the Indians have to offer, keeps it / all catalogued and filed in a storage room" (6-8). Buffalo Bill scavenges all he can, classifying it with the commodifying gaze of a museum curator. The cycle culminates in Buffalo Bill's move from collecting to exhibition:

and when the last Indian has pawned everything but his heart, Buffalo Bill takes that for twenty bucks closes up the pawn shop, paints a new sign over the old calls his venture THE MUSEUM OF NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURES charges the Indians five bucks a head to enter. (11-15)

By seizing the "heart" of the last Indian and subsequently closing the doors of the pawn shop, Buffalo Bill seals out the possibility of repossession. This act deprives the culture of its lifeblood. The new museum freezes "NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURES" in place, on display, behind glass cases. The painted over sign recalls the years of government manipulation of Indians in which new treaties invalidated old ones that the U.S. no longer wished to honor. The glossing over of old wounds and forms of cultural exploitation--feeding a people someone else's idea of what they should be--cap this poem with the absurd reality of a perverse history.

Jane Tompkins comments on the manifestation of another absurd reality in her visit to a museum in Cody, Wyoming that enshrines Buffalo Bill himself. The existence of this memorial ironically shifts the position of the celebrated pioneer from curator to spectacle. However, unlike the cultural deprivation enacted by the museum of Alexie's poem, the Buffalo Bill Museum petrifies the superhero status of its namesake. Both instances cast a type of paralysis--The Museum of Native American Cultures frames its objects as an exhibition of a primitive culture, a display of dry bones; The Buffalo Bill Museum, as Tompkins tells us, galvanized the golden image of an American icon:

The Buffalo Bill Museum envelops you in an array of textures, colors, shapes, sizes, forms. The fuzzy brown bulk of a buffalo's hump, the sparkling diamonds in a stickpin, the brilliant colors of the posters--there's something about the cacophonous mixture that makes you want to walk in and be surrounded by it, as if you were going into a child's adventure story. It all appeals to the desire to be transported, to pretend for a little while that we're cowboys or cowgirls; it's a museum where fantasy can take over. In this respect, it is true to the character of Buffalo Bill's life. (Tompkins 530)

The fantasy of Buffalo Bill's life is the fantasy projected onto it by the gaze of a hungry audience. For years Americans and viewers around the world stood captivated by the Wild West Show, feeding off its depictions of conquest, control, and violence. Tompkins gives us the severe yet appropriate metaphor that "museums are a form of cannibalism made safe for polite society," serving as venues that "cater to the urge to absorb the life of another into one's own life" (533). This remark accords with an attitude Alexie voices throughout his work. The dominant culture devours its subordinates to sustain its stance as an enforcer. "The objects in museums preserve for us a source of life from which we need to nourish ourselves when the resources that would normally supply us have run dry" (Tompkins 533). The act of sapping resources from another culture again points to the narrative of "Evolution," a title that drips with the irony of the concept of civilization. A civilized culture, Alexie implies, must "evolve" enough to perfect the practice of stealing and plundering other cultures for the purpose of presenting them as uncivilized behind the glass case of the museum. We too, Tompkins reminds us, are onlookers. "We stand beside the bones and skins and hooves of beings that were once alive, or stare fixedly at their painted images. Indeed our visit is only a safer form of the same enterprise" (533) rehearsed by Buffalo Bill's Wild West show--cultural objectification and destruction.

4.5 MAJOR THEMES AND ASPECTS OF STUDY

"Evolution" features the American capitalist culture and the social Darwinism used by European settlers in the form of "ethnic cleansing". This word implies – to wipe off the unfitted group of people from the face of Earth by the act of killing or marginalizing them. There is "Buffalo Bill" who opens a pawn shop in the Reservation and exploits Native Americans, by giving them less money in return for their goods. After he has drained them out of their goods, he opens a museum with their stuff and charges 5 bucks per head to let them see their own stuff (dark comedy).

4.6 LET US SUM UP

Alexi Sherman brings up new and diverse issues and themes through his literary works in American literature. Out of the two poems, *Crow Testament* by Sherman Alexie speaks on the hardships of Native Americans through its seven sections. You must have noticed that each of these sections is divided into shorter stanzas that range from one to four lines. The poem has no regulated rhyme scheme, but it does follow a specific pattern of words. The poem *Crow Testament* uses 'crow' to stand in as a symbol for the Native populations of the Americas and Alexie takes the reader through varying symbols representing the white settlers, and the present white majority of America. Likewise, *Evolution* is equally a powerful poem in which Sherman Alexie illustrates the systematic degradation of the Native American people and their culture. In this poem. Alexie addresses the compartmentalization and commodification of culture by supplanting Buffalo Bill's stage antics with a business venture. It is expected that you must have grasped the themes and issues that the poet has tried to underline and emphasise.

4.7 EXERCISES

1. What are the chief images and symbols used in the poem?
2. What is the central idea(s) of the poem?
3. Do you think that Alexie Sherman demonstrated a social vision through his poem?

Comment on.

4.8 FURTHER READINGS

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