

# **Addressing Shared Stereotypes of Native Americans and Veterans in a Composition Course's Reading Sequence**

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In American culture, Native Americans/Indigenous Peoples and veterans face a number of related labels, resulting in these groups' sense of marginalization today. In this presentation, I am going to speak about a Composition I course having a student veteran cohort at Southeastern Oklahoma State University. In this class, students read Sherman Alexie's story, "What You Have Pawned I Will Redeem" (2003). This text, which we covered, represents a seminal narrative that highlights stereotypes that Native Americans face, ones that, in many cases, society attributes to veterans similarly. After summarizing this story, I will discuss how Alexie, as well as Native American students and student veterans in my class, problematized the various stereotypes applied to both groups and balanced them with narrative devices, such as humor and a focus on contrasting traits, including having pride in one's culture and the adopting of a spirit of perseverance.

At Southeastern Oklahoma State University, thirty percent of students represent Native Americans. Likewise, from the area, many student veterans attend college at Southeastern. Of any state, Oklahoma has the largest number of citizens who join the military comparably. In light of the university's student population context, over the past two years, I have offered composition courses geared toward a veteran cohort, as well other students having an interest in military-themed material. In the Composition I course that I employ as an example for this presentation, students identified the common, overlapping representations of both Native Americans and veterans that have served to define these populations in sometimes problematic ways in our society. By reading work by authors, such as Alexie, as well as telling their own stories, students called attention to the media-based and literary portrayals of Native Americans and veterans that have acted to disenfranchise these groups.

Such negative pictures of Native Americans and veterans that students and I discussed included those of being uneducated, homeless, poverty-stricken, warring, violent, silent or uncommunicative, mentally ill, alcoholic, and consumed with alternate realities as connected to wild dream states or episodes related to post-traumatic stress disorder. Utilizing Alexie's story, "What You Have Pawned I Will Redeem," I will offer some examples of these stereotypes that the author also applies to Native Americans in the story. Then, I will connect these traits with similar attributes that society has associated with veterans.

In “What You Have Pawned I Will Redeem,” Jackson Jackson is a homeless, middle-aged, Spokane Indian. He moved to Seattle originally in order to attend college but flunked out soon after. He was married a number of times, had children, and worked a series of blue-collar jobs before “going crazy” (Alexie). Jackson represents an anti-hero, who is nevertheless on a quest to reconnect with his homeland and heritage by regaining possession of his grandmother’s regalia, which will link him to his ancestral, cultural identity. On the way, he is generous to other homeless characters that have little themselves. In an interview, Alexie explained that in creating Jackson, he “wanted a very ordinary protagonist, an ordinary hero, and that was what was interesting to [him] in writing this—the idea about some stumblebum trying to do something amazing” (Dellinger).

There are some ready comparisons between Jackson, a Native American homeless man, and the representative homeless veteran. Jackson is middle-aged. In turn, over forty percent of homeless veterans are between the ages of thirty-one and fifty (Shaw). Jackson has been married and divorced numerous times, and he now lives alone. Likewise, veterans marry at lower rates and divorce at higher percentages than the general population; moreover, twenty percent live alone (Green Doors). Jackson is from a reservation, and ninety-six percent of homeless veteran are also single men from economically disadvantaged communities (Green Doors), while twenty percent of homeless adult males represent veterans (National Coalition for Homeless Veterans). Presently, Jackson lives in Seattle. Likewise, sixty-eight percent of homeless veterans also live in large cities (National Coalition).

As an important trope located within “What You Have Pawned I Will Redeem,” Jackson depicts himself as uneducated. Still, the fact that he failed in college is a circumstance that he blames on himself. He does not mention whether any teachers or administrators attempted to help him or to intervene in circumstances that might have prevented him from continuing. Sometimes, student veterans often feel a sense of alienation at the university and have problems with their transition process to academia, too.

Second, Jackson explains to the audience what it is to be homeless and poverty-stricken, despite the fact that his “people have lived within a one-hundred-mile radius of Spokane, Washington, for at least ten thousand years” (Alexie). In fact, Jackson begins his story with the line, “One day you have a home and the next you don’t” (Alexie). He calls himself a “functional” homeless person and explains that his homelessness is “probably the only thing [he’s] ever been good at” (Alexie). Jackson does not divulge the reason for his homelessness, which he calls a “secret” (Alexie). Nonetheless, it is no mystery that the Native Americans were removed from their ancestral lands and left dislocated both literally and culturally. Interestingly enough, veterans, who also fought for their country and homeland, may not find a place to belong when they return either, with a number of veterans remaining homeless, especially from the Vietnam Era, in our country today. Some Native Americans reside on reservations or in rural areas, where access to services, educational opportunities, and high-paying jobs are limited. Comparatively, in Seattle, Jackson lives a day-to-day existence on a few dollars, which he gains by doing odd jobs, steals from other homeless folk, or gets from encounters with the public as a measure of

charity. For instance, in the story, the pawnbroker gives Jackson a day to find almost a thousand dollars to buy back his grandmother's regalia, which represents Jackson's overall goal. However, Jackson is only able to return with the original five dollars with which he entered this store, so the pawnbroker decides to sell it to him for that price in an effort to create some manner of exchange, even if the regalia was stolen.

In the story, as a would-be knight, Jackson exists on a figurative battleground, where he has been living in dangerous conditions in the city as a homeless person for the past six years. For example, at one point, Jackson even wakes up lying on a railroad track in danger of being run over. Comparatively, approximately a third of homeless veterans have been stationed in a war zone, and two-thirds were involved in the military for three or more years (Shaw). Like with Jackson's situation, the average homeless veteran also remains homeless for a period of six years, compared to four years for civilians (Green Doors).

Next, as a trope, some Native Americans in Alexie's piece are portrayed as warring or violent. For instance, the Native Americans at the bar get into a fight involving most of the patrons. Still, they are not portrayed as cruel in enacting their fighting tendencies, unlike one policeman of whom Jackson hears, who beats a civilian. Instead, Jackson envisions his cause of getting back his grandmother's regalia as being a noble one. He says, "I'm on a mission here. I want to be a hero, you know? I want to win it back, like a knight" (Alexie). Here, Jackson identifies himself as a soldier of sorts, intent on a mission for the betterment of his culture, not necessarily himself.

Then, the story shows Native Americans as being silent or uncommunicative. Jackson, unable to form relationships, does not have any ties to his homeland, children, or family. The friendships he does make seem transient and can change daily, with characters disappearing without warning. Moreover, Jackson suggests that some who desire to listen to Native American stories only want to capitalize on them for their own benefit, financial or otherwise. Thus, what would be his rationale for telling his story to an audience? Accordingly, Jackson says, "I'm not going to tell you my particular reasons for being homeless, because it's my secret story, and Indians have to work hard to keep secrets from hungry white folks" (Alexie). Like Jackson, veterans, too, may be wary that others will want them to share the stories that they do not wish to tell or verbalize.

Finally, we see that Alexie depicts Native Americans as being mentally ill, alcoholic, and consumed with alternate realities connected to dream states. Jackson admits that at some point before the story has even begun, he has gone "crazy." Providing more detail concerning his mental illness, Jackson also discloses that he has been diagnosed with asocial disorder. Still, he explains that he has "never hurt another human being . . . physically," being only a "boring heartbreaker," not a malicious "serial killer or something" (Alexie). Proceedingly, in the tale, as an alcoholic, Jackson drinks excessively twice in the same twenty-four hour period. In fact, there are two episodes related to his drinking in excess, with the latter leading to a bar fight scene and both to Jackson waking up the following day after having passed out from drinking. Connected to the second occurrence, a cop must take Jackson to the detox facility, where he can regain sobriety. Still, Jackson

argues, with ironic humor, that this “place is awful. . . . It's full of drunk Indians” (Alexie). Then, as an antihero involved in a quest, Jackson has also discovered a magical pawnshop containing his grandmother’s regalia, one that later disappears from the rest of the area’s store fronts. Similarly, associated with the same traits of Jackson, approximately two-thirds of homeless veterans suffer from substance abuse (Shaw), and fifty percent have a serious mental illness (National Coalition). Likewise, veterans are often connected to episodes related to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), even though the majority have not been diagnosed with PTSD.

Even though Jackson has learned how to become an “effective” homeless person in the story and to invoke humor in its telling, he does not make a transition out of this lifestyle by the end. Comparatively, for compensation for their time in the military, some veterans learn skills that do not transfer to the civilian world either (Shaw). Homeless veterans are associated with risk factors, such as poverty, lack of help from social groups and networks (Shaw), and a lack of proper or affordable housing (National Coalition for Homeless Veterans). Moreover, returning veterans have twice as great of a chance of ending up homeless as other civilians (Shaw).

As a character that Alexie draws in the story, “What You Have Pawned I Will Redeem,” Jackson represents a victim of multiple stereotypes as described here. However, Jackson is able to portray himself repeatedly not only as a successful “Indian” but also as a single person with a distinct background in the piece. Jackson sometimes describes his experiences in connection with his belonging to a larger framework. Still, he also sets himself apart from other Indians and Indian groups to stand alone and independently. Thus, through these dual methods of characterization, Jackson is able to express his total identity. Moreover, Jackson's sense of wit and ironical commentary allow him to highlight the various “truths” that he wishes to share with listeners concerning his society. In his tale, Alexie relies on humor to combat the labels socially applied to Native Americans. In an interview about the story, he states, “[B]ecause as Indians we've been so stereotyped and maligned and oppressed and abused, in acts and deed, in action and word, we seek literature that cheers us in some way, that acts as some sort of antidote, rather than an examination of us, and an interrogation of us. I mean, Indians don't necessarily want to be interrogated by our own art, we want to be cheered” (Dellinger).

Thematically, “What You Pawn I Will Redeem” is Alexie's stylistic attempt to play with and subvert the common motifs of the “lone Indian” and the “noble savage” that pervade much of American literature. In his portrayal of Jackson, Alexie goes beyond the stock images involving Native Americans and allows the character to develop a voice beyond that of his cultural caricature as being one of an individual. In describing Seattle’s homeless Indians, Jackson explains that the city goes mostly pass by them without offering a glance, but they occasionally give “a look of anger or disgust or even sadness at the terrible fate of the noble savage” (Alexie). Nonetheless, Jackson contends that “we have dreams and families” like anyone else” (Alexie). Likewise, at the university, the students and I used our class as a way to move beyond stereotypes of veterans and see them as individual beings. By interrogating representations of Native Americans and veterans, as well as understanding the populations’ demographic patterns, ones based on culturally and

historically founded realities, students generated a more informed and historically led understanding of the Native Americans and veterans in our area. Consequently, students were able to cast these groups in often celebratory lights instead of applying a necessarily deficit model to them in their analyses of the course materials.

As audience members attending this session now, please write down any stereotypes of which you have knowledge from the news, media, or other locations for Native Americans. Also, note stereotypes of which you have knowledge from the news, media, or other locations for veterans. To explain, I want to reiterate that stereotypes are essentializing descriptors, and they can be either seemingly “positive” or negative.

Finally, we will have a time for dialogue. With our group, please discuss any instances in which you and your students have had discussions about Native Americans in your classroom. Then, please discuss any instances in which you and your students have had conversations about veterans in your classroom. What were the results? How were these groups described?

## **Works Cited**

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