

Your First Name

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English 9 Literary Analysis

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Independent Reading Assignment:

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian

In Sherman Alexie's The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian, Junior narrates his transition from a tribal school (Wellpinit) on the Spokane Reservation to an all-white school (Reardan). The exposition unfolds explaining Junior's brain condition that caused physical deformities as well as seizure activity. He also explains that at fourteen, he has a stutter and a lisp. Aside from Rowdy (the Rez troublemaker), Junior does not have any friends. Poverty makes life really difficult for Indians on the Reservation. In the rising action, Junior and Rowdy go to a powwow, where three Andruss brothers (30 years old) beat up Junior. Rowdy stands up for Junior by cutting off their braids. At school, Junior gets in trouble for throwing a book at Mr. P (a white, geometry teacher at the Rez). He threw the book at him because his mother's name was in the text. This is symbolic of financial inequity in school systems on the Rez. Mr. P says that if you want hope, you must leave the Rez. So, Junior asks his parents if he can transfer to the all-white school in Reardan. While he faces a lot of challenges fitting in initially, Junior soon joins the basketball team, befriends Gordy (the geek at Reardan), and begins dating Penelope (allegedly the prettiest girl at the school, who also has a body image issue). Several events unfold, including: Junior standing up to the racist Mr. Dodge, Junior attending the Reardan dance, and family drama at home revolving around his sister leaving. The climatic point in the novel is when Junior (playing for Reardan's basketball team) has to play against his former best friend, Rowdy, and Wellpinit's basketball team. This is the highest point of conflict, because Junior realizes that by defeating Wellpinit, he suffered more loss and alienation from his tribe. The falling action further intensifies this notion of losing. Grandmother Spirit is hit and killed by a drunk driver. Eugene is shot and killed over the last sip of wine. Mary dies when her trailer catches fire, because she is too intoxicated to realize it. Junior realizes that all Rez families are unhappy for the same reason: alcohol. In the resolution, Rowdy and Junior find peace with their differences and Junior is able to maintain his Indian identity, while venturing into a world dominated by white privilege. In this text, dynamic characters include: Rowdy, Junior, Penelope, Roger, Gordy, and Mr. P. Rowdy is a dynamic character because he goes from not understanding Junior's choices for leaving and hating him for it to accepting him as a nomadic part of their tribe. In this text, the static characters include: Agnes Adams, Dad, Coach, Grandmother Spirit, Mr. Dodge, Earl, Ted, Eugene, and Bobby. Eugene is a static character, because the reader never gets the opportunity to see him develop in the text. He is shot by Bobby. **THESIS STATEMENT:** In Sherman Alexie's The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian, Junior represents the struggle that many individuals face when functioning in a Western world, but still maintain traditional American Indian identity.

While the explicit language and some areas of the text were unsettling, I respected this text for its complex view of contemporary Native American life. Alexie skillfully provides a realistic view of the effects of alcoholism. He writes, "Tolstoy wrote, 'Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.' Well, I hate to argue with a Russian genius, but Tolstoy didn't know Indians. And he didn't know that all Indian families are unhappy for the same exact reason: the fricking booze" (Alexie 200). As mentioned in the summary, Junior loses his grandmother, sister, and his dad's best friend to alcohol or alcohol-related events. In addition, the irregularity and instability in Junior's family revolves around his father's drinking problem. I appreciate the incorporation of this throughout, because it is something that could be versatile and

applicable to the lives of many living on reservations or not. I commend Alexie for his analysis and critical approach towards highlighting discrepancies in school systems. He writes, “My school and my tribe are so poor and sad that we have to study from the same dang books our parents studied from. That is absolutely the saddest thing in the world” (Alexie 31). This shows that tribal schools often do not have the funds to compete with other school systems. This continues a cycle of poverty on the reservation. In a knowledge-based economy, education is pertinent. I like that he includes all factors that lead to the cycle of poverty. It makes this text more realistic. Lastly, I appreciate the incorporation of the collective sense of family and traditional identity on the reservation. I am a realist, which means a lot of what I find important displays a negative outlook. However, I also think it is important, to recognize the positive aspects that also infiltrate into the text. Alexie writes from Junior’s narration, “On the rez, you know every kid’s father, mother, grandparents, dog, cat, and shoe size. I mean, yeah, Indians are screwed up, but we’re really close to each other. We KNOW each other. Everybody knows everybody” (Alexie 153). Despite the effects of alcoholism and inequity and poverty, Alexie does not fail to emphasize the collective support system on the Rez.

Due to the depth of the ideologies in this text and the employment of characterization, I would suggest this novel to someone who enjoys an easy read with a complex philosophical and psychological premise. This novel sheds insight into the lives of contemporary Native Americans struggling to live in two worlds at once- the Western world (which dictates educational and economic policy) and the traditional world (in this case- the Spokane world). It is the same overlap that allows individuals of all backgrounds to identify in some way with this text. From alcoholism and death, to high school dances and everlasting friendships, this text skillfully strikes a balance between the positive and negative aspects that plague and drive life. However, with all of that being said, to fully appreciate the depth of this text beyond the writing style, one must attain a level of maturity, insight, and experience. I would suggest that all education majors read this text as well as individuals who would like to pursue a wider knowledge of Native American perspective and culture.