

Son of the morning star



Son of the Morning Star Analysis Evan S. Connell has a unique writing style. While most stories are told from beginning to end, *Son of the Morning Star: Custer and The Little Bighorn* (North Point Press, 1984) begins with the aftermath of The Battle of the Little Bighorn. It is then followed by numerous events which led up to this battle. Connell chose this non-linear writing style in order to distribute the details he finds most fascinating and interesting to share with his audience. Using the conclusion of the battle as the introduction of the narrative creates a suspenseful tone.

In the beginning of the story, the setting is the battle field which The Battle of the Little Bighorn had taken place a few days earlier. Lieutenant James Bradley has led his troops to the land where they discover the corpses of which they believe are General George Armstrong Custer's troops. Custer himself was nowhere in sight. Even after a reward was offered upon his retrieval he could not be found. The deserted battle field raised questions and the men began to imagine what had happened days prior to their arrival.

The author writes, " While discussing the day's events around a campfire most infantrymen predicted more unpleasant news..." (pg. 3) The troops discovered a woman who was present during the battle and described to them what she had witnessed. The woman's recollection of her experience opens up the story to a chronicle of the events which happened during the battle. The reader is given details regarding to Custer's entrance and also each opponent's fighting style: " Instead, Reno's men dismounted and formed a skirmish line. Then they began to retreat. They ran very fast, she said, dropping guns and cartridges.

She was disgusted by the conduct of these whites, saying they must have been seized with panic worse than that which seized her own people. " (pg. 7) As the plot approaches its conclusion, the reader is taken back to the aftermath of the battle and receives a tale told by a Cheyenne woman named Kate Bighead. She delivered a short story about the corpses she saw laying on the battlefield, one in particular she identified as General Custer: She said two Southern Cheyenne women were at the Little Bighorn and when the fighting ended they went to the battlefield.

They saw Custer. They knew him well...they recognized him even though his hair was short and face was dirty. (pg. 422) Although the plot of this story does not have a chronological structure, it develops a more personal connection because the characters in the story are directly speaking to the audience as they give their personal accounts on the battle. For example, it had already been said that Reno was dead; however, an outburst made by Reno himself is mentioned shortly after. " The major was swigging at a flask when DeRudio splashed by. What are you trying to do? ' Reno asked. ' Drown me before I am killed? '" (pg. 50) Evan S. Connell's work, *Son of the Morning Star* is an extraordinary and captivating narrative. He has an acquiring mind and was not afraid to step away from the traditional form of writing. Behind the chaos there is meaning. The writing style presented in this story is untraditional which could possibly lose the attention of the reader; however, this was a valid decision. ? Based on its cover the reader might think that the entire story is about General Custer and his troops.

Despite expectations, the audience actually catches a glimpse of both the lives of Custer as well as his opponents. The author gives the reader a little

information on the background of Crazy Horse, formerly known as Curly. "Curly did not reveal this manifestation to anybody until he was sixteen and ready to become a warrior...Except for moccasins and breechcloth he rode naked." (pg. 67) The author also gives the reader the opportunity to read a few journal entries about Crazy Horse. These entries come from the diary of Jesse Lee, "Saturday, Sept. th, 1877. Everything is quiet and I think will remain so. Crazy Horse's body was brought to this agency and put on a little platform, Indian fashion, on the hill overlooking the post, not half a mile away." (pg. 75) He also includes a background on Chief Gall as well, providing facts about his birthplace and family. For example, he writes, "He was not a hereditary chief. The family seems to have been undistinguished, and because his father died at an early age the boy was regarded more with sympathy than respect.

So it appears that not through any legacy did he become a chieftain..." (pg. 376) Throughout the story, the audience develops an idea of the motives of the Native Americans during the battle. The reader becomes aware of what Sitting Bull was thinking: If Sitting Bull did indeed call off the attack it was not because of any affection for whites, who, he hated with abiding and impenetrable rancor, but because he understood how vindictive they could be. If all the soldiers were slaughtered the whites would insist upon another battle... (pg. 6) The audience was not only given an idea of what they were thinking before the battle. The author also makes a point to include a song that the Indians wrote after they had defeated General Custer and his men, "At that time the Indians did not realized they had fought Custer...when they found out, they sang about him. David Humphreys Miller transcribed one

such kill-song..." (pg. 54) With the erudition given in the story, the reader concludes that the Native American leaders were fully developed human beings. Connell includes information regarding Chief Crazy Horse's smart battle technique.

For example, there are quotations given from a journalist: At critical moments Crazy Horse would dismount before shooting: " He is the only Indian I ever knew who did that often...he didn't like to start a battle unless he had it all planned out in his head and knew he was going to win. (pg. 63) Chief Gall was compared to other great leaders and his leadership skills are described by his people including Lieutenant Godfrey, " He perceived Gall as a man of tremendous character natural ability, and great common sense, a chief whose massive physiognomy reminded him of Daniel Webster. (pg. 375) The comments made about these two leaders in particular demonstrate their equality of humanity compared to Custer's men. Not only does he give details about the lives of the Native Americans but Connell also gives insight on the lives of those who fought with General Custer. The reader is given an idea of the reputation and trial of Benteen. For example, " In this, that Major Frederick W. Benteen, Ninth Cavalry when in command of the Post of Fort Du Chesne, Utah, was found drunk...Specifications 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th and 6th were identical, only the dates changed. (pg. 34) The reader also gathers information about Major Marcus Reno regarding his leadership and his behavior thus similar to that of Benteen's. " Reno got demerits easily, almost deliberately..." (pg. 40) He also writes, " At least it failed to mollify the exasperated colonel because Reno found himself saddled with another charge..." (pg. 45) Although a great deal of this piece is devoted to the lives

and motives of the Native Americans, the author also takes time to write about Custer's men as well.

Including battle experience as well as family history, Connell captures the importance of The Battle of the Little Bighorn. Throughout the non-linear story, the reader is taken back and forth between stories about Custer's challengers and his troops. The author's objectivity is apparent because the reader is given the opportunity to capture the battle from both perspectives. ? Before The Battle of the Little Bighorn, General Custer had celebrated many victories; however, this battle ended in tragedy.

Unaware of what caused the downfall at Little Bighorn, many have speculated possible causes of Custer's defeat. These possibilities include Custer's sanity, his confidence and other stereotypes. In the story, Connell's collection of stories told by Sioux woman and other survivors give the reader ideas of what might have been the cause of this disastrous downfall. When looking back on the battle a discussion between an Indian and General H. L. Scott reveals a possible cause of this defeat.

For example, Connell writes: During subsequent conversations Feather Earring emphasized that if Custer had approached diplomatically the Indians would have gone back to the reservations...General Scott observed that such a method of dealing with the hostiles had not occurred to anybody. (pg. 414) Shortly after this discussion more information about Custer's skewed communication with the Indians is unveiled. If this miscommunication had never occurred the battle would have been avoided altogether.

A Sioux chief gives his recollection on the events occurring prior to the battle: He asked Custer to promise that he would not fight the Sioux. Custer
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promised...After we got through talking, he soon left the agency, and we soon heard that he was fighting the Indians and that he and all his men were killed. If Custer had given us time we would have gone out ahead of him, but he did not give us time. If we had gone out ahead of Custer he would not have lost himself not would his men have been killed. (pg. 415) The attack had been approved by his officers, however, there had been some objections.

Some of his troops did not believe the plan was logical but Custer's confidence does appear to take over his mentality. He ignores a suggestion made by Gibbon, " Custer, instead of proceeding at once into the valley of the Little Big Horn, even should the trail lead there, should continue on up the Rosebud, get closer to the mountains..." (pg. 255-256) Losing touch with reality Custer continues to explain his plan to attack, " the combined forces would count coup on Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, Gall...and all the rest" (pg. 56) Custer's plan includes a victory rather than an alternative in case of any misfortune, he left no room for the unexpected. Although Custer's plan seemed a little unrealistic his stubbornness was not the only thing to lead to the downfall at Little Bighorn. Many troops give their comments regarding Major Reno's choice of leadership, " several military analysts believe Reno should have stayed there instead of doing what he did. They point out that his battalion so near the village would have engaged a great many warriors, thus allowing Custer's plan to unfold. " (pg.) It is also mentioned that Reno had an altercation with one of the Indians which he encountered, " Reno misunderstood a figure of speech, taking I as an insult, and threatened to shoot High Bear-who responded by drawing a knife. Another scout, invoking

Custer's name, jumped between them and managed to prevent a bloody settlement. " (pg. 10) Not only was Reno's lack of intuition a cause of defeat but it is also possible that his belligerent temperament lead to Custer's labefaction. After analyzing the attitudes and actions of Custer and his troops, the reader can infer many causes that led to this disastrous defeat.

Based on the strategic analysts' comments, Reno could have used better instincts when leading his men into battle. It is possible that if the major would have had stronger intuition Custer's men would not have suffered as much as they did. The reader can conclude that there was a sense of overconfidence made not only by Major Reno but Custer as well; however, if Custer had kept his promise to Sioux the entire battle could have been avoided. Custer and his five companies certainly underestimated their Native American opponents.