

Resurfacing in sherman alexie's flight



2007 American literature novel, *Flight*, is the story of a foster kid with zero hope, however Sherman Alexie's (Spokane/Coeur d'Alene) unique approach makes it anything but an ordinary bildungsroman. Unlike in a conventional coming of age novel where readers witness the protagonist gaining maturity with difficulty, time traveling forces readers to question their own prejudices and fundamentals to realize what is important. First person protagonist narrator Zits was birthed as a half-breed Native American, yet believes he has no race, no home, no family, which he considers are the main components of someone's identity. Zits is sent time traveling to learn of Indian settlements in contemporary America, historically reliable thanks to Alexie's understanding of life on a reservation due to being raised on one (Spokane/ Coeur d'Alene). Zits fails to realize in the moment that his travel education will shape him into a new person, or for a matter of fact, the person who he was inside all along. Zits transforms not only externally by getting rid of his acne that gave him his name, but he also emerges from the time travels independent of who he was on page one. His time-treks bring Zits into contact with violence from people of multiple skin colors, into how such anger is stemmed from misconceptions of people, and further into how Zits has been wrongly identifying the people around him, as well as himself. The ability to see conflicts from both sides- American and Indian- opens the door to the idea that no one is defined by their cultural identity, but moreover by their actions and behavior during their life. This shows that there is not such a big difference between Indians and Americans, which is crucial for Zits to determine what type of life he is going to live.

Flight is a narrative with a community of different voices, each of whom embodies a different representation of the past that Zits initially lacks accurate knowledge of. The first authentic account takes place in the mid-1970s, where Zits is in the white body of a FBI agent on the Red River Indian Reservation. Since Alexie selectively chose historical occasions that would sound familiar to the reader, it would not be out of the ordinary for him or her to link the first encounter with the infamous battle between IRON, the Indigenous Rights Now! Movement, and HAMMER, the traitor tribal government officials who later teamed with the FBI. In this section, Zits acts as Hank Storm and witnesses his fellow agent's racist attitude towards Indians: " I wish Custer would have killed a few more of these damn tepee creepers" (43). Zits is confused to see that his partners are friendly with Elk and Horse, two Indians supposedly part of IRON. These two pull an Indian named Junior out of the trunk of their car and long story short, Hank Storm's partner shoots Junior without blinking when the captive refuses to speak. What is significant about this scene is that Zits does not witness the death of Junior without taking a hit himself. The white man wants to leave the dead body out to rot, while Elk advocates the morally right action that he was taught: " He's a traditionalist... his soul won't get to Heaven if we don't bury him the Indian way" (52). Basically, Elk and Horse torture and kill Junior and then moments later give him a just burial. Zits learns how closely related violence and compassion are, but is bewildered by it. It is normal for the narrator to feel nauseous from watching someone die, yet it is a sign of maturation in his journey that he pinpoints how unnecessary violence is even though it is still carried out by many. It is interesting to see both Native and white sides shine through Zits in this scene, as he watches Native burial

culture while feeling the guilt of a white man after a killing an Indian. Zits is the role of good and evil- of compassion and violence- attaining the guilt necessary for understanding where racial inconsistencies accrue from, and diminishing the gap of the us versus them scenario which has been restraining him from identifying himself.

Zits learns of the violence capable of all people, but time traveling dives deeper into this concept by suggesting that misconceptions are often the cause. To say that Zits is the average teenager would be unfair, given his divided struggle between Native ethnology and the unsympathetic white world. His Irish mother died when he was young, his Indian father left the son before they met, and as Zits became more aware of the atmosphere he lived in, he began to actively resent the whites that constantly stereotyped him. He was stereotyped for an Indian race that he did not even believe to be his, because he linked the abandonment of his father with the abandonment of Indian identity. Given his frustration derived from mislabeling, Zits' anger stems from misconceptions in contemporary America about Native Americans technically like him, which are prevalent throughout history. By way of illustration, one of his body-migrations is into a thirteen-year old Indian boy, presumed to be amidst Custer's Last Stand at the Battle of Little Bighorn in 1876. At the end of the battle, the Indian boy's dad pins down a young white soldier and insists that Zits wants revenge on him and must give the white soldier what he deserves; what he deserves for rough actions of a totally different white man on the Indian boy. Generalization comes into play here as the Indian boy's dad associates all white people as enemies. The innocent young soldier did nothing directly towards the Indian boy, yet

the sight of his white face inflicts the desire for revenge in the dad, causing Zits to question, “ Is revenge a circle inside of a circle inside of a circle?” (77) The pressure from the dad “ to be a warrior” forces Zits to face his own sentiments about revenge (78). After the distress that whites caused on Indians historically, such as the theft of perfect lands and uncanny brutality on them, Zits virtually could have taken this as an opportunity to retaliate. But no. He hesitates and the scene ends with him at a cross roads about what to do, where he eventually closes his eyes and is transported out. Alexie suggests Zits does not kill this soldier for the sake of the guilt he would have. Given his life-long hatred of whites and his destructive intentions early in the novel at the bank, readers initially would have predicted Zits to have no regrets killing this guy. However, the guilt Zits endures from simply considering the murder motivates him to measure the value of revenge when solving predicaments. In the end of the novel, Alexie reevaluates how the costs of revenge outweigh its benefits and now inclined to this analysis, Zits wants to live a life unmotivated by the resentments of people before and around him- a life renouncing violence.

The final person Zits embodies is his father, at the same time as when the novel started, and it is here that time traveling proves to Zits that everyone has their own inner conflicts- everyone is not so different after all. Through the eyes of Hank, Indian boy, Gus, and Jimmy, he gets a taste of being white and being red skin, but while he is in his father's body, everything he has learned meshes together. A homeless, alcoholic man on the streets near Seattle, Zits knows that his man blames whites for his condition. This is exemplified when he grows angrier and angrier as a kind white woman offers

help to him and again when he hates fellow homeless people who do not pay any attention to him. Zits does not know who the man is exactly until seeing what is in his pocket- a picture of five-year-old Zits. Given his lifelong disgust for the man who left his mom and him at birth, he has an urge to kill the body but decides to pry information from it instead. The memory is revealed of the hospital waiting room fifteen years prior. Nervous and upset while awaiting the birth of his son, Zits's father had an anecdote of his own in mind: when he was a young boy he was unable to satisfy his dad and therefore forced to repeat, " I ain't worth shit" (155). This was repeated so often that he was traumatized so badly that he believed it. All he wanted was to be loved and forgiven. This in mind, while pacing the halls of the hospital, he does not feel worthy of being a father so he runs away. All Zits's life he thought that his dad was simply shallow and did not care about Zits or his mom. In reality, he cared too much to let them suffer with having a dad who " ain't worth shit". Serving as a resolution to his hatred for his dad, traveling in time to this point shows Zits the potential life he could have if he does not take responsibility for the resentments he has, such as to white society and for those who have a nicer complexion than him. Zits applies his newly obtained perspective in the concluding chapters of the novel.

This novel is a pleading model that we are all the same people- no matter what color skin, we are all capable of violence, we are all capable of forgiveness. Being able to understand his dad's thoughts allows him to forgive and relate that everyone has resentments of their own, so the results of those should not be what defines a person. Instead, it should be how people handle those that determine the type of person someone is. Zits

takes this to heart, as seen within the walls of his final foster house. The whole novel has the narrator identifying himself by the surface as “ Zits,” a red face with much shame attached to it. In a smile-jerking scene, Zits’s newest foster mom, Officer Dave’s loving sister-in-law, teaches him about face-clearing products and when she promises that he will have clear skin, he cries. With this, he introduces his new desire to be called his real name, Michael. Having an acne-free face in the positive atmosphere of warm parents, a new beginning is underway, both literally and symbolically. Now able to look at people and not feeling the need to hold grudges for things out of his control, are weights off Michael’s shoulders.

Time traveling has forced Zits to confront his feelings of violence, anger, and identity and by determining that they are relatable for everyone, it is revealed that the difference between whiteness and Indianness is not as great as he- or most of contemporary America- has thought. Even after the resurfacing of a clear face, there will scars left behind, but that is okay, per Zits. Red scars represent the Indian culture from his father that he will always have and value. He is satisfied being in his white American home, but does not want to abandon his heritage, so Alexie uses Zits’s habit of thinking of his new foster mom as being Indian to reassure readers of this right away. No matter what, he is living a life of duality- he has a form of amalgamation of lessons learned from time-trekking in both white and Indian bodies. Time traveling achieves what no therapist and no single experience could. Zits, or Michael as a matter of fact, resurfaces in the end of Flight to acknowledge the people and struggles of everyone, especially his own.

Works Cited

Alexie, Sherman. *Flight: a Novel*. New York, Black Cat, 2007.