

# Indian killer: analysis essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Sherman Alexie paints the reader a picture in his book *Indian Killer*. He uses every possible element to his advantage. This includes his use of structure and form. Alexie uses these two elements in the shape of flashbacks, dreams and dream-like situations, the beginning compared to the end of the book, and the order in which events progress through the plot line. Within the story, Alexie utilizes flashbacks to bring the reader closer to the characters. The flashbacks are used give the reader some insight into the past and let the reader see how the characters are brought up and raised.

When the reader looks into a characters past, they can find the particular struggles the characters went through and the reader can also get a feel for what their life has been like. In the case of John Smith, the reader observes that John has had a hard time coming to terms with his separation from his tribe and never really feels like he belongs with Olivia and Daniel. In the case of Jack Wilson, Jack is suffering from much the same situation as John. Jack is orphaned and searching to belong. He takes refuge in his study of Native American culture.

Jack even goes to the extreme of inventing a distant Shilshomish relative. Alexie also uses flashbacks to introduce readers to new characters. The most predominant character introduced in this way is the Jesuit, Father Duncan. Father Duncan is never actually brought into the story as a live character, he exists only in John's hallucinations and memories. Alexie also introduces Aaron and David Roger's father through the use of David's flashbacks. David's flashbacks of his father portray a vivid image and correlation of his father's hatred and racism toward Indians.

This racism is engulfed in his brother's thought processes throughout the book. Alexie accomplishes two things through his use of dreams and dream-like states. First, he uses what is described as a dream-like state to convey John's sickly hallucinations. John has developed a case of schizophrenia in which he has very violent hallucinations. Because Alexie puts the reader right into the characters head, they have the opportunity to experience what John does during these episodes. John becomes very angry and he hears drums beating loudly.

He usually sees father Duncan walking through the desert looking for water. John also becomes violent during these episodes and finally decides that it is his job to kill the right white man after one of his episodes. Secondly, Alexie uses dreams in his book to give the reader a peek at what the characters are really feeling, even on the subconscious level. In one circumstance, Alexie uses the dreams of John's boss, the foreman, to convey the fear that most white people feel around Indians on a subconscious level.

In another circumstance, the reader can see the worry of John's father for his lost son when he has a dream about his son turning up in his room and even states to his wife that he can smell John, showing the reader the power that their own subconscious can have over their bodies. Alexie writes his books in such an order that the reader always knows more than the characters but at the same time is forced to feel the pain felt by the characters. This is because Alexie does not allow the reader to know more than the characters until later in the book.

One such example is the death of David Rogers. When David is killed, the reader is left to assume that the Indian Killer was the culprit. The characters in the book also believe this and David's brother is driven mad with grief. Aaron Rogers begins to assault innocent Indians and the reader can, to some extent, relate and understand these outbursts. Later in the book however, the reader learns that David Rogers was killed by two random white guys and his death alone was not even relevant to the story.

From the beginning of the book until the end of the book, the reader's main focus is on John Smith and the various struggles he faces. One such struggle that the reader is introduced to early on would be the development of his schizophrenia which ultimately leads him to the decision that he must kill a white man. John decides though that he must kill the white man that made everything go wrong. The entire book John tries to decide who this specific white man is and finally settles on Jack Wilson. To the reader's surprise, John actually does not end up killing anyone but himself.

The contrast between John's thoughts at the beginning of the novel and here at the end may actually resemble each other because maybe John decided that he was the white person that caused everything to go wrong. Alexie uses his characters to maximum effect by letting the reader inside each one of their heads. He allows the reader to experience things as the characters do which adds to their believability. He also allows the reader to see characters that they know from another character's point of view, which gives an in depth and an all-around view of the main characters.

By allowing the reader into each character's head, Alexie sets up the reader to think like the characters do, which adds to the characters' credibility. The reader can relate to the characters and understand how and why each character reacts to the story line. The reader can explore the character's mind with Alexie as a guide. With the familiarity that comes with knowing a character's thoughts, the reader can make connections to their own thoughts or to the thoughts of others that the reader may deal with on a regular basis.

The character becomes real to the reader because of this. Alexie draws the reader into the deepest and darkest parts of the mind where most people fear to go. The reader experiences vulgar hate, crushing sadness, and violent pleasures through the thoughts and actions of Alexie's characters. Alexie also allows the reader to see many of the characters from another character's view point. One such example can be observed when the reader gets to see John from everyone else's view point. The reader knows John to have mental problems, but in John's mind these problems are justified.

From the foreman's view point, the reader finds that the foreman and most others are afraid of John. From Marie's view point, the reader realizes that Marie has sympathy for John and wants to help him. Yet from Daniel and Olivia's view point, John is simply lost, confused, and in need of guidance. By allowing the visualization of each character from the other character's view point, Alexie gives the reader a depth and understanding of each character that is vacant from only the character in question's view point. Each of Alexie's characters are present and serve a purpose in the story.

Through their thoughts and interactions with other characters, the reader is able to discern specific details about each character that contribute to the book. These traits can be found in John Smith, Marie Polatkin, Truck Sholtz, Jack Wilson, Clarence Mather, and even the Killer. John Smith, the main character of Indian Killer, is introduced to the reader as a baby through one of his own fabrications. John was separated from his biological mother at birth and adopted by a white couple, Daniel and Olivia Smith. This separation sets the stage for the rest of the novel to take place.

John soon realizes that he does not belong with the white community. He also knows that since he was separated from his birth mother, he does not belong with the Indian community. This split causes John to fall somewhere in the middle and he develops a mental illness, schizophrenia, from this sense of not belonging. This split also represents the differences between the whites and the Indians all in one person. Because John's life is so out of place, he looks for someone to blame for the whole mess. Because of his illness, John decides that he must kill the person who is blame for it all.

In the end the only person that the reader knows for sure John has killed is himself, which leads the reader to believe that ultimately John blamed himself overall for the way his life played out. Marie Polatkin is a character that is partially reflective of Alexie's life. Like Alexie, Marie could read by the age of three and she grew up on the Spokane Indian reservation. Marie is introduced as strong, young, and independent. Like most characters in the book, Marie is full of hatred. Unlike most characters in the book, Marie channels all that energy into a proactive approach. She arranges protests and picketing lines to stand up for Indians.

She drives a sandwich truck around to all the homeless Indians to feed them. When the racial war erupts, Marie rounds up a group of homeless people to go out and help the Indians that are being beaten. In this way she and her crew even save John's life. Marie has a good heart and a bitter tongue, and she uses both simultaneously and effectively to further her cause. Alexie utilizes Truck Sholtz as a constant information source on the proceedings of the Indian Killer. Sholtz is a radio host that has a police insider. He is told by the police to keep his mouth shut about the killings, Truck does not listen.

He knowingly announces that the killings are done by an Indian and that whites should eradicate all Indians. He throws more fuel on the fire when he blames the death of David Rogers on the Indian killer when he was told by the police that they did not believe that this was the case. He further fanned the flames of the racial war when he coined the statement, "The only good Indian Killer, is a dead Indian Killer"(pg#). Truck Sholtz is the epitome of the type of people racist white people portrayed in this novel as his followers.

Jack Wilson is a reflection of what Alexie has created in John.

Both Jack and John were orphaned as young children. Jack however, turned to the study of Indian culture for comfort. He was so desperate to fit in that he even fabricated an Indian relative. Jack Wilson takes up a job as a cop and later on, as a detective. Throughout his career, he strives to help the Indians and when he retires, he becomes a writer. Claiming to have some Indian blood, Jack writes stories about some of the Indian cases he had worked. Although his intentions are pure enough, many Indians see Jack as a fraud and Jack becomes the center of a lot of the racism found in the book.

At the center of all the hatred and racism the reader finds people like Clarence Mather. Mather is a professor at the Washington State University and he teaches Native American Literature. Mather believes that he is truly painting a positive picture of the Indians and he believes he is helping them. The Indians however, believe that the whites' involvement with them is destroying their culture. This is the point that Marie frequently crosses Mather on. Mather represents the people that believe they are helping the Indians and the reader soon realizes that the Indians do not want any help for white people.

Methodical. This one word almost completely describes the Killer that Alexie portrays. Alexie's Killer models themselves after the owl, the bringer of death. The Killer hunts like the owl and feels no remorse for its prey. The Killer is very specific with their weapon of choice and they practice with the knife for long stretches of time. The Killer feels powerful when they are wielding the knife. The Killer does not care what people think of them, they only want people to respect the knife. The Killer represents the spirit of the Indians that flows through their rituals, including the Ghost Dance.

The Indians even begin to root on the Killer. The Killer is a manifestation of everything the Indians hope to accomplish. Alexie perfectly creates a setting in which Indian Killer will take place. Not only has Alexie created the perfect setting, but he has also created atmosphere and mood that add the multitude of feelings the reader experiences as the story progresses. Alexie sets the stage for Indian Killer in Seattle, Washington. Alexie grew up in and around Seattle allowing him to provide realistic places and scenarios within his novel.



Seattle also has a large population of Indians which adds to the credibility of the story. Seattle gets a lot of rain and fog giving off the eerie and gloomy feelings for the reader to experience. Most of the novel also takes place at night which makes people uneasy. The violence that is portrayed in the novel along with the setting that Alexie has crafted, creates a very dark and uneasy mood for the story to unfold within. Throughout the entire span of the novel, Alexie has beautifully inserted symbolism to include Native American culture and mythology into his story.

Alexie has chosen the symbols of the owl, feathers, and the Ghost Dance to be the presence of Indian Mythology within his novel, Indian Killer. In Native American mythology, the owl is the bringer of death. This is because Native Americans believe that their spirits soar after death, like the owl. Being the omen of death, the Killer naturally modeled himself after the owl. The Killer wanted to hunt like the owl, without remorse. By the testimony of the little boy who was taken, the reader is lead to believe that the Killer even dresses up like an owl because the little boy says, “ It had wings”(pg#).

The owl also shows up in a dream that Jack Wilson had about the car crash that killed his parents. The use of feathers is a tie to Indian spirituality. Indians use feathers to connect themselves to the various spirits that they worship. Therefore the use of feathers shows a reference to the spirit world within Indian culture. Because the killer leaves two owl feathers at the site of every killing, the Killer may be making a statement that he is an extension of the spirits and the will that they command. The Ghost Dance was created by the early Native Americans to destroy invading Europeans.

Performing the Ghost Dance is a symbol of your desire to see the whites removed from the land. Too many Indians, this gives the Indian Killer motive and some even believe that he is a manifestation of the Ghost Dance. At the end of the book the reader finds that the Indian Killer is alive and he is performing the Ghost Dance. He gains strength as other Indians join him in the dance. Marie's last statement, "Indians are dancing now, and I don't think they're going to stop"(pg#), echoes the unresolved conflicts of the book and the uneasy feeling the reader gets from the closing of the book.

The story told Alexie in his novel highlights some major themes along the way. Alexie provides a perfect scenario in which the characters all have reason to be angry at the opposite race and none have reason to compromise. This escalated anger leads the reader to the two major themes underlying the plot, atonement or revenge through violence and the racism that comes right along with it. Native Americans have long held revenge for the slaughter of their people at the back of their minds. When a Killer emerges called the Indian Killer, these revenges begin to stir again.

At the same time the whites believe that they should have revenge for those that were killed by the Indian Killer. A race war erupts and both sides begin to attack innocent people of the other race on the street in the name of revenge. Eventually the antagonists on both sides are taken care of and the race war comes to a screeching halt, but the resentment still remains on both sides. Both sides of the division of population in Seattle between Indians and Whites a long, deep seated racism against each other. When the race war erupts and the beatings start, the racism becomes apparent.

The violence becomes pure and sick racism when both Reggie Polatkin and Aaron Rogers begin to take pleasure in the beatings and can no longer use revenge as an excuse. The sentiments shared by these two gang leaders could also be found elsewhere in the city. Alexie utilized Aaron and Reggie to represent the extremes of racism on both sides of the divide. Alexie uses his simplest element to his advantage: the title and cover. The title of the book, *Indian Killer*, implies that there is going to be a killer and that killer is going to kill Indians.

This is not the case, however. The book is actually about an Indian who kills white people. This simple truth is enough to draw the reader in and want to find out more. Moreover, the cover of the book is simply a depiction of two red feathers in an “x” formation. The two feathers are owl feathers, the bringer of death. They are stained red from the bloodiness of the murder’s at which they are left at. Lastly, the feathers are laying in an “x” because and “x” is usually used to represent the end of something, in this case a life.