

Irony: how poverty  
motivates teens in the  
reluctant  
fundamentalist, the  
absolutel...

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In the early 1900's poverty was at the highest point in the world. Poverty is still a problem in a lot of places all around the world but can also help some people. Most people think that poverty makes people have a terrible life and fail, but poverty actually helps people to strive for more.

In *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie Arnold goes to Reardon because he wanted to be better, in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid Changez goes to Princeton to get a good job so that he can support his family and live a good life, and in "The Balek Scales" by Heinrich Boll the Grandfather investigates the legibility of the scales to get more money. Changez, like most people, saw his poverty as a restriction even though it was actually the thing that pushed him to all the great things that he did.

After college Changez realized that "Princeton inspired in me the feeling that my life was a film in which I was the star and everything was possible" (Hamid 3). Changez says that Princeton was the thing that inspired him to be better and to want better things but he doesn't yet realize that his motivation to go to Princeton came for his poverty. When Changez was getting interviewed for a well paying job directly out of school he was asked about his academic, financial and social life.

At one point the interviewer, Jim, talks about money and scholarships and how it is rare to get a full scholarship for a person overseas and all Jim can say is that "' You must have really needed the money. ' And for the third time, I said, ' yes'" (8). This is where it clicks in Changez' mind that the poverty wasn't a restriction, because if it were it would have stopped him  
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from going to Princeton and achieving greatness there. Poverty was the driving force that led Changez to Princeton because he wanted to get a good job in America and provide money for his family in Pakistan.

The firm that excepted Changez understood his financial situation and tried to help him by “[telling] us to continue to our hearts’ content and to charge our bill to Underwood Samson. We did so” (38-39). They understood that the poverty could easily turn against Changez so they try to help him as much as they can. Changez is driven by his poverty to help his family and eventually does bring money back to Pakistan with him. Arnold in this story sees poverty as a weakness but doesn’t realize until the end of the book that it was his motivation.

Arnold saw this poverty as a bad thing but when he looks back he can see that poverty is the reason that all the good things in his life happened in the first place. After Arnold threw a textbook at a teacher and got suspended the teacher told him he would be better at a different school; no because he would expel him otherwise but because there was so much potential that would go to waste if Arnold stayed here. That potential would be wasted by the poverty that kept almost every Native Indian on the reservation. Arnold saw this as a terrible thing and thought that he was being punished when he was motivated by Mr.

P when he said, “ Son [...] You’re going to find more and more hope the farther and farther you walk away from this sad, sad, sad reservation. ”

(Alexie 43) Arnold saw this as an insult that he didn’t belong there anymore

because of what he did but it was actually a gift. The poverty sent him to a different, better, more educated school through Mr. P. Arnold was starting to doubt the one good change in his life of switching to Reardon when “[He] only had five dollars, not nearly enough to pay for anything ??? not for photos, not for food, not for gas, not for a hot dog and soda pop. (119). This lack of money put him in a deep spot because he couldn’t have any social life at this school that was already so different for him because of his race. He would always blame this on the poverty that he thought was the backbone of all of these bad things until his girlfriend confronted him about his financial problem. “‘ Roger told me he lent you some money,’ she said. ‘ Yeah,’ I said. ‘ I forgot my wallet. ‘ Her laser eyes grew hotter. ‘ Arnold? ‘ ‘ Yeah? ‘ ‘ Can I ask you something big? ‘ ‘ Yeah, I guess. ‘ ‘ Are you poor? ‘ I couldn’t lie to her anymore. Yes,’ I said. ‘ I’m poor’” (127). He realized that his poverty was a motivator at this point because right after this conversation Penelope, the girlfriend, wept for Arnold, for everything he had been doing and will continue to do through his poverty. The Grandfather in “The Balek Scales” was born and raised in a poor family in an area where the only wealthy family near you was your employer. The Balek family was the wealthy family in that area of Germany and they made sure to nickel and dime every person that ever worked for them.

This angered the grandfather in this story and his lack of wealth made him double check every amount of money that he was paid and it also made him “[Bring] out great quantities of mushrooms; he even found truffles” (Boll 897) to sell to the Balek family to make more money. The Grandfather was

driven by his poverty to bring all of these goods to the Baleks to support his family with the money that was not only crucial to their survival but also to have fun; he was a child after all. This Grandfather wanted so much more that when he saw a moment he defied the rules to check the scale that the Balek family used to determine the price of goods. His heart thudded as he watched the black finger of justice come to rest on the left of the black line: the scale with the pound weight stayed down and the pound of coffee remained in the air" (897). At this point the Grandfather driven by his poverty went to a neighboring village, through the cold snow to find the difference of the scale that the Baleks own. He went to an apothecary and said, "' I wanted to have these weighed [...] It is the amount that is short of justice'" (898). This justice was how much money he could get for his family. He was so determined by now that he was unable to fail in his mind.

He ran home, soaking wet to do the math to figure how much money the Baleks owe him after the work he was done for several years. He is guided by this poverty and because the poverty doesn't have a brain it doesn't sense the danger in confronting the Baleks about the money. He is banished by the Baleks and has now become poorer than ever. The poverty did make the grandfather work and try his hardest to get the money he needed and desired but his lack of understanding consequence was his downfall, not poverty. These characters show the hope that is in all people who suffer from poverty.

When these people are driven by their poverty to get new and better things they succeed. They don't fail like most people would think they would

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because of their poverty, yet they succeed because of what the poverty gives them to do. This same kind of motivation is what helped the world get out of the Great depression in the early 1900's. Alexie, Sherman. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1966. Boll, Heinrich. "The Balek Scales." *The Language of Literature*. Evanston: McDougal Littell Inc. , 2006. 893-900. Hamid, Mohsin. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. New York: First Mariner Books, 2007.