

Illuminating irony: technology on sherman alexie's reservation



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Sherman Alexie's Native American characters in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* are modern Indians who are often fixated on the glories of their past. In their modernization, one of the most blatant attacks on their pride and respect for their traditional ways comes from the technology around them. In perhaps Alexie's subtlest use of irony, technology manifests itself throughout his book, highlighting the tremendous gap between Indians now and Indians before the time of reservations. Indeed, the technology itself — TV, radio, even traffic signals — serves as a reminder of the outside influence oozing in, and its inevitable use by Native Americans is another sign of their surrender. Alexie uses technology in his book to highlight such instances of irony. Television is perhaps the most often used example of technology in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto*, coming into most of the characters' lives indirectly. In fact, one would be hard-pressed to find any character interacting with the TV for longer than a sentence, yet its presence is undeniable; it gives all of the characters a connection to the outside world. Few Indians in the book venture beyond the reservation, yet none are totally clueless about outside society in general or, more specifically, about how that society sees them. References to Indians in popular culture, like comparisons to Tonto (155, 164), are made frequently to highlight the large gap between how Indians are perceived and how they really act. Most interestingly, it also gives these characters a window through which to see their own world. A young Victor sees a fistfight between his uncles like a hurricane on the news and sees himself as one of the crazy people who "tie themselves to the trees on the beach" (2) so they can "feel the force of the hurricane firsthand" (2). He also finds hollowness in the saying "at least we've got each other" (4) during a particularly giftless Christmas, finding the <https://assignbuster.com/illuminating-irony-technology-on-sherman-alexies-reservation/>

expression meaningless because he's heard it before on "the old Christmas movies they watched on television" (5). The events unfolding on television give these characters another backdrop against which to situate their lives, making their problems seem a little less daunting and a little more universal. Television's main role in the book is more direct: while it appears in the book passively, it is often followed by a frightening or violent event. A family is quietly watching television in "The Fun House" right before a mouse runs up a woman's leg (76); a character casually mentions he doesn't watch TV anymore because it "exploded and left a hole in the wall" (p 114); in one especially unsettling paragraph, a character "dreamed about television" and "woke up crying" (108). Alexie uses this narrative technique to quite literally show the negative impact of television, or technology in general, on these characters. The television, a symbol of sedentary and passive involvement, contrasts the punch of these events in an ironic way that Alexie is fond of. Music plays a large role on Alexie's reservation, with characters often alluding to old native songs and drums (165). More pertinently, modern music is just as important to some of these characters, particularly to Victor and his father in the story "Because My Father Said He Was the Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play 'The Star-Spangled Banner' at Woodstock." It is this modern music that allows these characters to interact and use technology, finding new meaning in it. Victor observes that his father would play the tape of the performance "until it wore down" (26). These characters are finding solace and pleasure in new, modern things, only to have them slowly disappear. While the tape itself is not why Victor's father enjoys the music, it is a rather impermanent medium that is relatively unfamiliar to Native Americans and their relation to music. Later, Victor listens to the <https://assignbuster.com/illuminating-irony-technology-on-sherman-alexies-reservation/>

performance again and finds that “ the reverberation came to mean something” (28): in particular, it meant a closer relationship to his father. Both found pleasure in this foreign recording in a purely sonic way. The irony here is that the actual meaning of “ The Star-Spangled Banner,” a song about America becoming stronger through war, would not appeal to any Native American. But Jimi’s guitar is an unrefined, piercingly removed rendition of the song, and it invokes happy memories in Victor’s father, reminding Victor of the bonds they share. The broken traffic signal in the story “ The Only Traffic Signal on the Reservation Doesn’t Flash Red Anymore” is a more specific example of technology in the reservation, but it effectively illustrates how Indians would ideally like to treat such a thing: with apathy or contempt. In the story, two characters are sitting on a porch watching the reservation, and Victor’s friend Adrian ironically mentions that the broken signal could “ cause an accident” (48). The two friends are doing what they do best: reminiscing, joking with each other, and quietly passing the day away. It is in this state that this sort of technology is especially jarring and unnecessary to them; the traffic signal is broken and meaningless, a symbol of white attempts to intervene. The road was fine before it was installed. Another specific yet meaningful instance of technology is the train in the story “ A Train Is An Order of Occurrence Designed To Lead to Some Result.” The train is the catalyst to Samuel Builds-the-Fire’s barrage of modernity during his days as a working man. Even in the admittedly obtuse story title, we see a train as some sort of charging and the inevitable series of events that will cause something to happen, so we as readers wait for it to show up. What ultimately happens is perhaps Alexie’s most direct use of technology harming Native Americans: a <https://assignbuster.com/illuminating-irony-technology-on-sherman-alexies-reservation/>

train comes and runs over a willfully surrendered Samuel. Samuel was drunk and suicidal; the train was merely doing what it was made for. The two of them together make up this bizarre, unsettling event. Alexie highlights the blind, mechanical fury of technology by coupling it with the humanistic and flawed nature of Samuel, who represents all Native Americans: whimsical, impulsive and curious. He shows, quite starkly, that these two things together do not produce a happy result. Alexie uses technology to create irony because it represents modernity. It is something that permeates every aspect of life, yet it couldn't be further from Native American tradition. It works so well for him because Indians use this technology and it interacts with them; it is one aspect of the newer way of life that they simultaneously resent and resign themselves to. No matter how hard these characters work to keep their pride and traditions strong, the very real image of a Native American family huddled around the TV set undoes that work. Not coincidentally, Alexie has come to the forefront about his own personal resentment of technology: in recent interviews, he has blasted the Kindle and other eBooks, calling them an "easily pirated device" and humorously noting that one could fall into the hands of the government (and saying, as an Indian, he has "plenty of reasons to fear the U. S. government"). More seriously, Alexie laments the loss of community-based celebrations of books, mentioning how much he enjoys "traveling from bookstore to bookstore" but noting that demand has since been squelched due to the digitization of both books and their marketing. Deep down, this use of technology in his books to highlight irony stems from a hatred of what this technology has done not only for the Native American way of life, but for life in general. It

has reduced personal communication and desensitized people to the benefits of hard work and individual perseverance.