

Cockroaches and death in "war dances"



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The stigma of death can be traced to many factors, including the fear of life's end and the anticipation of pain. It is clear that although death is a natural process, the fact that so little (if not nothing) is known about it provides a source of stress for many people; this feeling does not escape Sherman Alexie. In his short story collection *War Dances*, Alexie begins by describing an experience in which he discovers a dead cockroach in his suitcase. He finds himself asking of the cockroach, "As he died, did he feel fear? Isolation? Existential dread?" (Alexie 29), not knowing that he would later be able to ask himself the same questions with all affirmative answers as he thinks he is dying. The lifeless cockroach in Sherman Alexie's suitcase, and the many thoughts and inquiries that it inspires, represents the role of death in the story "War Dances" as well as the fear that death stimulates.

As often follows the realization that one is or might be dying, Sherman Alexie exhibits growing intensity of his fear as he learns more about his condition. Throughout these moments, the cockroach that he found in his luggage is revisited at multiple points in the story in which Alexie speaks of health and medicine with distress. Immediately after "My Kafka Baggage", the author describes a story in which a man was admitted to the emergency room after having woken up with most of his hearing lost: "The doctor peered into one ear... reached in with small tweezers, and pulled out a cockroach, then reached into the other ear, and extracted a much larger cockroach" (30). Whether fact or fiction, this tale appears to scare Alexie, who later sings hymns and prays as he attempts to use the mirror to see what could be lodged in his ear. In this scenario, the cockroach represents the fear of not knowing what is wrong, and the story he relates to only exacerbate his

dread. Alexie also, at the beginning of the story, exclaims that he's "being invaded" (29). In this particular quote he is referring to the invasion of cockroaches into his luggage and onto his property, but this parallels the invasion he feels of the tumor in his head and his subsequent deafness, which, he worries, may also be caused by cockroaches. In this way, the roaches are directly related to Alexie's fear.

Another common symptom of the sick and/or dying is the feeling of isolation, and this is the second inquiry Alexie has about the cockroach at the beginning of War Dances. Although he is not truly dying in the way that he frets over, this as well is a question he would later be able to ask himself. From a mix of his steroid-induced agitation and the fear of his tumor becoming malignant, Alexie spends the night of his wife's return uncomfortable and feeling "distant from the world – from my wife and sons, from my mother and siblings – from all my friends" (62). While the cockroach is not directly connected to this scene, this quote relates to the questions he asks of the roach at the beginning of the story. He asks himself if the roach feels isolated as it dies, and is later able to identify with that feeling. In this way, the cockroach represents the emotions that accompany death.

Although Alexie does not find himself asking typical existentialist questions such as "What is the meaning of life?", the story shows elements of the existential dread that he mentions as he questions the cockroach's dying thoughts. As he waits to pick up his prescription, Alexie finds himself shopping for items that might be useful in the afterlife, manifesting signs of questioning what happens after death. He also questions more clearly some of the rudiments of his life and the consequences that his absence will

produce, asking himself who will take care of his family and whether he had been a better parent for his children than his father had been for him. This extends to the questions that he has for his dead father in "Exit Interview for My Father." In this way, as well, the cockroach and the questions Alexie asks it represent the emotions that accompany death.

Among the many dark themes exhibited in his works, the role of death is very prominent. This topic is illustrated in many ways throughout the story "War Dances"; after all, one of the metaphorical manifestations can be found in the death of the cockroach at the very beginning of the text. In asking the insect "did he feel fear? Isolation? Existential dread?" (29), Alexie is setting himself up with questions that he would hypothetically be able to ask himself later as he finds out about the tumor in his head. The roach Alexie finds in his suitcase at the start of War Dances, as well as the analyses that follow, represent the role of death and fear the short story collection as a whole

Bibliography

Alexie, Sherman. War Dances. New York: Grove Press, 2009. Print.