

Racial biases in a gas station



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

White people have oppressed Native American populations in America for centuries, and racial biases continue to affect Native Americans today. In the short story *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, the Native American narrator encounters racist behavior from the cashier at the gas station he visits at three in the morning. Racism and the power hierarchy it imposes upon Native Americans are central themes in this story, which is represented by the interactions between the white graveyard-shift worker and the Native American narrator.

The white gas station clerk that sells the narrator a Creamsicle makes assumptions about him due to his race, which reveal the clerk's racial biases against Native Americans. When the narrator first walks into the store, the cashier greets him and asks him, "How are you doing?" The narrator does not respond, instead he recounts, "I gave him a half-wave as I headed back to the freezer. He looked me over so he could describe me to the police later. I knew the look." The narrator is so used to racist behavior that he has become accustomed to the way that people look at him when they are afraid of him or expecting criminal behavior from him. The cashier then asks, "Can I help you?" The narrator believes that the cashier was "Searching for some response that would reassure him that I wasn't an armed robber. He knew the dark skin and long, black hair of mine was dangerous." The clerk has no reason to believe that the narrator is dangerous, and clearly his fear stems from racist beliefs.

The narrator goads the cashier into believing that he is more dangerous than he is, which represents a rebellion to the power hierarchy that places white people in a more powerful position than Native Americans. After the cashier

asks, "Can I help you?" the narrator does not reassure him that he is not dangerous, and instead waits a long time to respond in a way that increases the tension of the situation. He finally says, "Just getting a Creamsicle." The cashier tries to continue conversation in a further attempt to assess the danger of the narrator. "Pretty hot out tonight?" he asks. The narrator describes this question as "That old rhetorical weather bullshit question designed to put us both at ease." The narrator is not interested in letting the cashier be at ease, because his ability to make the cashier feel afraid gives him a sense of power. The narrator responds to the question by saying, "Hot enough to make you go crazy." The cashier "swallowed hard like a white man does in those situations." Here we see that the narrator continues to let tension build, because the cashier feels a sense of powerlessness being alone in a gas station in the middle of the night with someone he perceives as dangerous, even though this perception is based in racial bias.

The tension is diffused when the narrator reveals that he was never a threat to the cashier by making a joke about the Brady Bunch, and the narrator feels a sense of understanding of the cashier due to their shared powerlessness in the world. Before the tension is diffused, the narrator describes the cashier as, "misplaced and marked by loneliness." He believes that, "If he weren't working there that night, he'd be home alone, flipping through channels and wishing he could afford HBO and Showtime." This portrays a sense of hopelessness and loneliness in the cashier to which the narrator relates. Despite the power differences due to race, in many ways they experience a similar powerlessness in the world. After the cashier realizes that the narrator has been joking and is not a threat, the cashier "

laughed loudly then, told [the narrator] to take the Creamsicle for free. He was the graveyard-shift manager and those little demonstrations of power tickled him.” The cashier, who up until this moment had felt powerless and afraid, is able to reclaim his sense of power when he gives away the creamsicle. In this way, the power hierarchy of white above other races appears to be restored, at least in the cashier’s eyes. However, the narrator is not impressed by this display of power, and continues to be disillusioned by the hierarchies that oppress him.

The conversation between the cashier and the narrator are representative of the institutional differences of power between white people and Native Americans. The white cashier makes the racist assumption that the narrator is dangerous, and the narrator takes advantage of this assumption. In this way, the narrator claims power over the cashier. However, this power is temporary, because it is an unlikely version of this story where the narrator retains this power—he must relinquish the power when it is revealed that he is not a threat, or if he decided to hurt the cashier, he would relinquish the power when he was punished for that action. At the end the cashier symbolically gives the narrator the Creamsicle to free, a magnanimous gesture that symbolizes the return to normality.