

Sherman Alexie- 'Evolution'

CORE 5: AMERICAN LITERATURE: Group A: Poetry



Contents:

- Biographical details (as already mentioned in the previous power point presentation)
- Background
- Title
- Figurative Languages
- Critical Analysis



Background:



Who is this Buffalo Bill?

- Buffalo Bill is also known as William F. Cody (1846-1917).
- An historical figure--an icon now synonymous with the American West, famous for exploiting Native Americans.
- The establishment of a binary between "wild" and "progressive" subjugates Indians by placing them in the role of savages, a representation that American history has repeatedly thrust upon them.
- Despite supposedly championing the rights of Indians, Buffalo Bill certainly contributed to their cultural confinement in his "Wild West" shows, performances that "contained elements of the circus, the drama of the times, and the rodeo," offering a "unique form of theatrical entertainment.
- The Wild West Show had as its theoretical aim the presentation of a pageant of the settling and the taming of the West."



To be continued:

- Buffalo Bill may be compared to other **colonizing heroes** in Western culture, especially those who circulated a **dominant ideology** as their role in enhancing domination.
- His ability to disseminate representations stems not only from his ubiquitous stage presence but also from the extensive publicity that presented his image.
- Certainly no individual, before the days of movies and radio, ever had such effective personal exploitation.
- For nearly half a century he was continuously held before the public, in the pages of nickel and dime novels, on the boards in blood and thunder melodrama and in that astounding Wild West Show which toured from the tank towns to the very thrones of Europe (Walsh 18).



To be continued:

- The title of a 1928 book, *The Making of Buffalo Bill: A Study in Heroics*, suggests that the phenomenon of Buffalo Bill was as much created by an eager audience as it was by Bill Cody.
- Its collective gaze, like the gaze performed by museum-goers, constructed an impervious ideal: "When they gazed upon the man himself they saw that he looked the part of hero" (Walsh 17).
- Empowered with the iconic eminence of a hero, Buffalo Bill possesses the capacity and authority to reproduce and distribute cultural myths.
- His conception of the "real West" extends from his imaginary relation to American ideals that have themselves been formed by such hegemonic historical representations as Manifest Destiny.
- The posters advertising Buffalo Bill contribute to the representational subjugation of Indians, portraying them as features of a crude land that the military must rehabilitate



Buffalo Bill opens a pawn shop on the reservation right across the border from the liquor store and he stays open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week

and the Indians come running in with jewelry television sets, a VCR, a full-length beaded buckskin outfit it took Inez Muse 12 years to finish. Buffalo Bill

takes everything the Indians have to offer, keeps it all catalogues and filed in a storage room. The Indians pawn their hands, saving the thumbs for last, they pawn

their skeletons, falling endlessly from the skin and when the last Indian has pawned everything but his heart, Buffalo Bill takes that for twenty bucks

closes up the pawn shop, paints a new sign over the old calls his venture THE MUSEUM OF NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURES charges the Indians five bucks a head to enter.

Alexie addresses the **compartmentalization and commodification** of culture by supplanting Buffalo Bill's stage antics with a business venture:

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Pawn shops tend to represent sites of unorganized accumulation, places that gather anything and everything with the prospect of profiting from the vulnerability of others. By enticing patrons with quick cash--an instantaneous materialization of value--the pawn shop successfully confiscates living objects only to deprive them of meaning by re-offering them for sale. Sherman Alexie adapts this story poignantly in "Evolution."

In the first line: "Buffalo Bill opens a pawn shop on the reservation"-- Buffalo Bill as a metaphor for the US govt.

"The Indians

pawn their hands, saving the thumbs for last..." ---This line symbolizes how the Govt. has taken everything.



Buffalo Bill opens a museum

- Buffalo Bill closes his shop, and in its place opens a museum.
- The Museum of Native American Cultures lets Indians enter for five bucks a head.
- This closely mirrors what happens in history, Native American artifacts have been exploited from the people for generations and they are later put into museums.
- When the Indian has pawned everything but his heart, Bill takes that too. For a measly twenty bucks.

Buffalo Bill– a
Colonizing Hero in
Western Culture.



Analysis of the Poem:

- Sherman Alexie illustrates the systematic degradation of the Native American people and their culture.
- Alexie's use of Buffalo Bill is significant in that it embodies imagery and reactions from both White Americans and Native Americans.
- Buffalo Bills is a historically significant character in that he was known to help "civilize the west."
- Alexie manages to create an extended metaphor that highlights the deceit that the American Govt. played against the Native American community and subsequent usurpation of land, identity, and self that they had to endure.



To be continued:

- Alexie shows the Native Americans pawning their “hands, saving the thumbs for last... their skeletons, falling endlessly from the skin.”
- The Native American people begin to sell their body parts, but it doesn't stop there; it leads to “[...] the last Indian pawn[s] everything but his heart, [and] Buffalo Bill takes that for twenty bucks.”



- This is showing how after the Native Americans lost everything to the American Govt. they ended up giving up their “hearts”.
- “Heart” is the metaphor for the core of the Native American Identity.
- The fact that “Buffalo Bill” put a momentary value on the “heart” of Native Americans show the lack of respect the American Govt. had for Native Americans as people.
- To the American Govt. the identity of Native Americans was an item that they sought to profit from.



Further study:

- William F. Cody "Buffalo Bill" (1846-1917)
http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/people/a_c/buffalobil.html
- **Benjamin Branham: On "Buffalo Bill and the Confiscation of Culture"**
- Kramer, Mary D., "The American Wild West Show and 'Buffalo Bill' Cody," *Costerus: Essays in English and American Literature*, 4 (1972): 87-97.
- Walsh, Richard J., *The Making of Buffalo Bill*, Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1928.

