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Developing homosocial and homoerotic themes in the work of Sherman Alexie

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The Cosby Show
and Its Role In
Breaking
Stereotypes

January 2004

**Developing Homosocial and Homoerotic Themes
in the Work of Sherman Alexie**

by

Anson Ferguson

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THESIS SIGNATURE SHEET

This thesis is accepted and approved in fulfillment of the requirements for the Master Arts in English.

9/2/03
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Abstract

In “Developing Homosocial and Homoerotic Themes in the Work of Sherman Alexie,” specific patterns of homosocial and homoerotic behavior in the author’s novels are studied to find out if Sherman Alexie believes that such behavior is healthy for males. In his earlier writing, Alexie – a Spokane/Coeur d’Alene Indian – experiments with homosocial relationships, which are defined as loving and affectionate interaction between two heterosexual partners of the same gender. As Alexie develops as a writer, he moves towards the theme of the homoerotic. Homoeroticism is defined as sexual feelings or sexual interaction between two people of the same gender who consider themselves to be heterosexual. Alexie contrasts homosocial and homoerotic relationships with having no relationship at all. Alexie illustrates in his stories that strong male-male interaction, regardless of sexual orientation, is always healthy for the human spirit, thus dispelling prejudicial notions on homosexuality.

Developing Homosocial and Homoerotic Themes in the Work of Sherman Alexie

By Anson Ferguson

Over the last decade, as Sherman Alexie developed as a writer, the male-male relationships he describes in his stories move progressively from homosocial behavior to homoerotic behavior. Homosocial interaction is best defined as having very strong feelings for a person of the same sex, but with no sexual activity present. Homosocial relationships display the same love and affection that sibling brothers may have for each other. If there is any intimacy displayed, sexual connotations cannot be found. Homoerotic interaction, however, involves sexual feelings, as both partners in the relationship have intimate sexual feelings for one another. The defining characteristic of homoerotic behavior is that neither partner asserts himself as a homosexual, or a person desiring intimate and sexual relations with a person of the same sexual orientation. The bond that they share, however, has caused the two partners to veer into sexual intimacy.

Through his tales of homosocial and homoerotic behavior among men, Alexie accurately proves that homoerotic interaction in a male-male relationship is acceptable. This behavior also emerges as a positive factor in the development of manhood. Alexie details the effects of strong homosocial interaction through the friendships outlined in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, as well as *Reservation Blues*; he shows the destructiveness of not having a homosocial relationship in *Indian Killer*; and he demonstrates homoerotic behavior which is beneficial to male-male relations in *The Toughest Indian in the World*. As Alexie

grows as a writer, he becomes more comfortable giving various portraits of male bonding, as evidenced by his increasingly graphic descriptions.

While Alexie probes the dynamic of male-male relationships, his true intention lies in associating these types of relationships with the development of Native American men. Indian boys learn to become men through their experiences in life, but also through their interaction with their male peers. Whether it is homosocial or homoerotic, Alexie proves that the progression of Native American manhood is incomplete without male bonding of some kind.

One of Alexie's earlier books, titled *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, deals with a homosocial relationship between two men named Victor and Thomas Builds-the-Fire. The name of a particularly relevant short story is "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona." Although the two characters are markedly different – Victor is described as a handsome young man while Thomas is seen as nerdy and annoying – their existence seems incomplete without each other. The major connection that the two men have is through Victor's father, who has recently died in Arizona. When Victor needs money to travel from the Spokane Indian Reservation in Montana to Phoenix, Arizona, to bury the remains of his father, Thomas gratefully offers to lend Victor the money. Both Victor and Thomas were close to Victor's father, a fact that comes as a revelation to Victor:

"My father never told me about finding you in Spokane," Victor said.

"He said he wouldn't tell anybody. Didn't want me to get in trouble. But he said I had to watch out for you as part of the deal."

"Really?"

"Really. Your father said you would need the help. He was right."

"That's why you came down here with me, isn't it?" Victor asked.

“I came because of your father.”¹

Despite their differences, both men find themselves alienated by their surroundings. Victor, though well-known in the Indian community, struggles to find meaning in his life, as his loss of employment at the Bureau of Indian Affairs demonstrates. Thomas is a humble man, yet is neglected by the people in his community because of his incessant story-telling. Through the memory of Victor’s father, however, the two men find solace in each other. This sentiment is evidenced in their childhood: “When Victor was twelve, he stepped into an underground wasp nest. His foot was caught in the hole, and no matter how hard he struggled, Victor couldn’t pull free. He might have died there, stung a thousand times, if Thomas Builds-the-Fire had not come by” (68).

Even with their natural bond, Victor and Thomas’s relationship was strained by puberty: “When they were fifteen and had long since stopped being friends, Victor and Thomas got into a fistfight. That is, Victor was really drunk and beat Thomas up for no reason at all” (65). Here, adolescence exposes the differences between the two characters, as Victor tries to separate himself from Thomas through physical means.

The strength of the bond is displayed, however, when Victor is compelled to reveal his feelings about the incident to Thomas years later:

“Listen,” Victor said as they stopped in front of the trailer. “I never told you I was sorry for beating you up that time.”

“Oh, it was nothing. We were just kids and you were drunk.”

“Yeah, but I’m still sorry.”

“That’s all right.” (67)

¹ Sherman Alexie, “This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona,” from The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1993), 69-70. Subsequent page numbers to this story are included parenthetically in the text.

Victor, remembering the cruelty of his actions, feels that he must apologize for his cruelty to Thomas. Although Thomas himself acknowledges immaturity as the cause for the event, Victor feels ashamed to have harmed someone with whom he shares a close bond.

Eventually, the differences between Victor and Thomas take them away from the characteristics of a true homosocial relationship:

Victor knew that Thomas would remain the crazy story-teller who talked to dogs and cars, who listened to the wind and pine trees. Victor knew that he couldn't really be friends with Thomas, even after all that had happened. It was cruel but it was real. As real as the ashes, as Victor's father, sitting behind the seats.

"I know how it is," Thomas said. "I know you ain't going to treat me any better than you did before. I know your friends would give you too much shit about it." (74)

The relationship between Victor and Thomas has been so popular among readers that a full-length movie called *Smoke Signals* was made. Written and produced by Alexie himself, the movie is an adaptation of "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona," as the homosocial aspects of the two Indian characters are maintained on the big screen. Jhon Warren Gilroy, author of "Another Fine Example of the Oral Tradition? Identification and Subversion in Sherman Alexie's *Smoke Signals*," illustrates the underlying theme that makes Victor and Thomas' relationship so important:

Throughout the narrative, the viewers listen to Thomas' stories and for the most part find they occupy a similar position to that of Victor. Victor has "heard the stories a thousand times" and still doesn't know "what the hell Thomas is saying most of the time," repeatedly telling Thomas that "he is so full of shit." From a modernist perspective Victor might easily be seen as the alienated, questing protagonist separated from his self, family, and culture. However, the generalized characterization is complicated by the cultural specificity of his internalized racist assumptions of what it means to be "a real Indian."²

² Jhon Warren Gilroy, "Another Fine Example of the Oral Tradition? Identification and Subversion in Sherman Alexie's *Smoke Signals*," from *SAIL: Studies in American Indian Literature* 13 (2001): 34.

Not only does Thomas provide friendship for Victor, but he offers a sense of family and heritage to a fellow Native American. The homosocial bond between the two men is strengthened due to the fact that Victor and Thomas struggle to mesh their Indian backgrounds within American society.

Regardless of the bond that the two men share, they agree that their lifestyles are too different for them to remain true friends, though they will not totally neglect one another. Both men have a void in their lives – the departure and eventual death of Victor’s father – and will ultimately gravitate toward each other to fill that void. Victor respects his father, while Thomas, whose father is not mentioned in this story, admires the fact that Victor’s father treats Thomas like one of his own. Both men must travel different paths to find their place in the world, but know that it is essential for them to interact on some level in order to feel whole within their community.

Jerome DeNuccio, author of “Slow Dancing with Skeletons: Sherman Alexie’s *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*,” demonstrates the importance of the relationship between Victor and Thomas:

The apparently naturalized historical forces that have decentered and determined Indian subjectivity certainly compromise the ability to discern and to choose to affirm the “one determination” that Thomas opposes to the derailing of past and future. Yet, those of Alexie’s characters who refuse to stop, who stay in step, do manage to see “inside,” do manage to conduct a clarifying introspection, do choose to align themselves with some still viable traditional practice that prevents “the folding shut of the good part of [their] past” and... that establishes the self as a structure of relation between past, present, and future. Indeed, Thomas teaches Victor this lesson. . . .³

By the end of the story, both men have learned more about themselves after spending quality time with each other. Thomas helps Victor overcome his painful history,

³ Jerome DeNuccio, “Slow dancing with Skeletons: Sherman Alexie’s *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*,” from *Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 44 (2001): 91.

while Victor provides Thomas with a true, albeit disjointed, friendship. Victor and Thomas have an understanding about their innate relationship, an understanding that will bond them together for life.

Reservation Blues, Alexie's next book, further describes the characteristics of homosocial interaction. Both Victor and Thomas Builds-the-Fire fill similar roles, with Junior Polatkin, a close friend of Victor, being introduced into the story as well. *Reservation Blues* occurs chronologically after *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. Alexie suggests that the relationship between Victor and Thomas will revert to its punishing ways, despite their adventure to Arizona. *Reservation Blues* confirms this notion, but Alexie continues to display the bond between the two. Victor is on the verge of inflicting pain upon Thomas when Alexie provides this narrative:

Thomas had received a pardon because of Victor's short attention span. Still, Victor never actually hurt him too seriously. Victor's natural father had liked Thomas for some reason. Victor remembered that and seemed to pull back at the last second, left bruises and cuts but didn't break bones. After Victor's father died, Thomas had flown with Victor to Phoenix to help pick up the ashes. Some people said that Thomas even paid for Victor's airplane tickets.⁴

As predicted in "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona," the two men cannot establish a relationship that demands mutual respect. Victor maintains a dominant role over Thomas, while Thomas almost seems content with his treatment, perhaps because he knows that Victor still cares for him. Despite the imbalance, we are compelled to believe that the two share some level of caring for each other.

⁴ Sherman Alexie, *Reservation Blues* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1995), 17. Subsequent page numbers to this novel are included parenthetically in the text.

As *Reservation Blues* continues, however, we witness significantly fewer beatings administered by Victor against Thomas. In the story, Thomas finds a guitar and dreams of forming a band. Although skeptical at first, Victor, along with Junior, joins Thomas's band after an open invitation. While practicing and playing at shows together, Victor continues his verbal abuse of Thomas, but we also see Victor listening to some of Thomas's ideas and taking his advice. For example, Thomas is the lead singer in the band – dubbed Coyote Springs – and Victor has no serious objections to Thomas gaining more recognition than he does for himself. As the band starts to enjoy some success, the relationship deepens, as Victor and Thomas relate the problems and concerns they have with regards to their fathers. Although Alexie hints that a love for music brings the two characters closer, it is evident that the foundation shown in “This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona” influences the way the two men continue to show love for each other despite their alarming differences. As time elapses for Alexie, he eagerly develops a strong homosocial relationship between Victor and Thomas that starts off awkwardly, but ends with a semblance of mutual respect.

After establishing a powerful homosocial relationship in *Reservation Blues*, Alexie experiments with the theme of the homoerotic. Homoeroticism is mildly illustrated by the friendship between Victor and Junior Polatkin. While the interaction between the two men cannot be considered homoerotic, Alexie implies that Victor and Junior have feelings going beyond a typical homosocial relationship. As Junior is introduced into the story, Alexie offers a description of the new character:

Junior Polatkin was Victor's sidekick, but nobody could figure out why, since Junior was supposed to be smart. A tall, good-looking buck with hair like Indians in the movies, long, purple-black, and straight, Junior was president of the Native American Hair Club...A job was hard to come by on the reservation, even harder to keep, and most figured that Victor used Junior for his regular income, but nobody ever knew what Junior saw in Victor. Still, Junior could be an asshole, too, because Victor was extremely contagious. (13)

Alexie's description calls into question many aspects of Victor and Junior's relationship. Junior is described as Victor's sidekick, so we can assume that the two were always seen together. We also can make this assumption when Junior is described as being "an asshole" due to the contagious behavior of Victor. The people of the Spokane Indian Reservation are curious as to why the two coexist. The community suspects that Victor has his own personal reasons for wanting to befriend Junior, but cannot find a reason why Junior would want to involve himself with Victor. Although the friendship between Victor and Junior seems purely homosocial at this point, Alexie gives us some information to work with. Alexie notes the physical characteristics of Junior immediately after noting that the two are inseparable. Recall that Alexie has described Victor as being a handsome young man as well. The language by Alexie must also be examined. Alexie says that "nobody ever knew what Junior saw in Victor." This type of language – to say "what you see" in someone else – is usually reserved for romantic relationships. In this passage, we find out that Victor and Junior are inseparable and are often thought of as a couple, and not as good friends, based on the dialect of Alexie. This early example of the homoerotic is extremely mild, but Alexie begins to pick up steam as he explores the relationship between Victor and Junior.

Alexie describes the intimate thoughts of Junior early on in the book: “Junior pretended his feelings were hurt so he could storm off. He needed to drive the water truck down to the West End of the reservation anyway but didn’t want Victor to know how much he cared about his job” (16). Junior’s emotional tirade is similar to that of two quarrelling lovers. Junior does not want to display his true feelings, so he puts up a front in order to leave the situation that he and Victor are in. As evidenced by the following exchange between Victor and Junior, Junior’s tactics worked:

“Where you going?” Victor asked Junior.

“To the West End.”

“Wait up, I’ll ride with you,” Victor said and ran after Junior. (16-

17)

Not only does Victor immediately chase after Junior once he finds out he is leaving, but he does so while in the midst of harassing Thomas, abruptly ending the bullying session. Once again, the interaction between Victor and Junior takes a homoerotic tilt, but doesn’t quite reach that level.

As the band starts to find venues to play in, Alexie makes more graphic sexual references to the relationship between Victor and Junior: “Thomas. . . walked outside to the van. He opened the sliding door of the van and surprised Victor and Junior, who were literally buck naked and drunk. The two naked white women in the van were even drunker and scrambled for their clothes. Thomas just stood there and stared” (80). Once again, Alexie’s placement of words must be examined here.

Apparently, Victor and Junior were involved with the same two white women earlier in the story, which implies that the males are being sexually active with the girls and not with each other. Alexie, however, notes that Thomas recognizes the nudity of Victor and Junior first, clearly pairing the two men, and not pairing them with the two

naked women. The image we are given is of Victor and Junior naked together, and not Victor with one naked girl and Junior with the other. The fact that Victor and Junior are comfortable around each other in this situation suggests a homoerotic theme as well. While this homoeroticism isn't conclusive evidence of a homoerotic relationship, the bond between Victor and Junior slowly but steadily approaches qualities of homoeroticism.

While the relationship between Victor and Thomas is separate from the Victor and Junior's relationship, Alexie unites the three men through the formation of the band Coyote Springs. After the band is formed, the trio are noticeably receptive to each other. The bond between the men is so strong that they appear to be one unit rather than three separate individuals. Douglas Ford, author of "Sherman Alexie's Indigenous Blues," notes the unison between the characters:

"Who's the lead singer?" a stranger asks before the first gig, beginning a pattern of questioning that continues throughout the novel, always involving an inquiry as to who sings lead. Alexie undercuts the validity of this question by frequently referring to Coyote Springs as a collective body as if the band's name signifies a character in itself.⁵

By creating a bond between the three men rather than sustaining two separate relationships, Alexie strengthens the homosocial aspect of *Reservation Blues*. Thomas is now an integral player in the relationship between Victor and Junior, adding his insight when needed and learning to become more socially interactive through his Native American brothers.

Alexie appears to dance around the issue of homoeroticism in *Reservation Blues*. By noticing the tone and manner in which Alexie tells his story, we can tell

⁵ Douglas Ford, "Sherman Alexie's Indigenous Blues", from *Melus* 27 (2002): 198.

that he is not yet comfortable with this topic. As we will witness later on, however, Alexie was experimenting with this topic in his earlier novels. As he writes more books, Alexie reaches new levels of boldness and no longer shies away from the topic of homoeroticism.

Before Alexie delves into homoeroticism, however, he first gives us an example of what can happen to an individual who doesn't experience a homosocial or a homoerotic relationship. *Indian Killer* is a novel about an Indian man named John Smith who was taken from his natural mother at birth and sent to live with a white family who cannot bear children. As John gets older, his ethnicity clashes with his upbringing in a traditional white family. Feeling alienated both at home and away from home, John becomes the typical loner, acquiring no friends and having trouble communicating with others. Alexie demonstrates this lack of understanding in an interchange that John has with Father Duncan, a priest who is showing him glass-stained pictures of Native Americans slaughtering priests at the Chapel of the North American Martyrs:

“Beautiful, isn't it?” asked Father Duncan.

John did not understand. He was not sure if Father Duncan thought the artwork was beautiful, or if the murder of the Jesuits was beautiful. Or both.⁶

Confused by the images before him and unable to intimate his feelings to Father Duncan, John never receives an answer to this important question. Apparently, John's background and upbringing keep him from having homosocial or homoerotic interaction with Father Duncan because John cannot fully relate to him.

⁶ Sherman Alexie, *Indian Killer* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1996) 14. Subsequent page numbers to this novel are included parenthetically in the text.

Although John has many intuitive questions and feelings about life in general, his inability to establish a male-to-male relationship hinders his effectiveness as a human being, resulting in fatal results for him and others within his presence.

John proves to be a very dangerous and volatile person as the story progresses. These elements are witnessed when John bumps into a young white man on a college campus:

“Hey, chief,” said the white man. “Had a few too many? You need some help?”

John did not respond. The white man was trying to be friendly. He was really not a man, John thought, just a boy dressed like a man. Though John was only a few years older, he felt ancient. He knew that Indians were supposed to feel ancient, old and wise. He concentrated on feeling old and wise, until the youth and relative innocence of this young white man infuriated him. John felt the rage he didn’t like to feel.

“Hey,” said the young man. “Hey, are you okay?”

“You’re not as smart as you think you are,” John said. “Not even close.”

The young man smiled, confused and a little intimidated.

“Calm down there, dude,” he said.

“I’m older than the hills,” said John, holding his hands out toward the white man. The young man looked at his friends, who shrugged their shoulders and smiled nervously. He turned back to John and flashed him the peace sign.

John was surprised by the gesture. He took a step back, momentarily disarmed. The young man finished his good-byes to his companions and walked away. John watched as the young white man crossed against the light, stopped briefly to look at himself in a store window, and then walked south down the Ave. Carefully and silently, John followed. (41-42)

This passage demonstrates how John’s lack of interaction in a homosocial or homoerotic relationship becomes detrimental to the people who come in contact with him. The young white man has approached John in a reserved, nonchalant manner. Yet, John feels threatened by him, mainly because of his lack of interaction with people. As implied, John murders the young white man, and eventually takes his own life by the end of the story.

Alexie illustrates John Smith in a peculiar manner: John doesn't have any true friends whatsoever, and eventually develops destructive habits. Stuart Christie, author of "Renaissance Man: The Tribal 'Schizophrenic' in Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer*," accurately notes that "the deracinated full-blood cannot even come into contact with either Anglo-European or Indian cultures without toxic consequences"⁷. Alienated from his parents because they are white, and alienated from Native American culture because of his upbringing in a white environment, John exiles himself from living a normal life. John's failure to sustain a relationship with anyone – his parents, his priest, interested females and male friends who try to help – destroys him. Alexie demonstrates to critics of homoeroticism that having no relationship is worse than having a homoerotic one. Alexie cleverly displays the pitfalls of life without homosocial or homoerotic relations before he probes deep into the theme of homoeroticism in his next book.

The Toughest Indian in the World, Alexie's next book, contains two short stories that deal with homoeroticism in a much more open and graphic manner than any of his other books. "One Good Man" illustrates the relationship between a father and a son, with four other men serving as a foil to the main activity of the story. Alexie's other short story, called "The Toughest Indian in the World" focuses on two male characters as well, as Alexie tells a tale about a man in search of his masculine identity and an Indian prize fighter whom he meets along his journey.

While women are always present within Alexie's stories, he rarely uses them within his homosocial or homoerotic plot themes. In "One Good Man," Alexie

⁷ Stuart Christie, "Renaissance Man: The Tribal 'Schizophrenic' in Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer*," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 25 (2001): 14.

explores this concept to a greater extent by showing the narrator's affection for his deceased mother. He reminisces over the time spent with her, but it is interesting to note what the narrator remembers about her:

“I mean, there's so many sexy white guys in the world,” my mother had once told me. “There are white guys who like being white, and what's not to like? They own everything. So, if you get the chance to sleep with a real white guy, especially one of them with a British accent or something, or Paul Newman or Steve McQueen, then why are you going to waste your time on some white guy who says he's part Indian? Jeez, if I wanted to sleep with part-Indians, then I could do that at every powwow. Hell, I could get an orgy going with eight or nine of those Cherokees and maybe, just maybe, they would all add up to one real Indian.”⁸

Although the narrator and his mother share a very open relationship in their discussion of subjects that might be thought of as taboo, the mother's discussion of sexual activity with men is impossible to ignore. Her humorous tirade continues with a description of the narrator's father, whom the mother describes as being Indian down to his “every last inch” (226). By witnessing a mother talking to her son in this manner, we must wonder what effect this kind of talk could have on a young adolescent male. Through the mother's illustrations, we see a young man introduced to sexuality through a female perspective, as she describes her experience with male sexuality.

To add to the homoerotic nature of “One Good Man”, Alexie throws in an interesting tidbit of information: “I missed my mother like crazy. During all of my childhood bedtimes, she'd read me books (Whitman! Dickinson!) I could not understand and would not understand until many years later” (218). Both Whitman and Dickinson were known to incorporate homoerotic themes in their works as well.

⁸ Sherman Alexie, “One Good Man,” from *The Toughest Indian in the World* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2000) 226. Subsequent page numbers to this story are included parenthetically in the text.

For Alexie to have the narrator's knowledge of sexuality consist of two authors who discussed homoeroticism is a clever move, to say the least. Based on these passages, Alexie is clearly more comfortable discussing homoeroticism than before.

"One Good Man" introduces an intense "friendship" whose attributes must be examined. The characters of Sweetwater and Wonder Horse have had a long relationship with each other, and although the two men are described as being best friends for nearly three decades, there is an implication that the relationship is more affectionate than they would both want to admit: "Wonder Horse stared into Sweetwater's eyes (Blue eyes! A half-breed who had never considered himself white, or been considered white by other Spokanes!) and wondered why his best friend had decided to become a casual enemy" (211). Staring into each others eyes, as well as the love/hate aspect of their relationship carries a homoerotic tone that cannot be ignored. The narrator and his father are aware of Sweetwater and Wonder Horse as well, joking that the two men are "like an old married couple" (215) and that they will "kiss and make up" (216) for their disagreements. These statements could be interpreted as humorous banter, but Alexie segues the relationship between Sweetwater and Wonder Horse with that of the narrator's mother and father. The narrator, upon discussing the two bickering men with his father, immediately thinks of his mother. The association between the two relationships – one appears to be a homoerotic friendship, while the other is a heterosexual marriage – strengthens the appearance of the homoerotic within the story.

Alexie solidifies the theme of homoeroticism between the two men later on in the story. Wonder Horse is talking to the narrator about cars. While discussing

automobiles, Wonder Horse makes an analogy between the love for a car and the love for a person: “You have to treat your car with love. And I don’t mean love of an object. . . . You have to love your car like it’s a sentient being, like it can love you back. Now, that’s some deep-down agape love” (232). Wonder Horse goes on to explain why loving someone and getting love back is important:

“Because it shows faith,” said Wonder Horse. “And that’s the best thing we Indians have left.”

Sweetwater pointed at Wonder Horse – a gesture of agreement, of affirmation, of *faith*. (232)

Alexie italicizes the word “faith,” suggesting that the two men share the type of love that Wonder Horse has just referred to. Based on these examples, the relationship between Sweetwater and Wonder Horse appears to be more than homosocial. Their behavior suggests strongly that they have a homoerotic relationship.

By far the most important character in the story is the narrator’s diabetic father. Throughout “One Good Man,” the two men have intimate exchanges that can easily be perceived as homoerotic. The bond between the two men is first witnessed when the narrator attempts to find all of the candy that his father has hidden throughout the house before his father comes back from the hospital. The narrator proves that he knows his father’s habits very well, collecting thirteen bags of hidden candy in an attempt to preserve the last months of his father’s life.

As more information about the relationship between father and son is revealed, homoeroticism is displayed by the two men. Early in the story, the narrator reminisces about his father when he was younger:

He was a man who used to teach ballroom dancing, back when he was young and strong and financing his communications education at the University of Washington. . . . He was the man who had taught me how to waltz about fifteen minutes before I'd left to pick up my date for the high school prom. I'd always wondered how we looked: two tall Indian men, father and son, spinning around the living room of a reservation HUD house. (215)

As in many of the other examples, any inclination of homoeroticism would be overlooked if not for Alexie's overpowering descriptions. The illustration of two strong, tall men spinning around in their living room accentuates the homoerotic tendencies that have been exhibited throughout the story.

The homoeroticism continues to intensify as the father's health begins to fade:

"You want to help me get you into bed?" I asked, carefully phrasing the question, setting down the pronouns in the most polite order. Of course, it was a rhetorical question. . . .

I picked him up, marveling again at how small he had become, and laid him down on his bed. I slid a pillow beneath his head and pulled a quilt over him. He looked up at me with his dark, Asian-shaped eyes. I'd inherited those eyes and their eccentric shapes. I wondered what else my father and I had constructed in our lives together. . . . I had never doubted his love for me, not once, and understood it to be enormous. I certainly loved him, but didn't know what exact shapes our love took when we pulled it (tenderness, regret, anger, and hope) out of our bodies and offered it for public inspection, for careful forensics. (220)

The narrator's analysis of his father and their relationship demonstrates a love that overpowers the love that most father/son relationships have. Although it is possible that the affection shared by the two men is derived from the father's impending death, the overall context of the story seems to suggest that this relationship is also homoerotic.

At the height of the father's incapability, we witness the extent to which the narrator loves his father. After the narrator's father chokes and vomits on himself, the narrator takes responsibility in cleaning him up, both out of love and because the father is unable to do so himself:

I undressed him and washed his naked body. His skin had once been dark and taut, but it had grown pale and loose. . . .

I washed his belly, washed the skin that was blue with cold and a dozen tattoos. I washed his arms and hands. I washed his legs and penis.
(230)

Once again, the backdrop of the story suggests that this is a homoerotic event and not simply a son taking care of his father. In the story, the word “penis” is used several times. This example is the most graphic usage of the term within the story. When the word “penis” is used in other sections of the story, the atmosphere and context of the scene are much lighter and are meant to invoke humor:

“If I’m going after a penis only because it’s Indian,” my mother had said, “then it better be one-hundred-percent-guaranteed, American Indian, aboriginal, First Nations, indigenous penis. Hey, I don’t want to get into some taste test, and realize one of these penises is Coke and the other one is Pepsi.” (226)

We must also think back to when the narrator’s mother gave vivid descriptions of her husband’s sexual prowess. The narrator’s illustration of his father’s physical characteristics and sexuality once again suggest homoeroticism rather than homosociality.

“One Good Man” explores the notion that the mere presence of sexual feelings constitutes homoeroticism. In “The Toughest Indian in the World”, the highest form of homoeroticism is finally discussed when we witness a homosexual act of intimacy between two men who are believed to be straight.

The narrator of this story, a middle-aged Indian journalist, is perplexed by what it means to be a man, or what constitutes toughness. The narrator feels that the Indian men of the past displayed the toughness that he wishes to achieve because he feels that they were true warriors. As the story progresses, we witness the narrator growing more enthusiastic about Indian warriors. At this point, the narrator runs into

an Indian hitchhiker who turns out to be a prizefighter. Enamored by the prizefighter, the narrator begins to describe his appearance when he sees him hitchhiking on the side of the road:

Even before he climbed into my car I could tell he was tough. He had some serious muscles that threatened to rip through his blue jeans and denim jacket. When he was in the car, I could see his hands up close, and they told his whole story. His fingers were twisted into weird, permanent shapes, and his knuckles were covered with layers of scar tissue.⁹

At this point, the narrator wants nothing more than to be around the prizefighter. The prizefighter embodies everything that the narrator wishes to become, and as the story progresses, we learn that the narrator's feelings for the prizefighter involve more than just simple admiration.

The narrator, intent on spending as much time as possible with the prizefighter, invites the fighter to share a hotel room with him that night. The events that transpire at the hotel reveal the theme of homoeroticism in "The Toughest Indian in the World":

I don't know what time it was when I finally drifted off, and I don't know what time it was when the fighter got into bed with me. He was naked and his penis was hard. I felt it press against my back as he snuggled up close to me, reached inside my underwear, and took my penis in his hand. Neither of us said a word. . . . I had never been that close to another man, but the fighter's callused fingers felt better than I would have imagined if I had ever allowed myself to imagine such things. . . . The fighter bent down to his pack and searched for his condoms. For reasons I could not explain then and cannot explain now, I kicked off my underwear and rolled over on my stomach. I could not see him, but I could hear him breathing heavily as he found the condoms, tore open a package, and rolled one over his penis. (31-32)

Interestingly enough, just before the two men have sex, the narrator utters to the prizefighter "I'm not gay" (32). In spite of his statement, the narrator goes

⁹ Sherman Alexie, "The Toughest Indian in the World," from *The Toughest Indian in the World* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2000) 26. Subsequent page numbers to this story are included parenthetically in the text.

through with the act. The only clear explanation for this sexual encounter lies in the narrator's obsessiveness to attain what he perceives as true masculinity. By being dominated by the prizefighter, the narrator hopes to walk away from the experience a tougher man. In essence, the narrator would have discovered what it means to be tough, or what it means to have a masculine identity. Although the narrator seems to be ashamed of his sexual encounter with the prizefighter, he feels that the experience has helped him fulfill his mission of finding out what it means to become a true warrior:

I stared at myself in the mirror. . . . I threw a few shadow punches. Feeling stronger, I stepped into the shower and searched my body for changes. . . . I wondered if I was a warrior in this life and if I had been a warrior in a previous life. (33)

At first, the narrator is skeptical about his encounter, thinking that his homoerotic experience might have been a mistake. After the prizefighter calls him a "tough guy" (33), however, the narrator seems to feel that he has lived up to his Indian ancestry through his true masculinity.

Russ Spencer of *Book* magazine attempts to describe Alexie's movement from homosocial to homoerotic themes: "He now traffics in huge metaphors and characters that engage in strange, archetypal and at times wildly desperate bids for intimacy or a sense of personal context"¹⁰. While Spencer is correct in noting the soul-searching aspect of Alexie's characters, Spencer is off-base in calling their attempts "strange" and "wildly desperate." Alexie himself confronts these criticisms head on: "...one of the things, one of the hatreds that bothers me the most is

¹⁰ Russ Spencer, "What It Means to Be Sherman Alexie," from *Book* magazine, <http://www.bookmagazine.com/archive/issue11/alexie.shtml>. Issue 11, 52, July/August 2000. Subsequent page numbers to this story are included parenthetically in the text.

homophobia. So in some sense I wanted to use my fiction as a way of addressing that directly. And celebrating [homosexuality] in all of its forms. And including it as just another aspect of love” (53).

Through increasingly graphic detail, Sherman Alexie moves from homosocial themes to homoerotic themes. At the same time, Alexie proves that having a homoerotic relationship is just as healthy – if not more healthy – than a homosocial relationship. What is detrimental to the masculine experience, according to Alexie, is not having either one of these relationships in a man’s life, as shown by the outcome in *Indian Killer*.

Sherman Alexie, through consistent growth in his treatment of the different types of bonds that men can share, demonstrates that masculinity can be found through strong male-male relationships despite the stigmas surrounding such relationships in our society. “It’s funny – it really brings up the homophobia in people,” says Alexie in *The Iowa Review*. “When a straight guy like me writes about a homoerotic experience in the first person with a narrator who is very similar to me – I could see people dying to ask me if it was autobiographical. They always ask in regard to everything else, but no one’s asked me about that story.”¹¹ By displaying the achievements of homoerotic relationships in his stories, Alexie does more than simply provide a new perspective: he bucks familiar trends and battles discrimination against homosexuals.

¹¹ Joelle Fraser, *Modern American Poetry* (2001) from “Sherman Alexie’s *Iowa Review* Interview,” http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a_f/alexie/fraser.htm.

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