Ayiana Baynes

Dr. DeSpain

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“You Don’t Have to Say You Love Me,” Sherman Alexie

“You Don’t Have to Say You Love Me” by Sherman Alexie was a very interesting read that kept me hooked throughout the entire reading. This memoir of his was mostly about his mother, but it also heavily revolved around him as well. He opened my eyes to a lot of Native American culture and experiences that I previously was not fully aware of, and this made me want to read the entire book. I believe this memoir was riddled with so many symbols while also sharing various experiences that Native American people go through.

First, this memoir is riddled with so many symbols, and if you think hard enough you can spot one in almost every chapter. “How does one commemorate the ordinary?...This poem about ordinary Grief” (113-114). Alexie talks about commemorating the ordinary as he thanks the spoon he was using since they have used it for “at least forty-two years” (113). He then goes to say that his poem about dealing with his mother’s death is “ordinary Grief.” I saw this as a symbol because it can also be interpreted as how we tend to take things for granted, such as people who have been in our lives for so long. He never thought to take the time to appreciate the spoon for being used for forty-two years, and in that same sense, he never thought to appreciate his mother. “It rained salmon On the day my mother was buried. The salmon fell to the grass Among headstones And struggled to breathe. They wanted to survive” (136). I also saw this as a symbol because it represented how his mother was one of the last fluent speakers of the Spokane’s tribal language. The salmon represented the remaining people of that tribe who wanted to know and learn the ancient history of their ancestry as well as the culture that comes with it, and his mother being buried symbolizes all of that knowledge and culture being buried along with her.

This memoir also shares various experiences that Native American people go through that isn’t talked about enough. “I had learned about the epidemic violence in Indian boarding schools, and I’d heard and read the countless stories of sexually abused women, but I had never seen so many male victims gathered together” (175). In these boarding schools these children would be raped and abused by “white priests, white teachers, white coaches, and white security guards and soldiers” (175). This was not surprising for me to learn, but I didn’t know too much about it before I read this chapter. I notice that throughout the book, Alexie slips in pieces of his culture here and there, and he sheds light on parts of Native American life that are not widely known.

I believe this memoir was riddled with so many symbols while also sharing various experiences that Native American people go through. The way that Alexie forces the reader to critically think in order to understand all of the symbolism he uses is very fascinating. The way he uses those symbols also allows him to say so much while only saying so little. Also, the way he incorporates his culture and experiences that he either experienced personally or knew of by word of mouth is also fascinating. He tended to stray away from a poem structure when sharing experiences, but used that structure when sharing his culture. It was interesting trying to figure out why; if there was a reason behind it to begin with. For me, reading a literary analysis was different from other texts we’ve read because it felt like I was reading a story with the narrator while the other readings felt like I was reading a story by myself. Lastly, the way that I can apply what I see in the text to our CODES theme is that there are so many different cultures and backgrounds that we have to incorporate as we work to resolve our problem and taking feedback and suggestions from all of those different people will further our ability to resolve the problem as best as possible. All of these aspects are what made this memoir such an interesting read.