

*Erin Galvin-McCoy's essay on Sherman Alexie's Flight is distinctive for several reasons. Its thesis is subtle, conveying a multifaceted view of the character Zits's emerging identity. The complexity of the essay's argument can also be seen from the wide array of traditions that it investigates for evidence, ranging from the figure of the trickster to the Plains vision quest and the Ghost dance itself. Finally, the essay's style and syntax convey the author's argument succinctly and with grace.*

ENGL 1102M

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Dances, Dreams, and Crazy Horse: Cultural Fusion in Sherman Alexie's *Flight*

In the beginning of *Flight*, Zits calls himself “a blank sky, a human solar eclipse” (Alexie 5). He is a mixed-race orphan who has been passed around between twenty different foster homes and has never really flourished in any of them. He feels as if a part of his identity is missing: “Yes, I’m Irish and Indian, which would be the coolest blend in the world if my parents were around to teach me how to be Irish and Indian” (Alexie 5). According to Zits, cultural identity must be taught, and without the influence of his parents, he is unsure of who he is or where he fits in the world. Abused and alone, Zits has retreated into his psyche and sealed himself in, refusing to have empathy or compassion for any other person because it would only get him hurt. He divides the world up carefully into nihilistic, black and white, me-against-the-world categories. Since Zits needs someone to shake up his established order, Alexie draws on both white and Indian traditions to tell the story of Zits’s journey through time, using a

trickster to catalyze the entire journey, drawing on elements of the Plains vision quest and the Paiute Ghost Dance for the journey itself, and creating a cultural fusion that will teach Zits that compassion crosses cultural lines.

Justice, the catalyst for the entire story, the one who cajoles Zits into the bank shooting that starts the whole sequence, shares many elements of his personality with the ancient archetype of the trickster. A trickster's role is to act as a "sacred clown" (or *Heyoka*, to use the Lakota word) (Marshall 288). The trickster figure breaks all the rules of society and purposefully scorns all of its accepted modes of behavior in order to shake up the established order, keeping the world in balance through controlled chaos. His motives are often ambiguous. He is an "eraser of boundaries," upsetting the established lines with his mischief, walking between the divine and the mortal (Weaver 248). His purpose is not to "create the world . . . but to shape it" (Weaver 249). Justice is certainly the person who pushes Zits to the start of the journey by cajoling and manipulating him. But it's no mistake that the ancient trickster figure takes the form of a pretty white boy where most of the traditional tricksters take the form of animals (Raven, Iktomi the spider, Coyote). Post-contact with whites, plenty of "downright thuggish" trickster figures with very few redeeming qualities began to show up in Native literature, such as Tseg'sgin of the Cherokee, Napi of the Blackfoot, and Veeho of the Cheyenne. They all have something to do with the settlers. Napi and Veeho each mean "white man" in their respective

languages, and some consider “Tseg’sgin” to be a bastardization of the word “Jackson” after Andrew Jackson, perhaps most famous for banishing the Cherokees to Oklahoma (Weaver 249). Justice shares, at first glance, the twisted and thuggish qualities of post-contact tricksters associated with the white man, preaching a Sith-like manifesto of hatred as the way to power and manipulating Zits into shooting up a bank full of people. But this one horrible act that Justice catalyzes sets off a very carefully engineered series of events that pushes Zits into discovering himself. Justice puts Zits into contact with whatever higher power it is that controls his journey, fulfilling the more traditional trickster role of the bridge between the divine and the mortal and, in the end, doing a great deal of good. Justice’s multilayered motives are more reminiscent of a traditional trickster figure in that: “Sometimes he is good; sometimes he is bad. But he is always very, very tricky” (De Souza 5, cited in Weaver 248).

If Justice is a fusion of the thuggish white tricksters and the more creative, traditional native trickster, then Zits’s time travel itself becomes a preordained fusion of white culture and Native religion. Early to mid-twentieth-century writers such as William Faulkner pioneered the modernist and contemporary technique of telling the same story from several different perspectives,<sup>1</sup> and Alexie uses a modified version of this trope. Rather than telling a single story from multiple perspectives, he uses multiple stories and multiple perspectives that tie together into a single theme that is meant

1 Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* is told from four different perspectives.

to change his protagonist's outlook on life. The preordained and carefully constructed quality of Zits's journey is tied in closely with Native religions. In the Plains tradition of visionary dreams, dreams are defined as an uninhibited union of the known and the mysterious (Irwin 238). According to the Plains paradigm, through Justice and through the powers in the visions, during his journey Zits has a brush with the mysterious powers greater than himself that give him the dreams beyond his control (although he regains some of that control later on). Through these dreams, he gains a valuable kind of knowledge: Zits learns to see through other people's eyes through the emotionally charged and highly image-oriented (another trait of Plains vision quests) visions he is given (Irwin 234).

The fact that the time-travel journey identifies with the Plains vision quest shapes the purpose of the journey, but another aspect of Plains culture mediates its effect on Zits. Justice, the trickster, asks Zits over and over again, "Do you think the Ghost Dance is real?" until he finally gets Zits to believe in the dance (Alexie 14). The Ghost Dance movement began in 1889 when the prophet Wovoka had a vision of an apocalyptic event in which all the buffalo would come back and all the dead Indians would rise, be reunited with the living, and live together in a world where there was no sickness, no hunger, and no death (Moses 336). It was a vision of renewal and revitalization. From his position straddling the border between the divine and the mortal, Justice tells the truth: he sends Zits off to a long,

hard dance in which Zits raises the dead (or merely the absentees—i.e., his father) and comes back almost an entirely new person. He's given a second chance, a fresh start. Zits dances as he plays the roles of all the different bodies he inhabits and is given visions of their lives, white and Indian alike.

A major turning point in Zits's time-travel journey is seeing Crazy Horse, one of the most legendary figures of the Indian Wars. Whites and Indians alike trade tales of the mysterious war leader of the Oglalas. He defeated Custer at the Battle of Little Bighorn, supposedly by anticipating his movements, making enormous sweeps across the battlefield, and flanking him from the north. (A horse's average galloping speed is nine miles an hour. If the accounts of Crazy Horse's movements are true, he would have been cruising along at fifty-four miles per hour) (Michno 44). He was a Thunder Dreamer, one who dreamed of the deities, the Thunder Beings, and thus was given the calling of the "sacred clown" in order to better serve his people (Marshall xiv). Neither bullets nor arrows could hit him, according to the fabled Thunder Dream (75). He was never photographed (281). The moment Zits sees him from the perspective of the little Indian boy, all of these legends and tales of Crazy Horse come rushing back. He calls Crazy Horse "the famous mystical Indian warrior who killed hundreds of white people . . . the greatest warrior ever . . . like Jesus, if Jesus had been a warrior" (Alexie 67-68). The immediate impression is the Crazy Horse of legend, the one Joseph Marshall, III says was the Crazy Horse of his boyhood

days, but as he grew up and heard more stories of the warrior leader, “I began to paint him with the brush of reality rather than the distortion of legend” (Marshall xiv-xv). To Marshall, Crazy Horse is the quintessential Lakota hero, a *wica* or “complete man,” a man who showcased the highest virtues of the Lakota (Marshall xxi). He scoffs at the idea that Crazy Horse could be half-white: “The ‘part white’ theory, to some folks, explains why Crazy Horse was such an outstanding warrior and tactician. The white blood made all the difference” (Marshall 282). Zits, on the other hand, when he stands next to Crazy Horse, realizes, “I think the greatest warrior in Sioux history is a half-breed mystery. I think this legendary killer of whites *is* half-white, like me” (Alexie 68). This identification with Crazy Horse becomes very important at the moment when the Indian boy’s father hands him a bayonet and tells him to slash a white soldier’s throat (Alexie 75). Up until this point, Zits has had a very romantic view of the Indian Wars, thinking that it was worth the fight, but when he is asked to participate, he cannot make a decision. He looks up and sees Crazy Horse alone on another hill, watching but not participating, much as Zits has been doing. It is there, on the hill, with a bayonet in his hand like the one that will eventually kill Crazy Horse, that Zits finally realizes that he cannot romanticize any one side of the war, white or Indian. After all, Crazy Horse, the legend, the Oglala hero, is a half-breed, too.

Viewed from this perspective, the purpose of the journey was to

teach Zits, essentially, “how to be Irish and Indian,” but in the end, Zits made the decision to protect the women and children and assimilate back into society by not killing the white woman and her child in the bank and turning himself over to Officer Dave. Like Zits, Crazy Horse makes the decision to surrender to protect the women and children, but for Crazy Horse, this move ended in betrayal and his death. Can the cultural fusion last under a white family, or will he assimilate entirely and lose the Indian piece of his cultural identity altogether? We see the evidence of Zits’s changed outlook on life when he begins to identify with his foster mother: “Her cheekbones are big, too, like Indian cheekbones. I wonder if she’s a little bit Indian” (Alexie 175). Zits’s new foster parents seem more open and kind than any of the other foster homes to which he has been, but not particularly culturally diverse. The diversions Robert offers Zits are very strongly white American: “A baseball game! Jesus, how American. Next thing you know Dave and the firefighter [Robert] and I will be playing catch in the backyard” (Alexie 167). Many of the older Indians, living under the whites, ended up losing their sense of self: Sitting Bull ended up traveling with Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show, and Wovoka finished his days exhibiting himself in a fair in San Francisco (Stewart 1). But here the supernatural element of the journey can come into play. Crazy Horse’s Thunder Dream governed, essentially, his entire life, and if we see Zits’s jaunt through time as a visionary dream, then the lessons he learned on his journey will shape him for years to come.

Ultimately, we are not really given enough evidence about Robert and Mary to determine whether Zits will keep the balance and the lessons he learned under his journey. The purpose of the vision quest was to find Zits's cultural identity by making him see that he could not romanticize any one side of the many numerous conflicts that he experienced. It shook up his nihilistic little categories of the world, and made him a kinder, more open, more compassionate person. The world is still the same—it's just Zits's outlook that has changed—and it's safe to assume that Zits, in a kind and open environment, will never forget his journey.

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