

Phil Pakenham

Professor Aiyad

Comp and Lit 200

10 December 2004

Insomnia's Insomniac

In his personal essay "Up All Night," Sherman Alexie discusses the lifestyle and issues of being both an insomniac and a Native American in contemporary society. Through the use of humor, personal anecdotes, and a compelling narrative of his life as an insomniac, Alexie is able to comment on significant social issues such as racism, alcoholism, fatherhood, and the fear of failure.

Alexie makes clear that his own father had a very strong, but negative effect on him, and he speaks in depth about his father's influence on the person he has become. The author exposes one instance in which his father deserts the family because of his obsessive alcohol addiction. Alexie confesses to having been hospitalized because of sleepless nights in which he cried himself into a state of trauma and sickness: "So maybe I learned how to become an insomniac because I'm still waiting for my father to come home." Obviously, Alexie's father had an immense impact on him. In this case, Alexie uses his essay on insomnia to reveal his father's unhealthy influence. Alexie is emotionally exhausted by the fact that he will never be able to recover from not having a father figure present in the family. He

realizes that no matter how long he waits, time will still not be able to ease the pain and suffering of his father's absence.

Alexie's essay suggests that alcoholism is a prevalent theme in his life. Alexie himself is a recovering alcoholic, and as Joyce Moss notes, "He gave up alcohol at age 23 and has not had a drink since" (294). This not only displays Alexie's personal involvement with alcohol, but also the adversity he overcame to give up a life centered around such a burdensome habit. Alexie, it seems, was determined not to walk in his father's footsteps and worked to separate himself from the depressing times of emotional torment and mental anxiety. His only relationship with his father seemed to be in his relationship with alcohol. And yet, Alexie's essay suggests that even though he does not drink alcohol anymore, it will always remain part of his past, present, and future. For Alexie, there will never be an escape from the grim reality of alcohol and its affliction.

Alexie's account of his insomniac nights also offers humorous yet powerful commentary concerning the social issues he both observes and experiences. Alexie illustrates one particular occasion when he was roaming the streets of Seattle in the middle of the night. He describes how a man in a pick-up truck "leans out the window and yells, 'Go back to your own country,' and [he] was laughing so hard because it wasn't so much a hate crime as a crime of irony." Alexie uses his humorous ethos to draw the reader into this sensitive situation. In fact his humor helps us identify with

him, and his own reasonable tone demonstrates just how careless and ignorant people can be. He points to how the social network of people in the United States is extremely diverse and opinions and beliefs are rarely shared. Alexie also appears to have come to the sad conclusion that the world will never be equal despite our best efforts.

Interestingly enough, Alexie includes the date of his encounter with the man in the pick-up truck. It happened on September 16th, just five days after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center buildings. The ignorant comment made by the man in the truck reveals what he thinks about non-whites who are out in the middle of the night. Through him we learn that, if you walk the streets in the middle of the night and your skin isn't white, you are vulnerable to such attacks. Alexie includes himself among these people to show that we should not judge a person by the color of his skin.

Another social issue Alexie comes across during his insomniac nights is the idea that white people will always have it best. He begins to explain that, for him, wandering supermarket aisles provokes thought and stimulates ideas for writing. Walking the isles of a store that caters to an affluent clientele, Alexie states: "I mean let's not tell lies. You want the good life? You live where white people live, you go to school where white people go to school, and you shop where white people shop." Alexie is referring to the notion of racial privilege. Whites have socially and politically dominated authority in this country for centuries. According to Alexie, this historical

ideology seems to grant whites a better quality of life, and he has resigned himself to living in places where he can have luxury of the same benefits and entitlements, even if he doesn't exactly fit in.

Alexie finds answers and inspiration in his bizarre passion for insomnia. He has established a love-hate relationship with this inability to sleep. Along with his writing, it seems to distract him from his marital and parental life, and it seems to set him free.

He is able to think without restrictions or limitations. "I'm awake because I'm a father, I'm awake because I'm a son, I'm awake because I'm a husband and a lover. I'm awake because I'm a Spokane Indian. I'm awake because I'm an alcoholic. I'm awake because I'm sober now. I'm awake because of all that." Sherman Alexie is an insomniac because he is Sherman Alexie. There is no denying who he is. He is an individual. He thinks for himself, he acts for himself, and he believes with the utmost confidence in who he is and where he comes from. Sherman Alexie uses insomnia in his personal essay as a unique pathway to elaborate his thoughts and ideas on what it is like to be a man, a human, and a Native American living in today's society. Thought, interpretation, and existence are all invented in the middle of the night.