

“The Texas Chainsaw Massacre”: Horror Allegory and The Blurry Line of Ethics

Sherman Alexie was born on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Washington and soon grew up to write works such as *Indian Killers* (1996), *The Summer of Black Widows* (1996), the screenplay for *Smoke Signals* (1998) and many poems and songs in between (Grassian). It's not only Alexie's admiration for his culture's past history that fuels his writing, but his ability to recreate such vivid imagery for the reader by using pop culture references that Americans are familiar with (especially if they aren't familiar with Native American war history). A prime example of this is in his poem “Texas Chainsaw Massacre”, a poem that references and compares the Sand Creek Massacre of November 19th, 1864 to the movie *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974).

In an article done in Smithsonian magazine titled “HUNDREDS OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN WERE COMING TOWARDS US, AND GETTING ON THEIR KNEES FOR MERCY” (a more than gripping title to say the least) gives a synopsis of the massacre and its effects on the Colorado tribe, coming to the conclusion that the healing process is not even close to being over. “When hundreds of blue-clad cavalrymen suddenly appeared at dawn on November 29, a Cheyenne chief raised the Stars and Stripes above his lodge. Others in the village waved white flags. The troops replied by opening fire with carbines and cannon, killing at least 150 Indians, most of them women, children and the elderly. Before departing, the troops burned the village and mutilated the dead, carrying off body parts as trophies.”(Horwitz) Its apparent through this that the attack was devastating to say the least. With troops, volunteer troops to go even further, murder a civilization that attempted to surrender, people who were

weaker and unarmed, it resembles a horror movie. A clear monster, clear victim and the only motivation during the battle being the craving for flesh and annihilation. And it is exactly that comparison that Alexie noticed that lead him to write his moving poem.

In the book *Understanding Sherman Alexie* by: Daniel Grassian, he delves further into Alexie's intention when writing the poem and what he is trying to convey to a predominately white, American audience that is not was acquainted with the history of Native American tribes. Grassian points out that even if Alexie views "Native Americans as solely extras in a country that caters to the white majority" (Grassian 37), he is able to find crossovers via popularized American films that can help explain his heritage's history. "Ultimately, Alexie explains that he appreciates the movie because it speaks to his internalized rage as an American Indian who knows of the crimes committed," (Grassian 37) which is seen throughout the poem, but most specifically through the movies depiction vs. the real life depiction through numbers. He begins with describing the murder of the young man with a sledgehammer, then the murdering of the cows with sledgehammers in the slaughterhouse, describing the anticipation as a "fear so strong it becomes a smell that won't escape." (Alexie) He then remembers the "killing grounds" which is a comparison of the "killing floor" of the slaughterhouse in both words and imagery. Alexie continues and instead give us numbers that are more horrific than the sledgehammer scenes, "105 Cheyenne and Arapaho women and children and 28 men were slaughtered by 700 heavily armed soldiers led by Colonel Chivington and his volunteers. Volunteers" ( Alexie). The instant connection made of thinking that 133 killings occurred like the killings depicted prior, or even worse, makes it hard to comprehend the type of anger and loss Alexie must feel knowing this only happened because of them being Native Americans. Much

like the victims in *Texas Chain Saw*, there is nothing they had done wrong, but be in the wrong place at the wrong time. But he continues and explains that movies like these is exactly what keeps his mind in check, “essence then, the movie is important to Alexie because it reminds him not to become consumed by rage and anger and to be vigilant against that possibility”(Grassian).

Perhaps the approach that Alexie has to TCM isn't only to compare a horrific event to a horrific movie, but to also question the barriers we have as humans on which types of lives should be valued and which are of lesser importance. When starting with the slaughtering of the young boy and then shifting backward to the pig slaughterhouse, it encourages the reader to compare the air-gun shot pigs to the gun shot teenager. Both are killed without warning, with confusion in their eyes along with a struggle. And both are used for parts, pigs are eaten while the boy is used for parts and will probably eaten as well. Now, if we were to compare this to a victim from Sand Creek, the killing is even more brutal in the sense that the killer leaves the body behind, with no intention of utilization. The Native Americans are comparable to vermin, killed in mass amounts to stop population growth and nothing more.

At what point does a human life lose its importance and shifts from being human to being simply a commodity or vermin? Is it simply due to the stronger take advantage of the weak and survive? Or is it that exact type of thinking, the belief that there is ranks on different types of lives that makes those who kill inhumane and then go on to become monsters that kills human, animals and any other living thing they deem below themselves and as a threat? What has to happen to change a person into a Leatherface or Sally? Maybe the answer doesn't have a concrete answer because humanity is relative to culture. Perhaps it is what we are taught within our culture to value and to destroy is what makes us humans to some and monsters to others.

What I believe Alexia is conveying in his poem is that life is life regardless of those stronger than us, the tiers are irrelevant when it comes to unnecessary cruelty. But with a nation with such uncompassionate and power hungry pasts and present, will there ever be a true consideration for life and humanity?

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### Bibliography

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