S/R #9: Sherman Alexie’s “A Good Story”

Summary

Sherman Alexie opens “A Good Story” with a mother asking her son to tell a happy story. A real good story, she says as her son abandons his effort to feign sleep on their couch. He-rummages about the kitchen and the reader learns through dialogue and narration the story takes place on an American Indian reservation, maybe in the summer. The mother insists that people should hear stories about good things that happen to Indians. Her son acquiesces and offers a good story.

The story concerns an Uncle Moses. He eats a sandwich and ruminates on his age and environment and waits for children to come home. Along the way, the narrating son describes the odd construction of Uncle Moses’ home, and the reactions of passing Indians. The Uncle offers “bumper-sticker” wisdom about the universe; cute one-line clichés full of optimism and humor. Presently a young boy presumably his nephew shows up. The boy wants to hear a story and Uncle Moses tells him the very story the son is narrating to his mother. Then the story ends.

Finished speaking, the mother decides to hum a tune inspired by the story. The son asks if his progenitor enjoyed his effort, and she responds with more humming. The son goes out on the porch to finish his drink and enjoy the sun, which seems to be a late summer, and seems to muse that good things are not necessarily awaiting them in the future.
Critical Response

Alexie’s prose immediately impressed me with the memory of Hemmingway. Alexie does not use nearly as much passive voice as Hemmingway exercises in “Hills Like White Elephants”, nor does he take the time to specify the setting in a single block of writing. As an example, Alexie opens “A Good Story” with “A quiet Saturday reservation afternoon and I pretend sleep on the couch while my mother pieces together another quilt on the living room floor” (1). This same sentence demonstrates concise description. It maximizes language to describe a scene in as few words as possible. Also like Hemmingway, “A Good Story” reveals mostly through dialogue, but in this case through first person narration:

She keeps singing, sings a little louder and stronger as I take my Diet Pepsi outside and wait in the sun. It is warm, soon to be cold, but that’s in the future, maybe tomorrow, probably the next day and all the days after that. Today, now, I drink what I have, will eat what is left in the cupboard, while my mother finishes her quilt, piece by piece. (4)

If composed in Hemingway’s shifting third person limited writing, this last passage would be inconsistent because it would be stepping out of the story to tell something. In the context of the first person narration it strikes me as consistent and logical.

I am tempted to refer to Alexie’s prose as “New Hemingway,” because it is neutral and open like Hemingway’s works while being more active in its execution. Both styles are contemporary, though “A Good Story” aims at a late 20th Century public while “Hills Like White Elephants” targets 1920’s America. Because Alexie’s prose, as demonstrated in the previous citation, progresses in active voice, it has a density and flow appealing to me.
Personal Response

I like this story and it’s hard to say why. Like “Hills Like White Elephants”, Alexie drops the reader straight in front of an on-going issue, with no context. It opens with a mother asking her son why his stories are so sad (1), while he is trying to avoid any discussion by feigning sleep. Part of my difficulty exists because, like “Hills”, no one sentence or passage can be pointed out as betraying the point. The reader has to take the story collectively. On the other hand, Fitzgerald and Blaise pretty much tell you what they’re talking about.

I think though, that I can figure this story in something of a cynical light. I take statements collectively: the mother’s claim that people need to hear that good things happen to Indians on page 2, the son’s two references to survival on pages 2 and 4, and the son’s story to his mother. Out of this collection arises a sense that Native Americans need to be on their toes, that hard times keep coming and they need to face up to them in spite of their relative prosperity. Alexie’s final statement—“Believe me, there is just barely enough goodness in all of this” (4)—strikes home as a warning, and a state of affairs. In these words, I can almost hear Alexie saying to critics, “You wanna good story? Here ya go—a good story about hiding behind good stories.”
Works Cited
