

Gintare Radvila. Lesson Plan A: Monday, March 7.

**Title:** Introduction to Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*; Native-American Stereotypes

**Time:** 50 minutes

**Setting:** This classroom is an Honors Sophomore English class. The students are mature and capable of handling respectful class discussions. The demographics of this particular classroom are: 13 female, 12 male. 13 Whites, 5 African Americans, 4 Asian Americans, 2 Latinos (1 ELL Spanish), 1 Native American. One of the students has Asperger's Syndrome. The school is a high school (grades 9-12) in an urban setting.

**Theory into Practice Background:**

After researching through Sherman Alexie's website, I found his essay, "I Hated Tonto (Still Do)." I knew that I wanted to use this essay to begin a discussion on Indian stereotypes that have been overwhelmingly present in Hollywood and the media. Jim Burke suggests that the teaching of books should be organized around "domains for conversations into which we want our students to enter, domains containing sets of issues within important traditions" (Burke 73). By having the students immediately begin to think about the stereotypical characteristics of Native Americans, this idea will linger in their minds as we begin the book together. The idea of stereotypes is infiltrated throughout the novel, and I really want the students to question these stereotypes as they read. Also, I want to establish questions that the students can expand on as they read. Burke writes that "questions include; they invite" (259). By analyzing the reasons as to why the author feels the way he does in the essay, the students are invited to take part in this dialogue of questions.

After doing some research on this essay, I came across the website: [www.tolerance.org](http://www.tolerance.org), which is devoted to "teaching tolerance." On this website, there was a lesson plan created around Alexie's essay, "I Hated Tonto (Still Do)." This lesson was devoted to the "big questions" that circulate around both this essay and the book itself. In teaching tolerance to students, making them think critically about what already know may be a very effective method. Jim Burke writes, "The truth is, however, that most students are *not* critical viewers of what they see in publications and on the screens they view" (33). Keeping this in mind, I will be using the YouTube video, *How Hollywood Stereotyped Native Americans* to get the class to critically think about how they view Native Americans themselves.

Lastly, based off of Burke's theory that writing makes students think about things at a different level, "bringing the unconscious to the surface," I will have the students reflect often in written form.

In terms of the content that will be covered in this lesson, the teachers must familiarize himself or herself with the essay, "I Hated Tonto (Still Do)." There are many references made to movies and shows in this essay, and it would be beneficial to have an

understanding of these references to explain to students who ask about them. It may be beneficial to discuss who Tonto was and show a picture of him to the class if they do not understand the reference. Also, one must watch the YouTube video prior to showing it in class. This YouTube video depicts how Native Americans have been portrayed in Hollywood over a longer span of years. The video will help draw from what the students already think about stereotypical Native Americans.

This will be one of the first lessons introducing Sherman Alexie as an author. The students have previously studied the history of Native Americans in their U.S. History course and are familiar with many of the injustices against them (including why they were forced onto reservations). The students will first be asked to create a list of things they think about when they hear Native Americans to start the discussion. This list can be quite broad referencing Disney movies to treaties passed by the American government. We may add to this list as the class period goes on, expanding it to include a variety of things. Finally, this lesson is related to future lessons as it introduces how the class views Native Americans. This ties in well to teaching *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* because the protagonist, Junior, struggles to define himself as a Native American or a White person. The Unit is centered around exploring options to find a true self-identity, and this lesson introduces these themes along with a brief biography of Sherman Alexie himself.

**Objectives:**

1. Students will be able to identify the stereotypes most attributed to Native Americans and how the media has solidified these stereotypes.
2. Students will be able to analyze the impact of stereotypes on the growth of an individual after reading “I Hated Tonto (Still Do).”
3. Students will make clear connections between Sherman Alexie’s essay and the current stereotypes of Native Americans along with being to briefly summarize a biography of Sherman Alexie.

**Materials:**

- Copies of Sherman Alexie’s “I Hated Tonto (Still Do)”
- Projector for YouTube Video: *How Hollywood Stereotyped Native Americans*
- Converted YouTube Video
- Pen/Paper
- Marker Board/Markers
- (Projected potential discussion questions)

**Preparation:**

When preparing to teach this particular lesson, the teacher must make copies of the essay and convert the YouTube video if necessary. Since this is an introduction to the unit, the students will not need much prepping before today. As always, they will be prepared to write in this class, and they will be prepared to have a respectful discussion. It would be of interest for the teacher to briefly discuss how the class should be respectful about these stereotypes and each others’ feelings about the issues that are going to be discussed in the weeks to come as a reminder. Lastly, it would be beneficial for the students’ desks to be

facing forward in rows before this lesson begins. If group work arises, the students can move their desks themselves. (The class schedule should be written on the board.)

**Procedure:**

9:00-9:03: (3 minutes) General housekeeping and brief discussion about being respectful when talking about stereotypes and race.

9:03-9:10: (7 minutes): Students will be asked to write down on a sheet of paper (that will be turned in) what they first think of when they hear “Native Americans.” After a few minutes of writing their ideas, I will ask for volunteers to jot up their ideas on the board. Students will be free to move and write their ideas freely.

9:10-9:15 (5 minutes): Show students the YouTube clip: *How Hollywood Stereotyped Native Americans*.

9:15-9:20: (5 minutes) Quick-write. The students will briefly respond in written form to the video they just saw, reflecting on the stereotype list that they created together.

9:20-:25 (5 minute): Discussion of the quick-write. Students may comment on the video, may comment on the stereotypes or what they wrote about.

9:25-9:45: (20 minutes): Handout Sherman Alexie’s Essay, “I Hated Tonto (Still Do)” to the class. After reading the title of the essay, ask the students what they think the essay is going to be about. Inform the students that the essay is written by a Native American. If the students are unaware who Tonto is, bring up a picture of him on the projector and explain how he became famous through the media as a stereotypical Native American. -Read the essay out loud as a class. (Depending on the particular class, you may ask them to read individually and practice annotating the text). Ask the class how they would prefer to read the essay.

After reading the essay, ask the students to put their desks in the form of a circle.

Using somewhat of a Socratic method, ask the students how American Indians were portrayed differently than Whites. The students may draw on both the YouTube video and the essay by Sherman Alexie. (Potential discussion questions should be projected over class.) These discussion questions are located in the “discussion ideas” section of the lesson.

9:45-9:50: (5 minutes): Ask students to briefly jot down anything new that they learned in the lesson or any new views that they have on Native Americans and stereotypes. This will be used as an exit slip.

(Move desks back into rows).

Assign homework for following night: (Read p.1-23 in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*).

### **Discussion Ideas:**

- Why does Sherman Alexie end his essay with: “I was just one little Indian boy who hated Tonto because Tonto was the only cinematic Indian who looked like me?”
- What is the first thing that you think of when you hear Native Americans?
- How did you come to think of these things?
- How has Hollywood impacted the views of Native Americans?
- Can these stereotypes have an impact on a Native American?
- How have these stereotypes impacted Sherman Alexie?
- Why did Hollywood portray Indians in this negative light?
- Why did Sherman Alexie hate Tonto?
- Do these stereotypes still exist today? How?
- How can we work together to break these stereotypes? Is it possible? How? Why?

### **Bilingual/ESL and Englishes Accommodations:**

One of the goals of this lesson is to break down to stereotypes associated with Native Americans. The quick reminder for students on respecting other cultures during our classroom discussion may help ease any hesitancy that our one Spanish ELL student has. Next, depending on the classroom’s response to whether or not to read Sherman Alexie’s essay out loud, the students may be reading on their own. An ELL/ESL student may struggle with understanding something immediately, so it would be very helpful to either send him the link to the essay beforehand or give him a copy of the essay the day before. The essay is not very long, and this way, the student would be able to take a look at it before class. Faltis and Coulter write, “...focused on enhancing participation in ways that break down social barriers and help students learn language while they are learning content” (Faltis 29). By giving this student the essay the night before, the teacher will be encouraging a heightened level of participation because the student will be familiar with the work and the themes of the lesson.

Also, the students are going to be writing their responses to the lesson as it progresses. I would inform this student that I will be looking more for his ideas rather than grading his grammar and writing. (This will be announced to the class, also, because it allows the students to focus on their thoughts rather than logistics.)

Since these will be graded more on content, any student who speaks African American English may choose to write their responses in almost whatever style they want. As long as the students answer all of the questions and respond at the right times that are required, they will not be punished for any differing style of writing. Also, for any student who speaks African American English, they will not be reprimanded for speaking as they choose during the circle class discussion. I want this discussion to be a real conversation between the students to encourage them to engage with the ideas of the lesson. Limiting their use of language would not be ideal; therefore, the students are allowed to speak as they please. There will be times when more formal speaking and writing will be necessary; however, they will be notified of this.

**Special Education Accommodations:**

As there is one student with Asperger's Syndrome in the class, certain accommodations must be made. When learning how to make accommodations for this student, it is vital to ask him what he prefers or speak to his counselor or parent about the best practices for this individual student. First, it is vital to produce a variety of visuals/handouts and clear and concise verbal instructions throughout this lesson. The agenda for the day's lesson will be written on the board as a reference for this student (and others). Also, giving this student the link to the YouTube video along with the essay the day before this lesson may be beneficial. This student may struggle understanding stereotypes, as many of the references are not literally described. I could begin discussion with a small description of what a stereotype is. If necessary, I could print out a brief definition of this word for this student to reference throughout the lesson.

It will be apparent that he struggles with the concepts of stereotypes when I read his responses after class. I would need to circulate around the room as the students write in order to see if this student is struggling. However, this written response could also be considered his participation for class if he does not feel comfortable speaking on the issue. Lastly, during the discussion, this student would benefit from a written list of potential discussion questions. This could be done repeatedly for classroom discussions; therefore, he would be able to keep up with his classmates and contribute to the class discussion.

**Assessment:**

This particular lesson will be assessed through the students' responses during the written response sections of the lesson. The students will turn in these responses as they leave the room in the form of an exit slip. I do not believe in grading these types of quick-writes according to any rubric since I want the students to experiment with different styles of writing and focus more on the content of the lesson over the actual logistics of writing. There will be further assessments that focus on stereotypes that will be included as the students begin to read the book.

**Extension Ideas:**

Potential extension ideas would be to have literature circles where the students read a variety of books from Native American authors. After reading these books, they could compare and contrast certain aspects on how stereotypes impacted their particular authors' life.

Another potential lesson would be for the students to research articles that trace or debate the historical treatment of American Indians. As the students begin to read *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* there will be more relevant extension ideas to the text. However, there are a variety of YouTube videos that trace the treatment of American Indians. The students could also potentially create a blog tracing their feelings as the unit progresses on the issues that were discussed in this lesson.

### Source of Activity:

I would like to mostly thank the “Teaching Tolerance” website for expanding my ideas and reshaping them into a unified lesson. I would also like to thank Jim Burke for his ideas on drafting lessons that deal with “big questions” that you want the students to answer. I would also like to thank Jim Burke for encouraging writing as a way for the students to respond to the different aspects of the lesson. This way, I will be able to see how each student responds (even if they did not verbally respond).

### Resources and References:

Alexie, Sherman, and Ellen Forney. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*. New York: Little, Brown and, 2009. Print.

Alexie, Sherman. "I Hated Tonto (Still Do) - Sherman Alexie." *I Hated Tonto (Still Do)*. 1998. Web. 07 Dec. 2010. <<http://www.mondowendell.com/tonto.htm>>.

Alexie, Sherman. *ShermanAlexie.com: The Official Site of Sherman Alexie*. Falls Apart Productions, 2010. Web. 07 Dec. 2010. <<http://www.fallsapart.com/>>.

Burke, Jim. *The English Teacher's Companion: a Complete Guide to Classroom, Curriculum, and the Profession*. 3rd ed. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2008. Print.

Faltis, Christian, and Cathy Coulter. *Teaching English Learners and Immigrant Students in Secondary Schools*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Merrill Prentice Hall, 2008. Print.

"Stereotypes and Tonto." *Teaching Tolerance*. Southern Poverty Law Center. Web. 07 Dec. 2010. <<http://www.tolerance.org/activity/stereotypes-and-tonto>>.

### YouTube Video:

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_hJFi7SRH7Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_hJFi7SRH7Q)

### Illinois State English Language Arts Goals:

**4.A.4b** Apply listening skills in practical settings (e.g., classroom note taking, interpersonal conflict situations, giving and receiving directions, evaluating persuasive messages).

This standard was accomplished during the circle discussion of the lesson. As the students were forced to listen and communicate with one another rather than just with the teacher, they began to have a conversation with each other. In this practical setting, the students found new ideas arising as they questioned what they read and viewed during the lesson. Lastly, because the students turned in their work at the end of this lesson, the teacher was able to evaluate whether they were listening or not.

**2.B.4b** Analyze form, content, purpose and major themes of American literature and literature of other countries in their historical perspectives.

This standard was accomplished when the students were analyzing Sherman Alexie's essay in reference to various historical perspectives. The students began to analyze why Sherman Alexie hated Tonto and why he chose to write about. This also presents solid insight into Sherman Alexie's novel, which was assigned for homework the following night.

**1.B.4a** Preview reading materials, clarify meaning, analyze overall themes and coherence, and relate reading with information from other sources.

This standard was accomplished when the students were asked to predict what Sherman Alexie's essay was going to be about after simply reading the title. Also, the students were asked to relate the essay they read to the YouTube video shown on Hollywood's portrayal of American Indians. The students were required to analyze the overall theme of the essay with their own interpretations and views of Native American stereotypes. Using a variety of sources to gather information, the students clarified the meaning of the works.

## I HATED TONTO (STILL DO)

by Sherman Alexie

Los Angeles Times, June 28 1998

(<http://bibliosity.blogspot.com/2008/05/i-hated-tonto-still-do.html>)

Commentary: Sherman Alexie recalls growing up with stereotype movie Indians — and loving them, wanting to be them. (Well, most of them.)

I was a little Spokane Indian boy who read every book and saw every movie about Indians, no matter how terrible. I'd read those historical romance novels about the stereotypical Indian warrior ravaging the virginal white schoolteacher.

I can still see the cover art.

The handsome, blue-eyed warrior (the Indians in romance novels are always blue-eyed because half-breeds are somehow sexier than full-blooded Indians) would be nuzzling (the Indians in romance novels are always performing acts that are described in animalistic terms) the impossibly pale neck of a white woman as she reared her head back in primitive ecstasy (the Indians in romance novels always inspire white women to commit acts of primitive ecstasy). Of course, after reading such novels, I imagined myself to be a blue-eyed warrior nuzzling the necks of various random, primitive and ecstatic white women. And I just as often imagined myself to be a cinematic Indian, splattered with Day-Glo Hollywood war paint as I rode off into yet another battle against the latest actor to portray Gen. George Armstrong Custer.

But I never, not once, imagined myself to be Tonto.

I hated Tonto then and I hate him now.

However, despite my hatred of Tonto, I loved movies about Indians, loved them beyond all reasoning and saw no fault with any of them. I loved John Ford's "The Searchers." I rooted for John Wayne as he searched for his niece for years and years. I rooted for John Wayne even though I knew he was going to kill his niece because she had been "soiled" by the Indians. Hell, I rooted for John Wayne because I understood why he wanted to kill his niece.

I hated those savage Indians just as much as John Wayne did.

I mean, jeez, they had kidnapped Natalie Wood, transcendent white beauty who certainly didn't deserve to be nuzzled, nibbled, or nipped by some Indian warrior, especially an Indian warrior who only spoke in monosyllables and whose every movement was accompanied by ominous music. In the movies, Indians are always accompanied by ominous music. And I've seen so many Indian movies that I feel like I'm constantly accompanied by ominous music. I always feel that something bad is about to happen.



I am always aware of how my whole life is shaped by my hatred of Tonto. Whenever I think of Tonto, I hear ominous music.

I walk into shopping malls or family restaurants, as the ominous music drops a few octaves, and imagine that I am Billy Jack, the half-breed Indian and Vietnam vet turned flower-power pacifist (now there's a combination) who loses his temper now and again, takes off his shoes (while his opponents patiently wait for him to do so), and then kicks the red out of the necks of a few dozen racist white extras.

You have to remember Billy Jack, right? Every Indian remembers Billy Jack. I mean, back in the day, Indians worshipped Billy Jack. Whenever a new Billy Jack movie opened in Spokane, my entire tribe would climb into two or three vans like so many circus clowns and drive to the East Trent Drive-In for a long evening of greasy popcorn, flat soda pop, fossilized licorice rope and interracial violence. We Indians cheered as Billy Jack fought for us, for every single Indian. Of course, we conveniently ignored the fact that Tom Laughlin, the actor who played Billy Jack, was definitely not Indian.

After all, such luminary white actors as Charles Bronson, Chuck Connors, Burt Reynolds, Burt Lancaster, Sal Mineo, Anthony Quinn and Charlton Heston had already portrayed Indians, so who were we to argue?

I mean, Tom Laughlin did have a nice tan and he spoke in monosyllables and wore cowboy boots and a jean jacket just like Indians. And he did have a Cherokee grandmother or grandfather or butcher, so he was Indian by proximity, and that was good enough in 1972, when disco music was about to rear its ugly head and bell-bottom pants were just beginning to change the shape of our legs.

When it came to the movies, Indians had learned to be happy with less. We didn't mind that cinematic Indians never had jobs. We didn't mind that cinematic Indians were deadly serious. We didn't mind that cinematic Indians were rarely played by Indian actors.

We made up excuses.

"Well, that Tom Laughlin may not be Indian, but he sure should be."

"Well, that movie wasn't so good, but Sal Mineo looked sort of like Uncle Stubby when he was still living out on the reservation."

"Well, I hear Burt Reynolds is a little bit Cherokee. Look at his cheekbones. He's got them Indian cheekbones."

"Well, it's better than nothing."

Yes, that became our battle cry.

"Sometimes, it's a good day to die. Sometimes, it's better than nothing."

We Indians became so numb to the possibility of dissent, so accepting of our own lowered expectations, that we canonized a film like "Powwow Highway."

When it was first released, I loved "Powwow Highway." I cried when I first saw it in the theater, then cried again when I stayed and watched it again a second time.

I mean, I loved that movie. I memorized whole passages of dialogue. But recently, I watched the film for the first time in many years and cringed in shame and embarrassment with every stereotypical scene.

I cringed when Philbert Bono climbed to the top of a sacred mountain and left a Hershey chocolate bar as an offering.

I cringed when Philbert and Buddy Red Bow waded into a stream and sang Indian songs to the moon.

I cringed when Buddy had a vision of himself as an Indian warrior throwing a tomahawk through the window of a police cruiser.

I mean, I don't know a single Indian who would leave a chocolate bar as an offering. I don't know any Indians who have ever climbed to the top of any mountain. I don't know any Indians who wade into streams and sing to the moon. I don't know of any Indians who imagine themselves to be Indian warriors.

Wait -

I was wrong. I know of at least one Indian boy who always imagined himself to be a cinematic Indian warrior.

Me.

I watched the movies and saw the kind of Indian I was supposed to be.

A cinematic Indian is supposed to climb mountains.

I am afraid of heights.

A cinematic Indian is supposed to wade into streams and sing songs.

I don't know how to swim.

A cinematic Indian is supposed to be a warrior.

I haven't been in a fistfight since sixth grade and she beat the crap out of me.

I mean, I knew I could never be as brave, as strong, as wiser as visionary, as white as the Indians in the movies.

I was just one little Indian boy who hated Tonto because Tonto was the only cinematic Indian who looked like me.