

Story of Self: “Rebel Without a Clause”

by Sherman Alexie



What is this? A chapter from Alexie’s memoir, *You Don’t Have to Say You Love Me* (2017)

Text:

I am Sherman Joseph Alexie, Jr., and I have always struggled with being the second of my name. Everybody on the reservation called me Junior. Most of my family and childhood friends still call me Junior. During my youth, there were at least five or six other men and boys who were also called Junior.

There are a lot of Juniors in the Indian world. That might seem like a product of patriarchal European colonial culture, and maybe it is, but we Indians have also created patriarchal systems of our own. My tribe has elected only two women to Tribal Council in 122 years. Even Crazy Horse, the famous Oglala Warrior, was named for his father. But nobody called him Junior, for rather logical reasons.

“Look! There’s the most feared and mysterious Indian of all time! Behold! It is Junior!”

So, yeah, as a name, Junior lacks a certain gravitas. And Crazy Horse, Jr., isn’t all that much better. It seems oddly formal and carnivalesque at the same time:

“Hello, my name is Crazy Horse, Jr., attorney at law, and I am here to fight for your tribal rights!”

I never hated my father, but I didn’t want to share his moniker. This personal struggle is the reason I wrote a picture book, *Thunder Boy Jr.*, about a Native boy’s rather innocent and ultimately successful quest for a new name.

My quest wasn’t as innocent and it wasn’t all that successful either.

At age three, when I was first taught how to spell my name--my nickname--I immediately added a u and wrote “Juniour.”

“That’s wrong,” the preschool teacher said. He was an eccentric white man who did double duty as my speech therapist. He was also an ex-Catholic priest and would later be the publisher, editor, writer, and photographer for an alternative rag that directly competed with the tribe’s official newspaper. So, yes, that white man was the *Village Voice of the Spokane Indian Reservation*. He was the White Fallen Holy Man with a Mimeograph Machine. Years later, he would take my first official author photo. But in 1969, he was just trying to teach a rez boy how to spell his own damn name.

“There is only one u in Junior,” he said.

“I know it’s wrong,” I said. “But that’s how I’m going to spell it. That’s my name.”

Many of you doubt that a three-year-old could speak like that. Some of you are probably worried that your doubt is racist and classist. After all, how could a poor reservation Indian kid be that self-possessed and radical? Well, that was me. I was the UnChild.

I said, “I will spell my name how I want to spell my name.”

I vividly remember the expression on that ex-holy man’s face. I have seen that expression on many faces. I have often caused that expression. That expression means “I might win this one fight with Junior, a.k.a. Sherman Two, the son of Lillian the Cruel, but he will immediately start another fight. And another. And another.”

For the next three years, in my own handwriting and in official school reports, I was Junieur, pronounced the same as Junior, yes, but it carried a whole different meaning.

I think the u in Junior was short for “F*** you and you and you and you and especially you. Yeah, you, the one who still thinks I am going to obey you.”

Part 1: Analysis

Read through the story of self above and then answer the questions below.

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1. What aspect of **selfhood** is this writer focusing on?

2. What are the **moments** or **events** they focus on in relation to that aspect of selfhood?

3. What is the **tone** of this piece? Or, how does this writer **feel** about the aspect of selfhood they are writing about?

4. What **details** and **images** they use to communicate that tone/feeling?

5. What are **three words** you would use to describe this writer, based on this piece of writing? What can you tell about their personality, values, or passions?

Part 2: Write-alike

A write-alike is an exercise in which you take inspiration from the format, structure, and themes of a piece of writing, but replace the original content with your own.

The Original:

“Rebel Without a Clause” is a prose essay in first-person about how Alexie’s name has affected his identity.

Questions To Think About For Your Write-alike:

- What is one label that is applied to you that you don’t like or feel constrained by?
- What are particular moments you can think of in which you struggled against this label, tried to reject it, or embraced it?

Starters For Your Write-alike:

One way you might begin your write-alike is to imitate Alexie’s opening line, “I am Sherman Joseph Alexie, Jr., and I have always struggled with being the second of my name.”

You could start by writing, “I am _____, and I have always struggled with being _____.” Replace Alexie’s name and struggle with your own.

Then continue your story.

Examples:

To find examples for this exercise, visit www.storiesofselfworkshop.com/writing_samples.html

- Gabriel’s “Rebel Without a Clause” write-alike

Your Turn:

Set a timer for 15 minutes and go!



A large rectangular area containing horizontal lines for writing, spanning most of the page's width and height.