

Sally Student

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### The Absolutely True Story of an Ever-Changing Indian

“What do you do when the world has declared nuclear war on you?” (Alexie 31). For Junior, a young Indian in Sherman Alexie’s novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, the world always seems to be against him. Through the perspective of this teenage Indian, Sherman Alexie illustrates some of the toughest struggles Indian’s go through in his novel. Hardships, like poverty, discrimination, and alcoholism, are common and prominent on Indian reservations. In *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, these struggles consume Junior for most of his young life. However, in a sudden change of events, Junior starts to see what his life would be if it was full of hope and opportunity. Throughout the book, Junior changes from a doubtful Indian to a teenager who is confident and grateful after he faces challenges like poverty, changing schools, and the deaths of his loved ones. The author demonstrates this change using character thoughts, character actions, and dialogue.

In the beginning, Junior is doubtful towards himself because of how people view him and other Indians in poverty. This is revealed through the use of character thoughts. At the start of the book, the main character, Junior, is introduced as an Indian living on a reservation. Junior has lived his whole life in poverty, something that is pretty common within his reservation. Sadly, Junior and his fellow Indians have a long history of having been ignored and never reaching their full potential simply because of their economic status. Junior thinks about such neglect saying, “They dreamed about being something other than poor, but they never got the chance to be

anything because nobody paid attention to their dreams” (Alexie 11). In this quote, Junior explains about how his own parents were some of the many ignored in society. Just seeing this type of rejection first-hand seems to hit Junior hard because he believes since it happened to his parents, it can, and will most likely, happen to him. Often times, negative thoughts can sometimes overpower positivity, which is exactly Junior’s case. As a young boy, he grew up in a place where people were unconfident and where they doubted they could ever be something other than Indians in poverty. Thoughts and experiences, such as his parents’ dreams, eventually shaped the mind of Junior. Junior states, “But we reservation Indians don’t get to realize our dreams. We don’t get those chances. Or choices. We’re just poor. That’s all we are... And because you’re Indian, you start believing you’re destined to be poor” (Alexie 13). Here it is clear to see Junior’s main belief regarding him being an Indian and in poverty; Junior thinks that he will always be poor and that he, and every other Indian will not get to pursue their dreams. Undoubtedly, it seems Junior has absorbed all negativity from the people in and out of the reservation. Instead of believing that things can change, Junior chooses to believe that the terrible things he has to go through are inevitable and he can’t do much to change it.

While Junior did grow up a doubtful person, he begins to gain more confidence after he takes a big risk and goes to school outside of the Indian reservation he lives on. After growing up on Wellpinit, where nearly everyone had a negative mindset on their future, Junior takes his teacher’s advice and moves schools to Reardan, a town far different than his reservation because of the many white people. After taking this leap of faith, several positive events move Junior forward to becoming a less doubtful person, including Junior making the varsity basketball team, something he never saw coming. Junior thinks about his performance saying, “I suppose it had something to do with confidence. I mean I’d always been the lowest Indian on the reservation

totem pole - I wasn't expected to be good so I wasn't. But in Reardan, my coach and the other players wanted me to be good. They need me to be good. They expected me to be good. And so I became good" (Alexie 180). In this piece of text, Junior realizes what could happen when others are believing in him and pushing him to do the best he can. With these higher expectations, it is obvious to see that Junior's confidence is boosted substantially because he has such positive encouragement at Reardan. Another push of confidence for Junior comes in the form of a girl named Penelope. After falling head-over-heels for her, Junior befriends the white dreamer, who helps him to find hope for the future. During a conversation between the two, Penelope expresses her dream and the reasoning saying, "Because I want to be remembered, " which Junior considers for a second, "And I couldn't make fun of her for that dream. It was my dream, too. And Indian boys weren't supposed to dream like that. And white girls from small towns weren't supposed to dream big either. We were supposed to be happy with our limitations. But there was no way Penelope and I were going to sit still. Nope, we both wanted to fly" (Alexie 112). This piece of conversation and character thought reveals that Penelope and Junior happen to share a dream; they both want to be someone who is not just a face in the crowd. Also, it has shown us that Junior is no longer backing down because of the limitations put on Indians. This is very important to the development of Junior because he is now confident enough to say that he won't "sit still." Now, with the help of Penelope, he is realizing that he is capable of pursuing a dream and becoming more than just an Indian in poverty.

Through dialogue and character thoughts, it is learned that, along with confidence, Junior also gains appreciation for what he has because of the losses of his loved ones. Towards the end of the book, the growth of Junior's confidence is accompanied by a wave of grief after his grandmother, Dad's best friend, and sister died. However, Junior doesn't let this new emotion

overcome him. Instead, he pushes forward, fighting harder than he has before. When asked to explain his feelings, Junior replies, ““How about I say that it makes me feel like I’ve had to grow up really fast, too fast, and that I’ve come to realize that every single moment of my life is important. And that every choice I make is important”” (Alexie 184). Here Junior is explaining that the past few events have resulted in him appreciating his life more. Grief changed Junior for the better because he understands that life is precious and, after his sister’s passing, he has seen that dreams are precious, as well, and should be pursued before it’s too late. As of now, Junior, of course, appreciates what he has, but he also appreciates that he has a future, a future that can be anything he makes it. Junior also realizes that instead of being grateful, like he should be, he has dismissed certain things and people who have been good to him. With Rowdy, his old best friend, topping the list, Junior is desperate to apologize and make amends with an irreplaceable person in his life. As Junior has his realization, he thinks, “It made me think of Rowdy. I missed him so much. I wanted to find him and hug him and beg him to forgive me for leaving” (Alexie 217-218). This quote shows that Junior has come to recognize how empty he has felt without Rowdy by his side and is now willing to apologize until Rowdy forgives him. The thought from Junior supports the fact that he is suddenly appreciative because if he hadn’t lost his loved ones, he wouldn’t have realized someone or something loved shouldn’t be let go or they could be lost forever.

From beginning to end, Junior has several challenges put before him including poverty, moving schools, and several losses of people close to him. Shown through the use of character thoughts, actions, and dialogue, Junior changes from being full of doubt to being full of confidence and appreciation as he faces these challenges. Junior begins his journey on a poor Indian reservation he calls home. The negativity from this reservation is rubbed off into Junior

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who now is confident only in the fact that he will never overcome his hardships. His hardships, however, are mostly forgotten when he begins to go to school in Reardan. There, a series of events, including making the varsity team and meeting a girl, boost Junior's confidence and he is now determined that he can have the same opportunities as the children in Reardan.

Unfortunately for Junior, his move to Reardan is followed by the passing of three loved ones.

The grief that follows allows Junior to think over what's important and that life and dreams are very important not to take for granted. As Junior has demonstrated, overcoming obstacles isn't always an easy task, but the smallest thing, like changing a mindset, can be a step in the right direction.