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2202234 Introduction to the Study of English Literature  
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Reading Response 1

### A Symbiotic Story

For many, stories begin with “Once upon a time,” establishing setting and mood for the characters and plot that follow. In Sherman Alexie’s “A Good Story,” the story begins with the narrator’s mother telling him, “You should write a story about something good, a real good story” (140). It is the reader, not the writer who starts the story. But Alexie provokes us further. Junior responds to his mother’s request by putting forward his own: “Okay...If you want to hear a good story, you have to listen.” The successful making, or “quilting,” of a story depends on the reader’s participation.

Alexie claims that he is not trying to “pull that Indian shaman crap on” the reader with exotic Indian Americanness in telling a story (xii). This is, after all, a modern Diet Pepsi drinking, potato chip munching, sandwich eating, HUD house dwelling tribe of Indians, not the Disney Pocahontas running through the forest singing “Colors of the Wind” type. Yet, this very image of basketball playing half-braided brown youths looks very exotic against the stereotype. Junior’s earlier demand comes back to chide us: “If you want to hear a good story, you have to listen”—a good story is a good story with the proper cooperation of parties involved. The proper names of things are proper because we make it proper. “Uncle Moses sat in his sandwich chair eating a sandwich” (141). It is proper that one should eat a sandwich in a sandwich chair. His “it-is-a-good-day song” is what it is because he hums it and makes it so.

The web of a story is spun out for us in this interdependent way. Arnold’s straight words to Moses in response to why he hid from going on a field trip, “Because I wanted to see you,” is an “unplanned kindness” and, for Moses, “a good thing” (143). When Arnold

asks for a “good story,” his story—his actions that leads him to Moses sitting in front of the house, and his kindness—therefore, is what is told. This “good story” is a proper name for it, fulfilling as it does the request of the willing and attentive listener, Junior’s mother, who responds, also properly, with an approving “it-is-a-good-day song,” which in turn finishes the story quilted of diverse pieces of material fitting together in a symbiotic relationship.

Chutamas—

The title of your response, “A Symbiotic Story,” is good, but I think you should also have a one-sentence introduction stating the main idea of your response before proceeding to the discussion.

The first paragraph is clearly and logically developed. I like the way you picked up on Alexie’s use of the communal activity of “quilting” as a metaphor for the cooperative way in which stories are made.

In paragraph 2, a topic sentence outlining the main idea of the paragraph would be helpful to the reader. Otherwise, the paragraph starts well and your marshalling of details from the story to describe the modern Indian tribe is well executed. However, clarity becomes an issue when you introduce the word “proper.” It is used three times in one sentence alone and its meaning becomes unfixed. You need to establish early on your understanding and employment of the term “proper.”

Paragraph 3 begins with a good topic sentence. However, the slippage in meaning in your use of “proper” continues to affect clarity. The conclusion is nice and you return to the term “symbiotic,” but apart from the title this is your only use of that word. It should be explicated early on in the response if it is central to your discussion.

Overall, an insightful response but for the full effect you need to clearly explicate key terms used in your discussion so that clarity doesn’t become a problem in conveying your thoughts to the reader. Furthermore, in fully responding to the question in the ‘Weekly’ you should refer to the Aristotelian tradition as background in discussing Alexie’s innovations in the short story form. Also, have you directly addressed the final part of the question, i.e. “how [the story] has affected the listener and teller”? A final point is that in paragraph 2, you tantalizingly raise the issue of conscious exoticism and how Native American products are viewed by non-Indians, but leave it hanging. It’d be great if you could elaborate further on this point.