Oral Tradition Of Indians Essay, Research Paper

Conflict Between the Oral Tradition and the Written Form in The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven

The oral tradition of passing along history, information and stories of culture have been around since the beginning of time. In many cultures today, oral traditions are still the main means of passing down knowledge and history. Several problems arise from the oral tradition as a use of passing along of a people s heritage. Often as it is passed down from generation to generation some information is left out or forgotten. At this point problems arise between the written word and oral tradition. Many Native Americans still use it as a means to carry on the history of their society. The Native Americans are masters of telling stories. They are one of the few peoples without any trouble in keeping the oral tradition alive. They use the oral tradition as a means of enlightening those who have not witnessed the past. The Native Americans carry it close to their hearts. The oral tradition is where their heroes are born. The passing down of their culture through the oral tradition helps to keep their autonomy, yet many Native Americans have abandoned the practice of oral tradition to adapt to modern times and the written word. In his novel The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven, Sherman Alexie demonstrates how he Native American population has kept the practice of passing along their heritage through the oral tradition despite the movement to the written word by most of society.

The Indians have always used the oral tradition as a way of immortalizing their heroes. Whether it is a mighty Plains Indian on the hunt over a hundred years ago or a young high school basketball player playing the game of their life. Every time one of the stories is told it is exaggerated a little, making the character or characters in the story greater each time. Of course there are always downfalls though as each of the legendary basketball players was built up in hopes that one-day one of them would make it to college. None of them made and as each generation passes, they pass on the tales of those great players to the next generation hoping that one of the young children on the reservation might make it one day. There was a young man about the age of Victor and those of his generation that has been immortalized in these stories. When Victor asks Adrian about Silas he replies, Do I remember? I was there when he grabbed the defensive rebound and I don t mean it looked like he flew, or it was so beautiful it was almost like he flew. I mean he flew, period. (Alexie, 47) The Indians keep retelling stories like these to keep their heritage alive. Julius Windmaker is one of the players that have been immortalized. Yet he succumbs to material things like alcohol and hope is lost in him. Stories of Julius are passed down through the generations to keep the spirit alive that one might make it off the reservation one day. That is where struggle comes into play between the oral tradition and written word. The telling of stories broadens the imagination and gives birth to hope. The Native Americans needed hope ever since the white man came to the Americas and took over the land that was rightfully the Indians. There is an old saying in sports that says, anybody can look good on paper. The imagination can make things look better though and the Indians continue to use the oral tradition to give a sense of stability in their ever-shaky world.

Thomas Builds-the-Fire is the one that continues to use the oral tradition. He chooses to close his eyes when telling his stories. It s as if Thomas is linked to his stories spiritually when he closes his eyes. Thomas speaks whatever ideas, pictures and visions come to his mind. He has been abandoned by many of his friends for the apparent reason that he has not abandoned the use of the oral tradition. He uses the oral tradition though, not as a means to continue the history of the Coeur d Alene Indians, but to tell stories that come to him. They often have a significant meaning or moral importance. Yet the younger Indians on the reservation do not understand him or the importance of the stories he tells. The other Indians of his generation have given up the oral tradition and moved onto the written word. Thomas stories bored them; therefore many of his generation simply grew tired of hearing his stories. This is an example how the Indians are turning more to the ways of the written word. It may also be due in part to the fact that the younger Indians are like any other young people of the day and age and have a shorter attention span. The main reason for the Indians not listening to Thomas stories is that they have all grown tired of the circumstances surrounding them today and they are fed up with hearing about the past that Thomas tells them about in his stories. Thomas continues to tell his stories although everyone simply ignores him and he is often found telling the stories to himself. Alexie uses Thomas in particular to demonstrate the traditional Native American culture while at the same time showing the struggle of the general Indian population s switch from the oral tradition to written word in one man.

Though the oral tradition is still practiced and held sacred by many today, many of the Native Americans inhabiting our country have changed with time and have adapted the written form. Alexie showed how hard it could be on people to adapt to a new form of passing along information. The tension that he displayed between the traditional ways of the Native Americans and those that they had to adapt to were incredible. It created inner conflict between certain people like Thomas and his peers that would not have been there in earlier times.