

# Evolution



## SUMMARY

A man called Buffalo Bill comes to an American Indian reservation and opens up a pawn shop (a kind of business that offers people monetary loans in exchange for material collateral). This shop is very close to another store that sells alcohol. Buffalo Bill keeps the pawn shop open all day, every day.

The indigenous people who live on the reservation come to the shop to pawn things like jewelry, TVs, video cassette players, and even an intricate, hand-made traditional outfit that took a woman over a decade to complete.

Buffalo Bill buys whatever they have to sell and then stores it all away systematically. The indigenous people start selling their own body parts—starting with their hands and eventually moving on to their thumbs.

They pawn their very bones, which keep separating from their skin. And when the only indigenous person remaining has nothing left to pawn except for his own heart, Buffalo Bill buys it from him for a measly twenty dollars.

Then he closes his shop and repaints the sign. He refashions the shop as a "Museum of Native American cultures" and makes the indigenous people pay \$5 each to go inside.

here: the U.S. government engineered a wide-reaching land grab throughout the 18th and 19th centuries that, whether through treaty or outright force, pushed indigenous peoples into specific areas under often punishing restrictions. This process amounted to the wholesale loss of many traditional ways of life. And in the hundreds of years since, reservations have become frequent sites of despair and poverty, with high levels of alcoholism that many link to immense generational trauma.

Buffalo Bill thus arrives on the scene sensing an opportunity: his pawn shop is just the next "evolution" of exploitation. He's not simply offering a loan service, but rather contributing to the cultural erosion that, historical context implies, created this situation in the first place. Exploitation, poverty, and cultural destruction are linked in a vicious cycle.

The Indians start by selling VCRs and TVs. In the same breath, the speaker notes that they then pawn traditional items like a "buckskin outfit / it took Inez Muse 12 years to finish." The [juxtaposition](#) between these things—mass-produced electronics and an intricate, handmade outfit—suggests how desperate the Indians are. And the loss of this traditional item of clothing more specifically represents the loss of traditional ways of life.

Once all material goods are gone, the Indians begin to sell their own bodies—from their hands, to their "their skeletons," to their "heart[s]" (for a mere twenty bucks!). These can be taken as representing the loss of their identity, community, and spirit. Bill then "catalogue[s] and file[s]" everything he acquires, imposing a cold, pseudoscientific approach on an entire culture.

Using the Native Americans' pawned possessions, Buffalo Bill then opens a "MUSEUM OF NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURES," selling back to them a gaudy and false version of their own history and identity. The museum continues to exploit indigenous identity by pretending to document and celebrate it; in reality, the museum is just the latest stage in cultural destruction. The "Evolution" here, then, really amounts to devastation under the pretense of civilization, the Native Americans forced to pay an admission fee to wander, like ghosts, through their own ruined world.

### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-15



## THEMES



### THE EXPLOITATION AND CULTURAL DESTRUCTION OF AMERICAN INDIANS

"Evolution" explores the devastating cultural destruction and exploitation of American Indians at the hands of white society. The poem is a kind of retelling of the story of Buffalo Bill, whose popular 19th-century roadshow "Buffalo Bill's Wild West" repurposed indigenous traditions and trauma for the entertainment of white audiences. Here, a modernized Buffalo Bill opens a pawn shop on a "reservation," where the locals come to pawn their goods (implicitly in order to earn money for alcohol). Once they've sold everything they have down to their own bodies, Bill opens a "Museum of Native American Cultures" and charges his old customers an admission fee to see what used to be theirs. The poem can be read as a sharp critique of the centuries of exploitation and violence that continue to devastate American Indian cultures.

The poem's tragedy, of course, doesn't start with this Buffalo Bill; the fact that the native peoples in this poem live on a reservation nods to the lasting effects of settler colonialism and Westward expansionism. Some historical context is important



## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

## LINES 1-3

*Buffalo Bill opens ...**... days a week*

The poem starts by taking a real figure from American history, "Buffalo Bill," and reimagining him in the modern world. But first, it's useful to understand some context about the *original* Buffalo Bill (1846-1917) to whom the poem [alludes](#):

- This Buffalo Bill (real name William F. Cody) fought for the Union in the American Civil War and later served as an army scout in the [Indian Wars](#). But he is most famous for his "Wild West" traveling show, which repacked and repurposed native traditions—and traumatic experiences—for entertainment.
- In addition to displaying skills like equestrianism and archery, American Indian actors participated in sensationalized re-enactments of historical battles.
- The original Buffalo Bill, then, was a white man who thrived on exploiting American Indians—and that's exactly what *this* Buffalo Bill does in the poem.

The first stanza describes how Buffalo Bill senses an opportunity. He sets up a pawn shop on a reservation, a tract of land granted by the U.S. government to indigenous peoples. Historically speaking, the reservation system is itself the product of exploitation and oppression.

A pawn shop, meanwhile, is a kind of store that offers people financial loans in exchange for material collateral. In other words, people can trade valuable items—jewelry, electronics, etc.—to the shop in exchange for money. The seller then has a certain amount of time to buy the item back (typically with interest) before it's resold to other customers.

The mention of a nearby "liquor store" further hints that Bill is taking advantage of a common problem on reservations: alcoholism. The shop, the poem implies, is meant to catch people at their most desperate, when they're willing to sell anything—including themselves—for a drink.

That the store stays open all day, every day implies that Buffalo Bill is eager to make a profit. The [enjambment](#) in this stanza rushes readers from one line to the next without respite, as if the poem itself is a store with its bright lights on at every hour of the day.

## LINES 4-8

*and the Indians ...**... a storage room.*

Buffalo Bill's decision to open his pawn shop on the reservation has a cold, calculating—and capitalist—logic to it. He builds it

and the "Indians" "come running."

The implication is that these people are in desperate need of money (and more specifically, given the reference to the nearby liquor store, alcohol).

First, these "Indians" sell jewelry, TVs, and VCRs. (Recall that this poem was written in the early '90s, when VCRs were popular and streaming services didn't exist!) The TVs and VCRs might [symbolize](#) American consumerism and materialism—the desire to buy and own more and more things. These electronics also might speak to the homogenization of American culture (with everyone owning the same products and watching the same forms of entertainment).

Soon enough, people start to sell more precious items—such as "a full-length beaded buckskin outfit / it took Inez Muse 12 years to finish." Native peoples aren't just giving up mass-produced goods, but invaluable pieces of their own culture and history:

- Buckskin is a traditional textile made from deer hide, and an outfit like this represents an incredible achievement of craft and artisan skill. Notice how the sharp [alliteration](#) of "beaded buckskin" reflects this artistry while also echoing the alliteration of "Buffalo Bill."
- Inez Muse is, presumably, an American Indian woman who lives or once lived on the reservation mentioned in the poem. The poem doesn't offer any further details, which seems in keeping with the way activities like those of this Buffalo Bill *erase* Native American identity.
  - It's worth noting, too, that the name "Inez" is of European origin, with roots in Portuguese, French, and Spanish. The name itself might thus subtly gesture towards European colonialism and the way that native peoples adopted, or were forced to adopt, more European-sounding names to avoid discrimination.

The [caesura](#) after "finish" then creates a loaded pause, one that evokes a sense of the finality of this loss—of this garment, and of the cultural traditions it represents. The end of this stanza then features yet more [enjambment](#), the swift movement from one line to the next reflecting the swiftness and ease with which "Buffalo Bill / takes everything."

Bill then "catalogue[s]" his purchases, trivializing their significance by labeling them and filing them away in a "storage room." The sharp [juxtaposition](#) between the image of a painstakingly crafted outfit and a dull filing box speaks to the tragic devastation of American Indian life and culture, which moves from something living and vibrant to something that can be simply "catalogued" and locked away.

## LINES 8-12

*The Indians ...  
... for twenty bucks*

While serving as a biting [extended metaphor](#) for colonialism and the exploitation/destruction of American Indian cultures, the poem, until this point, has nevertheless remained pretty realistic. That is, everything described thus far has *could* literally happen.

But here, things become more explicitly nightmarish. From the [caesura](#) in line 8 till the end of line 12 ("The Indians [...] for twenty bucks"), the poem describes what the "Indians" sell once they've run out of material possessions: *themselves*.

They start with their own hands, perhaps representing the loss of traditional knowledge and craft (without hands, there will be no more "beaded buckskin outfits" to replace the one that "Inez Muse" already had to part with). The line "saving the thumbs for last" suggests that they're selling themselves bit by bit, piece by piece, and that this process is intensely painful.

Hands gone, they sell their skeletons, which "fall[] endlessly from the skin." Metaphorically speaking, this suggests that Buffalo Bill's actions represent wider systemic violence done to indigenous peoples. The skeletons fall "endlessly" because this is a societal wound that can never truly heal.

Soon enough, there's just one "Indian" left, and all he has left to sell is his own "heart." This represents his cultural identity, communal spirit, and perhaps his very soul.

To add insult to violence, Buffalo Bill's price for one "Indian" heart is a mere "twenty bucks." In other words, to the Buffalo Bills of this world, indigenous cultures are worth next to nothing.

## LINES 13-15

*closes up the ...  
... head to enter.*

No sooner have the "Indians" lost everything—their wealth, their traditions, and their own hearts—than Buffalo Bill changes course, transforming his pawn shop into "THE MUSEUM OF NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURES." Buffalo Bill has put their world on display for profit and entertainment, essentially reducing an entire group of people and way of life to a kind of roadside curiosity.

The fact that he simply "paints a new sign over the old" suggests both the *erasure* of "NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURES" and the idea that this kind of exploitation has gone on for a long time under different names. In other words, the traveling "Wild West" show of the real Buffalo Bill's day, which offered white people glimpses into (a highly sensationalized/caricatured version of) American Indian culture, has simply transformed into this "museum." The word "museum" also implies that this way of life is a relic of the past—that it is distinct from and

incompatible with the modern world.

Notice how the [enjambment](#) between the last stanza and this one (and, in fact, every line in the poem) suggests the relentlessness of Bill's exploitation. The capital letters of the museum's name also have a shouty quality that foregrounds Buffalo Bill's audacity and inauthenticity. A once rich and varied set of cultural practices, traditions, and artifacts have been put on display for people to gawk at. And adding insult to injury, the "Indians" have to *pay* to view what is rightfully theirs.



## SYMBOLS



## TVS AND VCRS

In the second stanza, the American Indians pawn TVs and VCRs for alcohol (the poem was written before streaming services came along!). These subtly gesture towards modern American consumerist culture, which implicitly contrasts with traditional indigenous cultures. These electronic goods can be seen as markers of the homogenisation of society through mass entertainment, with everyone effectively consuming the same stuff. The fact that they're in the poem hints at the way traditional cultures have already been displaced before Buffalo Bill's arrival.

It's worth noting, too, that they sell these items alongside a "full-length beaded buckskin outfit" that took 12 years to make—implying that these items are of the same (little) value.

## Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "television sets, a VCR"



## THE BUCKSKIN OUTFIT

The pawning of the handmade "full-length beaded buckskin outfit" in the second stanza [symbolizes](#) the destruction of American Indians' crafts, skills, and cultural traditions. This intricate outfit "took Inez Muse 12 years to finish" yet is sold in an instant to "Buffalo Bill" alongside much more trivial, common objects like TVs and VCRs. This speaks to the way that American Indian culture has been both exploited and devalued. The fact that Buffalo Bill then puts the outfit away in a "storage room" reflects his lack of respect for it; when it later becomes part of his "MUSEUM OF NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURES," this shows how it's been transformed into a relic of a lost world. Instead of being worn by Inez or someone in her community, it's on display for strangers to gawk at.

## Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "a full-length beaded buckskin outfit / it took

Inez Muse 12 years to finish”



## POETIC DEVICES

### ALLITERATION

There's not that much [alliteration](#) in "Evolution," which, for the most part, features distinctly casual, straightforward language. The brief moments of alliteration add pops of emphasis and intensity to the poem, and they also draw readers' attention to certain important images.

The name "Buffalo Bill" is itself alliterative, which makes it sound all the more mythical and legendary. Indeed, Buffalo Bill has become a famous character in American history and folklore (and was the real nickname of a 19th-century showman named William F. Cody). The alliteration is loud and makes the name catchy and showy.

Then, in the second stanza, there's alliteration in the mention of the "full-length beaded buckskin outfit." This sound patterning calls attention to the importance of this outfit in the poem, which [symbolically](#) represents the artistry and culture being exploited by men like Buffalo Bill. The fact that this is the *same* sound as Buffalo Bill also creates tension and suggests a link between the garment and its new owner.

In line 13, Buffalo Bill reveals the next stage of his plan as he:

closes up the pawn shop, paints a new sign over the old

The punchy /p/ sounds here feel sharp and quick, suggesting the violence and cruelty of Buffalo Bill's actions.

#### Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Buffalo Bill"
- **Lines 1-2:** "reservation / right"
- **Line 5:** "beaded buckskin"
- **Line 6:** "Buffalo Bill"
- **Line 10:** "skeletons," "skin"
- **Line 12:** "Buffalo Bill"
- **Line 13:** "pawn," "paints"

### ALLUSION

"Evolution" features one very important [allusion](#): "Buffalo Bill," real name William F. Cody, was a 19th-century army scout turned showman who fought in the American Indian Wars and later created the wildly popular outdoor show "Buffalo Bill's Wild West."

The show romanticized life on the American frontier and featured sensationalized reenactments of battles with

American Indians, who were routinely stereotyped as violent aggressors. The "Show Indians," mostly from the Plains Nations, who performed alongside white actors were typically caricatured as wild "savages" with strange traditions and often made to dress in culturally inaccurate and/or revealing clothing.

In this poem, Buffalo Bill becomes an enterprising pawn shop owner; instead of hiring indigenous actors, he exploits their poverty as well as reservations' historically high rates of alcoholism for his own profit. The museum he opens at the poem's end can be read as a modern analog for the theatrical production that the real Buffalo Bill put on so many years ago: a venue for non-native peoples to gawk at traditional cultures.

#### Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Buffalo Bill"
- **Line 6:** "Buffalo Bill"
- **Lines 9-10:** "they pawn / their skeletons, falling endlessly from the skin"
- **Line 12:** "Buffalo Bill"

### CAESURA

[Caesura](#) is an important feature of the poem. Arguably every line here is [enjambéd](#); as such, rather than coming to a pause at the *end* of lines, the poem's pauses fall *within* lines. All these caesurae add to the poem's conversational, informal tone. They generally keep things feeling both unpredictable and casual, reflecting how nonchalantly Buffalo Bill exploits the local indigenous people.

There are two full-stop caesurae that have an especially strong impact. These appear in lines 6 and 8, quoted below:

it took Inez Muse 12 years to finish. Buffalo Bill takes everything the Indians have to offer, keeps it all catalogued and filed in a storage room. The Indians

In what is an otherwise pretty breathless poem, these two full stops create sudden and dramatic silences. The first one imbues the line with a sense of finality and intensity: this handmade outfit, which took a whopping 12 years to finish, is quickly gone for good.

The other full-stop feels almost like a door being locked, representing how Buffalo Bill takes anything these people can sell and keeps it hidden away—that is, until he has enough material to open his museum.

#### Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "day, 7"
- **Line 5:** "sets, a VCR, a"
- **Line 6:** "finish. Buffalo"

- **Line 7:** “offer, keeps”
- **Line 8:** “room. The”
- **Line 9:** “hands, saving,” “last, they”
- **Line 10:** “skeletons, falling”
- **Line 12:** “heart, Buffalo”
- **Line 13:** “shop, paints”

## ENJAMBMENT

Arguably every line in "Evolution" is [enjambé](#), and it's only [caesurae](#) that allow the poem to have clearly marked distinct sentences. On one level, this keeps things feeling casual—in turn, implying that the exploitation here is nothing out of the ordinary. All this enjambment also grants the poem a speedy pace that propels headlong towards the ending.

The poem's relentlessness mirrors Buffalo Bill's own merciless desire to take everything the local indigenous people can give—down to their very identities. Bill stays open 24/7, the bright white space at the end of each line working like lights in a store that are always on.

Some of the line-breaks themselves are pretty abrupt, as close to a kind of violence as grammar/poetry can get. See how the enjambment in the third stanza, which runs on from the second stanza, suggests aggressive greed:

it took Inez Muse 12 years to finish. Buffalo Bill  
takes everything the Indians have to offer, keeps it  
all catalogued and filed in a storage room. The  
Indians  
pawn their hands, saving the thumbs for last, they  
pawn

Enjambment here makes that "takes" seem extra grabby while "pawn" seems desperate, speaking to the poem's overall atmosphere of despair.

Overall, enjambment evokes the Indians' desperation as they "come running" to the pawn shop and Buffalo Bill's eagerness to exploit them.

### Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** “reservation / right”
- **Lines 2-3:** “store / and”
- **Lines 3-4:** “week / and”
- **Lines 4-5:** “jewelry / television”
- **Lines 5-6:** “outfit / it”
- **Lines 6-7:** “Bill / takes”
- **Lines 7-8:** “it / all”
- **Lines 8-9:** “Indians / pawn”
- **Lines 9-10:** “pawn / their”
- **Lines 10-11:** “skin / and”
- **Lines 11-12:** “everything / but”

- **Lines 12-13:** “bucks / closes”
- **Lines 13-14:** “old / calls”
- **Lines 14-15:** “CULTURES / charges”

## METAPHOR

One might read the whole poem as a kind of [allegory](#) or [extended metaphor](#) meant to represent the devastating exploitation of American Indians.

Right away, the mention of Buffalo Bill—a 19th-century showman—in a modern context clues readers into the fact that the poem isn't meant to be read as entirely literal. The Buffalo Bill that appears in this poem seems to represent the history of white settler colonialism and the U.S. government's treatment of native peoples more generally. He stands in for the people, policies, and capitalist greed that, for hundreds of years, have violently displaced and exploited indigenous peoples.

The mention of a liquor store, meanwhile, subtly nods to the high rates of alcoholism on reservations. The experience of the indigenous people in the poem, meanwhile, represents the near-total destruction and exploitation of their culture.

The poem also uses smaller metaphors to tell its story. For example, there's the way the Indians sell off their "hands," finger by finger," and then "their skeletons," and finally their "heart[s]." The selling of their own body parts represents the idea that these people are not just losing wealth or material markers of culture; they're losing their very *identities*. The heart, of course, is often a [symbol](#) for the soul and people's emotional sense of self. The metaphorical pawning of their own *selves* creates a deep sense of hopelessness and despair.

### Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-15

## IRONY

There is a tragic [irony](#) to the story told by this poem. Buffalo Bill exploits the "Indians," providing them with an easy way of selling their possessions to generate money for alcohol. Bill's ultimate end-game, it seems, is to fleece them for all they have—in doing so, he acquires the items he needs to build a "MUSEUM OF NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURES."

Through this process, Bill strips these people of access to what is rightfully theirs and is able to profit from doing so. The indigenous people lose ownership of their own cultural identity. And in order to access some ghostly, hollowed version of their own history and traditions, they have to pay "five bucks" to the very individual who effectively stole everything from them.

The destroyer of indigenous culture ironically becomes its gatekeeper, able to set the terms of access and to control the narrative. The *real* Buffalo Bill did something similar, repacking

traumatic events from the Indian wars for entertainment aimed at white people around the world.

There is a further irony in that this poem's Bill sees a museum as a "venture"—a business for profit—as opposed to a way of preserving a culture under threat. In this, he embodies the capitalist values of the American West (e.g., the rush for oil that robs indigenous people of their lands).

Finally, there's irony in the poem's title as well. Evolution is the process through which life on earth got to be what it is today—principally via natural selection and survival of the fittest. Here, the "evolution" in question might refer, ironically, to two things:

- The poem might be mocking the idea that culture "evolves" from a state of wildness to "civilization." Historically, this process has involved the violent destruction and assimilation of indigenous cultures. Indeed, the white settlers who headed west across America in centuries past often thought they were fulfilling their *manifest destiny*: their God-given right to spread across the land and dominate whomever they encountered along the way.
  - Of course, the poem implicitly argues that the loss of indigenous culture isn't "evolution" at all, but rather cruelty and injustice that's wrongly framed as progress.
- The "evolution" in question could also be a reference to the way that exploitation itself has "evolved"—from the openly racist caricatures of "Buffalo Bill's Wild West" to subtler institutions that nevertheless continue to trivialize and otherize indigenous cultures.

#### Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 12-15:** "Buffalo Bill takes that for twenty bucks / closes up the pawn shop, paints a new sign over the old / calls his venture THE MUSEUM OF NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURES / charges the Indians five bucks a head to enter."

## ASYNDETON

Closely related to the poem's use of [caesura](#) is its frequent [asyndeton](#). Rarely does the poet use conjunctions to connect various parts of a sentence. As a result, the poem flows swiftly, even unstoppably, down the page. Asyndeton can also enhance the poem's striking [juxtapositions](#), as in lines 4-5:

the Indians come running in with jewelry  
television sets, a VCR, a full-length beaded buckskin  
outfit

There's a huge difference between mass-produced electronics like TVs and VCRs and a handmade traditional outfit crafted over 12 years. Yet all these items are presented in the same breath—a technique that shows both how desperate these people are for money and how little Buffalo Bill values their culture.

Buffalo Bill's actions in the poem also frequently feature asyndeton, which makes them feel unstoppable and inevitable. Take lines 7-8:

takes everything the Indians have to offer, keeps it  
all catalogued and filed in a storage room. [...]

Thanks to that asyndeton, his actions feel casual and perhaps even careless. The destruction of an entire people is done swiftly and efficiently, seemingly without a second thought.

#### Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- Line 3
- Lines 4-5
- Lines 7-8
- Lines 9-10
- Lines 12-15



## VOCABULARY

**Buffalo Bill** (Line 1, Lines 6-7, Line 12) - Buffalo Bill was a 19th-century soldier and showman whose traveling roadshow "Buffalo Bill's Wild West" was famous around the world. Among other things, it featured highly sensationalized retellings of the conflict between American Indians and white expansionists.

**Pawn Shop** (Line 1, Line 13) - A place where people can trade material possessions for monetary loans, usually with an option to buy them back within a certain time period (and plus interest).

**Reservation** (Line 1) - An area of land assigned to an American Indian tribal nation.

**VCR** (Line 5) - Videocassette Recorder (a.k.a how people watched films at home before streaming!).

**Full-length beaded buckskin outfit** (Line 5) - A traditional indigenous garment made from deer hide.



## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"Evolution" consists of five three-line stanzas, a.k.a. tercets. These short stanzas lend the poem structure, even as it doesn't follow any set [meter](#) or [rhyme scheme](#). At the same time, the

tercets create subtle tension: every line in the poem is [enjambéd](#), with sentences never fully mapping onto the poem's visual line breaks. That is, the strict three-line shape *doesn't* correspond to the ends of individual sentences, making the poem feel abrupt and disorientating. The tercets, in their uniform shape, could represent oppression and exploitation—attempts to restrain and distill native peoples' ways of life.

## METER

"Evolution" uses [free verse](#), meaning it has no steady [meter](#). Instead, the language unfolds casually and conversationally, evoking the cruel nonchalance with which Buffalo Bill "takes everything the Indians have to offer." The poem's loose rhythms might also suggest that, however tragic, the events being described are commonplace. Something like a steady [iambic](#) rhythm, by contrast, would probably feel too measured and self-consciously poetic.

## RHYME SCHEME

As a [free verse](#) poem, "Evolution" doesn't follow any set [rhyme scheme](#). As with the poem's lack of [meter](#), this keeps things from feeling overly poetic; the poem's events are presented in a simple, straightforward manner that suggests they're nothing out of the ordinary. This, in turn, reinforces the tragedy at the poem's core: the situation described is not surprising or new.

owner. Moving the poem to the modern era implies that the kind of exploitation of the real Buffalo Bill's day is alive and well, having simply "evolved" into something subtler (yet no less powerful). The reference to mass-produced electronics (TV sets and VCRs) alongside traditional buckskin outfits also reflects the ongoing devaluation of native cultures.



## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

Sherman Alexie is an American Indian writer with ancestry from a number of tribes, principally the Spokane and the Coeur d'Alene people. He grew up on the Spokane Indian Reservation, attending a high school outside of the reservation at which he was the only Native American in his class. He later attended Washington State University and was inspired by Alex Kuo's creative writing course to write about his own experiences. Alexie has [spoken about](#) being a recovering alcoholic and witnessing multiple family members, including his father, die from the disease.

"Evolution" was published in *The Business of Fancy-Dancing*, which came out in 1992 and won numerous prizes. Fancy-dancing is a colorful form of dancing loosely based on a war dance from the Ponca Tribe; Alexie views his own poetry as a similarly expressive way of communicating. His writing focuses on the experiences of native peoples both on and off reservations, and his characteristic use of dark humor and [irony](#) can also be seen in works such as "[The Powwow at the End of the World](#)," "[How to Write the Great American Indian Novel](#)." He published the best-selling novel "[The Absolutely True Diary of A Part-Time Indian](#)" in 2016.

Alexie is one voice among many exploring Native American experiences and perspectives in contemporary poetry. Others include Joy Harjo, a member of the Mvskoke Nation and the incumbent Poet Laureate for the United States, who has often incorporated the rich oral traditions of indigenous cultures into her work; Leslie Marmon Silko, whose work draws on Native American myths and symbolism; and Orlando White, whose poems focus on the role of language in power, culture, and identity.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Though "Evolution" was published in the 1990s, it draws from centuries of American history.

Believing that colonial expansion was both their right and their destiny, white settlers drove further west across the North American continent throughout the 17th to 19th centuries. This brought them into conflict with Native Americans and resulted in the deaths of millions of indigenous people through both direct violence and exposure to European diseases. The U.S. government also routinely annexed native lands, forcefully



## SPEAKER

The speaker of "Evolution" is never identified. Instead, the speaker works like an omniscient narrator in a novel, presenting the story at hand without commentary. In a way, the speaker's detached tone makes the story feel all the more tragic; it feels as though the poem is simply presenting facts, suggesting that the brutal reality of life for American Indians is just the way things are.



## SETTING

The poem takes place in the modern era on an unspecified reservation, an area of land set aside by the U.S. government for sovereign rule by indigenous Americans. The setting itself is thus part of the legacy of white settler colonialism: the reservation system [began](#) largely as a means for the government to seize native lands and to relocate, control, and forcefully assimilate native peoples. Today, those living on reservations often have statistically higher risks of alcohol abuse, poverty, suicide, and many chronic health conditions than the general population, something the poem alludes to in line 2 with the reference to a nearby "liquor store."

While Buffalo Bill is the nickname of a real person who lived in the 1800s, the poem reimagines Bill as a modern pawn shop

displacing or assimilating their indigenous inhabitants in an attempt to "civilize" them by making them more like white people. This resulted in the destruction of innumerable traditional cultures.

The legacy of all this historical violence, racism, and oppression can be seen in the reservation system, which began largely as a means to control native peoples by confining them to specific tracts of land. Violence, depression, poverty, chronic illness, infant mortality, and substance abuse remain significant problems in reservation communities to this day, where the average life expectancy is often far lower than that of any other group in North America. Such issues are linked to centuries of generational trauma, oppression, and the wholesale loss of traditional ways of life.

The Buffalo Bill of this poem, meanwhile, is a modern imagining of William F. Cody (1846-1917), a former Union soldier, notorious bison hunter (hence the nickname), and army scout during the American Indian Wars. But Bill became most famous for his traveling roadshow "Buffalo Bill's Wild West," which introduced millions of people throughout the U.S. and Europe to a highly sensationalized version of life on the American frontier—complete with re-enactments of battles from the American Indian Wars, wherein native peoples were routinely stereotyped as violent, strange, and primitive.



## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Alexie's Biography](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/sherman-alexie) — A valuable resource from the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/sherman-alexie>)
- [Native American Poetry and Culture](#) — A selection of poems and essays by indigenous writers.

(<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/144560/native-american-poetry-and-culture>)

- [Alexie Interviewed](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X_F_jl3BE-k) — The poet on his life, work, and wider issues around Native American identity. ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X\\_F\\_jl3BE-k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X_F_jl3BE-k))
- [The Story of Buffalo Bill](https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-F-Cody) — A short biography of William F. Cody, a.k.a Buffalo Bill. (<https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-F-Cody>)
- [Reservation Living Conditions](http://www.nativepartnership.org/site/PageServer?pagename=naa_livingconditions) — Striking statistics about living conditions on modern reservations. ([http://www.nativepartnership.org/site/PageServer?pagename=naa\\_livingconditions](http://www.nativepartnership.org/site/PageServer?pagename=naa_livingconditions))
- [Native Americans and Westward Expansion](https://www.vmfamuseum.com/learn-archive/microsites/george-catlin/native-american-indian-and-western-expansion-of-the-united-states/) — More on how westward expansion devastated North America's indigenous peoples. (<https://www.vmfamuseum.com/learn-archive/microsites/george-catlin/native-american-indian-and-western-expansion-of-the-united-states/>)



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