Close Reading Practice from “Saint Junior”by Sherman Alexie

**Directions**: Read the following information taken from Sherman Alexie’s short story “Saint Junior,” originally published in his collection of short stories entitled *The Toughest Indian in the World*. Then, answer each of the questions in an expanded paragraph. Include embedded text evidence in each answer.

**Background and Purpose**

This passage is from a story by Sherman Alexie called “Saint Junior,” in his short fiction collection, The Toughest Indian in the World (2000). Like the author, Roman Gabriel Fury is a Spokane/Coeur d’Alene Indian. He has just received two letters: one congratulates him on his exceptional performance on the CAT test (the thinly veiled SAT) while the other requests a meeting with the test administrator, a white man named Williams. The young man travels once more from the reservation to Spokane, Washington, not knowing whether he is to be congratulated or confronted by the bureaucrat. The passage records the gist of the meeting; the tone of Roman’s parting shots should be easy to surmise.

“Hmmm,” said Mr. Williams, as if the guttural were an important part of his vocabulary.

“Yes,” said Roman, because he wanted to be the first one to use a word actually found in *Webster’s Dictionary*, Ninth Edition.

“Well,” said Mr. Williams. “Let me see here. It says here in your file that you’re eighteen years old, a member of the Spokane Tribe of Indians, valedictorian of Wellpint High School on said reservation, captain of the chess, math, history, and basketball teams, accepted on full academic scholarship to St. Jerome the Second University here in Spokane.”

“Yes,” said Roman, with the same inflection as before.

“That’s quite an all-American resume, Mr. Fury.”

“No, I think it’s more of an all-Native American resume.”

Mr. Williams smiled. His teeth, skin, and pinstriped suit were all the same shade of gray. Roman couldn’t tell where the three-season wool ended and where the man began.

“Roman Gabriel Fury,” said Williams. “Quite an interesting name.”

“Normally, I’d say thank you, sir, but I don’t think that that was a sincere compliment, was it?”  
 “Just an observation, young Mr. Fury. I am very good with observations. In fact, at this very moment, I am observing the fact that your parents are absent. A very distressing observation, to be sure, considering our specific request that your mother and father attend this meeting with you.”

“Sir, my parents are dead. If you’d read my file in its entirety, you might have observed that.”

Mr. Williams’ eyes flashed with anger, the first display of any color. He flipped through the file, searching for the two words that would confirm the truth: *deceased, deceased*.

At that moment, if Roman had closed his eyes, he could have seen the yellow headlights of the red truck that smashed head-on into his father’s blue Chevy out on Reservation Road. He could have remembered that his father was buried in a brown suit. At that moment, if Roman had closed his eyes, he could have seen his mother’s red blood coughed into the folds of a white handkerchief. Roman was three years old when his mother was buried in a purple dress. He barely remembered her.

“Yes,” said Mr. Williams. “I see now. Your grandmother has been your guardian for the last three years. Why didn’t she come?”

“She doesn’t speak much English, sir.”

“And yet, you speak English so well, speak it well enough to score in the ninety-ninth percentile in the verbal section of our little test. Quite an amazing feat for someone from, well, let’s call it a modest background.”

“I’ve never been accused of modesty.”

“No, I would guess not,” said Williams, setting the file down on his desk. He picked up a Mont Blanc pen as if it were a weapon.

“But I guess you’ve been called arrogant,” added Williams. “And perhaps, calculating?”

“Calculating enough for a ninety-nine on the math section of your little test,” Roman said. He really hated wooden chairs.

“Yes, indeed,” said Williams. “A nearly perfect score. In fact, the second-highest score ever for a Native American. Congratulations.”

“Normally, I’d say thank you, sir, but I don’t think that was a sincere compliment, was it?”

Mr. Williams leaned across his desk, straightened his back, placed his hands flat on either side of his desk, took a deep breath, exhaled, and made himself larger. He owned all ten volumes of Harris Brubaker’s *How to Use Body Language to Destroy Your Enemies*.

“Son,” said Williams, using what Brubaker considered to be the second-most effective diminutive. “We’ve been informed there were certain irregularities in your test-taking process.”

“Could you be more specific, sir?”

“You were twenty minutes late for the test.”

“Yes, I was.”

“I also understand that your test-taking apparel was, to say the least, quite distracting.”

Roman smiled. He’d worn his red, yellow, white, and blue grass dance outfit while taking the test—highly unusual, to say the least—but he had used two standard number two pencils, as specified in the rule book.

“There’s nothing in the rule book about a dress code,” said Roman.

“No, no there’s not. But I certainly would enjoy an explanation.”

“My grandmother told me your little test was culturally biased,” said Roman. “And that I might need a little extra power to do my best. I was going to bring my favorite drum group and let them sing a few honor songs, but I thought the non-Indians in the room might get a little, as you say, distracted.”

“Power?” asked Williams, using Harris Brubaker’s favorite word.

Roman stood and leaned across the desk. He’d read Brubaker’s first volume, had found it derivative and ambiguous, and never bothered to read any of the others.

“Well, you see, sit,” said Roman. “The thing is, I was exhausted from having to walk seventy-five miles to get from my reservation to Spokane for the test, because my grandmother and I are too poor to afford a dependable car.”

“You hitchhiked?” asked Williams.

“Oh, no, hitchhiking would mean that I actually got a ride. But people don’t pick up Indians much, you know?”

“Do you expect me to believe you walked seventy-five miles?”

“Well, that’s the way it is,” said Roman. “Anyway, I get to the city, but then I have to run thirty blocks to get to the private high school where they’re giving the test, because I had enough money for lunch or a bus, but not both, and sometimes you have to make hard choices.

“And then, once I got to the private high school, I had to convince the security guard, who looked suspiciously like a member of the Seventh Cavalry, that I was there to take the test, and not to vandalize the place. And hey, thank God I wasn’t wearing my grass-dance outfit yet because he might have shot me down on the spot.

“Anyway, once I got past him, I was, as you observed, twenty minutes late. So I ran into a bathroom, changed into my grass-dance outfit, then sat down with your little test, realizing belatedly that I was definitely the only Injun in the room, and aside from the black kid in the front row and the ambiguously ethnic chick in the back, the only so-called minority in the room, and that frightened me more than you will ever know.”

**Using Skills to Understand the Passage**

1. What do we learn about Roman’s character from the passage? What social and personal factors have influenced his development?
2. What is the source of conflict between Roman Fury and Mr. Williams?
3. What is the significance of the details that describe the private school and the reservation? What contrast is implied through the choice of details?
4. Consider the role of diction and tone in the story. Examine both the language of the narrator and the characters’ use of words as weapons. What effect does this highly deliberate use of language have in establishing the tone of the passage?
5. How is color imagery used in the story? What qualities do the presence or absence of color suggest?