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Literary Research Essay

*“This is what it means to say Phoenix Arizona”* is a story written by Sherman Alexie, published in the year 1994 (Robinson). The story has been adapted into a film called "Smoke Signals" which was released in the year 1998. It has been recognized as one of the best American short stories. The paper analyzes the various aspects of the story mainly focusing on the Native American culture.

The story centers on two Native American characters Victor Joseph and Thomas Builds-the-Fire who live in Washington and accidentally meet after the death of Victor's father (Learning). Victor didn’t have a good relationship with his father but his death upsets him. He meets Thomas, his childhood acquaintance, and both of them go to Arizona to retrieve his father’s ashes. During the whole trip, Thomas and Victor converse about Victor's father and this conversation gives the reader an idea about the mysterious nature of Thomas (Robinson).

The story demonstrates Victor’s conflict of identity which is an example of Man/Himself conflict (Robinson). When Victor was young, his father left a reservation and moved to Phoenix, Arizona which is the core of Indian civilization. Victor is represented as someone who refuses to acknowledge his identity since he is unsure of where he belongs. Man/Man identity is represented in a way that symbolizes the differences between two human natures. Both Thomas and victor are represented to have completely different aspects of personality and thinking (Robinson). The fact that the Tribal Council refuses to make arrangements for his father’s funeral represents the Man/ Society conflict based on racial discrimination (*Postcolonial Analysis of “This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona” | Asmahaff*).

Various moments throughout the story make the reader wonder about the supernatural nature of Thomas. He is shown to possess certain traits such as foretelling something. It is said that he could fly and see visions. The touch of inevitability in Thomas's character demonstrates his supernatural abilities (Robinson).

The significance of the character's name "Thomas Build-the Fire” is mainly associated with Victor (Robinson). It seems that victor does not only have to collect his father's ashes but the fair share of the collection is contributed by his ashes. However, the character of Thomas Build-The-Fire is the one to shape the fire under Victor. Passion is mainly symbolized by the fire which became a driving force for Victor. It served as a transformation force that instills a sense of vision and magic in Victor.

Racial differences in the story play a major role. Since the Native Americans are of Indian origin, they are highly discriminated against among the Caucasians (*Postcolonial Analysis of “This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona” | Asmahaff*). On several occasions, Thomas's humor and satire was associated with the differences between the Native Americans and other Americans. How the Government refused to pay for the funeral arrangements was one of the major factors representing Racism.

Thomas is shown to have a different memory of Victor's father as compared to Victor (Robinson). Victor only remembers his father as an alcoholic, abuser and self-centered individual with abandonment issues while Thomas recalls his father as a hero and characterizes his life and death in a different way to provoke Victor. He keeps telling him about how his father saved his life at the reservation while he was looking for the vision (Learning). This shows Thomas's positivity towards life and its creatures. It made Victor feel gentle towards his father. After retrieving his father’s ashes, Victor and Thomas decide to pay respect to Arnold’s death by returning his ashes to the Spokane Falls. At the end of the story, Victor can overcome the identity crisis when he returns to the reservation after many years.

**Works Cited:**

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