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English 355

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## This is How You Say Phoenix, Arizona

### A Presentation

- I. Introduction (Vanessa and Dylan)
  - A. YouTube Clip (From Smoke Signals)
- II. Author and Synopsis
  - A. Sherman Alexie is an acclaimed author, known for his short stories depicting contemporary Native American issues and life on the reservation
  - B. Synopsis:
    1. “This is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona” is a prime example of his writing style
      - a) *Humor, insightful, moving*
    2. The story follows the young Victor, as he travels to Phoenix to recover his father’s ashes
    3. He is accompanied by a childhood friend, Thomas Builds-the-Fire, who supports Victor through his journey
    4. The trip there and back allows for healing and an exploration of identity
    5. Adapted into the movie “Smoke Signals”
- III. Thesis: Sherman Alexie uses Title, Plot, Setting, and Characterization to explore the theme of **rebirth** in “This is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona.”
- IV. Analysis:
  - A. Title:
    1. The title is our first clue. This is a work of fiction. This is not biography, and so the author’s selection of the city Phoenix is not arbitrary.
    2. Phoenix is a mythological creature referenced in many works of literature and pop culture:
      - a) *Jean Grey in the X-Men comic books.*
      - b) *Dumbledore’s pet bird Fawkes in Harry Potter.*
      - c) *The creature dates to Greek mythology. It is a bird that is cyclically reborn from its own ashes (Hill 61)*

- B. Plot and Setting:
1. Setting kicks off the plot (the low-income area necessitates Victor to work with Thomas).
  2. We're flying in an airplane (Alexie 282). Bird imagery. Their personalities open up in new setting/look on personalities with fresh eyes: for example, Thomas flirting with gymnast.
  3. They go into the trailer to recover the father's things, a very hot place (Alexie 282).
  4. The status quo has returned, but the characters are slightly changed.
  5. They return home with the father's ashes. Their friendship is changed. It has been reborn from the ashes of Victor's father. When they began, they did not speak. Now, at the end of our story, Victor agrees set father's ashes free with Thomas. Victor agrees to stop and listen to Thomas tell a story (Alexie 286). Father image is reborn from imagination of Thomas (ashes, waterfall, Salmon rising from waterfall).
- C. Characterization – Victor
1. Main Character – suffers loss of estranged father
    - i. Experiences “genetic pain” associated with his death (278).
  2. Complex Emotional Character
    - i. Internal conflict/Constantly recollecting
    - ii. Feels ashamed of himself for being cruel to Thomas (286).
  3. Assimilated/not spiritual
  4. Serious/negative tone
- D. Storytelling in the Native American Community
1. Transmit traditions orally through the use of stories.
  2. Address any imaginable issue
    - i. Origins, cosmology, nature, family.
    - ii. Social orders / Power dynamics.
  3. Stories are entertaining, but the primary purpose is to educate.
  4. Storytellers were teachers.
    - i. Ancient knowledge and values.
  5. The stories promote healing.
- E. Characterization – Thomas Build-The-Fire
1. Tribal storyteller
  2. Ignored and rejected around the reservation. “Thomas was the storyteller whom nobody wanted to listen to” (Alexie 279).
  3. Wise/insightful. At age 7, Thomas had insight into Victor's father. “your father's heart is weak. He is afraid of his own family. He is afraid of you” (Alexie 279).

4. Humorous/lighthearted. “I’m half magician on my mother’s side and half clown on my father’s” (Alexie 282)

F. Victor and Thomas together. (Vanessa)

1. Alexie establishes the Thomas Builds-the-Fire as Victor’s antithesis
  - i. Exact opposites
  - ii. They represent different aspects of the Native American identity.
  - iii. Together, the characters balance one another out.
  - iv. Thomas Builds-the-Fire promotes healing within Victor. “Take care of each other” (Alexie 283).
  - v. Thomas re-imagining Victor’s father flying like a salmon. “Remaking the story of Victor’s father into that of a spiritual caretaker, Thomas transforms Victor’s world by inspiring his belief in his father’s magical leap from the ashes of his life” (Carroll 81).

G. Conclusion

1. Alexie explores the theme of rebirth through his skillful use of Title, Plot, Setting, and Characterization. Victor’s relationship with Thomas is reborn. Where there was once division, there is the idea that they will “Take care of each other” when Victor agrees to listen to one of Thomas’s stories (286).
2. With Thomas’s help, the image of Victor’s father is reborn, rising from the ashes. Although our character return to the status quo the walk away changed.
3. This is what it means to say Phoenix, Arizona!

H. Discussion/Wrap up

1. What other symbols of birth/rebirth did you find in the story?
2. The title of the story is “This is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona.” Why not, “Phoenix, Arizona” or something simpler? What interpretation can you glean from the wording of the title?

### Works Cited

- Alexie, Sherman. "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona." *Compact Literature: Reading, Reacting, Writing*, edited by Laurie G. Kirszner and Stephen R. Mandell, 9<sup>th</sup> ed., Wadsworth, 2016, pp. 278 – 286.
- Carroll, Kathleen L. "Ceremonial Tradition as Form and Theme in Sherman Alexie's 'The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven': A Performance-Based Approach to Native American Literature." *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2005, pp. 74–84. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/30039300](http://www.jstor.org/stable/30039300).
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