Analysis of Victor in *This is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona*

This story by Sherman Alexie is about a Character named Victor who went back home with his best friend from his childhood, Thomas Builds-the-Fire, to claim Victor’s father bank account and make some arrangement. Throughout this trip, Victor changes his opinion of indifference toward appreciation of Thomas Builds-the-Fire, who represents the connection, of the Indian, of a member of community, of a symbol.

Plot

From the story we know that Victor met Thomas Builds-the-Fire when he faced an impasse, that he had not enough money to fly to Phoenix, claimed his father’s bank account and then flew back. He attempted to ask help from Tribal Council but only got one hundred dollars. Even though one hundred dollars was still not enough, he accepted. At that time, Victor found Thomas Builds-the-Fire in the post office. The relationship between them is very subtle. They had grown up and played in the dirt together yet they have not talked to each other for years due to the fact that Thomas Builds-the-Fire was not welcome among Indians and they got into a fistfight when they were young. After Victor saw Thomas Builds-the-Fire, he immediately threw a question, “How did you know about my father’s dead?” Thomas Builds-the-Fire replied, “I heard it on the wind…” This is obviously an excuse. Thomas Builds-the-Fire plays the role of a saver who intends to help Victor remind his identity as Indian.

When Victor got back to his home, he recalled his memory that they were staying together and watched a firework. In the end, “They…each headed for home, both laughing all the way.” The memory hugged Victor in warmth and guided him to Thomas Builds-the-Fire’s home. By recalled his childhood experience in the reservation, Victor gradually picked up his identity. Victor decided to receive Thomas Builds-the-Fire’s help and flew back to Arizona with him together.

So they both were in an airplane several days later. In the airplane Thomas Builds-the-Fire shows his talent in talking with Cathy who sits beside them. Their talk triggers Victor’s emotion. He said, “You always used to tell me I think too much. Now it sounds like you do.” (Page890) Thomas said, “Maybe I caught it from you.” In the plane, Victor developed a closer kinship with Thomas Build-the-Fire.

When they go back home, they only find a photo album and a stereo, plus a story about Victor’s father. Thomas Builds-the-Fire used to have a dream and Victor’s father helped him realize it and told him to take care of each other. As part of the deal, Thomas Builds-the-Fire promises to help Victor if in need. Until now, Victor finally realized that Thomas Builds-the-Fire knew his father’s death ahead of him and his help was on purpose.

Then they decided to drive back. During the back drive, they did not switch the driver because Victor drove for a thousand miles and there was not even any bugs crashed on the windshield but Thomas Builds-the-Fire drove for ten seconds and killed the only living thing in Nevada. There is always interesting around Thomas.

At the end, Victor realized that he owed Thomas something. He gave half of his father’s ash to Thomas and Thomas asked Victor to hear another story, just one more time. This time, Victor admitted his membership in the Indian group society.

Social perspective

Thomas Builds-the-Fire was an orphan when he was born. His father died in Okinawa in the Second World War and his mother died when giving birth to him. He himself is a person full of stories. Therefore, I think he was more willing to “pour out” his stories since he grew in an environment without love from parents. He eventually chose to tell stories unstoppably. His exist represents a tribal lore, symbolically a media to past.

Both Thomas and Victor are Indians and lived in the reservation. This ethnic identity shapes the background that they lived in a poor life. For Victor, he did not even have the money to fly forth and back from Phoenix. For Thomas, he lived as a storyteller.

The story states that Victor’s father exercises power over them. His father’s influence is the key in explaining their relationship. Victor gradually realized the misconception of his father since he was young, as he understood the story between his father and Thomas. Therefore, under Thomas’s help, Victor decided to change himself by reviving the relationship with other people.

Literary Motif of Theme

One of the characteristics of this story is that the author puts many anecdotes of Victor in the story, from the firework show to the fistfight, to the wasp nest… These pieces consist of the early life of Victor and Thomas. They served for the theme that Indian people in a society should have an identity and interacted to each other but not separate.

How I revise this essay.

After the meeting with professor, I realized that I needed to know more about the background, especially history of that age, and then try to understand the real meaning of this essay. I searched some reviews on the Internet and they gave me a lot of help. I related these reviews to the contents in the essay. Hopefully, this will dig more than the original one. For example, I analysis character Thomas and make a conclusion that he is the symbol of an identity.