

Conflict within the mind

[Countries](#), [United States](#)



Conflict Within Thyself Jermaine Kelly ENG 102 072 Prof. Messina Essay 1
October 2nd, 2007. 1 Sherman Alexie's story, "This Is What It Means to Say
Phoenix, Arizona", states mainly how two Native Americans struggle to adapt
to modern times and their culture, and the conflict they endured within their
lifetime. The story focuses on two main characters that embark on a cross-
country journey to retrieve a dead father's ashes and belongings. Victor, one
of the main characters in the story, must come to terms with his personal
conflicts when he finds that his father is dead and he must retrieve his
personal belongings. With no money and no adequate financial assistance
from the Tribal Council to retrieve his father's remains, his one-time friend,
Thomas Builds-the-Fire, offers him the money he needs to make the trip. On
one condition only, he must bring him along for the ride. Once in Phoenix,
Victor must confront his conflicted feelings towards his father and one-time
friend, Thomas Builds-the-Fire, as well as his own identity. Yet, the conflict
between Thomas and Victor leads to more substantial struggle, the conflict
that Victor possesses within himself. The most apparent conflict in the story
is the inter-personal conflict between Thomas Builds-the-Fire and Victor. As
young children, Victor and Thomas Builds-the-Fire got into a fistfight.
Revealed through the text in the story, it was told it was Victor who
instigated the fight between the two because he was extremely drunk. Due
to Victor's internal frustration, he unleashes his anger onto Thomas for no
reason at all. Before the physical incident occurred between 2 Victor and
Thomas Builds-the-Fire, they would often see other on the reservation but
due to Victor's insecurity on how others would view him, he decided to
befriend Thomas Builds-the-Fire. Throughout his tribe, Thomas Builds-the-

Fire was hated for his visions and his way of life. Victor chided Thomas for thinking so much as kids because Thomas was so concerned about the past. He was a traditional and idealistic Native American Indian who believed in the ways and views of his forefathers. He believed that Native American Indians should not distance themselves from their past but better themselves from it. Because of these views and the stories he told, he was cast as the outcast of the tribe. Thomas Builds-the-Fire has no close relationships with others in town. He solely relies upon his stories to provide him with a sense of security, an identity per se. Thomas Builds-the-Fire not only uses the stories to define himself but also how he views others and community. Early in the story, we see that Thomas Builds-the-Fire is a storyteller who remains apart from society because of the stories that so define him. There was a time when they were once young when Thomas Builds-the-Fire quoted " It's strange how us Indians celebrate the Fourth of July. It ain't like it was our independence everybody was fighting for." Victor replies, " You think about things too much." Thomas Builds-the-Fire was outcast for his views from his own friend, Victor, even as youngsters. ³ This became one of the many conflicts that Victor would have to face on his journey to Phoenix, Arizona. Victor's insecure ways play a sufficient role in this story and the author, Sherman Alexie, goes a length to exploit that in a manner that many Native American Indians suffer from today. The setting on the airplane adds a significant meaning and understanding to Victor's conflicts within himself. During their flight to Phoenix, Arizona, Victor gets to see the first person-to-person interaction that Thomas Builds-the-Fire has with someone other than Victor. The interaction between Thomas Builds-the-Fire and Cathy, the

beautiful gymnast that he converses with on the flight, shows Thomas's social skills and maturity level and a mere understanding of his Indian ancestry. Thomas presents himself in a confident and respectful manner as he approaches Cathy for mere conversation. Victor saw that Thomas Builds-the-Fire was not shy or afraid. As Thomas Builds-the-Fire started off with building up a conversation with Cathy, the gymnast, Victor closes his eyes in embarrassment. He was surprised to see that someone other than himself would have a conversation with Thomas Builds-the-Fire. It showed in that part of the story that Victor was not as confident as Thomas Builds-the-Fire. On their journey to Phoenix, to retrieve Victor's father's bearing and ashes, both him and Thomas Builds-the-Fire had a chance to talk with one another, something they could not do on the reservation due to Thomas's insecure ways about how people would portray him. Victor is the character who must come to terms with whom he is and where he fits in this world. Surrounded by failure as exhibited by poverty, loss of manhood and isolation, Victor has essentially given up hope. His beating of Thomas while drunk is an indicator of how much Victor is trying to put out of his mind the things which so diminish his miserable life on a Native American reservation. Victor is a man of many conflicts; among them are his father's desertion from him and his mother, the death of his father even though they were not close, an Indian society in which he feels a man can no longer become a warrior, and Thomas Builds-the-Fire who he believes represents past and foolish idealism. The conflicts of Victor demonstrate the everyday life of a normal human being living under substantial living conditions. Sherman Alexie's story, "This Is What It Means To Say Phoenix, Arizona",

mainly states how Native Americans struggle to adapt to modern times and their culture. The conflict that one Native American Indian must face on his quest to retrieve his father's bearings. Although not every conflict has an immediate solution, Sherman Alexie does maintain a sense of hopefulness and the possibility of a new beginning. Victor is indeed a man of many conflicts. Victor's self-bitterness partially stems from the deeply embedded conflict that many Native Americans face in this modern day American society. It is merely common in society for people to misplace their anger on someone else; especially someone perceived as weaker. It seems that the writer, Sherman Alexie, is frustrated with Native American society, being that he is of Native American descent, eventually uses the frustration to polish the stories in the life of Victor and Thomas Builds-the-Fire. In, " This Is What It Means To Say Phoenix, Arizona", Sherman Alexie illustrates such a process in the character of Victor and his conflicts. His relationship with Thomas Builds-the-Fire is temporary, which only lasts during the duration of the time it takes them to retrieve Victor's dead father from Phoenix, Arizona. However, this relationship is a metaphor of the title of the story about his conflicts and his regression through his trip to Phoenix, Arizona. By the end of the story, Thomas Builds-the-Fire has helped Victor recover his father's truck, but Victor must still find his own way. Victor starts to overcome some of his conflicts by first apologizing to Thomas Builds-the-Fire for his actions as teenagers. He apologizes for lashing out on him and asks for forgiveness. Thomas Builds-the-Fire, the more mature one in this situation, forgives Victor knowing what the circumstances are. Victor, with a change of heart now that he has become fond of Thomas Builds-the-Fire, implies that Thomas Builds-

the-Fire take half of Victor's fathers' ashes and do what he wants with them as a sign of gratitude. Thomas Builds-the-Fire decides to take the ashes and spread them out on the water to allow the spirit of Victor's father to rise. Nonetheless, Victor does agree to at least stop and listen to one of Thomas' stories. It is the hopeful beginning to the reconstructing of Victor's life and conflicts.