

**Materials and Lessons
for Teaching
“This Is What It Means
to Say Phoenix, Arizona”
by Sherman Alexie**

**Created by Megan Pankiewicz,
Curriculum Designer for
*The English Teacher’s Friend***

Suggestions for Teaching “This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona”

Created by Megan Pankiewicz, Curriculum Specialist for The English Teacher’s Friend

Knowledge students should command before reading the story:

- Understanding of the quest or hero’s journey
 - Can be paired with *Odyssey*
 - Use first chapter of *How to Read Literature Like a Professor* by Thomas C. Foster, entitled “Every Trip is a Quest (Except When It’s Not)”
- Understanding of symbols and archetypes
 - Give students pre-quiz just for fun, then provide them with list (could be the one found online and included in this packet or a shortened version)

During reading of the story, students can:

- annotate and/or highlight significant moments, words, images, etc.
- use handouts to write down questions or comments
- write on discussion guide table

After reading the story, the teacher can:

- give the reading quiz (especially if reading assigned for homework)
- lead students in class discussion based on annotations, questions, and comments made on story or on discussion guide table
- assign one of Thomas’s stories per small group for close reading and analysis, then bring back to whole class discussion
- use close reading handout to students as an individual assignment
- ask students to partner and complete the Hero’s Journey handout
- ask students the question begged by the title and discuss the phoenix as a symbol
- lead students in discussion of organization of story and purpose of flashbacks
- lead students through theme handout, focusing on finding textual support

Archetype Pre-Quiz

1. What emotions do you think of when you think of the following colors?
 - a. red
 - b. white
 - c. green
 - d. blue
 - e. black
2. What ideas do you associate with the rising sun?
3. What ideas do you associate with the number four?
4. What ideas do you associate with the wind?
5. What ideas do you associate with the moon?

SITUATION ARCHETYPES

1. The Quest – This motif describes the search for someone or some talisman which, when found and brought back, will restore fertility to a wasted land, the desolation of which is mirrored by a leader's illness and disability.
2. The Task – This refers to a possibly superhuman feat that must be accomplished in order to fulfill the ultimate goal.
3. The Journey – The journey sends the hero in search for some truth of information necessary to restore fertility, justice, and/or harmony to the kingdom. The journey includes the series of trials and tribulations the hero faces along the way. Usually the hero descends into a real or psychological hell and is forced to discover the blackest truths, quite often concerning his faults. Once the hero is at this lowest level, he must accept personal responsibility to return to the world of the living.
4. The Initiation – This situation refers to a moment, usually psychological, in which an individual comes into maturity. He or she gains a new awareness into the nature of circumstances and problems and understands his or her responsibility for trying to resolve the dilemma. Typically, a hero receives a calling, a message or signal that he or she must make sacrifices and become responsible for getting involved in the problem. Often a hero will deny and question the calling and ultimately, in the initiation, will accept responsibility.
5. The Ritual – Not to be confused with the initiation, the ritual refers to an organized ceremony that involves honored members of a given community and an Initiate. This situation officially brings the young man or woman into the realm of the community's adult world.
6. The Fall – Not to be confused with the awareness in the initiation, this archetype describes a descent in action from a higher to a lower state of being, an experience which might involve defilement, moral imperfection, and/or loss of innocence. This fall is often accompanied by expulsion from a kind of paradise as penalty for disobedience and/or moral transgression.
7. Death and Rebirth – The most common of all situational archetypes, this motif grows out of the parallel between the cycle of nature and the cycle of life. It refers to those situations in which someone or something, concrete and/or metaphysical dies, yet is accompanied by some sign of birth or rebirth.
8. Nature vs. Mechanistic World – Expressed in its simplest form, this refers to situations which suggest that nature is good whereas the forces of technology are bad.
9. Battle Between Good and Evil – These situations pit obvious forces which represent good and evil against one another. Typically, good ultimately triumphs over evil despite great odds.
10. The Unhealable Wound – This wound, physical or psychological, cannot be healed fully. This would also indicate a loss of innocence or purity. Often the wounds' pain drives the sufferer to desperate measures of madness.
11. The Magic Weapon – Sometimes connected with the task, this refers to a skilled individual hero's ability to use a piece of technology in order to combat evil, continue a journey, or to prove his or her identity as a chosen individual.
12. Father-Son Conflict – Tension often results from separation during childhood or from an external source when the individuals meet as men and where the mentor often has a higher place in the affections of the hero than the natural parent. Sometimes the conflict is resolved in atonement.
13. Innate Wisdom vs. Educated Stupidity – Some characters exhibit wisdom and understanding intuitively as opposed to those supposedly in charge.

SYMBOLIC ARCHETYPES

1. Light vs. Darkness – Light usually suggests hope, renewal, OR intellectual illumination; darkness implies the unknown, ignorance, or despair.
2. Water vs. Desert – Because water is necessary to life and growth, it commonly appears as a birth or rebirth symbol. Water is used in baptism services, which solemnizes spiritual births. Similarly, the appearance of rain in a work of literature can suggest a character's spiritual birth.
3. Heaven vs. Hell – Humanity has traditionally associated parts of the universe not accessible to it with the dwelling places of the primordial forces that govern its world. The skies and mountaintops house its gods; the bowels of the earth contain the diabolic forces that inhabit its universe.
4. Haven vs. Wilderness – Places of safety contrast sharply against the dangerous wilderness. Heroes are often sheltered for a time to regain health and resources.
5. Supernatural Intervention – The gods intervene on the side of the hero or sometimes against him.
6. Fire vs. Ice – Fire represents knowledge, light, life, and rebirth while ice like desert represents ignorance, darkness, sterility, and death.
7. Colors
 - a. Black (darkness) – chaos, mystery, the unknown, before existence, death, the unconscious, evil
 - b. Red – blood, sacrifice; violent passion, disorder, sunrise, birth, fire, emotion, wounds, death, sentiment, mother, Mars, the note C, anger, excitement, heat, physical stimulation
 - c. Green – hope, growth, envy, Earth, fertility, sensation, vegetation, death, water, nature, sympathy, adaptability, growth, Jupiter and Venus, the note G, envy
 - d. White (light) – purity, peace, innocence, goodness, Spirit, morality, creative force, the direction East, spiritual thought
 - e. Orange – fire, pride, ambition, egoism, Venus, the note D
 - f. Blue – clear sky, the day, the sea, height, depth, heaven, religious feeling, devotion, innocence, truth, spirituality, Jupiter, the note F, physical soothing and cooling
 - g. Violet – water, nostalgia, memory, advanced spirituality, Neptune, the note B
 - h. Gold – Majesty, sun, wealth, corn (life dependency), truth
 - i. Silver – Moon, wealth
8. Numbers:
 - a. Three – the Trinity (Father, Son, Holy Ghost); Mind, Body, Spirit, Birth, Life, Death
 - b. Four – Mankind (four limbs), four elements, four seasons
 - c. Six – devil, evil
 - d. Seven – Divinity (3) + Mankind (4) = relationship between man and God, seven deadly sins, seven days of week, seven days to create the world, seven stages of civilization, seven colors of the rainbow, seven gifts of Holy Spirit.
9. Shapes:
 - a. Oval – woman, passivity
 - b. Triangle – communication, between heaven and earth, fire, the number 3, trinity, aspiration, movement upward, return to origins, sight, light
 - c. Square – pluralism, earth, firmness, stability, construction, material solidity, the number four
 - d. Rectangle – the most rational, most secure
 - e. Cross – the Tree of life, axis of the world, struggle, martyrdom, orientation in space
 - f. Circle – Heaven, intellect, thought, sun, the number two, unity, perfection, eternity, oneness, celestial realm, hearing,

sound

- g. Spiral – the evolution of the universe, orbit, growth, deepening, cosmic motion, relationship between unity and multiplicity, macrocosm, breath, spirit, water

10. Nature:

- a. Air – activity, creativity, breath, light, freedom (liberty), movement
- b. Ascent – height, transcendence, inward journey, increasing intensity
- c. Center – thought, unity, timelessness, spacelessness, paradise, creator, infinity,
- d. Descent – unconscious, potentialities of being, animal nature
- e. Duality – Yin-Yang, opposites, complements, positive-negative, male-female, life-death
- f. Earth – passive, feminine, receptive, solid
- g. Fire – the ability to transform, love, life, health, control, sun, God, passion, spiritual energy, regeneration
- h. Lake – mystery, depth, unconscious
- i. Crescent moon – change, transition
- j. Mountain – height, mass, loftiness, center of the world, ambition, goals
- k. Valley – depression, low-points, evil, unknown
- l. Sun – Hero, son of Heaven, knowledge, the Divine eye, fire, life force, creative-guiding force, brightness, splendor, active awakening, healing, resurrection, ultimate wholeness
- m. Water – passive, feminine
- n. Rivers/Streams – life force, life cycle
- o. Stars – guidance
- p. Wind – Holy Spirit, life, messenger
- q. Ice/Snow – coldness, barrenness
- r. Clouds/Mist – mystery, sacred
- s. Rain – life giver
- t. Steam – transformation to the Holy Spirit
- u. Cave – feminine
- v. Lightning – intuition, inspiration
- w. Tree – where we learn, tree of life, tree of knowledge
- x. Forest – evil, lost, fear

11. Objects:

- a. Feathers – lightness, speed
- b. Shadow – our dark side, evil, devil
- c. Masks – concealment
- d. Boats/Rafts – safe passage
- e. Bridge – change, transformation
- f. Right hand – rectitude, correctness
- g. Left hand – deviousness
- h. Feet – stability, freedom
- i. Skeleton – mortality
- j. Heart – love, emotions
- k. Hourglass – the passage of time

CHARACTER ARCHETYPES

1. The Hero – In its simplest form, this character is the one ultimately who may fulfill a necessary task and who will restore fertility, harmony, and/or justice to a community. The hero character is the one who typically experiences an initiation, who goes the community's ritual (s), et cetera. Often he or she will embody characteristics of YOUNG PERSON FROM THE PROVINCES, INITIATE, INNATE WISDOM, PUPIL, and SON.

2. Young Person from the Provinces – This hero is taken away as an infant or youth and raised by strangers. He or she later returns home as a stranger and able to recognize new problems and new solutions.
3. The Initiates – These are young heroes who, prior to the quest, must endure some training and ritual. They are usually innocent at this stage.
4. Mentors – These individuals serve as teachers or counselors to the initiates. Sometimes they work as role models and often serve as father or mother figure. They teach by example the skills necessary to survive the journey and quest.
5. Hunting Group of Companions – These loyal companions are willing to face any number of perils in order to be together.
6. Loyal Retainers – These individuals are like the noble sidekicks to the hero. Their duty is to protect the hero. Often the retainer reflects the hero's nobility.
7. Friendly Beast – These animals assist the hero and reflect that nature is on the hero's side.
8. The Devil Figure – This character represents evil incarnate. He or she may offer worldly goods, fame, or knowledge to the protagonist in exchange for possession of the soul or integrity. This figure's main aim is to oppose the hero in his or her quest.
9. The Evil Figure with the Ultimately Good Heart – This redeemable devil figure (or servant to the devil figure) is saved by the hero's nobility or good heart.
10. The Scapegoat – An animal or more usually a human whose death, often in a public ceremony, excuses some taint or sin that has been visited upon the community. This death often makes them a more powerful force to the hero.
11. The Outcast – This figure is banished from a community for some crime (real or imagined). The outcast is usually destined to become a wanderer.
12. The Earth Mother – This character is symbolic of fulfillment, abundance, and fertility; offers spiritual and emotional nourishment to those who she contacts; often depicted in earth colors, with large breasts and hips.
13. The Temptress – Characterized by sensuous beauty, she is one whose physical attraction may bring about the hero's downfall.
14. The Platonic Ideal – This source of inspiration often is a physical and spiritual ideal for whom the hero has an intellectual rather than physical attraction.
15. The Unfaithful Wife – This woman, married to a man she sees as dull or distant, is attracted to a more virile or interesting man.
16. The Damsel in Distress – This vulnerable woman must be rescued by the hero. She also may be used as a trap, by an evil figure, to ensnare the hero.
17. The Star-Crossed Lovers – These two characters are engaged in a love affair that is fated to end in tragedy for one or both due to the disapproval of society, friends, family, or the gods.
18. The Creature of Nightmare – This monster, physical or abstract, is summoned from the deepest, darkest parts of the human psyche to threaten the lives of the hero/heroine. Often it is a perversion or desecration of the human body.

The Above is Compliments to Lisa Lawrence, English Teacher at Jenks High School, Jenks, Oklahoma

RECOGNIZING PATTERNS

The following list of patterns comes from the book How to Read Literature Like a Professor by Thomas C. Foster who teaches at the University of Michigan. If you are serious about literary analysis, then I highly recommend buying this book. It goes into detail what I just briefly mention and is written in such a lively, witty voice that it does not read like a textbook at all! It will be well worth your time and effort to read it.

Trips tend to become quests to discover self.

Meals together tend to be acts of communion/community or isolation.

Ghosts, vampires, monsters, and nasty people and sometimes simply the antagonists are not about supernatural brew-ha-ha; they tend to depict some sort of exploitation.

There's only one story. Look for allusions and archetypes.

Weather matters.

Violence and be both literal and figurative.

Symbols can be objects, images, events, and actions.

Sometimes a story is meant to change us, the readers, and through us change society.

Keep an eye out for Christ-figures.

Flying tends to represent freedom. What do you think falling represents?

Getting dunked or just sprinkled in something wet tends to be a baptism.

Geography tends to be a metaphor for the psyche.

Seasons tend to be traditional symbols.

Disabilities, Scars, and Deformities show character and theme.

Heart disease tends to represent problems with character and society.

So do illness and disease.

Read with your imagination.

Irony trumps everything!

Remember the difference between public and private symbols.

Applying the Hero's Journey

Step	“ _____ ”	Popular book or movie
I. The Ordinary World <i>Where is the story taking place?</i> <i>What time of day?</i> <i>Season?</i> <i>What is the protagonist's normal life like?</i>		
II. Call to Adventure <i>Who gives the hero a challenge or adventure?</i> <i>What is his/her reaction?</i> <i>What is the challenge or quest?</i> <i>How does he/she leave normal world?</i>		
III. Refusal of the Call <i>How does the hero initially react to his/her challenge? Does that change?</i> <i>Who or what finally makes the hero decide to accept?</i>		
IV. Mentor <i>Who influences or teaches the hero?</i> <i>How?</i>		
V. Crossing the First Threshold <i>What is the hero's first challenge or adventure?</i> <i>Who is present?</i>		
VI. Tests, Allies, Enemies <i>Who are some of the friends?</i> <i>Who are some of the enemies?</i>		
VII. Innermost Cave <i>What is the new place the hero comes to?</i> <i>Is it frightening?</i> <i>What happens there?</i>		
VIII. Supreme Ordeal <i>What big challenge or confrontation does the hero face?</i> <i>Does he/she overcome? How?</i> <i>Is he/she hurt? How?</i> <i>Does he/she get better?</i>		
IX. Reward <i>What is the hero's reward?</i> <i>Had he been looking for it?</i>		
X. Road Back <i>Is the hero journeying home or elsewhere?</i> <i>Is the enemy chasing him/her?</i> <i>How is he/she feeling?</i>		
XI. Resurrection <i>What is the hero facing now?</i> <i>Had he/she faced death?</i> <i>Has he/she been injured or almost died?</i>		
XII. Return with the Elixir <i>Is the hero back in his/her own home?</i> <i>What has he/she brought back with him/her?</i> <i>How will it help his/her city?</i>		

"This is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona" by Sherman Alexie

Questions from the story:

Patterns I noticed:

Plot Observations:	Characterization
Symbolism	Imagery
Subject	What author is saying about subject

"This is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona" by Sherman Alexie

Questions from the story:

- ① How did Thomas know ^{Victor's} his dad was going to die?
- ② Why did Th + Vic stop being friends?
- ③ Why wasn't Vic's dad w/ tribe?
- ④ Why weren't there any other animals in Nevada?
- ⑤ Why ~~did~~ was Th so insistent to accompany Victor?

Patterns I noticed:

- ① Plot of story interrupted by ^{Was putting ball cap on dad & planned?}
- ② Th. closed eyes before telling stories
- ③ Stories about Vic's dad

<p>Plot Observations: This stories: ^{Victor's} moral + topic</p> <p>topic → ^{Victor's} moral + topic</p> <p>destination:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ① reservation ② plane there ③ trailer ④ drive home ⑤ reservation 	<p>Characterization</p> <p>Victor: angry, apathetic, shy, jealous, possibly embarrassed by Indian-wood</p> <p>↳ plane, storyteller, capacity for guilt about treating Th.</p>
<p>Symbolism</p> <p>Phoenix → of the sun, resurrection, rebirth</p> <p>dad cremated → Phoenix rise from the ashes + reborn</p>	<p>Imagery</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - pg 30 - desc of Vic's dad as palm tree in waterfall - pg 26 - stink of trailer - pg 30 - bottle + broken dreams ↳ alcoholism
<p>Subject</p> <p>rebirth → ^{Th. dad} Th. + Vic's relationship</p> <p>↳ reservation (poor)</p>	<p>What author is saying about subject</p> <p>↳ Rebirth is possible in many forms.</p> <p>↳ Theme Statement</p>

Journey

Self-Knowledge

In media res → Vic's dad already dead

↳ Builds the Fire: connects to fire + ashes

↳ "...of everything"

↳ fire is central to tribe

↳ Th. should be - but not allows for rebirth to occur

Thomas: sarcastic / sense of humor, spontaneously storyteller, lonely, mystical

↳ only has ← no one listens

Cassandra: can see the future but no one believes her → punishment from God's

doesn't hold grudges → Th. accepts people's baser qualities

not ashamed of being Indian

↳ calm, assured

Name:

Close Reading and Annotating “This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona”

Directions: In the “Annotated Quotes” column, highlight or circle important words, images, or sentences in the quote. In the “Notes – Thoughts – Questions” column, write down observations or insights you have about the quote or any questions presented.

Annotated Quotes	Notes – Thoughts - Questions
<p>While Victor stood in line, he watched Thomas Builds-the-Fire standing near the magazine rack talking to himself. Like he always did. Thomas was a storyteller whom nobody wanted to listen to. That’s like being a dentist in a town where everybody has false teeth. Victor and Thomas Builds-the-Fire were the same age, had grown up and played in the dirt together. Ever since Victor could remember, it was Thomas who had always had something to say.</p>	
<p>When they were fifteen and had long since stopped being friends, Victor and Thomas got into a fistfight. That is, Victor was really drunk and beat Thomas up for no reason at all. All the other Indian boys stood around and watched it happen. Junior was there and so were Lester, Seymour, and a lot of others.</p>	
<p>Victor was ready to jump out of the plane. Thomas, that crazy Indian storyteller with ratty old braids and broken teeth, was flirting with a beautiful Olympic gymnast. Nobody back home on the reservation would ever believe it.</p>	
<p>“He broke his wing, he broke his wing, he broke his wing,” all the Indian boys chanted as they ran off, flapping their wings, wishing they could fly too. They hated Thomas for his courage, his brief moment as a bird. Everybody has dreams of flying. Thomas flew. One of his dreams came true for just a second, just enough to make it true.</p>	

Name:

Close Reading and Annotating “This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona”

<p>Victor’s father, his ashes, fit in one wooden box with enough left over to fill a cardboard box.</p>	
<p>All through Nevada, Thomas and Victor had been amazed at the lack of animal life, at the absence of water, of movement. “Where is everything?” Victor had asked more than once. Now, when Thomas was finally driving, they saw the first animal, maybe the only animal in Nevada. It was a long-eared jackrabbit.</p>	
<p>Victor and Thomas made it back to the reservation just as the sun was rising. It was the beginning of a new day on earth, but the same old shit on the reservation.</p>	
<p>Victor was ashamed of himself. Whatever happened to the tribal ties, the sense of community?</p>	
<p>It was a fair trade. That’s all Thomas had ever wanted from his whole life. So Victor drove his father’s pickup toward home while Thomas went into his house, closed the door behind him, and heard a new story come to him in the silence afterward.</p>	

FIVE SIGNIFICANT POINTS FROM CLASS DISCUSSION:

Name:
Period:

The Stories of Thomas Builds-the-Fire from “This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona”

The story	The symbolism / archetypes	The message or insight
<p>Your father’s heart is weak. He is afraid of his own family. He is afraid of you. Late at night, he sits in the dark. Watches the television until there’s nothing but that white noise. Sometimes he feels like he wants to buy a motorcycle and ride away. He wants to run and hide. He doesn’t want to be found.</p>		
<p>There were these two Indian boys who wanted to be warriors. But it was too late to be warriors in the old way. All the horses were gone. So the two Indian boys stole a car and drove to the city. They parked the stolen car in the front of the police station and then hitchhiked back home to the reservation. When they got back, all their friends cheered and their parents’ eyes shone with pride. ‘You were very brave,’ everybody said to the two Indian boys. ‘Very brave.’”</p>		
<p>I remember when I had this dream that told me to go to Spokane, to stand by the falls in the middle of the city and wait for a sign. I knew I had to go there but I didn’t have a car. Didn’t have a license. I was only thirteen. So I walked all the way, took me all day, and I finally made it to the falls. I stood there for an hour waiting. Then your dad came walking up. ‘What the hell are you doing here?’ he asked me. I said, ‘Waiting for a vision.’ Then your</p>		

Name:

Period:

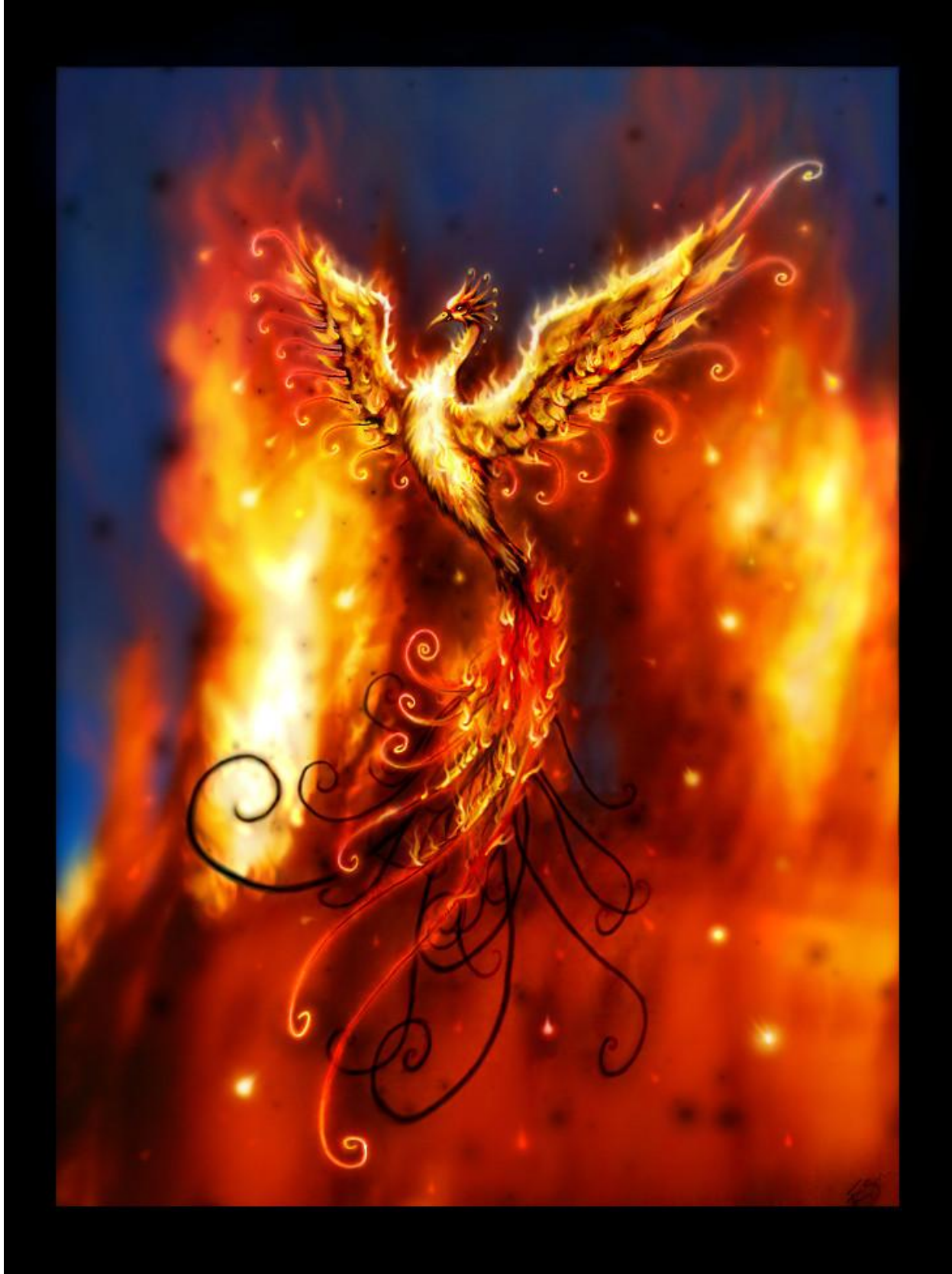
<p>father said, 'All you're going to get here is mugged.' So he drove me over to Denny's, bought me dinner, and then drove me home to the reservation. For a long time, I was mad because I thought my dreams had lied to me. But they hadn't. Your dad was my vision. <i>Take care of each other</i> is what my dreams were saying. <i>Take care of each other.</i></p>		
<p>We are all given one thing by which our lives are measured, one determination. Mine are the stories that can change or not change the world. It doesn't matter which, as long as I continue to tell the stories. My father, he died on Okinawa in World War II, died fighting for this country, which had tried to kill him for years. My mother, she died giving birth to me, died while I was still inside her: She pushed me out into the world with her last breath. I have no brothers or sisters. I have only my stories, which came to me before I even had the words to speak. I learned a thousand stories before I took my first thousand steps. They are all I have. It's all I can do.</p>		
<p>I'm going to travel to Spokane Falls one last time and toss the ashes into the water. And your father will rise like a salmon, leap over the bridge, over me, and find his way home. It will be beautiful. His teeth will shine like silver, like a rainbow. He will rise, Victor, he will rise.</p>		

**“This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona”
Reading Quiz**

Directions: Please draw four boxes on your paper. Choose **four** questions to answer. Do not rewrite the question. Your answer must be in complete sentences and will be rewarded for its thoroughness.

1. Describe Victor and Thomas’s relationship as teenagers.	2. Describe the story about the two Indian warriors that Thomas tells on the fourth of July.
3. What happened when Thomas saw Victor’s father at the waterfall?	4. How does the gymnast feel about Thomas? Support your answer with details from the story.
5. List three physical items Victor retrieves from Phoenix.	6. Why does Victor give Thomas half of his father’s ashes?

What DOES it
mean to say
Phoenix,
Arizona?



Name:

Period:

THEME: *argument or general idea expressed by a literary work, as it relates to the human condition, human nature, or society*

Subject(s): [What is this story about, in general?]

What does the story say about the subject(s)? (Must be in a complete sentence.)

Support from story: (minimum four examples/points – quotes or summary)