

Black robe essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In the 1991 film *Black robe*, Jesuit missionaries are sent to the city of Quebec in hopes of changing the native Indians from savages to Christians. Both the French and the Natives have formed strong perceptions of each other characterized by unusual similarities, undeniable differences, and evident physical traits. The mission the Jesuits have embarked on introduces both societies to experience a never before seen culture, serves to transform an internally confused Frenchman, and lastly provides religious understanding and tolerance.

Initially, we are introduced to each group as we see a dominant male prepare for a typical night. In the case of the French heavy armour and shields are a staple, whereas the Indians choose less clothing and elaborate face paint. Not only do these physical characteristics mold perceptions but they serve as supporting evidence to justify each other's attitude. The French see the Algonquin's as barbaric claiming often that they are "savages" consequently; the strange behavior and rituals of the French lead the Indians to believe that perhaps they are in fact "demons" - possessed by some ungodly power.

Even more interesting, is the way social customs are perceived. While the Indians dance, smoke, and show no shame in their public display of affection the French identify themselves as superior to the Indians because they do not participate in the same activities. The boundaries between the groups are ever more growing and seem to gap as each group maintains a closed mind of the other.

When Father Laforgue, arrives at the Algonquin village where he is viewed as an outsider his physical features become intimidating- hairy face, light skin, and dramatic black attire- the hesitation displayed by the Indians gives insight into their secluded world and illustrates their prejudice towards the unknown. Father Laforgue and Daniel's reserved ways make it difficult for the Algonquin's to trust them, because for the less-than selfish Indians the French appear greedy, possessive, and mystical.

All of these qualities highlight the Indians as content, peaceful, and satisfied; however, it quickly becomes evident that the Indians are more alike the French than what they would care to admit. Laforgue proves he doesn't believe in spirits when he does the symbol of the cross on the baby and the Indians view it as " demon-like", showing that their lack of formal education leads them to explain their surroundings with religion. Consequently, because father Laforgue displays fear when lost, the Indians cannot trust someone who lacks courage- a prime characteristic in Algonquin culture.

Lastly, the Indians perceive the French as " un-manly" since they refuse to have sex with women, smoke tobacco, or display physical strength. This perception reveals that the Indians rely solely on tangible evidence as a measurement of character which allows them to consider someone either " like us" or " outsiders. " Most interestingly, the Indians rely heavily on the opinion of Mestigoit, the village medicine man. The small yellow human insists on convincing the villagers that Blackrobe is a magical but evil creature, in fact the sign of the cross is satanic and Blackrobe truly is a demon.

This detail is important in reinforcing the ideal that the Indians really trust with their eyes because their sense of religion lies with explaining their environment and surroundings. Ultimately, it is desperation and the verge of extinction rather than understanding that truly allows the Indians to develop a religious tolerance and even convergence with the French. Furthermore, the film also gives insight into each culture from a 3rd view perspective allowing us to conclude that both cultures share similar qualities that subconsciously binds them together.

Throughout the film each society attempts to categorize themselves with labels unique to their own people, however basic human instinct and necessity overcomes these labels. For example, when Black Robe has a flashback of his mother's words urging him to seek a woman of high morals and upper position in the social class it is paralleled to Chomina's wishes for his daughter. Chomina attempts to convince his infatuated daughter that the man she has found - Daniel - is unsuitable for her on the basis that he is physically unattractive, cannot provide for her, and is simply different.

This use of parallelism highlights the broader aspect that besides being French or Indians at the end of the day they are all one race- human kind. Even though this concept is clear to us, the French find it difficult to associate themselves to the "uncivilized" Indians. Uniquely, they feel sorrow for the Indians who are in "darkness", but it is this same pity that demonstrates just how superior and above the French believe themselves to be.

The fact that father Jerome and father Laforgue feel responsible for the salvation of the Indians also adds to the perception that they consider themselves saint-like. Physical evidence also gives insight into the culture of the Jesuit, their need for personal space deeply shows an organized upbringing, with strict judgment of right and wrong. Social acceptance dominates the lives of the French, whereas the Indians struggle to accept the terms of a heaven without multiple women, tobacco, or worldly possessions.

The French cannot associate with the Indians childish and superstitious ways because technology, capability, and “knowledge” of God has formed them into the very thing they preach not to be - prejudice. Furthermore, the Indians thrive upon survival of the fittest and have endured every obstacle Mother Nature has ever thrown at them making them a strong and connected people, on the other hand the French see this strength as nothing more than a stagnant culture who lacks motivation and intelligence to move forward.

This depicts another major difference, where the French live for the future feeling that it is most important to seek a peaceful afterlife; the Indians instead choose to live in the moment, a quality the French cannot comprehend or value. Subsequently, Daniel says it best when he describes that the Indians forgive things the French could never fathom to pardon. Daniel's role in the film serves primarily to be a connecting catalyst between the French and Indian.

His constant internal battle focuses on the doubt that everyone feels when they think of religion- for the French Father Laforgue admits that he does not

welcome death as a good Christian would and for the Indians they do not trust in their traditions to free them of the plague. Ultimately, it is Daniel's confused character that leads the viewers to equally relate to both societies even when they cannot agree with each other. At first a selfish man whose only motivation in helping others is to see what he can get for himself, Daniel is transformed into a questioning native who will risk anything to be as humble as the people he has met.

His confused personality identifies the struggle of having to choose and equally highlights how religion is merely a solution to unanswered questions. Daniel does not simply "go with the wind" instead he chooses to identify with whatever culture seems to have the fastest solution to his problems. For Example, when he lusts for Annuka he abandons Christian teachings and instead does as the Indians would do, however when faced with life threatening challenges he retreats to "faith" to guide him through it.

This constant switching of belief illustrates the child in us all who when faced with emotion will do almost anything to feel at peace. In Conclusion, both the French and the Indian find it painfully hard to not only accept but to understand one another, each one perceives the other as un-human. But, it is this climatic moment when father Laforgue cries in front of the Huron's that truly reveals there has been a cultural rapprochement between both groups.

This physical manifestation of an internal condition allows the Indians to finally identify with the French, and for once believe that they should share the same faith. The desperation the Indians feel drives them to explore their

last option- Christianity and simultaneously allows father Laforgue to find it within himself to accept the faults within his own religion. The mutual understanding reached in Black robe highlights the complexity in religion that we see today; the challenges remain the same at a universal level.