

Three day road: novel analysis

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



Wandering Windigo of the Wemistikoshiw The novel Three Day Road can be viewed as an explicit indicator as to the importance of sustaining cultural identity, and the consequences associated with its absence from any aspect of human life. The tale provides a salient setting through which this spiritual malfeasance is brought about, with much of its content consisting of the supremacy of the wemistikoshiw, or white man, over the Aboriginals in World War 1.

The novel's European setting manifests the primary cause for the spiritual bankruptcy of Elijah Weesacheejak, one of the story's central figures and the novel's primary thematic microcosm. Influenced deeply by Western ideals, he is said to be a windigo which, as explained by the aboriginal bushmaster, Niska, is characterized by: "...sadness so pure that it [shrivels] the human heart and [lets] something else grow in its place" (Boyden 261).

A polar opposite to Elijah, Niska recognizes the necessity of spirituality rooted in tradition, and is able to identify the Windigo as a logical product of wemistikoshiw influence. Her nephew, Xavier, is defiantly against European conformity in much the same way, sacrificing physical well-being for the sake of the Cree culture which he cherishes and to which he hopes to return in the wake of the war. It is clear that each of these three characters is negatively affected by the widespread influence of the whites, albeit to different degrees.

Each character's amount of exposure to wemistikoshiw culture corresponds proportionately to both their bodily state by the novel's end, and their specific levels of windigo-ism. Joseph Boyden's Three Day Road illuminates

the Windigo's corruption of identity through the personalities of Xavier, Niska and Elijah via their cultural adherence, contrasting health, and dynamic relationships. Much like two sides of the same coin, Western and Aboriginal societies share a structural essence, but vary wildly in their fundamental ideals and respective emphases.

Xavier is aware of this distinction between the two peoples, saying: "...I'm left wondering what connection there might be between their [the European] world and mine" (246), in a manner which would suggest that one must belong to one 'world' or another, but never both simultaneously. Xavier chooses to live by Aboriginal tradition, as exemplified through his frequent neglect of wemistikoshiw behaviours. A prevalent literary critic explains the significance of naming in this respect, exclaiming that the: "...various names assumed by or assigned to Xavier and Elijah signify to what extent their identities are able to transcend or fall victim to [the influence of the West]..." (Gordon 7). The only Western name assigned to Xavier is 'X' in light of his extraordinary shooting precision (Boyden 109). Despite the name's positive connotations, Bird discards it, keeping to his original alias, which is bestowed upon him by his cherished Aboriginal friends (360, 363).

It is evident, then, that Xavier's neglect of the wemistikoshiw ways runs deep, and even when facing external, culture-based adversity, becoming an outcast is always a preferable option to abandonment of his tradition. Unlike the other soldiers, Xavier never acquires even the slightest appetite for killing, believing it to be wasteful in the context of war, since there is nothing to be gained but fresh supplies of bloodshed (Bohr).

Initially, Xavier is revolted by the sight of death soon after he witnesses it devastate a German, saying, “ The image of the soldier’s head exploding makes my stomach churn” (Boyden 88). In order to remedy this spiritual deficit he associates with letting the lives of others be wasted, Bird turns to prayer, which keeps him centered and stable within the comfort of his cultural roots. Over the entire course of the novel, Xavier never once forgets the importance of his background in regards to his current situation, meaning that he remains metaphysically anchored in spite of his foreign surroundings.

Supplementary to Xavier, in terms of spiritual independence, is Niska, whose understanding of the wemistikoshiw transcends that of every other character in the novel, and stems from both her experiential knowledge of Western culture and the windigo. An objectivist to the core, Niska represents an archetype of cultural wisdom, as described by Joseph Boyden: “ I wanted her to be a strong woman who was doing this [being a woman of the bush] despite what everyone says about her and the toughness of her existence...” (Wylie 229).

Niska is exposed to the horrors of the world at an early age, witnessing events such as her father’s murder of one of her fellow Cree gone windigo (Boyden 45). This coupled with her being used sexually by the Frenchman, who claimed to have “...fucked ahcahk, [her] spirit” (174), out of lustful capitalism creates a perfect storm of familiarity with the human condition within her. Niska realizes that the man-made society of the whites further pronounces the flaws of the human spirit, thereby differentiating between

her culture and that of the wemistikoshiw. She explains this difference early on in the novel, by way of her epileptic visions: “ No one is safe in such times, not even the Cree of the Mushkegowuk. War touches everyone, and windigos spring from the earth” (49). In order to prevent the mingling of Aboriginal and European lifestyles, she completely refuses to submit to the will of the wemistikoshiw, even when forced to live in one of their residential schools as a young girl.

The bushmaster neglects even menial compulsories, such as hair-cutting, saying, “ They were going to remove the black hair that reached my waist as a symbol of wemistikoshiw authority, of our [the Cree’s] defeat” (93).

Coming from a long line of Cree chieftains, Niska not only seeks to avoid the company of windigos, but also is obligated to dispose of them in the best interest of her fellow aboriginals (48). Niska’s comprehension of selfishness’ presence in both the wemistikoshiw and the Windigo contribute to her consequent avoidance of the two, and in turn, her unwavering state of impeccable spiritual stagnancy throughout the novel.

Contrarily, Elijah succumbs completely to the culture of the white man, becoming immersed in its ideals and pursuits to the point of morphing into a fully fledged windigo. The reason for Weesacheejak’s uprooted spiritual state can be traced back to his upbringing, which consisted of an intensely ambiguous cultural identity. Growing up in residential schools for much of his life, Elijah is brainwashed into thinking of the Aboriginals as a “...backwards people...” (56) by the nuns who live with him.

The seeds of European identity clash with those of the Aboriginal culture when he is adopted by Niska, and resultantly, a fragile concept of cultural integrity emerges within him. This identity crisis contributes significantly to his inevitable saturation into the violence of the West, as described by the author Vikki Visvis: "... Elijah's perverted determination is primarily the product of the wartime environment, which is an inherently Western endeavor" (273). Elijah learns, very much unhealthily, that identity is malleable, and depends entirely on circumstance rather than individual character.

This lack of oneness can be examined easily through his acts in The Great War, which consist of both the impulsive murder and the desecration of his victims (Boyden 310). Elijah's lack of cultural foundation is responsible for each of these atrocities, and he believes that by committing acts such as scalping those he kills, he is somehow able to absorb a portion of their spirit. Xavier describes Elijah's carnage as a "...spark which fills his belly when it gnaws for food(200)," thereby pronouncing the young man's profound emotional imbalances.

Elijah's reliance on the mastery he achieves by 'owning' the flesh of his victims is hauntingly reminiscent of the definition of the Windigo, and this is no accident made by Boyden. Despite his inferiority to Xavier in regards to his skills in marksmanship (78), it is he, not his Cree companion who yearns for the blood of his enemies. Such a skewed perspective which testifies to the irrelevant nature of morality can be attributed to the boy's faithless and marred upbringing.

Like a true Windigo, it is Elijah's lack of cultural backbone which provokes the collapse of his soul, as he contains no trace of the fundamental axioms required in the construction of a spiritually healthy human being. Vividly reflecting the spiritual status of Xavier, Niska and Elijah, is their amount of mental and physical trauma, which is minimized when rooted in a fixed, adaptable personality. Xavier is the prime example of an individual whose disposition itself promotes a fragile psyche, which contains a dangerously low capacity for negative emotions.

Caught in the thick of the Great War, there are many instances in the novel which expose Bird's benevolent personality in order to provide a reason for the corporeal turmoil which he endures. Xavier's forgiving soul is illustrated multitudinously throughout the novel, emerging most prominently in his taking of Elijah's namesake after his death, despite the dark circumstances surrounding it (375). Not confined to sorrow based solely on human tragedy, Xavier takes pity on even the lesser forms of life, which are senselessly destroyed as a result of the war.

This universal respect for entities is present when he refuses to sweep the swallow's nest from his cabin window. This defiance initiates his explicit description of Elijah's carrying out of the terrible deed: Two [birds] are lifeless, killed instantly by the fall. The third raises its featherless head, bewildered, its eyes large and round above its small yellow beak. Its tiny wings beat frantically on the floor, then more slowly. The mother bird cries out. The baby swallow's lids sink and it ceases to move.

I turn my head away from all of them. (Boyden 258) Inherently, Xavier is a character who easily becomes sick with depression due to his compassionate nature, hindering him in certain situations, yet proving to be essential to his maintained Aboriginal perspective as his time spent in the war increases. He deems the west to be a “strange place where the entire world’s trouble explodes” (22), and it is therefore inevitable that his extensive exposure to the war-torn battlefields of Europe instigates his severe mental strain.

Discretely physical, alternatively, is his involuntary ingestion of morphine, which only serves to numb his senses into weakness, threatening his life when he enters withdrawal (289). Despite these eminent dangers to Xavier’s mental and physical state, however, it is his spiritual fortitude which enables both his mind and body to be salvaged by Niska via the matatosowin, or purification ceremony which customarily follows the three day voyage by which a Cree returns to his/her people after a long absence.

As explained by Neta Gordon, the event marks a certain: “...constructive deconstruction, and a forward-looking inclination towards healing and hope” (2). Xavier’s symbolic journey represents not the death of his physical body, but the annihilation of the last wemistikoshiw remnant clouding his sanity - his addiction to morphine. In spite of the wide variety of factors hindering Xavier’s will to survive, he is able to outlive his anarchic environment by accessing his actively ethical and tempered personality.

Niska is very similar to her nephew in this respect, withstanding an onslaught of traumatizing circumstances back in Canada which test her bodily and cranial stature. Unlike Xavier, however, she is adept in her

esoteric self-sufficiency (35), being able to distract her corporeal self from pending danger by actualizing her love of anecdotes. The primary medium she accomplishes this through is her participation in speech craft, which she uses to listen to and project tribal stories as a means of satiating her spiritual hunger (Bohr).

A consistent theme embedded within the novel is Niska's own retelling of her life to Xavier, as embodied by a quote: " Words are all I have now. I've lived alone so long that I'm [Niska] starved to talk" (89). Even earlier in her life than Xavier, the Cree woman develops the aptitude for developing a thick skin via the harnessing emotions such as heartbreak for conversion to wisdom. Her exposure to the Frenchman is notable in this regard. It serves Niska as an impetus through which she begins to develop a mature, progressive outlook on life.

Reminiscing about this boost to her spiritual immune system, she says, " I was young, and the emotions of the young are as strong a pull as the arctic tides that suck fishermen's canoes out into the bay to be lost forever" (165). In this way, she is able to look back on the event of the European's quick departure after their first sexual encounter, and understand its arrogant, chauvinistic connotations (135). Upon adaptation to her current situation, she achieves a level of spiritual purity mutual to that of Xavier.

With this in mind, it is only through the undamaged will of both Niska and Xavier that he is cleansed of the complete collapse of self which foreruns death (379), and partakes in the " physical necessity" (Gordon 4) which allows him to survive the ordeal. Were it not for the complimentary moral

steadfastness of these two characters, each would have been subjected to profound devastation, with one of them perishing, only to leave the other in a state of mourning over the severing of her last, greatest familial connection.

Such an anchored identity is devoid in Elijah's life, however, as exemplified through his deteriorating eupepsia, which reaches its apex at his demise. At the heart of Elijah's ambiguous, conditional personality is his unending thirst for exhilaration as a form of immediate gratification. Saturated by the empiricism of the residential schools, which deny the existence of all aboriginal deities, Elijah thrives on the seemingly transcendent feeling of adrenaline coursing through his veins.

When Xavier ponders the spreading of a forest fire into the town they reside in before the war, Elijah responds with: " Can you imagine anything more glorious? " (Boyden 142), thereby manifesting his twisted disposition towards fear, while also foreshadowing his eventual descent into lunacy. Lieutenant Breech's evaluation of the aboriginal people finds a portion of truth in Elijah, since metaphorically, his blood really is, "...closer to that of an animal than that of a man," (101).

In order to subconsciously override this perverted perspective in favour of a religious outlook, he turns to the recreational use of morphine, which is present in high amounts amongst his brother in arms, Grey Eyes. When describing its effects, Elijah says: " It allowed me to leave my body and see what was around me. I see how it could be a very powerful tool in a place like this" (128). By no coincidence, this passage occurs at around the same

point where Elijah loses his knowledge of the aboriginal tongue, and thus, becomes linguistically assimilated by his fellow soldiers.

The morphine hollows Elijah's soul and accelerates his acculturation, causing him to pursue pleasure and meaning from killing (283), through which he attains the spontaneous euphoria which he craves. Instead of discovering the spiritual intelligence and purpose of which his life is bankrupt, he loses grasp on the distinction of reality and fantasy, with Xavier exclaiming late in the novel that, "...he [Elijah] walks with one foot in this world, [and] one firmly planted in the other world" (334).

Additionally, the morphine ingestion was meant to rid him of his inner demons, such as his previously stated animalistic tendencies. Instead, it only serves to sharpen these instincts, and feed them with a profound apathy that enables Elijah to live without fear of moral consequences (212). This quickly advances into an addiction which exceeds recreational foundations in favour of unbridled dependence, and is the primary reason for Elijah's eventual metamorphosis into a walking anathema.

As stated by the author, Vikki Visvis, "Elijah's windigo state is part shell shock, part morphine emotional addiction induced by European contact, and part internalized racism learned at residential schools" (Visvis 223). Therefore, Elijah's downward spiral into death was not based significantly on his overuse of morphine, but his spiritual surrender to the drug. Over time his relationship with Grey Eyes (Boyden 313) becomes one which is entirely centered on the drug, and is therefore, not a true relationship at all, but an

uninvolved, symbiotic connection existing only to satiate dark indulgences of a stereotypical windigo.

The notion of relationships present in the lives of Xavier, Niska, and Elijah reveals, through their level of social authenticity, how completely they have become absorbed into the world of the wemistikoshiw. Xavier's relationship with the Ontario Rifles can be accurately described as precarious and fluctuant. He refuses to socialize with the vast majority of his wartime acquaintances met during the war, with the exception of war veterans Thompson and General McCann (317). Bird reveres the two, figuring that they have each tolerated war for many years without cracking under its sinister pressure.

The fact that Bird respects their capacity for bodily toil without the use of morphine indicates an avid understanding of both the war's potential dangers, and its ability to corrupt those not willing to remain immovably independent from its paradigms. When describing the nature of the Great War, Xavier personifies it as a monster which hungers for the bodies of soldiers (73), thus explaining the prayers he sends to Gitchi Manitou, requesting a safe return home to his aunt in Moose Factory (237).

Consequently, Xavier's seclusion from the vast majority of the Ontario Rifles flourishes, and is only compounded by his unwillingness to learn English and loss of hearing (227). Bird, however, is dynamic in his relationships on occasion, as with the case of his pseudo-lover, Lisette. Initially, Xavier believes her to be an innocent soul who is untouched by the hedonism and selfishness of the West, swiftly proceeding into what he believes to be a

loving relationship with her (159). He is overwhelmed with feelings of aching for her not long afterwards, deciding to disobey the orders of his superiors and return to the town where they met.

He is unexpectedly met with animosity from the girl, who turns out to be not as authentic as she first appeared: “‘You can’t stay, Indian boy,’ she whispers. My stomach feels as if it has been punched so hard that all the air has left it. ‘ I am with another. He is upstairs’” (252). Crushed by the betrayal he feels upon discovering Lisette to be a prostitute, Xavier’s isolation reaches its all-time peak. Despite being left with only affection for his heritage and aunt, he remains religiously disciplined when continuing his participation in the war.

By the end of the novel, Xavier completely comprehends the nature of the West’s cultural imperialism and individualistic ideals. He recognizes these traits in Elijah, causing their friendship to decay at a breakneck pace. With the established practice of Niska in mind, he carries on the legacy of the Windigo-killer, and murdering Elijah for the sake of the sane. As described by Neta Gordon: “ The role of the windigo killer is taken on because it fulfills the community necessity, and, in the case of...Xavier, it is taken on rather inadvertently and somewhat reluctantly” (Gordon 11).

Xavier’s most endearing attribute, therefore, is his independence, because it facilitates his ability to glimpse at his communal surroundings objectively, and make correspondingly righteous decisions. The greatest example of an ethical figure present in the novel, however, is Niska, whose wild life alone in the bush proves to be the perfect setting for producing a terrene, detached

shaman. In her epileptic visions, Niska establishes somewhat of a one-sided relationship with the conflict in Europe, which cultivates her interest of the Windigo psychosis scourging the continent.

To this end, she ominously states: “ The sickness of the windigo could spread as surely as the invisible sickness of the windigo” (Boyden 262). Like Xavier’s use of Thompson and McCann as moral benchmarks, Niska leans on her family for moral support throughout the novel: namely her father and sister, Rabbit. The salience of these two characters is the radically opposing symbolism which they maintain in their relationship with the bushmaster. While Rabbit teaches the Niska unconditional love through fond memories (34), her father, the late hookimaw, or village elder, instills in her a primitive sense of respect and tradition.

It is from these two characters that Niska is able to educate the last of her kin, Xavier, in the ways of the Cree, and ultimately, provide him with the emotional stability necessary to survive the effects of war through what Neta Gordon calls a “ detoxification” process (Gordon 4). Most prevalent and divulging of Niska’s connection with others is her role as a Windigo-killer, which implies an acute responsibility for making difficult choices which often contradict what is deemed to be ‘ civilized’ (Boyden 169).

Ironically, it is Niska’s solitude and right-judgment which give her the reputation as what Xavier, and undoubtedly many others call a “... good and crazy woman” (221). In actuality, Niska’s actions exude wisdom, pragmatism, and an authentic desire to obliterate the radiating wreckage of the Windigo. The malfunctioned motivations of a windigo cannot warrant

animosity on their own, and rely on the destructive actions of characters like Elijah to animate their nature.

As described by Joseph Boyden: “ He [Elijah] isn’t grounded in his place or culture, and this ends up being very damaging to him” (Wyile 230).

Incessant boasting is what is most easily evident in his demeanor, with Xavier pointing out a multitude of situations in which Elijah can be found falsely glorifying himself due to his emotional insecurity (Boyden 77). At one point in the novel, Xavier declares: I look around and realize that I know very few men by name any more. So many have come and gone that I’ve lost track. Amazingly, Elijah seems to know all of them, acts as if he’s known them for years. 243) The white-washed Weesacheejak is only capable of establishing superficial relationships with the other soldiers by donning a “ mask” (314) which, in reality, distances him further from his allies than even Xavier does. A will to dominate sprouts from his impersonal approach to friendship, resulting in the fiery approach to human interaction that is demonstrated in Weesacheejak’s relationship with Peggy. When scouting one day with Xavier, he says, quite irrelevantly, “ I am better than Peggy. He cannot take a scalp. He cannot do what I do” (246).

Elijah’s attitudes towards superseding others are crystallized in his love for flying, since it entails an elevated level of importance in comparison to civilization, which is largely terrestrial. Ironically, when he does experience flight for the first time in an aero plane, it brings him a great pain, (331) thus foreshadowing the untimely demise of which he experiences by the novel’s close, which is brought about by his greed for contention. Most detrimental

to Elijah's psyche, undoubtedly, is his swift acceptance of western customs and paradigms, which is demonstrated by his conformity to the warmongering attitudes of his colleagues.

Elijah's bloodlust steadily increases throughout the duration of the novel, earning him medals of honour for his "unmatched bravery" in the face of battle (254). What these medals symbolize is a complete forfeit of his kinship with the Cree, a culture which preaches the sanctity of every form of life. Additionally, the medals indicate the completeness of Elijah's assimilation into Europe's wartime effort, and the connotations of selfishness which fester in its nucleus.

Deranged and unsatisfied with even this acknowledgement, however, Elijah's desire for human flesh continues to define him to the point of unsuccessfully assaulting Xavier, and dying in the process. He is the epitome of a non-Aboriginal, having always having what Xavier calls a "...gift for the wemistikoshiw language" (59). Elijah does not discover other people, which soils the seed of a robust relationship, but uses them as devices for augmenting his ego in a fashion typical of both an avaricious European and the Windigo.

The purpose of *Three Day Road* by Joseph Boyden is to introduce the Windigo's infectious and corrosive potential for spiritual defilement through the personalities of Xavier, Niska and Elijah via their cultural adherence, contrasting health, and dynamic relationships. The degree to which these three protagonists repel or embrace attitudes characteristic of the Windigo

determines their physical, mental, and spiritual condition by the end of the anecdote.

The novel's 'Wandering Windigo,' Elijah, is portrayed as an individual who can find neither a form of metaphysical shelter, nor a definite identity, resulting in his decline into nothingness. In his downfall however, Elijah destroys the lives of hundreds, highlighting the necessity for Xavier's donning of the Windigo-killer from Niska. By way of extension, Boyden speaks, via the juxtaposition of Xavier and Niska in comparison to Elijah, of the importance of the righteous, and their responsibility to eradicate evil before it is able to worsen despite the contesting pressures of one's affiliates.

Most importantly, the novel is Boyden's plea to immerse children in the indigenous dimensions of their ethnicity and nationality in order to construct a strong sense of identity. An Aboriginal himself, Boyden describes Three Day Road as a cautionary tale (393) in which the human person is presented as a feeble, vulnerable entity which can only be sustained when its body, mind, and spirit are in communion with one another.

The novel seeks to be food for thought, asking its audience how they would respond to excruciating circumstances such as war - whether they would be able to stay anchored enough to survive it, or experience the downwards spiral of the Windigo. In the course of our lives, will we journey along the road most travelled, losing ourselves to the entropic tides of conformity, or pave our own path in order to live an independent, fruitful existence?