

Atanarjuat: the fast runner essay



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The role of religion has been a major factor of every culture for as long as anyone can remember. The feeling of togetherness that comes with belonging to a group of people that believe in the same ideas and a central entity defines a person and the way they see the world. Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner shows the impact of a certain belief on a tribe of Eskimos in Igloodik, a village in Eastern Arctic wilderness, at the dawn of the first millennium. An evil curse was said to be following one member of the tribe, Oki, because of his jealousy of Atanarjuat.

The film follows the lives of these two men and the conflicts they have as they grow older. It also focuses on the spiritual ideas that drive both Oki and Atanarjuat, and their other tribe members, to drastic actions. From the beginning, the curse is embedded into the film successfully, as it helps explain why certain things happened to Atanarjuat and Oki. The curse was portrayed by a sound effect whenever a person was affected by it. Without that effect, the idea of the curse may not have come across as well, and might even have been forgotten until the end.

As well as the curse was portrayed, the reason for it coming about was a bit confusing for viewers who were not used to the language and style of the film. Years before the story of Atanarjuat and Oki, a shaman predicts that a curse will be brought on by Tulimaq. By no coincidence, camp leader, Kumaglak, died in a duel and his rightful successor, Tulimaq, was passed over and Sauri was given the title. Tulimaq does not take this well, accusing Sauri of helping murder his father.

Tulimaq becomes a laughing stock and cannot feed his wife and kids, Atanarjuat and Amaqjuaq, though he gets help from his friend, Panikpak, widow of Kumaglak. It was hard to understand what exactly caused the curse and why Tulimaq was the one burdened by it with the way the story was told. The quick scenes and unclear dialogue were not exactly helping in telling this story, especially since it was from a culture that most viewers would not be familiar with. Overall, the film was effective in describing the actions and beliefs brought on by Tulimaq's curse.

The power the idea that the curse is what causes the constant conflict between Atanarjuat and Oki is portrayed skillfully. In the beginning a tribe member, Qulitalik, is shown leaving the village in fear of the curse, but promises to return if his sister, Panikpak, ever needed his help. This promise is so strong that, decades later, when Atanarjuat needs help hiding and defeating Oki, Qulitalik is the person that aids in ending the curse. This brings in the idea of loyalty to family and community and shows that these were vital beliefs of the tribe.

Another aspect of the film that greatly helped illustrate the importance of both the tribe's beliefs and conviction of the curse was symbolism.

Throughout the film, certain symbols and symbolic gestures were used to show the tribe's belief in a certain idea. Right before her husband dies, Panikpak witnesses a stone lamp fall and break in half, which foreshadowed the bad events that were to come. A walrus-tooth necklace was introduced in the beginning of the film as a sort of heirloom of Kumaglak. It was given to Sauri as a symbol of his new power as the new chief.

Although it is just an object, it revealed the tribe's faith in what it represented because at the end of the film, once the necklace was returned to Tulimaq's spirit, its rightful owner, peace is brought back to the village. This film shows how greatly this tribe of Eskimos are effected by their beliefs and rituals, although the viewers may not be familiar with them. In the ethnography *Never In Anger* by Jean Briggs, she describes the difference in gender roles in Utku tribe. They were very similar to those of the tribe of Igloodik.

The women were the caretakers, doing housework, tending to animal hides, looking after children, and cooking, while the men fished, hunted, and built igloos as shelter. Each sex was separated during meals and women were submissive to men. This played an integral part in the film, especially for the character, Puja. She did not seem to want to conform to the ideals of what women were supposed to do in the tribe, and was seen as lazy and spoiled. She also seemed to believe she could have more than one man, as men were allowed to have more than one wife, and challenged this idea when she seduces Atanarjuat's brother, Amaqjuaq.

The women's role in the village was a catalyst for certain actions taken by the males. For example, Atanarjuat and Oki had their first conflict over Atuat when she and Atanarjuat fell in love while she was betrothed to Oki. Oki goes after Atanarjuat once again when Puja lies about his brother hitting her for no reason, when in fact it was because she was caught cheating on her husband with him. Although women were not in charge of the actions of the tribe or important decisions of the tribe, it is shown that they do have importance in another sense.

They can influence the men's actions individually and in terms of the tribe as a whole. The film Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner definitely has some aspects that need improvement for viewers who are not familiar with the Eskimo culture to understand. However, in terms of portraying the culture and beliefs, this film gives its audience something they can identify with. No matter where they are from, they can sympathize with what believing in a supernatural notion can make one do, and how family and community loyalty influences one's decisions.