

Physical journeys essay



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“ It is good to have an end to journey towards; but it is the journey that matters in the end. ” – Ursula K. LeGuin. A journey, in essence, is a travelling from one place to another, or, more broadly, a passage or progress from one stage to another.

Whether it is the journey or the arrival that is more difficult is irrelevant. It is how the journeyer reacts to his or her travels; how he or she chooses deal with the journey; and what the traveller achieves from his or her passage or progress that is vital to the study of physical journeys. Peter Skrzynecki’s *Immigrant Chronicles*, and the films *Finding Nemo* (2003), directed by Andrew Stanton and Lee Unkrich and *Cast Away* (2000), directed by Robert Zemeckis, each explore the concept of journeys using a range of techniques. Transformation and personal discovery are central to each text, and this demonstrates that both the journey and the arrival can be difficult in their own ways. Skrzynecki’s poem *Crossing the Red Sea* deals with the themes of courage, change and hope through physical journey.

Skrzynecki uses a great deal of religious imagery to compare the immigrants’ voyage over the sea to the Bible story of Moses leading God’s people to the Promised Land. The title of the poem itself refers to the Red Sea that Moses parts for the people. The line, “ (And the seas touched the eyes of another Lazarus who was saying a prayer in thanksgiving for miracles) ” refers to Lazarus of Bethany, who was raised to life by a miracle performed by Jesus. This connection suggests that the migrants were also “ raised to life” by a miracle, or perhaps, saved from death.

This links to the movie *Cast Away* in which FedEx deliveryman, Chuck (Tom Hanks), survives a plane crash and, as a result, is forced to live alone on a deserted island for four years. It is amazing that Chuck lives through the crash, but much like the immigrants in *Crossing the Red Sea*, the hardships are not over: “ As they beckoned towards a blood-rimmed horizon” As time passes in *Crossing the Red Sea*, the migrants open up to themselves and others: “ Voices left their caves and silence fell from its shackles, memories strayed from behind sunken eyes”. The use of the word “ shackles” creates intense imagery, alluding to the violence and entrapment of the migrants’ pasts. This powerful imagery is also used when the colour of red poppies is compared to blood: “ ‘ Blood leaves similar dark stains – when it runs for a long time on stones or rusted iron. ’ ” The contrast between the blood and the poppies is sudden and horrific, and the two juxtapose each other completely.

This contrast represents how the migrants’ lives have been corrupted by the war; once beautiful and peaceful, their world is now frightening and bloody. In the plane crash scene of *Cast Away*, the camera angles and dramatic noise bring the audience into the action, much like the imagery of *Crossing the Red Sea* does. The shaking camera gives the audience an idea of what it’s like to be on the plane and the loud plane noises instil fear and suspense into the mind of the viewer. This violent scene begins Chuck’s journey, in the same way that the violence of the war began the journey of the migrants. The rest of the film contrasts the pivotal plane crash scene and is much more quiet.

Although these scenes of Chuck struggling for survival involve minimal dialogue or music they are indelible. The silence is the key to understanding his physical journey and the adversity he faces every day. In *Crossing the Red Sea* the immigrants grow spiritually and emotionally with the hope of a brighter future. Similarly, in *Cast Away*, Chuck endures a physical hardship for four years. His physical journey becomes a life changing experience for him emotionally, personally, spiritually and psychologically.

This is also evident in the film *Finding Nemo*. Both Nemo and Marlin go through change as a result of their physical journeys. Marlin learns that he cannot hold a constant fear of the world, and that he must trust others and his surroundings. During his journey he is driven by necessity – he must find his son. This necessity is mirrored in *Crossing the Red Sea* when the migrants search for land, for anything that could be their new home: “ To look for shorelines – peaks of mountains and green rivers”.

In *Finding Nemo*, Marlin’s constant need to find Nemo is highlighted in the scene where Marlin is swimming frantically around the ocean, around other fish and plant life, searching desperately for his son. The flurry of movements and the swift camera movement in the scene along with the continuous calling for his son emphasises Marlin’s despair. While the motive for Marlin’s journey is necessity, the motivation of the film from Nemo’s perspective is to prove oneself as being independent and to be confident when moving out of familiar territory. Through his journey, Nemo learns that although he may be small, with a deformed (“ lucky”) fin, he can survive without his father’s constant supervision and care.

In one scene, the Tank Gang of the fish tank devise a plan for their escape. As a result, Nemo becomes stuck in the tank's filter: " Nemo: Can you help me? Gill: No. You got yourself in there, you can get yourself out. " Nemo is forced to help himself, just as he is forced onto his journey when the boat takes him. This can also be compared to Skrzynecki's poem Leaving Home.

The persona in the poem is made to pack up and leave for a job in a country town: " The verdict came next day by phone: ' You must go. ' " He is given no choice, and must follow the orders of the authorities, unless he wants to lose his job. Leaving Home very much emphasizes the feeling of being lost and unprepared. The vulnerability of the persona causes him to be obedient, and to even blindly obey orders: " caught unaware by ignorance and faith: Our dull-witted, frog-mouthed obedience".

Despite wanting to make a good impression for the interview, the persona is not taken seriously " I waited three hours for a two-minute interview;" Similarly, Nemo is not taken seriously by his father: " You think you can do these things, but you just can't, Nemo! " When the persona finally is interviewed he treated with no respect and almost completely ignored " The man behind the desk never once looked me in the eyes – his face was the back of my application papers. " The metaphor used gives the audience an immediate opinion about the interviewer. He is then described as " Hawk-nosed, crew-cut, with a Tally-Ho paper skin," The man's appearance is unfriendly and tough, portraying what kind of a person he is. The outcome of each text is different, though. In Finding Nemo, through their physical journeys, both Nemo and Marlin learn independence – they are changed for the better.

In *Leaving Home*, however, the persona is stuck at the end of the poem, dreaming about hopelessness and horror, which underlines the desperation he feels. Another one of Skrzynecki's poems, *Migrant Hostel* is a text that focuses on adapting to new surroundings and environments. It is set in a moment of stasis, and describes the life of an immigrant living in a hostel. The use of bird imagery is a motif throughout the poem: "like a homing pigeon circling to get its bearings;" "for over two years we lived like birds of passage."

"The migrants can be compared to migratory birds, moving from one place to another, as they need to. The mood of the poem is depressing and lonely. The migrants feel isolated and cut off from the world "A barrier at the main gate sealed off the highway from our doorstep". This is similar to *Cast Away* – there are many moments in the film where Chuck feels sad and alone, and he physically is isolated from the rest of the world.

In *Migrant Hostel* the audience gets a sense that the immigrants feel very different and awkward in the Australian culture that surrounds them; even shame: "it rose and fell like a finger pointed in reprimand or shame". In one way, *Migrant Hostel* and *Cast Away* are very similar. Both explore the challenges and hardships faced by characters when exchanging their old world for an unfamiliar new one. In another way, the two texts contrast one another – in *Migrant Hostel* the travelers chose their path, yet in *Cast Away*, it was forced upon Chuck. In both texts, response to change through physical journey is examined – the ways in which the migrants and Chuck respond to their situations is very similar in their isolation and loneliness.

After examining Peter Skrzynecki's *Immigrant Chronicles*, and the films *Finding Nemo* and *Cast Away*, it is difficult to say whether it is the journey or the arrival that is most difficult. Through journey, a person can be changed by their experiences, and these changes can be difficult to live with, though the journey of transformation itself can be hard enough. In the end, though, it is how a person treats the overall experience of the journey that really matters.