

Wartime Difficulties And Healing From Its Imprint: A Study Of Joseph Boyden's Novel Three Day Road

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Abstract

Joseph Boyden is genetically a Canadian of mixed identity. His articles mostly focus on the lives of the Metis people, who are indigenous to Canada, though he is also a Metis. Boyden is the author of three novels, a novella, a short-story collection, and three non-fictional works. French and Cree Canadians make up the Metis population. The book Three Day Road pays tribute to the creative prowess and tactical dexterity of Native Canadian soldiers who fought in World War I. The physical and psychological harm that soldiers endured during the conflict is also covered in the book. The experiences of Xavier and Niska, two Cree Indians, are used to tell the story. The present study, "Wartime Difficulties and Healing from its Imprint: A Study of Joseph Boyden's Novel Three Day Road", focuses on the challenges that Xavier and his aunt Niska in Three Day Road faced during the war in trying to find treatments for his bodily and psychological wounds. Niska heals Xavier and narrates the experiences that support her in improving her psychic abilities. She provides him with answers regarding his bodily and mental injuries through her organisation, or order of healing.

Key Words: racial discrimination, intergenerational trauma, healing in native ways.

Introduction

Joseph Boyden, a Canadian author, was born on October 31, 1966, in Willowdale, Ontario. His genetic genealogy includes Métis, Scottish, and Irish origins. During World War II, Raymond Wilfred Boyden, his father, was a member of the Canadian armed forces and was awarded for his medical accomplishments. He served in Italy and Northern Europe. Both his father's uncle and his mother's grandpa fought in the First World War. Boyden's family members' and the indigenous' involvement in the two world wars served as inspiration for Three Day Road. Boyden is the author of four novels, a collection of short stories, and three nonfiction volumes. Born With a Tooth (2001) is a collection of short stories; Three Day Road (2005), Through Black Spruce (2008), Kikwaakew (2012), The Orenda (2013), and Wenjack (2016) are novels. His three non-fiction books are titled From Mushkegowuk to New Orleans: A Mixed Blood Highway (2008), Extraordinary Canadians: Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont (2010), and Kwe: Standing with Our Sisters (2014). Born With a Tooth marks the beginning of Boyden's writing career. His writing mostly focuses on the hardships that the First Nations people of James Bay, in Northern Ontario, have faced in the past and present.

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Three Day Road honours Native Canadian soldiers who fought in World War I. Boyden gives of their modest bravery and skills. These warriors were unique snipers because of their creative talents and defensive tactics, which they adopted from their native hunting. Boyden honours Canadian First World War sniper, scout, and later leader Francis Pegahmagabow. Boyden talks about Francis Pegahmagabow's influence on Three Day Road via Peggy and made-up characters. He highlights the importance of leading a Native American lifestyle and exhorts the next generation to continue this custom. Boyden emphasises making the book an homage to Canadians who fought in the First World War, rather than just fixing it. He encourages the next generation to continue this practice and underlines the importance of leading a Native American lifestyle. Boyden concentrates on the anguish and hardships that the soldiers endured on the front lines rather than turning the book into an homage to the Canadian-born soldiers who fought in the First World War. Boyden has drawn attention to the troops' physical and psychological wounds, which have left them in a depressing and hopeless state regarding their present and future. The novel's path is infused with the promise of recovery and healing.

During their three-day canoe trip, Xavier and Niska, two Cree Indians, tell the tale of Three Day Road. As they travel, Xavier tells Niska about his experiences during the war, and she discusses her own experiences with Xavier, which will aid in his recuperation. According to Cree tradition, a person's spirit travels for four days westward to the afterlife once their body dies. The title of the novel describes the three days that Xavier and Niska spent travelling. Using her innate healing psychic abilities, Niska thinks she could heal Xavier from any dangerous condition during the three-day canoe journey.

Niska lives a pure native life, surrounded by dense undergrowth. Her dislike of the sound of cars and "wemistikoshiw" makes her unwilling to live in a township or city (16). In the context of the Three Day Road, "Wemistikoshiw" alludes to the Europeans. She believes that her perception of living in a natural setting is distorted by the noise of the cars. She is hence drawn to living in burrows like a rabbit. When Niska is seen, she is regarded as an animal from the bush. Niska describes the attention she receives from the general population on Three Day Road as follows: "They stare and point and talk about me as if they've not seen one of me before. I must look a thin and wild old woman to them, an Indian animal straight out of the bush" (16). Xavier has a close childhood friend named Elijah; they are both the same age. A letter from the war camp informs Niska that Elijah has escaped with serious injuries and that Xavier has died in a fight. On the day specified in the letter, Niska paddles a canoe from the forest to the train station in order to get to Elijah. She finds out that her cousin Xavier has come back instead of Elijah at the railway station.

Xavier has suffered psychological and physical abuse. Niska notices that Xavier is too weak to breathe and has lost his limb. He is also being given morphine to sublimate pain from war injuries. Niska and Xavier planned to canoe across the James Bay for three days to reach their bush in Northern Ontario. As they travel, Niska tries to heal Xavier by telling him stories from her own life, and he recounts his memories from the battle. Xavier was incapable of appreciating the agony and carnage brought on by conflict. Exposure to war causes Xavier to suffer from trauma and bodily wounds. From the boat ride onward, Xavier resumes his tale. Xavier is too frail to travel or tell stories about what he has seen. As a result, they speak to one another through soul-chatter. Soul chattering is the exchange of messages among spirits. During the canoe ride, Niska and Xavier engage in similar behaviours; they exchange conversations between their spirits. However, as the healing journey progresses, he uses gestures to communicate with her until he can finally speak.

The medical staff at the military camp recommends Xavier use morphine for pain relief. When he gets caught in a bombshell blast, one of his legs is amputated. His leg sustains severe damage when he is flung aside in the shell explosion. He is told to leave his house after having his leg amputated because he is deemed unable to serve in the military. His family is informed of the same. The only thing that can ease his anguish on this voyage is morphine. Xavier is not given any additional medication or painkillers to treat his wounds or ease his discomfort. Xavier has developed an addiction to morphine, which he takes frequently to ease his agony. Due to his addiction, Xavier is unable to take care of his physical and emotional well-being, which results in extremely unpleasant experiences and a loss of innocence. He becomes depressed, loses his individuality, and changes into something that is not human. Through recalling and recounting his experiences, Xavier is able to sublimate his trauma with the help of his aunt Niska's therapeutic storytelling. In addition to being Xavier's boyhood friend, Elijah is a soldier beside him.

One of the troops gives Elijah his first dose of morphine while they are at war. He speaks English fluently. He therefore hangs out with his alcoholic clanmates from the conflict. In addition to his poor English, Xavier doesn't agree with these pals. Elijah anticipates the same to give him some extra time even though he is injury-free. Elijah starts the first combat as an innocent soldier because of his inexperience. Because he had to hunt his adversaries like wild creatures in order to survive, he acquired a great deal of experience killing. "I think it is just like hunting," Elijah remarked at the outset, explaining his soldiering duties. It is a hunt. "I am made for this," I tell myself, "I am created for this"" (79). Elijah is hooked to murdering and is unable to view his foes as fellow soldiers due to his morphine dependency.

Since Xavier is not a skilled marksman, he cannot regard the soldiers on the other side as adversaries. Xavier is devastated by the atrocities of the war, which his aunt Niska labels as a sickness. She states, "What happened over there has wrecked him," as well as "This is a sickness I've not had to face before" (32). Niska is aware that his condition is more than just a physical disability; it is emotional in character. Xavier loses his innocence when he murders a man for the first time in his life. He keeps thinking "over and over" about this episode, which prevents him from falling asleep (69). Elijah sees these kinds of situations all the time, but the ones where he witnesses horrific death scenes stick out the most. As the battle rages, Xavier is surrounded by these violent events and is frequently killed on the front lines. These are the visuals from one of the opening scenes: "Arms stick up from the pool of water, some curled like they are grasping something I cannot see...Besides the limbs, rotted faces peek over at us. I see the eye sockets are empty and their lips have pulled back from their open mouths so that they look like they're screaming...I feel like I'm going to be sick." (64)

Elijah thinks uncivilized if he is fully engrossed in a struggle. He's satisfied with the way he eliminates his opponents. He enjoys watching his enemies suffer horrendous deaths. Wendigo or windigo is the term used in Native American folklore to describe this goal. "Wendigo are people who eat other people's flesh and grow into wild beasts twenty feet tall whose hunger can be satisfied only by more human flesh and then the hunger turns worse," is how *Three Day Road* describes the nature of wendigo (41). Xavier has discovered that Elijah is driven by battle madness and craves the horrible death of troops. The phrase "war madness that swallowed him whole" is used by Xavier in *Three Day Road* (271). The phrase "war madness that swallowed him whole" is used by Xavier in *Three Day Road* (271). In order to shield Elijah from his eyes and other soldiers—or from being executed by war officials—Xavier chooses to kill him.

In *Wendigo Lore: Monsters, Myths, and Madness*, Chad Lewis discusses the folklore surrounding wendigo that is shared throughout the indigenous populations. When the wendigo was killed, he states that "the responsibility of killing a person turning wendigo fell upon the shoulders of a direct family member in order to decrease the chances of retribution coming from committing the act" (156). Xavier accepts responsibility for the wendigo's death in *Three Day Road*. Elijah is fatally shot by Xavier after he ties his neck with his hand. After killing his best friend, Xavier is horrified. However, he has the ability to do so; otherwise, Elijah's predicament might be even more pitiful than his demise at the hands of Xavier. Niska hears the story of Elijah's death as, "My hands wrap around Elijah's throat... I straddle him once more and place the rifle across his throat. "You have gone mad. There is no coming back from where you've travelled." I press down harder" (367, 368).

Xavier recounts the events leading up to Elijah's death, and Niska tells Xavier about her experiences with the wendigo. Wendigo, a terrifying form of cannibalism, is mentioned in Native American culture. When a person is possessed by the wendigo spirit, the spirit may disseminate the wendigo nature to other members of the community, or the affected person may feast on the flesh of his family or community. Therefore, killing the wendigo would put an end to this nature. Hookimaw primarily kills wendigo. The spiritual leader of a clan is known as the Hookimaw, and they possess the psychic abilities to handle any circumstance. The hookimaw of Niska's clan is her father. A man killed his wife and children and fed them during a harsh winter. Being the hookimaw and village chief, Niska's father killed the wendigo.

Though Xavier is an accomplished hunter, he is not a trained sniper, and he cannot regard the soldiers on the other side as adversaries. Xavier has been traumatised by the atrocities of the war, which his aunt Niska labels as a sickness. She states, "What happened over there has wrecked him," as well as "This is a sickness I've not had to face before" (32). Niska is aware that his condition is more than just a physical disability; it is emotional in character. Xavier loses his innocence when he murders a man for the first time in his life. He keeps thinking "over and over" about this episode, which prevents him from falling asleep (69). Elijah sees these kinds of situations all the time, but the ones where he witnesses horrific death scenes stick out the most. As the battle rages, Xavier is surrounded by these violent events and is frequently killed on the front lines. These are the visuals from one of the opening scenes: "Arms stick up from the pool of water, some curled like they are grasping something I cannot see... Besides the limbs, rotted faces peek over at us. I see the eye sockets are empty and their lips have pulled back from their open mouths so that they look like they're screaming... I feel like I'm going to be sick." (64)

Xavier struggles to sleep as well because of his trauma. In addition to having a "half-sleep lying there below the earth's surface with the dead," he also learns to dream with his "eyes open" (48, 64). His inability to sleep may indicate that he is experiencing anxiety or perhaps insomnia, which could spiral further worsen his mental health problems. In addition, he feels that he has changed into something other than a human person because he sleeps beneath the surface of the ground among the dead.

Through his physical and mental challenges, Xavier overcomes the obstacles in order to bring honours to Canada as a soldier. The Canadian soldiers selected to go to England are asked to travel first by boat and then by train. Xavier thought the cruise from Canada to England was uncomfortable. Horses are entrusted to Xavier, and it is his duty to care for them during the journey. "I've taken the horses as my own responsibility," he says, recounting the journey. When Elijah comes to visit, he notices that I am so unwell I can not stand, but I continue to stay with the miserable creatures and attempt to soothe them. With animals, I feel at ease. I feel

connected to the earth because of them" (183). The soldiers travel by train to the military camp after arriving in England.

It is forbidden for Native soldiers to ride in the same compartment as White soldiers. Rather, people are required to ride in the compartment adjacent to the one holding the animals. The lack of fresh air on the voyage makes the native warriors feel disgusted. Their voyage is hard because of the animals' bitter stench coming from the next compartment. Due to racial disparities, the native soldiers are not permitted to travel with the White people. Xavier is traumatised by these encounters. The same is recalled by Xavier to Niska in *Three Day Road*: "A man in a uniform said to us, soon as we got on, 'No Indians in this car.' He pointed down the aisle. 'You belong four cars to the back.'... The seats are wood and uncomfortable. The smell of animals in the next car is strong. We choose a bench and once again settle in with our packs at our feet" (Road 168).

Through Niska's storytelling and his own recollections of his own experiences, Xavier achieves catharsis. Even if nature helps Xavier survive in his current situation, Niska's support is necessary for Xavier to make progress towards recuperation. Xavier finds solace in Niska's narrative because it allows him to see his own emotions and ideas from the perspective of others. Her stories help him to relive long-forgotten feelings and experiences. This helps Xavier access necessary feelings and experiences, which helps him eventually become well. By "unlocking" his story, Xavier is able to release himself from his pain and guilt. Xavier is at peace and free from mental distress when he is in his aunt Niska's care. As a healer, Niska gives him consolation and uses storytelling to share her psychic abilities with him. With Niska, Xavier shares his healing experiences, saying, "As I watch her work, the comfort of the bush wraps around me." "The bird makes me think of home" (257). Xavier finds comfort in the idea of living in the bush or in the natural world since it brings him back to his hometown. This enables Xavier to divert his attention from the horrific ideas he has been having due to the conflict and focus on the peaceful lives of his ancestors.

The stories narrated by Xavier are not the fictional experiences of Xavier penned by Boyden. *Three Day Road* investigates the devastation effects of World War One faced by native Canadian soldiers through Xavier Bird and other fictional characters. Boyden emphasises the value of storytelling and the importance of sharing one's own experiences and pain in overcoming trauma. Instead, Boyden could have included numerous difficulties faced by native soldiers in real life. Through native healing skills, Boyden informs the natives about the possibilities of living their natural lives and transmits the same to the needy and the younger generations. The ordeals narrated by Xavier to Niska as stories help Niska learn that Xavier is mentally disorganised because of physical and mental injuries and sleeplessness. Niska assists Xavier in regaining his physical and mental health through her storytelling and healing abilities. Through her narrative, which has psychic powers and heals Xavier, Niska assists Xavier by arranging or placing the experiences he has had in order. This gives Xavier hope for his own survival once he gets home.

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