

Reassessment and Justification of an Allegorical and Exploitative Narrative in

Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road*

There is no denying that man is capable of great things, every event or monument being bigger than the preceding one. It is the source of infinite improvement and the very basis of human evolution. Adaptability is a key trait of human character, the capability to learn from our mistakes. Based on this assumption, there was much to learn from World War I. This was a major trauma and a first international one of this scale. This war is now deeply rooted in our collective subconscious. It is the source of countless narratives that each emphasizes on the absurdity of its causes. This traumatic event was the cause of men; they were at the mercy of something created by them, but now out of their control. If we transpose this lack of control to a smaller scale, to a person for example, we see emerging a theme that is recurrent in quite a large number of popular narratives. From ancient folkloric tales to Star Trek, a strange force controlling our body has been a major narrative theme¹. You just have to think of werewolves or the now more than ever popular vampire. These are all forms of evil spirits controlling the human body. It has been a driving force that led to some famous theories. Freud's model of the psyche is a great example. What if some parts of us were controlling, or influencing our behaviour; an entity like the superego or subconscious, which silently defines who we are and how we act. In Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road*, the windigo narrative symbolically represents the loss of control over ourselves. Nishka and Xavier's storytelling are not only a recapitulation, but also a reassessment of the past in order to deal with the present in

¹ Charlie T. McCormick, Kim Kennedy White, Folklore: An Encyclopedia of Beliefs, Customs, Tales, Music, and Art, Volume 1, ABC-CLIO, 2010, p.182.

the context of an exploitative society. This exploitation of the native is strongly criticized by Boyden and *Three Day Road* is nothing short of allegorical.

Boyden put a great deal of importance on the windigo narrative. It is not only a universal narrative theme, but an embodiment of every form of dependence, loss of control and miscomprehension when faced with unknown forces. The windigo narrative is a tool used by Boyden to create a threshold between fiction and reality with the use of symbolism. The windigo, as ethno historian Robert A. Brightman points out: "Refers to one of a class of anthropophagous monsters [...] Either many or all windigos were once human beings, transformed, usually irreversibly, into their monstrous condition."² In *Three Day Road*, both Xavier and Elijah are transformed into a monstrous condition. Both are dependent at some point of morphine, as the windigo is dependent of flesh. This is only the result of extreme conditions imposed by the First World War. This trauma was called shellshock, a new concept in the early twentieth century. As they change, they become fearful of themselves and gradually lose control of their body, as if they were possessed by an evil spirit. They lose control of their body in the same way that the windigo became a monster, by choosing to eat human flesh. This key element of choice and consequence for actions taken is the main critique of Boyden on World War I, crossing the line from literary fiction to critique of factual events. World War I was a murderous, destructive and immoral event that was created by men and more precisely by choices made by men. Evelyn Cobley refers to World War I as an

² Brightman, Robert A. , *Ethnohistory*, Duke University Press, Vol. 35, No. 4 (Autumn, 1988), p.337.

“apocalyptic transition into the new”³. It was an apocalypse that morally challenged our view of warfare. Man was now technologically able of large scale destruction. This arm race led to the use of gas as a weapon of mass destruction; the possibilities were endless, exactly like the supernatural beast. As the weapons could destroy entire cities, the windigo could wipe out a tribe. As the tribe was confused when faced with the windigo, realising that the myth was real, so was the world when battles like Verdun, Ypres or the Somme ended killing hundreds of thousands. When writing about strategy and its uses, Hannah Arendt says that “its danger, for it can lead us to believe we have an understanding of events and control over their flow which we do not have”⁴. Boyden uses the windigo narrative as a symbolic materialisation that embodies the incomprehension and the fear of men from themselves and what they have created during this international conflict. This quote about the omnipresence of fear in Xavier represents a feeling present in every character of the book. In parallel, the fact that fear is the central emotional focus point of the book puts emphasis on Boyden symbolism with actual events. This apocalyptic war scared everybody at some point. This trauma, caused by four years of doubt, indecision and technological genocides created a social feeling of fear that would only be equalled during World War II.

Nishka’s storytelling of the windigo, put in parallel with Xavier’s storytelling of World War I is an acknowledgment of past events and a justification of their actions. The

³ Cobley, Evelyn, Representing War: Form & Ideology in First World War Narratives. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993, p.4.

⁴ Arendt, Hannah. On Violence, San Diego, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1970, p.7.

storytelling of the two protagonists is also an allegory of the way that the current Amerindians are single out in the Canadian society. There was a belief that if the Amerindians were to go to war, the Canadian government would give them more rights.

“ [...] some band councils refused to help the Allied war effort unless Great Britain acknowledged their bands as independent nations. That recognition was not granted.”⁵

This proved to be an enormous blow to the Amerindian tribes that contributed to the war effort. When Xavier is expressing the heroic temper of Elijah, his stubbornness in the face of danger, he is in a way, justifying the Amerindian effort of war. Boyden is again on the verge of fiction and reality with the story told by Xavier. As fictional as the written events are, the courage of the Amerindians during World War I is as true as the war itself. By having an in-depth view of the front, always comparing Xavier and Elijah to Canadian troops, going as far as making them compete with one another⁶, he implies that fundamentally, there is no difference between an Amerindian and a Canadian. He condemns the racist treatment suffered by Amerindians during the conflict and beyond, this matter being of utter importance even to this day.

“For it is the settler who has brought the native into existence and who perpetuates his existence”⁷

Frantz Fanon couldn't have said it better. The Canadian government, by excluding and secluding the Amerindians, created a class that has no purpose in itself. Boyden,

⁵ IN DEPTH: ABORIGINAL CANADIANS: Aboriginals and the Canadian Military, CBC Canada, June 21st 2006, Web, April 4th 2012.

⁶ Boyden, Joseph, Three Day Road, Penguin Canada, Toronto, 2005, p.104-109.

⁷ Fanon, Frantz, On Violence, Grove Weidenfeld, New York, 1963, p.35.

through Nishka and Xavier, is condemning the actions of the government, not only in the past, but in the present. The whole novel is allegorical and presents a situation that fictionally happened a hundred years ago with the same social struggle that was happening in 2005. The reason why Nishka and Xavier are telling those stories, their past lives, is not a way from Boyden to condemn the 1914's Canadian position towards the autochthones, but to allegorically provoke the thought in the reader's mind that there is still much progress to do with our handling of aboriginal affairs.

Briefly, the windigo narrative is a symbolic tool used by Boyden to create a passage from the fictional events of the book, to factual events of World War I. Both Elijah and Xavier reach at some point a kind of windigo state, being dependant of the morphine as the windigo is dependant of flesh. Their dependence is a choice made by them, and this critique of responsibility for your actions is major in the novel. They believed that they could control their dependence as the government thought they could control the war, which of course was not the case. It is also a critique of the actions taken by the government. By having Nishka telling the story, we can take a step back and realize that Boyden is telling a story as well. Nishka is reassessing the mistake made in the past and condemns what is happening now in her timeline; Boyden does the same with the racism and exclusion of the Amerindian, his novel is therefore allegorical. He makes the reader realize that injustice towards the native Canadian is still going on today.

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