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Death and Renewed Identity in *Three Day Road*

Three Day Road by Joseph Boyden follows the story of two Cree hunters, Elijah Weesageechak and Xavier Bird, through their journey in World War I. The narrative comes from Xavier who tries to recount the war stories of the past to his aunt as she tries to 'revive' him. Boyden uses two soldiers to bring out the mesmerizing and conflicting desires of soldiers during World War. Xavier is the humblest and quietest of the two friends raised by his aunt Niska according to the Indian traditional beliefs and customs. Xavier has an endowment of hunting skills and is aware of the cannibalistic Windigos who must be excommunicated from the tribe. Elijah has been to school and has impeccable English speaking skills that impress other soldiers as he tells his stories. Being through the classroom does not make Elijah any soft, as he has the crafts of a hunter, which makes him hungry to kill. Among his obsessions is the insatiable use of morphine that is rampant within and through the ranks.

Niska, who is part of the story, is a Shaman or Windigo killer having inherited the craft from her father. The conflict between the tribe and the white man is that the killing of the Windigos is referred to as murder, yet these are cannibals and has seen Niska's father executed by the white man's court. The conflict between the Indian native tribes and the white man brings an intersection of moral lines provoked by the differences of their worldviews. Xavier has seen many deaths and orchestrated some as well, and the experiences of World War are taking a toll

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on him, as the dehumanization of the war changes his virtuous nature to a murderer. The need for survival and association in the war is the reason behind the need for identity change in Xavier impacted upon by death.

Death and a Redefined Identity

The number three has a lot of significance in the novel and World War according to Xavier. His aunt once told him that those ready for death had to journey through the three-day road, and his journey back home signifies this three-day road. Another time that the number three comes up is in a reference to the war where the front line, reserve line, and support line exist. Xavier tries to envisage the number in all situations even after battles when there is a representation of food, rest, and later women. While in church, there is the Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost. In superstition, there is the lighting of three cigarettes with one match. As such, the title of the book is significant especially in bringing out the theme of death where Xavier's three-day journey home signifies his readiness for death.

Identity is another important theme in the book that has close association to death. Each death seems to impact on an individual in a particular way, especially in the redefinition of identity. For Elijah and Xavier, their cultures define them as much as they define their native cultures (Coates). In the redefinition of identity, the most important question is whether a man's identity defines a culture or whether culture defines a man's identity. Xavier observes as his friend Elijah veers away from his native cultural association, as he tries to impress other soldiers. Having been through the school system, Elijah adopts a British accent and even drops his Indian religion (Boyden 137). He claims that he wants an association with an Indian who knows how to hide and hunt further distancing himself from his native culture that defined him. For the white men, they see Elijah's character as native and do not draw any difference between his implied

identity and that of his native culture. While Elijah may have shown that other people define his native culture, Xavier proves otherwise, as he opts to learn from his friend's behavior.

Xavier realizes that his friend is moving away from his friendship and the sacred native culture they were brought up in. Though he feels obliged to have a change of identity and self, Xavier tries to remain as pure as possible and asks the gods for help through his prayers. After killing his first enemy, Xavier prays for two days and thanks the gods that it is he who breathes and not his enemy (Boyden 224). From the prayer, one can see that Xavier has an obsession with his true self and does not want that position occupied by someone else should it be his enemy or another identity of himself.

Even with a decree to remain himself, circumstances force him to try to be someone else, someone like Elijah or close to Elijah. After an explosion wakes Xavier up, the nurses refer to him as Elijah, and instead of being afraid or against the idea, he feels comforted to be him (Boyden 373). From this incidence of having been close to death, Xavier tries to remain as close as possible to Elijah, so he can distance himself from his native culture (Coates). The survival seems to be a driver and the reason behind the need for changing identity by Xavier within the war period. The need for survival pushes the soldiers and especially Xavier to the limits of being a killer as Elijah was. His vivid description of death shows that he is no longer afraid to kill. He recounts having to stick a bayonet at the back of a soldier where it bounced off his spine before finding a soft spot to sink in (Boyden 220). For Elijah, he had no difficulties in killing soldiers and recounting their stories to others.

The bodies of fallen soldiers may have influenced the change in character and identity in the two friends, but what transforms Xavier is the killing of his friend. At one point, Elijah jokes that the meat his friend is eating is human flesh, much to the disgust of his friend Xavier

(Boyden 288). Xavier reaches for his knife ready to kill Elijah who later admits that it was a joke. The incidence may have proved Elijah's insanity, but after Xavier kills him, he is united with his native clan that he once tried to distance himself from. Xavier's aunt, Niska, and her father were Windigo killers, and now the fact that Xavier kills Elijah connects him to his aunt's tribe. Again, the need to survive and emerge from the war drive him to kill others including his best friend, and as such his change in identity has been orchestrated by the numerous death incidences he has witnessed.

The *Three Day Road* has vivid descriptions of the events that unfolded within World War I and the influence it had on the lives of the two soldiers. Both Elijah and Xavier demonstrate conflicting identities that unite at some point only for them to draw apart later. Death is evident throughout the book, but the need for survival has been the greatest driver in the need to bring out the different characters. Elijah's character may have defined his native association, but for Xavier, his native association (Windigo) defined him.

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Works Cited

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