English 11

Novel Study Guide

***Three Day Road* by Joseph Boyden**

**Plot Overview**

In the opening of this novel we are presented with the **innocence** of Elijah and Xavier, two twelve year old Cree boys spending their first night on the trapline. The boys find a marten in the trap, and Elijah goes to kill it, but hesitates. Xavier puts the creature out of its misery. Afterwards, Elijah asks, “we are great hunters and best friends, yes?”, and Xavier agrees. Thus opens a story of companionship, acceptance, belonging, courage and survival.

The boys grow up and enlist in the First World War. Elijah is eager to win the **acceptance** of other non-Cree soldiers, even if it is at the cost of Xavier’s reputation. However, Xavier and Elijah remain close friends and become expert snipers. Elijah slowly becomes addicted to morphine, while Xavier experiences heartbreak from a brief affair. Elijah becomes increasingly more obsessed with increasing his kill count and begins collecting scalps in order to prove his kill count. Xavier is troubled by his friend’s behavior and when Xavier witnesses his friend committing an act of **cannibalism** he kills him. Then Xavier becomes addicted to morphine in the hospital.

Xavier is a windigo killer, like his aunt, Niska. Xavier survives the war and goes home. As his aunt, Niska, paddles him home, he struggles to find peace while remembering the events that happened overseas and withdrawing from morphine. Niska heals him through story and ceremony.

**Characters**

The main character in this story is Xavier Bird. He is a young man who spent some time in residential schools and then the remainder of his childhood with his aunt, Niska. His story is supplemented by Niska’s voice, who provides background information on the windigo and on Xavier’s life. Elijah, who spent many years in residential school before being adopted by Niska and is Xavier’s best friend from childhood is also an important character in the story.

**Main characters**

• Xavier • Niska • Elijah

**Characters from the Moose Factory area**

* Rabbit
* The Frenchman
* Niska’s father
* Joseph Netmaker
* Old Man Ferguson
* Mariaus
* Micah
* Micah’s wife

Homeguard Indians are Indians that live on the newly created reservations rather than living off the land. Niska resists the government’s efforts to remove her from the land and traditional life.

**Soldiers**

* Fat
* Graves
* McCann
* Breech
* Thompson
* Grey Eyes
* Peggy
* Sean Patrick
* Colquhoun
* Smithy
* Gilberto
* Francis
* Driscoll

The Huns and Fritz are colloquialisms to describe German soldiers.

**Setting**

Three Day Road takes place in Europe and Canada. The story itself extends over the period of Niska’s lifetime, from her early childhood until she is an old woman during the First World War.

You may find it helpful before beginning to locate a map on the internet of Canadian troops during the first world war which is easily located by image searching “Canadian troop movement first world war.” You may also find it interesting to look at the photos of soldiers from this period, which will also show up in your search.

You may also find it helpful to do an image search of Moose Factory, which will turn up maps as well as current and historical photos.

The following locations are mentioned in the novel:

**Ontario**

* Toronto
* Moose Factory
* Mushkegowuk
* Moose River
* Hudson Bay

**Europe**

* Vimy Ridge
* Saint Eloi
* Passchendaele
* Belguim

**Literary Elements/Themes**

**Foil**

A foil is a character who provides a contrast to the main character. In this novel the foil is Elijah. Elijah and Xavier are both in the same scenario however they each respond to the scenario differently. In the company of people from a different culture who belittle their background Elijah turns towards the culture, befriending the strangers and adopting their ways, while Xavier remains distant and maintains his own ways. Elijah seeks solace in drugs and acts of dehumanization while Xavier seeks to maintain his spiritual roots. A question arising from the novel is to what degree their childhoods influenced the ways that they responded to the stress of the battlefield. Elijah was raised primarily in residential school where he was subject to abuse (341) while Xavier was raised primarily by his aunt who gave him a solid cultural foundation and sense of accomplishment from learning how to live off of the land.

**Imagery – invisibility**

A recurring image throughout the story is invisibility. For example, Xavier cannot speak English very well and is left out of conversations because he cannot follow them or participate in them, so he becomes invisible, “a brown ghost” (65). Stealth is important both as a hunter and as a sniper, and “Elijah’s like a shadow when he wants to be,” (102). Niska, while playing a trick on the Frenchman, says about herself “if there’s one thing in which I excelled, it was becoming invisible” (133). Being invisible is at times purposeful and at times unpleasant.

**Imagery – cannibalism**

The central plot of this novel revolves around Elijah becoming a windigo. A windigo is the transformation of a human into a flesh eating creature. Traditionally, as Niska explains, it occurred in times of starvation and windigos must be destroyed because of the spiritual and physical risk they pose to other community members. Niska and Elijah are windigo killers. However, the theme of one human consuming another is also used metaphorically. For example, Elijah confides in Xavier and Xavier suspects it is because “I am depressed and he gives me little bits of himself as an offering,” (212). Similarly, while Elijah is recovering from the war Niska decides that she will “feed him another story” as part of her effort to heal him (213).

**Theme – friendship and betrayal**

The opening to this novel shows Elijah and Xavier as boyhood friends. Repeated stories about Elijah and Xavier’s early friendship gives us insight into what bonds them, such as the shared experience of surviving residential school and journeys on the river. However, during the war Elijah repeatedly betrays Xavier’s friendship. For example, early in the war Elijah teaches Xavier a phrase in English. Xavier thinks that his friend is helping him. However, Elijah was actually pulling a prank on him and the phrase that Xavier learned got him in trouble with his superiors (78). Elijah takes advantage of the fact that he can speak English in order to improve his reputation among the other soldiers at Xavier’s expense (97). An ongoing question until the climax of the novel is to what degree Elijah would harm Xavier. A question to consider after the novel is whether Elijah’s betrayals are a matter of self-­‐protection in a hostile foreign environment, the result of drug abuse, a side-­‐effect of the evil windigo spirit taking over him, or an inherent character flaw. Niska also experiences betrayal by her lover the Frenchman.

**Literary element – language**

Cree words are used throughout the novel and each chapter has a Cree heading. The use of Cree words reflects the way that the character’s Cree identity through language informs their worldview. The use of Cree also provides insight into the Cree spiritual world.

**Theme – cultural conflicts and colonialism**

Throughout the novel we are presented with ways that the characters have been influenced by colonialism. For example, Niska remembers a winter of starvation in her childhood which was the result of the policy in which the NWMP arrested community members who hunted. As a windigo killer Niska is uneasy among the settlers who do not understand the important role that she plays in community survival. Through state policies such as residential schools Aboriginal language and culture has been systematically and purposefully denigrated and eroded. Today we are experiencing a period of revitalization and renewal in language and culture. In the novel Xavier turns to Niska and his cultural roots as a means of healing from trauma, and in the larger context this is symbolic of the significance of culture and language to Aboriginal people in Canada as a means of healing from individual and collective trauma.

**Literary device – point of view**

This novel has multiple first person perspectives. All of the chapters are narrated in the first person, however, perspective shifts between Xavier and Niska. The only exception to this is on page 280 where Xavier briefly, within his first person narrative, becomes omniscient and can hear Elijah’s thoughts.

**Literary device – flashback**

A repeated element of the story is the flashback where readers are taken to scenes of the past. Sometimes this happens through memory, other times it happens through story. This makes for dynamic storytelling and requires careful attention by the reader, especially in instances like page 183 and page 197 where a character in the memory tells a story within the memory, thus, it is a flashback within a flashback.

