

Applying the Coming of Age lens to *Three Day Road* and *Whale Rider*

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Coming of Age is the development and transition of a person from adolescence to adulthood. They acquire a new understanding of themselves and the world around them. This structure of physical and psychological growth is a commonly used theme to develop characters, even having its own genre called Bildungsroman. This lens can be applied to both the novel *Three Day Road* and the film *Whale Rider* to discover the different components and metamorphoses. It can be displayed through a loss of innocence, an epiphany, a catharsis, and an emergence.

The loss of innocence signifies the departure from childhood to be exposed to more of the world. A child has often been seen as a clean slate, bearing an untainted mind, still shielded from the world. Niska leaves this stage of her youth when she explores farther from familiar grounds. She encounters a French hunter, who for the first time makes her feel small upon his presence. After being free for most of her life, she feels restricted, faced with temptations and sexual desires. The act of sexual intercourse often marks the commencement of adulthood and introduces one to greater personal and social problems. Niska's first sexual act with the opposite gender lets her guard down and become prone to manipulation. This first look into reality overtakes her, making her feel more self-conscious, constantly belittling herself and distrusting others. Niska's loss of innocence now makes up a part of her character and strong spirit. This communicates that the loss of innocence is a crucial step into the process of coming of age.

Three Day Road highlights recurring epiphanies that mark moments of truth. When Xavier watches Niska kill the Windigo, just as she did with her own father, she later explains that “sometimes one must be sacrificed if all are to survive”(265). Niska explains that even healers, people who restore life, must resort to killing to end a sickness. Though at first Xavier doesn't fully understand this new concept of life, he begins to transfer this knowledge into the battlefield at the age of around 17 winters. Xavier first reacts to the killing of another human by vomiting, viewing this new method of survival as preposterous. But as the war grows, he realizes that surviving was always answered by death. He absorbs this idea as he becomes more composed when killing enemies, knowing that Canadians would have a higher chance of survival if they were eliminated. Xavier's acts of going out of his comfort zone and acceptance of harsh realities showcase his growing maturity and coming of age.

The protagonist almost always experiences a catharsis in which they release all the pent up emotions that were built up in the prior stages. In *Whale Rider*, Pai struggles to gain the approval of her grandfather and earn his favour. The feeling of not satisfying Koro fuels her to earn more awards and bigger milestones. She gains enough confidence to invite her grandfather but is left with disappointment when he does not show up. Though many people praise her, the disapproval of Koro breaks her. She releases her pent up emotions into tears, crying while dedicating her speech to him. This moment is pivotal for her because it makes her think she will never live up to what her grandfather expects from her. The realization of worthlessness and the extreme emotional outbreak is what eventually leads her to ride the whale, which is the task she is destined to do. This shows how catharsis is an essential part in the process of maturity.

The shell to emergence signifies the beginning and end of the coming of age lens. In *Three Day Road*, the shell is when Xavier comes out of the train as a crippled man who is damaged from the war and morphine. The literal emergence is when he comes out of the sweat lodge with Niska. During the first three rounds in the sweat lodge, Xavier cleanses his soul of his brutality. Throughout the war, he breaks his morals when he no longer kills for sustenance, but kills men who could have had complete lives like him. He also takes the life of his own friend, Elijah, which causes Xavier to feel an enormous amount of guilt. The healing allows Xavier to let go of the past which helps take away the guilt of the murders he committed and the chaos he created as a sniper. Xavier also acknowledges what Elijah had become through the war, and finally accepts the fact that he had to kill Elijah. Furthermore, when Niska and Xavier emerge from the sweat lodge, Niska recounts “We lie beside one another, our skin as tender as newborns’, steam rising from us like we are on fire inside.”(p.382) When she states their skin to be like newborns, this implies a rebirth of Xavier after he forgave himself and let go of the past. Xavier starts as a haggard and hollow man, destroyed by the war and morphine, but he emerges out of the *matatosowin*, reborn, as a stronger and wiser individual with a purified soul and a heavy burden lifted off his shoulders. This exemplifies the drastic difference of character from the start to the end of coming of age.

Three Day Road and *Whale Rider* exhibited coming of age to be a lengthy and difficult process. The characters of these texts portrayed the various ordeals one must go through in order to achieve maturity. In the case of Xavier, Niska, and Pai, they've all cycled through the metamorphosis coming of age cycle to achieve their own enlightenment.

