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Analyzing Literature and Film through an Anthropological Lens

Both *Three Day Road*, by Joseph Boyden, and *Whale Rider*, by Niko Karo, can be explored more deeply if an anthropological lens is applied. Anthropology is the science that studies human behaviour. It is usually divided into four branches: cultural anthropology, linguistic anthropology, biological anthropology, and archaeology. As both *Three Day Road* and *Whale Rider* are fictitious works, the focus will be on cultural and linguistic anthropology. Also, as culture and language are an important part of both works, this lens can also explain why certain events unfold, or why characters act in a certain way.

As its name suggests, cultural anthropology focuses on the culture of a certain group of people. It encompasses religion and spirituality, the way the people think and interact, their values and morals, and how they behave as a member of their society.

Traditions and spirituality are important in Cree culture, and stories help enforce them. These stories can enforce taboos and rules by telling tales of people breaking them and the accompanying consequences.

The *Wendigo* is a creature or evil spirit from Cree folklore. It is a man eater, and its craving for flesh never ceases. The *Wendigo* is sometimes portrayed as a terrifying beast, and is the embodiment of greed, cold, starvation, and winter. The stories go that a human can turn into a *Wendigo* if they become too greedy, or stay too close to one for a long time. If someone becomes one, a special ritual is done to kill them, and to dispose of them correctly. This ritual is done by a special person, usually the chief, that has the power to destroy the *Wendigo* safely and properly.

Both Niska and Xavier witness a *Wendigo* killing in their childhoods. They both see the ceremonies performed during the killing, which are important to Cree culture. The *Wendigo* Niska sees killed is a Cree woman and her daughter. They are believed to go *wendigo* after eating the remains of their deceased husband/father. When their actions are found out, both are deemed to be going *Wendigo*, and later, are both killed in the traditional ritual performed by Niska's father. This ritual is important in killing the *Wendigo* as it makes people feel safe, and according to the traditions, ensure that other people who have been exposed to them will not become *Wendigo* themselves.

In Xavier's childhood, he witnesses Niska being the *Wendigo* killer, and the ritual of disposing of the *Wendigo* body is described: "I tell them to construct a large fire of hardwood and build up the hot coals for a day. When the fire was at its height, they would place the body upon it and would keep the fire burning until there was nothing left. They would then carefully sweep up the ash and burn it upon another fire. This was to be repeated a third time, and when the ash was carefully collected from the last fire they were to sprinkle it in the river and let the current carry it away." (264). The way the body is disposed of is to ensure there will be nothing left of the *Wendigo*. This demonstrates the spirituality and the carefulness

taken to follow the tradition, as the Cree also believe that if they do not follow this, the Cree people would be at risk of turning into a *Wendigo* themselves.

Traditionally, there also has to be a particular person who kills the *Wendigo*. This person is believed to have the power to rid the group of the evil the *Wendigo* brings. Niska and Xavier are both believed to have that power as they are descended from a long line of *Wendigo* killers (pg __). This makes them key figures in the health of a group and its members, the Cree tribes in northern Ontario and the South Ontario Rifler's battalion, respectively. Also, this commonality between them allows Niska to understand the sickness Xavier is suffering from after he returns, and her experience as a medicine woman allows her to cure his sickness, saving his life. Niska constructs a *matatosowin* or sweat lodge for Xavier, which gives him an environment to converse with Elijah's spirit and find the forgiveness he needs. She knows that to restore balance between his physical self and spiritual self, he needs a sweat lodge, as she often needs one herself to connect with the spirit of the Lynx to find her direction in life again. It is therefore their role as *wendigo* killers that bond Niska and Xavier more deeply than just an aunt and nephew, but make each other one of the most important people in their lives and give them the ability to understand and save one another.

In *Whale Rider*, Koro's beliefs in tradition reflect aspects of Maori culture. For example, he recognizes that his community has strayed from their culture and is no longer as unified as it once was. As a result, he tries to restore these values in the community. The people's indifference toward the community is shown by the younger generation's eagerness to leave. When Pai asks Hemi where he would even go if he wanted to leave, he replies, "Wherever. Get outta this dump." This highlights his negative sentiment toward his origins. These members of the community view it as a "dump" because of their relative seclusion and lack of opportunity outside of a traditional life.

Koro explains the importance of unity and staying together in the motor boat scene. He says to Pai that they must "Weave together the threads of Paikea so that our line remains strong," and that "Each one of those threads is one of your ancestors... all joined together and strong... all the way back to that whale of yours". He references that the rope's strength is drawn from each individual thread's contribution, which reflects the Maori's communal and cooperative values. He wishes to keep "the line strong" by retaining culture within the community. He attempts to rejuvenate loyalty to culture by teaching the boys how to use *Taiahas* and looking for a strong, male leader, even if he was not a direct descendant of Paikea.

In *Whale Rider*, Koro's beliefs in tradition reflect aspects of Maori culture. He recognizes that his community has strayed from its culture, and is no longer anchored in its values. As a result, he tries to restore these values, especially those of unity, in the community. The people's indifference toward the community is shown by the younger generation's eagerness to leave. Firstly, when Paikea's father actually leaves to Europe, starting over without his family and friends. Secondly, in a conversation between Paikea and Hemi. She asks him where he would even go if he wanted to leave, to which he replies "Wherever. Get outta this dump," which highlights his negative sentiment toward his origins. These members of the community view it as a "dump" because of their seclusion and lack of opportunity outside of traditional life. Being away from the mainland, Paikea's father wanted to explore and experience other places, without his family. This also highlights his deviation from the culture, as it believes in unity.

Koro explains the importance of unity and staying together in the motor boat scene. He says that they must “Weave together the threads of Paikea so that our line remains strong,” and that “Each one of those threads is one of your ancestors... all joined together and strong... all the way back to that whale of yours”. He references that the rope’s strength is drawn from each individual thread’s contribution, which reflects the Maori’s communal and cooperative values. Similar to the rope, each member of the community has to support others and do their share to keep the community as a whole strong. He wishes to keep “the line strong” by retaining culture within the community. He attempts to rejuvenate loyalty to his culture by teaching the boys how to use *Taiahas* and looking for a strong, male leader to lead the tribe.

The leader of the village needed to fulfill many roles and qualities. Koro wanted the leader to be knowledgeable in their culture, tenacious, and preferably a direct male descendant of Paikea. He shows that he values cultural interest when he teaches the boys how to use a *Taiaha*, a traditional Maori weapon, and teaches them traditional chants. He shows he values tenacity and action when he throws his whale tooth necklace into the ocean, and asks the boys to retrieve it. As the water is deep and the tooth sinks quickly, the boys would need to focus completely in retrieving it and use all of their physical strength. The criterion of lineage was not able to be fulfilled, but we see its importance in the opening scene, where Koro’s first words are “Where is the boy?” which show his value in having a male leader. These three criteria reflect different values in Maori culture. They value a knowledge of their own culture, as it shows a knowledge of traditional principles. They value grit, as the leader must be strong, and they value lineage, as it reminds them of their origin.

Linguistic anthropology is the second branch of anthropology that will be discussed. Linguistic anthropology studies the role of language in the social lives of individuals as well as communities. It explores how language shapes communication and how it plays a vital role in social identity, group membership, and establishing cultural beliefs and ideologies.

Language is an important part of the Maori culture. The chants, songs, and dances the Maori use allow them to express themselves. They do so to feel more connected to their ancestors and to express celebration, grief, support, or protest. *Waiata*, which are the songs and chants, express emotion and tell ancient stories. As an oral culture, this is how the majority of Maori knowledge has been preserved. This is the type of chant Pai sings during her school concert in *Whale Rider*. *Waiatas* were integral in *Whale Rider* as they were an aspect of their culture they have been able to preserve.

Language is a way the Maori preserve their culture. In *Whale Rider*, the Maori do the *haka*, a traditional war dance with loud chanting, hand movements, foot stamping, and thigh slapping. Throughout the beginning of the film, Pai’s grandfather, Koro, is desperately trying to find a male successor as his only descendant is a female and people have been drifting away from the Maori culture. He teaches the young village boys the *haka*. This is because passing down the *haka* is a way to preserve the Maori culture and teach the cultural knowledge that few others possess in the film. The *haka* was historically performed in battle and was used to call upon the war god to help them win their battle. It was used to scare the opponent with facial expressions called the *pūkana*, such as bulging their eyes or poking out their tongues. The Maori expressed their thoughts with sounds made using their tongues, and someone

with an exaggerated tongue is considered to have mastered their words and thoughts. People with gifted tongues passed down the stories, chants and songs of the *haka* to the next generation, so that the Maori culture would be preserved.

Language is also used to bring the community together. Because the purpose of the *haka* evolved, it became a way for communities to come together, ultimately becoming a symbol of community and strength. An example of this is when the people gather together at the end of the film to do the *haka*, while Pai and the others row the boat. This scene shows the Maori community coming together and their strength after finding a new leader.

The Maori use language to find guidance and feel connected to their ancestors. An example is the *Karakia*, the chants of Maori ritual, using traditional language, symbols, and structures. *Karakia* is used to become one with the *atua*, one with the ancestors and one with the events of the past. The Maori recited *Karakia* for guidance and protection. There are multiple examples of this in *Whale Rider*. When Paiea's whale is dying, Koro recites a *Karakia* to try to get the whale to turn back into the water. This highlights how the Maori use the *Karakia* in situations where they need help, showing how important language is in Maori culture.

Language is a significant part of the Maori culture in *Whale Rider*. It plays a role in expressing emotion, preserving culture, bringing the community together, and for guidance.

In *Three Day Road*, language is also an integral aspect of Cree culture. Language acts as correspondence between the Cree characters in the novel, and is the basis on how they communicate different ideas and commands.

The Cree use various different phrases and words that have symbolic meanings traditional to their culture. Their language is used as a way to express and reinforce their culture for generations. For example, a common term among many Cree, is *Wemistikoshiw*, which is how they refer to western or 'white' individuals. Some other popular terms within the Cree culture include: *Hookimaw*, which refers to a shaman or spiritual leader of a clan, *Wendigo*, which refers to a cannibal or evil spirit that exists in the bush, *Manitou*, someone with power over nature or any spirit, *Awawatuk*, the Cree word for a hunter, and *Askihkan*, the Cree word for a moss hut. These terms, along with other various expressions are used as a means of communication and correspondence between Cree individuals. The use of the Cree terms and phrases are vital in maintaining their shared patterns of beliefs, behavior, values, and knowledge.

Language is also tremendously used as a way to shape the personal experiences of both Xavier and Elijah, the two main characters in *Three Day Road*. More specifically, Xavier and Elijah's knowledge of language hugely impacts their individual experiences during their time at the war. Their language played a powerful role in how they were able to convey their own thoughts or feelings. In the novel, it is evident that Elijah knows more English than Xavier, which makes it much easier for him to communicate and relate with the other soldiers, as well as the sergeants and lieutenants in his company. For example, Elijah is seen talking to Thompson in a British accent when he says, "Jolly good night for a little snooping, eh, Thompson?" (137). Xavier comments on how Elijah "began talking this way to get the others to laugh, but he likes it now. Makes him feel respectable" (137). This symbolizes how it is easy for Elijah to gratify corporal Thompson using his knowledge of the English language. Elijah has the power to use language for his own advantage and gain. In other words, language plays a critical role in Elijah's experiences during the war, as they influence how he acts when with Xavier versus the other members of

his company. Also, linguistics as a whole is influenced by the language that people use. The languages that Elijah chooses to express in specific situations, is extremely powerful, as it elicits his own feelings, moods, information, ideas, and experiences. For Xavier, language undoubtedly has a very important social purpose. As a young boy, Xavier, leaves the residential school at an earlier age than Elijah and since his primary language growing up was Cree, his English skills are weaker compared to Elijah's. This drawback makes it more challenging for Xavier to be accepted and to be able to communicate within his fellow soldiers. For example, at a drinking house, Elijah and Xavier are having a conversation with a few Frenchmen, when Elijah mentions that he and Xavier are both Indians from the North, however Xavier, "doesn't speak much English" (203). One of the men then asks Elijah if Xavier speaks French, and Elijah simply shakes his head and replies by saying that Xavier is "a heathen, speaks his own tongue fluently, and nothing else" (203). This situation demonstrates how Xavier is excluded from the social interaction as he is fluent in a language that was neither English, nor French. Language undeniably shapes the communication between Xavier and the others, and clearly plays a vital role in Xavier's social identity in his company.

Language is inherent to the expression of culture. In *Three Day Road*, the Cree language is used as a means of communicating values, beliefs and customs. Their language has an important social function as it fosters feelings of group identity and solidarity. It is the way their culture, traditions, and shared values are conveyed and preserved. For example, although Xavier's short period of time at the residential school had an immense impact on him, Niska is still able to raise him with the Cree language and thus pass down her culture and language to the next generation. By doing this, Xavier is able to use his native tongue as a means of carrying his culture with him during the war. For example, on a cold night in an old farmhouse, Xavier mentions how he is "still uncomfortable with the language of the wemistikoshiw" (13), as "it is spoken through the nose and hurts [Xavier's] mouth to try and mimic the silly sound of it" (13). His comment exemplifies how he doesn't enjoy speaking like a western person, demonstrating his commitment to the native tongue that he grew up with. This showcases the deep care that Xavier has for the Cree language as well as his cultural beliefs.

Language is not the only difference between Elijah and Xavier. Throughout *Three Day Road*, Joseph Boyden emphasizes the strong connection Xavier has with his Cree culture. It is repeatedly shown that Elijah lacks this connection, and this is one of the biggest differences between the two friends. While Xavier grew up in the bush with Niska, learning the Cree ways and beliefs, Elijah spent most of his childhood in the residential school, where he was abused by the nuns. Therefore, he did not learn what it means to be loved, nor proper human morals. The effects of their different upbringings become apparent when they go to war.

For example, during one of the trench raids the Canadians conduct, Xavier is especially nervous. He prays to the *Gitchi Manitou*, the supernatural power in Cree culture, and whispers Niska's name over and over, as if to protect himself (237). In this situation Xavier relies more on his Cree beliefs than his belief in his ability to shoot the enemy if in danger. This showcases how Xavier most values his culture and his family as opposed to his pride. On the other hand, Elijah does not believe in the *Gitchi Manitou*. When Elijah laughs at Xavier when he calls the blackening of their faces in preparation for a raid a "smudging ceremony", Xavier remarks, "No Indian religion for him. The only Indian Elijah wants to be is the Indian who knows how to hide and hunt" (137). This shows how Elijah values the practical side of the Cree ways much more than the spiritual side. He thinks in this way because he has grown up surrounded

by nuns and a western culture that disrespects the Cree culture. Subconsciously, Elijah has adopted this mindset that the Cree tradition and spirituality are not respectable, although he does manage to retain his love of the practical side of the Cree culture as he eventually joins Xavier and Niska in the bush. This exemplifies that culture is something that one gains through experience and through the influence of the surrounding people and their ideologies, even if one does not make an effort to conform to that culture. Elijah also takes pride in his “Indian” hunting skills, and believes in his abilities to kill men, because this is what is most important to him. He then gains an air of arrogance after he has seen a lot of action, stating that killing is “in [his] blood” (75). Elijah enjoys the recognition he gets for killing men and it motivates him to kill more. The idea that hunting and killing is a point of pride and should be enjoyed that Elijah believes in is a western idea. This showcases how it is the influence of the western culture that Elijah grew up with that leads him to kill more than is necessary, and had Elijah followed the cultural beliefs of the Cree, it is unlikely he would be so invested in killing.

Also, Xavier realizes that even in a war, where the goal is to kill the opposing side, there is a difference between killing for survival and killing excessively; Elijah, however, never makes this differentiation and argues with Xavier on the subject. Near the end of the war, Xavier gets mad when Elijah asks him to divine the location of a Hun, and tells him that it is different from doing so with a moose. Elijah, however, is a picture of innocence: ““What is the difference?” Elijah asks. ““To hunt is to hunt”” (320). The mindset that all killing is the same and required leads to Elijah’s lack of remorse for the lives he takes; he unapologetically enjoys killing, and revels in it. By contrast, Xavier understands the necessity of killing at times when his, or others’ lives are in danger. He, however, finds killing horrid. This is shown when Elijah makes his first sniper kill. Xavier describes the experience: ““The image of the soldier’s head exploding makes my stomach churn. I retch a little and spit up bile from my empty stomach, my throat burning and the acrid smell of my own insides making me retch a bit more”” (88). This showcases how Xavier does not want to kill other humans. This is because one of the most fundamental aspects of the Cree belief is that one should only hunt out of the necessity to survive and to use every part of that animal. Therefore, killing men and leaving their corpses to rot goes against what Xavier has learnt and practiced all his life, making him more against the idea of killing, unlike Elijah.

If Xavier had grown up in the residential school like Elijah and did not have deep roots in the Cree culture, it is likely he would not have survived the war and ended up like Elijah. Xavier, however, survives because his Cree beliefs keep him morally humane. It is therefore his culture that saves Xavier, and the lack of culture that causes Elijah to meet his demise.

In both *Three Day Road* and *Whale Rider*, culture and language are significant aspects of the plot and character development. By applying an anthropological lens, many of the reasons behind the characters’ actions become clear. Although both of the works are centered around a particular culture, Cree or Maori, and their respective languages, the anthropological lens might also be applied to works without as clear of a culture. This is because culture is tied with the beliefs and lived experience of any person or character.

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