

Literary Lens Analysis - Rites of Passage/Coming of Age

Liliana Mahave, Trinity Hsu, Hanas Shi, Julia O'Neil, and Tooba Rahim

Coming of age is the journey a character goes on to transition into adulthood. The character is initially unaware about the world around them, but their experiences help them learn more about society and figure out their own place in it as the story progresses. This idea is found in both Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road* and Niki Caro's *Whale Rider*. The growth of the characters is a strong focus in both stories.

Rites of passages are important events in someone's life which contribute to a person's coming of age and maturity. In the novel *Three Day Road* by Joseph Boyden, and movie *Whale Rider* there are many rites of passages for the characters Niska, Elijah, and Xavier and Pai which symbolise an emergence and coming of age for their character and identity.

As a young girl, Niska experiences two significant coming of age moments which change her purpose and identity. The first occasion which shapes her maturity is when she witnesses her father kill Mika's wife and child who are windigo. Niska explains how watching the killing has affected her childhood: "I had been witnessed to brutal deeds that no child should see"(p.46). She realizes her loss of innocence as she is only a young girl who has watched a killing happen right before her. Her maturity is also showcased as she understands she too is a windigo killer, like her father and will have to do the same in the future. The second incident which contributes to Niska's discovery of purpose and identity is when she gets her period after witnessing the killing, in which she says: "More than ever I kept to myself now, too old to play with the children, too young to be accepted by the adults"(p.46). Her realization portrays the difficulty of the transition she must accept as she enters into womanhood. Experiencing these realizations and changes so suddenly is difficult for Niska as she now views her life and purpose in a different way. The struggles which Niska's maturity brings showcase the shift she abruptly experiences from an innocent child to an adolescent who has a future to fulfill.

Niska's relationship with the Frenchman is also a notable period in her life as it recognizes the conflicts which come along with young love. In the early stages of her relationship, Niska explains the strong emotions she feels as an adolescent whilst pursuing the Frenchman: "I was young and the emotions of the young are as strong a pull as the arctic tides"(p.65). This illustrates how her young age causes her hunger for freedom and new experiences regardless of the circumstances she may be in. Niska never truly loves the Frenchman as one would in a romantic relationship but allows the strong emotions which came with her age to blind her. When Niska finally realizes the Frenchman's intentions, her outlook on love and relationships have now been altered forever due to the brutal and explicit comments which he eventually speaks to her. Her perception of young love and relationships will never be the same as her naive emotions distracts her from the truth.

Xavier and Elijah's first sniper kill is a significant moment in their lives as it showcases their development from the prologue. The prologue at the beginning of the novel portrays the two boys' innocence as they are hesitant to kill the marten they have caught. At first, they are both reluctant to slaughter the marten but then reassure themselves by saying: "We had to do it"(p.2). Xavier and Elijah's hesitation depicts their innocence because it is their first time hunting and he is afraid to kill. Their first hunt contrasts with their first sniper kill whilst in the

war as the two young men are now less hesitant and afraid of the act of killing. These two moments highlight how they've gone from surviving by hunting animals to then hunting men in order to survive in the war. The conflict which they face begins to shape the two character's personalities in the rest of the novel.

A coming of age moment for the character Pai in the movie *Whale Rider* is when she realizes she is the leader of her people. At the beginning of the movie Pai is continuously looked down upon by her grandfather Koro, as she is not the strong male leader of their people he had hoped for. Regardless of her grandfather's beliefs she continues to try to fulfill the traits of the whale rider by learning how to use the taiaha (fighting stick) and calling out to the whales. Although she believes that she can be the leader her people need, the constant disapproval from her grandfather causes her to ultimately doubt her own capability of acquiring the skills and traits to do so. Later on in the movie, when she discovers washed up whales on the beach she realizes she was the one who called them the previous night which means she is the whale rider of her people. Her realization represents her maturity as she realizes she is capable of being a strong leader regardless of her gender. The discovery leads her to find her purpose and identity in her community.

Conflict is the second stage in the coming of age metamorphosis. The shell stage, which is the first stage, is the character's initial, usually naive, state. The conflict stage occurs when the character comes into contact with forces that they must overcome in order to reach an epiphany, the next stage in coming of age. The antagonizing forces can be external or internal.

Xavier experiences a strong internal conflict- he feels unease and disgust over killing in the war, especially towards Elijah's kills. Initially, when he is little, he is in a shell state and doesn't experience this conflict as he only kills what he needs to, without wasting. This stage of his life is shown in the prologue, as he tells Elijah "We had to do it" (p. 2) after killing a marten. It is also noted that he is careful not to damage the fur, as he wants to show Niska that he didn't waste anything. However, when he goes to war, he experiences and witnesses atrocities as well as human suffering for the first time. This is when he first begins to feel conflicted over the morality of war, Elijah's actions, and his own actions. When he sees Elijah shoot somebody in the head (p. 88), Xavier throws up, which shows his disgust and dislike of killing. As the war goes on and Elijah becomes more obsessed with killing, Xavier's unease grows. At the very beginning, on Xavier's first time on the front, Elijah says: "Now we get to hunt" (p. 15). Xavier doesn't say anything, which shows he is still tolerant of Elijah's behaviour. However, as Xavier sees more deaths of people he cares about, specifically Gilberto and Graves, he says that "...this freedom to kill, is a choice I no longer want" (p. 283), suggesting he is disillusioned with the war and is sick of killing. The next time Elijah and Xavier come into conflict (on p. 320), Elijah asks Xavier to use a German shoulder bone to divine for him, saying that "To hunt is to hunt", implying that he sees the Germans as prey, and saying the killing feeds him. Xavier tells him that he hunts for sustenance, refuting Elijah's statement. The quote "We all fight on two fronts: one facing the enemy, the other facing what we do to the enemy" (p. 326) exemplifies his struggle with coming to terms with the atrocities he has committed. This conflict pushes him to grow as a character and come to the epiphany that he should "do what he has to" prompted by Niska's letter, ending with him killing Elijah.

The second example, of external forces, is the rampant racism and overlooking that Xavier experiences. Since Xavier lives with his aunt, he is sheltered from the views of others

towards Indigenous peoples. When he goes on the train in Toronto with Elijah, he is surprised to be put in a separate car for "Indians only". This is the start of his conflict, when he moves out of the shell stage. He gets looked over by his squad mates and generals in favour of Elijah, although Xavier is a better shot than he is, exemplified by McCaan telling Xavier to shovel dirt because he doesn't want the snipers to become arrogant. However, he doesn't tell Elijah to do the same, proving that the squadron treats Elijah as though he is special, overlooking Xavier. Xavier realizes that they don't see he is a better shot than Elijah. This eventually propels him to prove himself during two occasions during the novel. The first time is during a competition against another squad, the 48th highlanders when he beats Elijah and the highlanders' sniper during a shooting competition (p.105), the other during a casual competition against Elijah on p. 244. After winning both competitions, Xavier feels fulfilled, deciding he won't let them forget who he is and proving that he is no longer a 'useless bush Indian'.

The epiphany is the stage in which the character undergoes a critical realization. This realization normally provides relief to a certain emotion that the character is feeling. Although there is usually one main such moment in a story, a character can experience several revolutionary moments throughout the plot.

In *Three Day Road*, Xavier comes upon constant epiphanies as he gradually realizes the ugly truths of war and its effects on the people around him. From when he realizes that he can take another man's life at the time of his first kill, to when he realizes that he is going to die when he runs out of morphine, this book is riddled with instances of self-growth and realization. However, the most significant epiphany is when he realizes that Elijah, his best friend of so many years, has spiraled into insanity from the effects of war and addiction to morphine. Xavier's epiphany that Elijah's character has become immoral is paired with the realization that he must take action on the issue and end Elijah's life to clear his conscience. Although this realization takes place over a long period of time, as he becomes more and more suspicious of Elijah's behaviors, there is one more noticeable moment when this speculation is confirmed. In the *hero* chapter, Xavier starts acknowledging Elijah's immorality and says that "Sometimes [he] finds himself hoping that Elijah... will be killed in action"(p.348). Xavier mentions, "To me he is mad. I am the only one now to know Elijah's secrets, and Elijah has turned himself into something invisible, something inhuman. Sometimes, though, I feel as though I'm going mad too" (p.348). This moment captures when Xavier finally confirms that Elijah has transformed into an immoral person. Highlighting the notion that he is inhuman, he refers to Elijah as "something", rather than "someone". He realizes now how his conscience would be cleared if Elijah were gone. This, along with the realization that he too has been made mad by the war, heavily foreshadows the catharsis to come, when the fight occurs between the two characters a few pages later.

Elijah has his own epiphany when he goes up in the airplane and realizes that he is capable of dying in action. On p. 331, Joseph Boyden writes, "[Elijah is] not thought about his own death before this, other than in the abstract, even in the most intense bombings.... Elijah realizes now, something has changed" (331).

This is an important moment in Elijah's character development, as it pinpoints a crucial moment as he descends into insanity and his obsession with death. After this realization, he becomes even more consumed by killing and skinning German soldiers, feeding into his corrupt and morbid fascination with death.

In *Whale Rider*, Paikea, at the mere age of twelve, makes several realizations about the society in which she lives, ultimately leading to her emergence as the leader of her people. One notable epiphany is when Paikea is in the car to move in with her father and she makes the abrupt realization that she must go back to living with her grandparents and pursue her connection with the whale. Her sudden comprehension of purpose and duty is when Pai first understands her place in her community and in the world, an epiphany that determines the rest of her future.

Catharsis is the stage when there's a sudden release of emotion that results in renewal. This stage allows characters to purge the old understanding of the world and solves the confusion created in the conflicts. There can be several catharses during the coming of age, for there are different barriers the character has to overcome before emergence.

A catharsis for Xavier in *Three Day Road* is when Elijah is translating for Xavier when the officers are questioning him about Xavier leaving their battalion without permission. During this incident, Xavier has released the emotions that he has been suppressing inside him. From the beginning of his coming of age process, Xavier is holding back his emotions and thoughts due to the language barrier he struggles with. He lacks the strong desire for victory, honor, and pride which Elijah has. Moreover, his introverted personality made him stay silent when misunderstood or blamed. Thus, speaking with a bad attitude, swearing, and cursing might be an action very common for Elijah or the other privates, but for Xavier, it's crossing the line, and acting out of the ordinary.

Xavier's emotion liberates because the two people he trusts the most betraying him. When he is all hyped up and filled with excitement to meet Lisette again, Lisette says: "I am with another. He is upstairs" (p. 252), and extinguishes all of Xavier's dreams. However, at this point, Xavier is only filled with bewilderment and refuses to face the truth, and is forced to leave under the watch of the officer with Lisette. On the way back, he is half-conscious of the world around him, for he is still going over the details of what just happened. When he realizes what he lost, which is one of his few psychological supports - Lisette, he starts to feel that there's nothing more he could lose. Therefore, on the way to his dugout, he ignores all the looks from other privates. When Elijah told Xavier the truth that Lisette was paid to sleep with him, Elijah provides an opportunity for Xavier to let his emotions out. Xavier did not explode earlier because he didn't sort out everything that just happened, and he didn't have anyone to vent his emotions to. Now that he is going to release his emotions, he has to pick between Elijah and bastard Breech. Significantly, his first choice will be bastard Breech. Although Elijah has betrayed Xavier, Xavier can still make rational decisions that he will have to deal with the officers first, then Elijah. While not offending Breech, but still releasing his emotions, Xavier swears in his native tongue. During this catharsis, Xavier sees more of the ugly side of the world and is reminded of his vulnerability. This is indicated when Elijah sweeps down the swallow nest from the ceiling for Xavier. They are forced to follow instructions to satisfy the officers.

Another example of catharsis for Xavier is when he howls at his vulnerability to explain to the others that he is not Elijah and the fact that he killed Elijah. This is a release of emotions, for Elijah's ID forces him to face the images of Elijah's body in the crater. It brought him back to the memories of Elijah's death and taking objects out of Elijah's pockets. "A moan begins deep in my chest, finds something inside that helps it grow until it is a cry, and then finally a howl." (p. 375) This passage described Xavier's process of change in emotions. A moan is like pleading

to *Gitchi Manitou* to help him out of the situation he is in. He wants to escape because he did something that's against his will, but he had to for his morality. The cry that turned into a howl is the sadness for his friend's death. The howl, at last, is Xavier's struggle for his inability to do anything with his language and physical barriers. The renewal for this catharsis comes days after when he accepts his mistaken identity as Elijah.

Emergence is the final stage of a character's metamorphosis. It is the conclusion of a coming of age story as it depicts the character with a newfound understanding of the world around them. This stage is notable in both *Three Day Road* and *Whale Rider*.

After experiencing many scarring situations during childhood, such as going to residential school and pursuing the Frenchman, Niska decides that it would be better off for her to live in the bush, away from *wemistikoshiw* culture and all the hardships it has caused her. She becomes a woman who is aware of the assimilation of First Nations people, but her character development does not complete until she begins raising Xavier. Initially, she plans to rescue him from residential school solely out of her "loneliness combined with [her] fear" (p. 216). Her rather selfish reasons become more caring as she assumes a parental role for Xavier, teaching him the ways of the Cree, as well as about her powers.

Another example of emergence can also be found as the reader follows Xavier in *Three Day Road*. The reader follows the Cree soldier as he endures war and the aftermath of his time there. True emergence occurs near the end of the novel, when Xavier acknowledges Elijah's descent into madness and the actions that must be taken to prevent him from going any further. Coming from a line of *windigo* killers, he realizes that he has to end his best friend's life, which becomes a significant source of conflict. When he does, he is able to let go of the emotional burdens Elijah had given him. A spiritual emergence occurs when Niska heals him in the last chapter. She rids him of his pain from the war, allowing him to rest and continue his life, presumably with a clear conscience. Her healing represents the idea moving on from events in one's childhood, as it is a gateway into Xavier's more peaceful future.

While *Whale Rider*'s Paikea is comparatively younger than the characters in *Three Day Road*, she still has an emergence by the end of the film. Through persistence and determination, Paikea overcomes adversities to follow in her ancestors' footsteps and lead her people. She defies gender expectations and gains the respect of her grandfather as well as the other members of her tribe. She knows much more about her tribe's society, as well as the world's overall reservations regarding breaking gender barriers, but is able to reach her goals regardless of those complications.

Humans tend to go through moments that alter their perception or mindset as they grow up. The coming of age process proves to be complex, as each element develops the character's evolution in different but equally important ways, crucial to one's development into adulthood. The universal and crucial experience of growth and change is what makes the lens important to analyze.