

Three Day Road



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JOSEPH BOYDEN

Joseph Boyden was born the ninth of eleven children to Blanche Gosling and Raymond Boyden, a highly decorated medical officer from World War II. Boyden grew up outside Toronto, Canada, and went to Brebeuf College School, a Catholic all-boys academy in Toronto. He attended York University in Ontario, where he studied Humanities, and later earned a Master of Fine Arts degree at the University of New Orleans in Louisiana in 1995. Boyden worked as a professor in the Aboriginal Student Program at Northern College in Ontario and taught at the University of New Orleans and the University of British Columbia. In 2006, he published his first novel, *Three Day Road*, to popular and critical acclaim and wrote his second novel, *Through the Black Spruce*, in 2008. Most of Boyden's writing focuses on First Nations culture and people, and Boyden himself claims to be of Métis heritage, meaning he is of mixed Indigenous and Euro-American ancestry. Boyden received the McNally Robinson Aboriginal Book of the Year Award in 2005 for *Three Day Road*, an honor that is bestowed upon Indigenous Canadian writers and includes a \$5,000 prize. He became embroiled in controversy in 2016 when a national news outlet claimed no Indigenous ancestors could be found in Boyden's family tree, which is mostly Scottish and Irish. Several Indigenous writers and activists spoke out against Boyden and his seemingly false claims to First Nations heritage, especially considering his acceptance of the McNally Robinson Award, an honor reserved for Indigenous writers only. Boyden maintains his Métis heritage and claims to be of mixed Ojibway and Nipmuc blood. He keeps homes in both Louisiana and Ontario, where he lives with his wife and fellow writer, Amanda Boyden.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Three Day Road is loosely based on Francis Pegahmagahow, famously known as "Peggy," an indigenous Canadian World War I hero. Boyden mentions Peggy by name in the novel, and Elijah is constantly trying to live up to Peggy's untouchable sniping record. The real-life Peggy was a First Nations soldier of the caribou clan who was awarded the MM, or Military Medal—a decoration given to the British Army and other members of the armed forces for bravery in battle—three times during his illustrious military career. Elijah too is awarded the MM in *Three Day Road* for bravery in the trenches of France. Francis Pegahmagahow was the most effective sniper during World War I and is credited with 378 confirmed German kills. He was wounded in battle and returned home to Canada, where he fathered six children and became chief of the Wasauksing First

Nation, just as Elijah dreams of doing in the novel. Peggy died in 1952 at the age of 61. In 2016 on National Aboriginal Day, a bronze statue of Peggy was unveiled in Parry Sound, Canada, where Peggy lived and died.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

As a piece of First Nations literature, which generally includes works written by First Nations, Métis, and Inuit writers, *Three Day Road* focuses on the Indigenous people of Northern Canada. Other notable works of First Nations literature includes [Indian Horse](#) by Richard Wagamese, a member of the Wabaseemong First Nation, which focuses on a young Ojibway boy in Northwestern Ontario. Cree writer Rosanna Deerchild's book of poetry, *Calling Down the Sky*, tells the story of Deerchild's mother and explores the historical trauma caused by residential schools, and *Legacy*, by Waubgeshig Rice of the Wasauksing First Nation, interrogates the disproportionate violence and injustices perpetrated against Indigenous women. Boyden names Louise Erdrich, a Native American novelist and poet from the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians widely known for her novels [Love Medicine](#) and [The Round House](#), as a major influence on his writing, as well as Beat writer Jack Kerouac and his famous novel [On the Road](#). *Three Day Road* takes place during World War I, and Boyden frequently notes the beauty of nature that carries on despite the carnage and violence of war. Similar themes of war and nature are reflected in Sebastian Faulks's [Birdsong](#) and Ernest Hemingway's [A Farewell to Arms](#).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Three Day Road*
- **When Written:** 2005
- **Where Written:** Ontario, Canada
- **When Published:** 2005
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary, Postmodernism
- **Genre:** Historical Fiction, First Nations Fiction
- **Setting:** Northern Canada and France during World War I
- **Climax:** Elijah "goes *windigo*" during the War and Xavier is forced to kill him
- **Antagonist:** Elijah
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

A technical knockout. Joseph Boyden is not only an award-winning novelist and professor of literature; he also holds a black belt in American Kickboxing.

Bidding war. Even though *Three Day Road* was Boyden's first novel, several publishers fought to publish it. The ensuing bidding war drove the final price of the novel well into the six figures, a sum that is nearly unheard of for a first novel.



PLOT SUMMARY

Niska hides in the woods outside of Moose Factory for days waiting for Elijah Whiskeyjack (her nephew, Xavier's, best friend and the "closest thing" Niska has to a relative), to return home from World War I. Elijah and Xavier enlisted in the war together, and while Niska received word that Xavier was killed in battle, Elijah will be returning on the train today. Niska comes to Moose Factory to take Elijah home to the bush. As Cree Indians, Niska raised Xavier, and often Elijah too, in "the old way," away from Moose Factory and the *wemistikoshiw* (European people). Niska is not used to seeing so many *wemistikoshiw* in one place, and as she walks down the street, they point and stare at the "Indian animal straight out of the bush."

When the train arrives in Moose Factory, Elijah is not onboard. Instead, Niska's nephew, Xavier, steps off the train. He has been badly injured in the war, and his left leg has been amputated. As Xavier see Niska, he falls to the ground. "I was told you were dead, Auntie," he says. Niska had sent Xavier a letter during the war, but she had to dictate her words through Joseph Netmaker, a local Cree man, and Joseph's poor English mistakenly claimed that Niska had died. Niska is relieved; the nephew she thought was dead is alive and has home from the war, and she quickly shows him to her waiting canoe. The bush is a three-day journey down the river, then they will be home.

Niska can see that Xavier isn't well. Fever and "something far worse" are "consuming" him, and Niska fears he has come home only to die. Xavier suffers from intense pain, both physical and emotional, and he frequently injects himself with morphine. He is helplessly addicted to the *wemistikoshiw* medicine, and soon he will run out. Xavier closes his eyes and lets the morphine take him back to the French trenches, where German bullets and bombs whiz by his head. He is back in his dugout with Elijah— "Where is Elijah now?" Xavier wonders—and Sergeant McCaan. Sean Patrick, a fellow Canadian soldier and sniper, is at his post, and his spotter, Grey Eyes, stands nearby. Xavier can tell that Grey Eyes has taken some of the *wemisikoshiw's* morphine, and his eyes look "glassy" and distant. Suddenly, Sean Patrick is hit in the throat by a and there is blood and chaos everywhere.

Niska's father often told her stories when she was sick or scared as a child, so Niska turns to storytelling to save Xavier. She begins to tell him the stories of their ancestors, and of Niska's father long before Xavier was born. Niska's father was the clan's hookimaw (spiritual leader) and had come from "a

long line of windigo killers." When Niska was just a girl, Micah, a young hunter, took his family into the bush to survive during a harsh winter. Game was scarce and the people hungry, and Micah decided to take his chances in the bush. Game was scarce everywhere, however, and Micah and his family continued to stave. Micah's wife saw the tracks of the *windigo* outside their lodge, and the day that Micah froze to death trying to catch fish, the *windigo* visited Micah's wife and threatened to eat her baby if she didn't feed the child. To save her baby, Michah's wife turned to cannibalism, effectively "going *windigo*" by succumbing to the evil spirit. When she returned to camp with Micah's flesh in her pack, Niska's father was forced to kill her and her baby to ensure the spirit of the *windigo* did not infect the entire clan. The *wemistikoshiw* did not understand Niska's father's reason for killing Micah's wife and her baby, and they came to arrest him for murder. He died alone in a cell in Moose Factory's *wemistikoshiw* jail.

As Niska tells Xavier stories, he takes more morphine and lets himself "drift back to the comfort of old friends." He is back in the trenches of the war, and Corporal Thompson is teaching him and Elijah "the art of the sniper." As hunters who live off the land, Elijah and Xavier excel at sniping, and they easily blend into their surroundings and sneak undetected through no man's land. In the dark, Elijah and Xavier are like "owls or wolves," and Lieutenant Breech says it is because their "Indian blood" is "closer to that of an animal than of a man." The racist assumptions of Lieutenant Breech affect Elijah and Xavier for most of their time in the war. He is unnecessarily hard on them and doesn't believe the kills they report from the field. Xavier is further alienated because he doesn't speak English as well as Elijah, and when it is clear that Elijah is better suited for killing and war than Xavier, they begin to drift apart.

On the second day of their three-day journey home, Niska stops to make camp. She encourages Xavier to eat but he refuses. He is slowly dying, and Niska can do little to help, so she continues to "feed him with [her] story." She tells Xavier of a winter long ago, when he was just a boy, when a local "awawatuk from the turtle clan" came to Niska and told her that a member of their clan had gone into the woods several weeks ago and had come back with a pack full of human flesh. The man had gone *windigo*, the *awawatuk* said, "and threatened to destroy" them all. Niska and Xavier go to the *awawatuk's* camp, and Niska kills the *windigo*, just like her father did before her. Niska is "the second to last in a long line of *windigo* killers," but "there is one more," she tells Xavier.

Back in the trenches, Elijah continues to excel as a sniper, and his number of confirmed kills rises. Elijah is consumed by war and killing, and he is slowly going mad. He has even begun scalping his enemies, a trick he learns from the French soldiers, and Xavier is convinced that Elijah is going *windigo*. After Grey Eyes reports Elijah's morphine addition and scalping practices to Lieutenant Breech, Elijah kills both Grey Eyes and Breech to

avoid a court-martial. A violent bombardment consumes their unit, and Elijah and Xavier are trapped near the German trenches. As Xavier scopes out the enemy, Elijah turns on Xavier and tries to strangle him, the war and the *windigo* finally driving him to complete madness. Xavier knows what he must do. He is a *windigo* killer, just like Niska, and he is forced to kill his best friend.

Near the end of Niska and Xavier's trip home, Xavier's morphine supply runs dry, and he begins to withdraw. He shakes uncontrollably and is in horrific pain—it seems as if he will certainly die. Niska begins to construct a *matatosowin*, and when the rocks are hot, she drags Xavier into this sweat lodge. Niska calls on Gitchi Manitou and purifies Xavier with steam and prayer. By the third round in the *matatosowin*, Xavier accepts both responsibility and forgiveness for his role in Elijah's death, and his fever begins to subside. By the time Niska and Xavier crawl out of the *matatosowin* for the last time, Xavier is "calm." A **lynx** looks on with "her yellow eyes" as Niska settles next to Xavier in front of the fire. "By tomorrow," Niska thinks, "we'll be home."

for the last time, Xavier is "breathing calmly." Xavier embraces his Native culture and identity through the sweat lodge ceremony, restoring the balance between his physical and spiritual self and, ostensibly, saving his life. Xavier returns to his indigenous land and culture and begins to heal, which underpins Boyden's central argument of the importance of maintaining Native culture and identity.

Elijah Whiskeyjack – Xavier's best friend and the antagonist in *Three Day Road*. Elijah's mother dies of a "coughing sickness" when Elijah is a small boy, and he goes to live with the nuns at the residential school. There, Elijah learns to speak English "like one of [the nun's] bishops," and becomes friends with Xavier, another young Cree boy who lives on the reserve. Xavier soon goes to live with his aunt, Niska, and Elijah spends much of his childhood with them in the bush. Xavier and Elijah rely on one another. Through Niska, Elijah relies on Xavier to teach him the ways of the bush, and Xavier relies on Elijah to help him navigate the *wemistikoshiw* (European) world. Elijah embraces *wemistikoshiw* culture, and when Xavier and Elijah enlist in the Canadian Army during World War I, Elijah easily adapts to the *wemistikoshiw* military. Elijah excels as a sniper and shows tremendous bravery in the field. He is even recommended for a MM, or Military Medal, an important war decoration given for bravery in battle. But Elijah is consumed by the war and a morphine addiction, and as he surrenders more and more to the *wemistikoshiw* medicine, his life begins to unravel. He begins to scalp his enemies, a tactic he learns from the French soldiers, and he seems to have an insatiable taste for blood. Xavier suspects Elijah is infected by an evil Anishnabe spirit ("going windigo"), and when Grey Eyes reports Elijah's morphine addiction and scalping to Lieutenant Breech, Elijah kills both Grey Eyes and Lieutenant Breech to avoid a court-martial. His unit soon takes heavy fire, and in the confusion, Elijah tries to kill Xavier too. But Xavier is a *windigo* killer, and he strangles Elijah with his Mauser rifle. Elijah conforms to *wemistikoshiw* ways and turns his back on his indigenous culture, and in doing so, isolates himself from his people and invites the evil spirit of the *windigo*. Elijah also reflects the assimilation and whitewashing of Indigenous people by the *wemistikoshiw*. Elijah's Native identity is erased and replaced by a "Christian name" and a British accent.

Niska – Xavier's aunt and Rabbit's sister. Niska is the *hookimaw*, or spiritual leader, of her clan, and she is "the second to last in a long line of windigo killers." After Niska's father dies in a *wemistikoshiw* (European) jail, Niska's mother continues to raise Niska in the traditional way until scarce game forces them onto the Moose Factory reserve. The nuns at the residential school abuse Niska for speaking her Native language and strip her of her Native identity. Niska's mother helps her escape the school, and they return to the bush, where Niska lives for the rest of her life. Niska begins to have "visions" of a young boy on the reserve (her nephew, Xavier) and she



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Xavier Bird – Niska's nephew and Elijah's best friend. Xavier is the protagonist in *Three Day Road*, and he is the personification of Native Cree culture. Xavier's mother abandons him at the residential school when he is just a young boy, and Niska soon brings him to live in the bush. In the Canadian wilderness, Xavier learns the "old ways" of the Anishnabe and lives a life nearly free of *wemistikoshiw* (European) culture and influence. Elijah comes to live in the bush as well, and together they hunt and grow into men. Both Xavier and Elijah enlist in the military during World War I and are sent to the trenches of France. There, Elijah and Xavier excel as snipers, but Xavier doesn't have the stomach for killing. He feels out of place in the military and completely rejects *wemistikoshiw* culture, and he resents the military's efforts to erase his Native identity. As the war rages on, Xavier becomes convinced that Elijah is infected by an evil Anishnabe spirit ("going windigo"), and one day after Elijah kills a fellow soldier and their commanding officer, Elijah tries to kill Xavier as well. Like Niska, Xavier too is a *windigo* killer, and he is forced to kill his best friend to save his own life and stop the evil spirit of the *windigo*. Xavier returns home to Niska, severely wounded with an amputated leg and a crippling morphine addiction, and she paddles him the three-day trip home. As Niska paddles, she nourishes Xavier with her stories, and after he runs out of morphine and it appears as if he will die, Niska constructs a *matatosowin*. Inside this sweat lodge, Xavier accepts responsibility for his role in Elijah's death and finds forgiveness. By the time he crawls out of the *matatosowin*

brings him to live in the bush, teaching him the traditional ways of the Cree people. Xavier's best friend, Elijah (a young Anishnabe boy from the reserve), spends time with them too, and together they are a family. Xavier and Elijah later enlist in World War I, and Niska is told that Xavier has been killed. She goes to Moose Factory to get Elijah when he returns home from the war and is shocked to see "the ghost of her nephew" stepping off the train. Xavier is alive but has been badly wounded and is addicted to morphine. As Niska brings Xavier home to the bush—a three-day trip down the river—he comes closer and closer to death. Niska nourishes Xavier's wounded and exhausted soul with her stories, and on the last day of their journey when it appears that all hope is lost and Xavier will certainly die, Niska builds a *matatosowin* and calls on the spirit of Gitchi Manitou. Niska cleanses and purifies Xavier's soul and body in this sweat lodge, and when they finally climb out, Xavier "breathes calmly." Niska is the embodiment of traditional Cree culture and identity in *Three Day Road*. She resists assimilation and rejects *wemistikoshiw* culture. She remains true to her indigenous identity, and, presumably, she saves Xavier's life by returning him to their Native roots and lifestyle.

Micah's Wife – Micah's wife goes into the bush to survive with her husband and baby during a harsh winter, but game is scarce everywhere, and Micah can't feed them. As they slowly starve in the Canadian bush, Micah's wife finds the tracks of the windigo circling their lodge, and after Micah freezes to death trying to catch a fish, the *windigo* comes to visit Micah's wife. The *windigo* threatens to eat the woman's baby if she does not feed the child by the next day. Micah's wife resorts to cannibalism, and she eats Micah's flesh and feeds it to the baby to save her child from the *windigo*, effectively "going *windigo*" in the process. She goes mad and returns to her village with Micah's flesh in her pack, and Niska's father, the clan's *hookimaw* (spiritual leader), is forced to kill her and her child to prevent the evil spirit of the *windigo* from spreading to the rest of the clan. The character of Micah's wife reflects the importance of community in Anishnabe culture and the dangers of isolation. Micah and his family turn their backs on their tribe and go into the bush alone, leaving themselves wide open for the evil spirit of the *windigo* to enter. Micah's wife also illustrates the lesson that Niska tries to teach Xavier from the time he is a little boy, the same lesson Xavier must remember when he is forced to kill Elijah: "Sometimes one must be sacrificed if all are to survive."

Niska's Father – Father to Niska and Rabbit, and "the last great talker of [their] clan. Niska's father told many stories when Niska was young, and he also served as the clan's *hookimaw* (spiritual leader). Niska's father comes from "a long line of windigo killers," and when Micah's wife and baby "go *windigo*" (are infected by an evil Anishnabe spirit), Niska's father is forced to kill them to save the rest of the clan. Niska sneaks into her father's lodge and watches as he kills Micah's wife and baby, and even though Niska's father knows that she is there, he says

nothing. He knows that Niska will have to kill *windigos* one day too, and he wants her to be prepared. The *wemistikoshiw* (European people) in Moose Factory hear of Niska's father's actions, and they come to the bush to arrest him for murder. He dies alone in the *wemistikoshiw* jail. Niska's father underscores the cultural division between the native Cree and the *wemistikoshiw*. The *wemistikoshiw* do not understand Cree culture or why Niska's father had to kill Micah's wife and baby, and they don't even try. The *wemistikoshiw* wish to see the Indigenous people completely assimilate to white culture, and they force it in any way they can. Niska's father reflects this forced assimilation.

Lieutenant Breech – An officer in the Canadian Army during World War I and part of Xavier and Elijah's unit. The men in Xavier and Elijah's unit refer to Lieutenant Breech as "Bastard Breech," as he is exceedingly unpleasant and racist. He scolds Xavier on the ship on the way to Europe when Xavier is forced to kill two wounded and suffering horses. "You will never become an officer," Breech says to Xavier. Breech claims that Xavier and Elijah's "Indian blood" is "closer to that of an animal than that of a man," and he frequently sends them out ahead of the unit to scout for danger before sending in the other soldiers. He repeatedly refuses to give Elijah and Xavier credit for their kills as snipers because they are Indians and can't be trusted. Lieutenant Breech makes Elijah and Xavier miserable for much of the war, and Elijah later kills Breech by clubbing him over the head when Breech finds out that Elijah has been scalping his kills and is addicted to morphine. Lieutenant Breech represents the widespread racism and hostility that Indigenous people must endure in broader society.

Grey Eyes – A soldier in the Canadian Army and part of Elijah and Xavier's unit. Grey Eyes is addicted to morphine, and he first introduces Elijah to the drug on the ship to Europe to fight in the war. Elijah becomes extremely seasick on the ship, and Grey Eyes injects him with morphine. Grey Eyes works as a spotter for Sean Patrick, a fellow soldier and sniper, and Sean Patrick takes a bullet to the neck because Grey Eyes is high on morphine and not paying attention. Grey Eyes and Elijah spend much time together during the war and have a relationship of "convenience," relying on each other to feed their addiction. Grey Eyes goes missing near the end of the war, but he later comes back and reports Elijah's addiction and habit of scalping his kills to Lieutenant Breech to divert trouble from himself for deserting his unit. Elijah kills Grey Eyes by striking him on the head with a piece of wood right before Elijah also kills Lieutenant Breech.

Niska's Mother – Mother to Niska and Rabbit and grandmother to Xavier. After Niska's father dies, Niska's mother teaches Niska the "old ways" and "the magic deep in the bush that is real." She teaches Niska about medicinal plants and herbs and shows her how to construct a *matatosowin* (sweat lodge). When the *wemistikoshiw* (European) priest comes to

take Niska to the residential school, Niska's mother helps Niska escape and takes her back to the bush. Before Xavier is born, Niska's mother dies of a sudden illness. Niska wraps her mother's body and places her in a tree so her "ahcahk is free."

Micah – A young Cree hunter. Micah takes his wife and baby into the bush to survive during a harsh winter. Game is scarce, however, and Micah and his family continue to starve. Micah becomes "desperate" and tries to catch fish to feed his family but freezes to death sitting on the ice. Micah's wife is visited by the windigo (an evil Anishnabe spirit), and she eats Micah's flesh and feeds it to her baby to save them the *windigo*.

Peggy – An Indigenous soldier in the Canadian Army during World War I. Peggy is an Ojibwe and a sniper, and while he has well over one hundred kills, Peggy's commanding officers will not give him credit because he works alone and doesn't have proof. The disbelief of Peggy's superior officers reflects the widespread racism that Indigenous people are forced to endure throughout the novel, and Elijah and Xavier have similar experiences. Peggy serves as a source of jealousy for Elijah, and while Elijah never meets him, Peggy remains a motivating force in Elijah's own sniping. The character of Peggy is based on real-life World War I hero, Francis Pegahmagahow, a Canadian sniper and member of the First Nations who is generally regarded as the most effective sniper of World War I.

The Wemistikoshiw Trapper – A French trapper. Niska comes across the wemistikoshiw trapper in the woods, and he follows her back to her lodge. They make love and have a longstanding relationship. One night, a local awawatuk (Indigenous hunter) arrives to get Niska's help when a clan member "goes windigo" (is possessed by an evil Anishnabe spirit), and Niska must ask the trapper to leave. The trapper is apparently offended and never comes back, and Niska is forced to go to Moose Factory to find him. She does, and she also finds rumors of "half-French, half-Indian children running around [Moose Factory] that he refuses to claim." In town, the *wemistikoshiw* trapper leads Niska to a church. He seduces her in the church and then turns on Niska, calling her a "heathen Indian." "I took your ahcahk. Do you understand? I fucked your *ahcahk*, your spirit. Do you understand that?" the trapper says to Niska. The trapper strips Niska of her dignity and identity, and she immediately goes back to the bush and prays to the **lynx** to "extinguish" the "source of [her] hurt." The trapper soon goes mad and commits suicide by jumping out a high window.

Corporal Thompson – An officer in the Canadian Army and part of Xavier and Elijah's unit. Thompson is kind to Xavier and Elijah, unlike Lieutenant Breech, and he teaches them all about life in the trenches. Thompson teaches Xavier and Elijah to blacken their faces with charcoal before "going over the top" of the trenches into no man's land—a process that Xavier calls "the wemistikoshiw smudging ceremony"—and he familiarizes them with the different sounds of shellfire and bombs. Thompson is "an excellent teacher, patient and calm." He speaks

very little and instead expects Xavier and Elijah to follow his lead. "He is very much like an Indian in this way," Xavier says. Thompson is wounded twice in battle, and he dies of his injuries near the end of the war.

Sergeant McCaan – An officer in the Canadian Army during World War I, and part of Elijah and Xavier's unit. Like Corporal Thompson, Sergeant McCaan is kind to Elijah and Xavier, and he excuses Elijah's boastful and reckless behavior because he thinks Elijah is a good sniper. McCaan gives Xavier the nickname, X—"X marks the spot on any target [Xavier] wishes to hit"—and he serves as a buffer between Xavier and Elijah and the racist Lieutenant Breech. McCaan dies near the end of the war when he is shot at pointblank range by a German soldier right in front of Xavier.

The Girl/Lisette – A prostitute near Saint-Eloi in France. Elijah tricks Xavier and tells him that Lisette is the daughter of an estaminet owner, and Xavier begins to fall in love with her. Xavier has sex with Lisette one evening, and he spends much of his time trying to figure out a way to get back to her. Of course, Elijah has paid for Lisette's services, but Xavier only discovers this after he deserts his unit to find her and is nearly court-martialed. Elijah's joke is cruel, but Xavier's relationship with Lisette is like Niska's relationship with the wemistikoshiw trapper. Xavier and Niska's existence as windigo killers can be rather lonely—even the old Indian woman tells Niska that "happiness isn't [Niska's] to have"—but nobody can be alone all the time. Thus, Xavier turns to Lisette.

The Old Indian Woman – An old Indian woman who lives in Moose Factory. When Niska goes to Moose Factory to find the wemistikoshiw trapper, the people stare at her in disgust. Women call away their children and men bless themselves and close their doors. Only the old Indian woman is kind to Niska and invites her in. She feeds Niska and gives her brightly colored wemistikoshiw (European) clothes to conceal Niska's awawatuk (Indigenous hunter) identity. "You must watch yourself around here," the old woman says. "Or the same that happened to your father will happen to you." The *wemistikoshiw* in Moose Factory did not understand Niska's father's role as the clan's windigo killer, and he was arrested as a murderer. Niska too is a *windigo* killer, and, according to the old woman, Niska isn't safe in Moose Factory.

Joseph Netmaker – A Cree man living in Moose Factory. Joseph Netmaker grew up in Moose Factory and was forced by the nuns at the residential school to read and write English, so he helps Niska write a letter to Xavier while he is away at war. Joseph's English, however, is poor, and his letter mistakenly claims that Niska is dead. The letter devastates Xavier when it reaches him on the frontlines, and he loses his "desire for survival." Joseph's letter underscores how damaging language can be to Indigenous people and that suggests that language can tear one down as easily as it can build them up.

Francis – A soldier in the French Army during World War I. Elijah meets Francis in a wrecked French town, where Francis tells Elijah about Peggy, an Indian sniper who isn't given credit for his kills because his racist officers didn't believe him. "Avoid what happens to Peggy," Francis says to Elijah. "Do what we do. Collect evidence of your kills. Do what my people taught your people a long time ago. Take the scalp of your enemy as proof. Take a bit of him to feed you." Francis's advice is important because it is reflected in Elijah's madness when he "goes windigo" (is infected by an evil Anishnabe spirit), but it also disrupts popular stereotypes of Indians as uncivilized savages who scalp innocent victims. Here, scalping is directly attributed to the French (the *wemistikoshiw*), not Indigenous people. In this way, it is the French *wemistikoshiw* who are savages, not the Indians.

The Indian – An Ojibwe soldier in the Canadian military during World War I. Elijah and Xavier meet the Indian in a pub in the French village of Lens—the only other Anishnabe they meet during the war—and he reminds them that there are many Anishnabe soldiers in France. "We all want to be warriors again," the Indian says. Through the Indian, Boyden reminds readers of the thousands of Indigenous soldiers who fought for Canada during World War I, history that is often neglected, or erased, through the whitewashing of broader society.

Old Man Ferguson – The proprietor of the trading post in Moose Factory. Ferguson's trading post is a hotbed of local gossip, and he gets all the latest news from the battlefields as well as the names of soldiers from the area who were killed in battle. Niska goes to Ferguson's trading post to get news about Xavier, but Ferguson doesn't want her in the trading post. He calls her a "dirty bush Indian" and a "heathen," and he only agrees to let her stay and listen if she also agrees to supply him with fur for trade. Old Man Ferguson reflects the widespread racism of the *wemistikoshiw* (European people) against Indigenous people in *Three Day Road*.

Rabbit – Niska's sister and Xavier's mother. Rabbit goes to the residential school in Moose Factory and is transformed into Anne. As Anne, Rabbit rejects her Native identity and embraces *wemistikoshiw* (European) culture. She begins to drink *wemistikoshiw* rum and abandons Xavier to the nuns at the residential school when he is just a child.

Colquhoun – An officer in the Canadian military during World War I. Colquhoun is sent to Elijah and Xavier's unit after Sergeant McCaan is killed in battle. Colquhoun doesn't care for Elijah, and he doesn't turn a blind eye to Elijah's behavior the way McCaan did. Colquhoun threatens to "have [Elijah] put up of charges" for disregarding his command.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Gilberto – A soldier in the Canadian Army during World War I. Gilberto is Italian, and Xavier is "fond" of him because Gilberto's

English is poor, just like Xavier's, when he first joins the military. Gilberto is killed near the end of the war.

Sean Patrick – A Canadian sniper in Elijah and Xavier's unit during World War I. Sean Patrick is killed at his sniping post when he is shot by a German sniper because Sean Patrick's spotter, Grey Eyes, is high on morphine.

Driscoll – The medical officer in Elijah's unit. Elijah must go to Driscoll with medical excuses and complaints of pain to supply his morphine addition.

Graves – A Canadian soldier in Elijah and Xavier's unit during World War I.

Smithy – A Canadian sniper in World War I. Smithy is the first person to tell Elijah about Peggy, an Indian sniper with an unbeatable record.

Fat – A Canadian soldier in Elijah and Xavier's unit during World War I.

TERMS

Ahcahk – A Cree word meaning "soul" or "spirit". When **Niska's mother** dies, **Niska** wraps her mother's body and places her high in a tree "so her *ahcahk* is free." By placing her mother in the tree, Niska's mother's spirit can move on to the afterlife with little resistance. The *ahcahk* is central to Indigenous spirituality and identity and is considered sacred by the Anishnabe people. Like most aspects of Indigenous culture and identity, however, the *ahcahk* is not safe from erasure and assimilation at the hands of the *wemistikowshiw*. After Niska and the **wemistikowshiw trapper** have sex in the church in Moose Factory, he turns on her, becoming abusive. "I fucked the heathen Indian out of you in this church," he says. "I took your *ahcahk*. Do you understand? I fucked your *ahcahk*, your spirit. Do you understand that?" The trapper's racist rant at once degrades Niska and strips her of her native identity.

Anishnabe – The Indigenous people of Canada and the United States, including the Cree and Ojibwe people. The Anishnabe speak languages belonging to the Algonquin family, although many are now extinct, which is further proof of the cultural erasure Boyden critiques in *Three Day Road*. All the Indigenous people in the novel are Anishnabe, and the Cree language is represented throughout. Boyden even includes a Cree translation for each of the chapter titles, again highlighting Indigenous culture by making it more visible.

Awawatuk – "Roving bands" of Indigenous hunters who "live in the old way." Both **Niska** and **Xavier** are *awawtuk*, or true "bush Indians," and they live off the land and have very little interaction with the *wemistikowshiw*. *Awawatuk* reject *wemistikowshiw* culture and ways, and as such, they have the "unfair reputation of being thieves and murders." The *awawatuk* refuse to assimilate and are treated with absolute disgust by

the *wemistikowshiw*.

Cree – One of the largest groups of Indigenous people in Canada. **Xavier**, **Elijah**, and **Niska** are Cree.

Gitchi Manitou – Cree for “Great Spirit.” In Anishnabe culture, *Gitchi Manitou* is the Giver of Life and the Creator of all things. Each time **Xavier** is forced to kill during the war, he prays to *Gitchi Manitou* for forgiveness, and when **Niska** constructs a *matatosowin*, she prays to *Gitchi Manitou* for guidance and vision. According to Anishnabe legend, Michilimackinac (an island in Northern Michigan now known as Mackinac Island) is the home of *Gitchi Manitou*.

Hookimaw – The Cree word for “spiritual leader” or “shaman.” **Niska’s father** was the *hookimaw* of their clan, and after his death, **Niska** is as well. The *hookimaw* has great responsibility within the tribe, such as “divining” fertile hunting grounds and killing windigos. The **old Indian woman** in Moose Factory warns Niska of the difficult and lonely life of a spiritual leader. “You are a *hookimaw*, from a strong family,” she says. “Happiness is not yours to have. You are a *windigo* killer.”

Manitous – Spirits in Anishnabe culture. *Manitous* can be either good or evil. Boyden references *Gitchi Manitou*, the primary spiritual force in Anishnabe culture, several times in *Three Day Road*. The *windigo*, on the other hand, serves as an example of an evil *manitou*. *Manitous* are fundamental to Anishnabe spirituality and culture.

Matatosowin – A sweat lodge filled with steam by pouring water over hot rocks. **Niska’s mother** teaches **Niska** to construct a *matatosowin*, and Niska in turn teaches **Xavier**. Both Niska and Xavier build *matatosowins* to conduct sweat lodge ceremonies, a widely practiced ceremony in Anishnabe culture that purifies the soul and restores balance between the physical and spiritual. Niska builds *matatosowins* to induce visions and “divine” fertile hunting grounds, and Xavier builds one to help guide him through tough decisions during the war. At the end of the novel, Xavier finds acceptance and forgiveness during a sweat lodge ceremony for his role in **Elijah’s** death, and when Xavier leaves the *matatosowin*, his crippling Morphine withdrawal is all but resolved. Xavier is purified by the *matatosowin* and is restored both physically and spiritually.

Ojibwe – The Indigenous people of Canada and the United States. The Ojibwe, also known as the Chippewa, are of the Anishnabe people. **Niska’s mother** is Ojibwe, and **Xavier** and **Elijah** meet a fellow Anishnabe, an Ojibwe **Indian**, in France during World War I.

Wawahtew – A Cree term for “aurora borealis,” or Northern Lights. Many Anishnabe believe that the *Wawahtew* are the spirits of their ancestors, dancing and celebrating.

Wemistikowshiw – A Cree term for the white European trappers, traders, and settlers encroaching on Indigenous lands. The

wemistikowshiw “instill in the Cree a greed for furs that nearly wipes out the animals,” and when the land can no longer sustain them, the Cree are forced to go to the Moose Factory reserve. On the reserve, Indigenous culture and identity is stamped out through residential schools. Indigenous children are forced to speak English and are punished for speaking their Native languages. Their hair is cut, and they are given “Christian” names and identities and are forced to worship the *wemistikowshiw* God. In addition to this forced assimilation and whitewashing, the *wemistikowshiw* are openly racist and hostile toward Indigenous people, often referring to them as “heathens” and “uncivilized.” Most of the Indigenous characters in *Three Day Road* struggle to maintain their native identities in the face of the oppressive *wemistikowshiw*, and they likewise struggle to be seen as equal, worthy of visibility and respect.

Windigo – A legend in Anishnabe culture of an evil spirit, or *manitou*, that is usually depicted as a large beast. The *windigo* eats only human flesh, and its spirit can infect others and quickly spread to an entire community. **Micah’s wife** “goes *windigo*” in *Three Day Road*, as does **Elijah**, and they are both killed by a “*windigo* killer.” The clan’s *hookimaw* is responsible for killing members of the tribe that “go *windigo*” and consume human flesh, and **Niska’s father**, **Niska**, and **Xavier** each must kill *windigos*. The legend of the *windigo* represents an imbalance between the spiritual and physical self, but it is also a powerful cautionary tale against the dangers of isolation. Only those who leave their tribal community, either literally or metaphorically, are infected by the *windigo*, which underscores Boyden’s central argument of the importance of community within Indigenous culture.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



ISOLATION VS. COMMUNITY

At the center of Joseph Boyden’s *Three Day Road* is the First Nations legend of the *windigo*. Within North American Indigenous culture, the *windigo* is an evil spirit, often depicted as a large and powerful monster, whose hunger can only be satisfied by human flesh. When Micah, a respected Cree hunter, leaves his tribe and goes into the bush with his family, his wife finds the tracks of the *windigo* circling their lodge. As Micah’s family slowly starves in the unforgiving Canadian wilderness, a “strange man-beast” comes out of the bush and tells Micah’s wife that it will eat her baby if she doesn’t feed the child the next day. To save her child from

the *windigo*, Micah's wife must resort to cannibalism, and in doing so "goes *windigo*" herself. According to Cree legend, the spirit of the *windigo* can enter a human and infect them with evil and a thirst for blood that can quickly spread and destroy an entire community. Stories of the *windigo* represent the devastation that can result from an imbalance between the spiritual and physical self, but they are also haunting cautionary tales against the dangers of isolation. Through the legend of the *windigo*, Boyden highlights the importance of community and effectively argues that one should never turn their back on their tribe to strike out on their own, regardless of the circumstances.

Niska, one of the novel's main characters, is "second to last in a long line of *windigo* killers." Both Niska and her father are forced to kill those who "go *windigo*" after leaving their communities for the isolation of the bush. Micah, a "headstrong" young hunter, takes his wife and child and leaves the tribe, choosing instead to chance survival alone in the bush. Micah selfishly abandons his community for his own good and that of his family, leaving his tribe with one less hunter to sustain them. Micah's decision ends tragically, and he freezes to death trying to feed his starving family. After Micah's wife is visited by the *windigo*, she eats Micah's flesh and feeds it to her baby. When she returns to her tribe with Micah's butchered body in her pack, Niska's father is forced to kill her and her child before the evil of the *windigo* can spread to the rest of the community. Niska is later visited by a man from a neighboring village who tells her that a young member of their tribe had gone "out in the bush" alone for weeks and came back with a pack full of human flesh. "He has gone mad and threatens to destroy all of us," the man says. Like Micah, the young man left his community for the isolation of the bush only to be infected by the *windigo*, driving home the message that deserting one's community can have disastrous outcomes.

Similarly, Elijah, the novel's antagonist, isolates himself from his community during World War I and slowly "goes *windigo*," a fate that once again positions isolation as dangerous—and even deadly. Elijah and Xavier, Niska's nephew, are best friends and enlist in the war together. Xavier—a true "bush Indian" and the personification of First Nations culture—fears the military will separate him from Elijah, but Elijah welcomes a separation. "It might be better that they separate us," Elijah says to Xavier. "It will teach you a little about independence." Elijah would rather be alone than with Xavier, the living symbol of his Native culture and community.

Elijah further isolates himself from Xavier—and, by extension, his Native community—through language. Xavier speaks Cree and very little English, but Elijah speaks almost exclusively in English. He even begins speaking with a British accent, further distancing himself from Xavier and their Indigenous community by mimicking the very white settlers who encroached on their land and destroyed their way of life. As Elijah begins to go mad,

he often sneaks away from his battalion at night to kill Germans undetected. The punishment for desertion and acting without an officer's order is death by firing squad, but Elijah's urge to kill—his taste for blood, so to speak—is so strong that he abandons his unit and risks his own life to satisfy it. In leaving the fold of his community, in this case both his Native community and his battalion, Elijah endangers not only himself but countless others, emphasizing the severe risks associated with isolation.

Elijah's cannibalism as he "goes *windigo*" is certainly metaphorical, but it is nonetheless represented in his thirst for killing Germans. Elijah begins scalping his kills, first as proof of his accuracy and skill as a sniper, but then almost compulsively, as if to satisfy his need for flesh. Elijah even offers Xavier some "gamy" and "tough" meat, supposedly horsemeat, but tells Xavier it is human flesh, "German, to be exact." Elijah's words presumably are meant as a joke, but Boyden plants enough doubt that readers can't know exactly what the meat is. In the end, Xavier, the last "in a long line of *windigo* killers," is forced to kill his best friend or risk being infected by the *windigo* himself. Boyden clearly traces this devastation back to the issue of isolation: Elijah isolates himself from Xavier and therefore turns his back on his culture and community as well, leaving him wide open for the evil spirit of the *windigo* to enter.



RACISM AND ASSIMILATION

In *Three Day Road*, the Indigenous people of Northern Canada are constantly plagued by the *wemistikoshiw*, or white settlers, whose encroaching presence threatens their traditional way of life. Indigenous people in Boyden's novel are met with blatant racism and are forced to assimilate to *wemistikoshiw* ways, which threatens to completely erase their own Native culture and identity. For example, the mother of Xavier, the novel's protagonist, goes to the Moose Factory reserve as a young Cree girl named Rabbit and is transformed into Anne, an obedient student of the *wemistikoshiw*'s Christian school. Assimilation in *Three Day Road* does not mean adopting some aspects of *wemistikoshiw* culture in addition to one's own Native identity; it is effectively the loss of Native identity all together. The culture and identity of Indigenous people is erased by the racism and assimilation of the *wemistikoshiw* in *Three Day Road*, a point which Boyden implies is reflected in broader society as well.

When Rabbit moves to the reserve, she brings her mother and sister, Niska, with her, and the *wemistikoshiw* try to completely erase Niska and Rabbit's cultural identities. Unlike Rabbit, Niska refuses to go to the school on the reserve, but when the priests find out an "Indian" girl is running around Moose Factory "uncivilized as an animal," they come to take her away. Niska tries to run, and when she is caught, she fights "like a **lynx**," "scratching" and "biting." Niska wants to stay with her

mother and live her traditional lifestyle as best she can in Moose Factory, but the *wemistikoshiw* priest overpowers her and forces her to attend the residential school. At the *wemistikoshiw* school, Niska's mouth is washed out with lye soap for speaking Cree, and the nuns cut her hair, a symbol of Niska's Native identity, much shorter than the other girls as punishment for her resistance. With this, Niska is forcibly stripped of her culture and identity and is made to adopt *wemistikoshiw* ways. Still, Niska resists the school's attempts to stamp out her Native identity, and she sneaks into the barber shop and shaves her head down to a "stubby field." The nuns, determined to break Niska's spirit, throw her into a basement room with little food as punishment until her hair grows back, but Niska's mother rescues her and they escape into the bush. Niska never returns to Moose Factory, and she spends the rest of her life living off the land in the traditional way.

Blatant racism is seen throughout the novel, and Indigenous characters are constantly sidelined and punished for their identities. When Xavier's best friend, Elijah, goes to the residential school, a nun tells him that the Cree are "heathens" who "anger God." She tells him that the Cree are "backward people" and "God's displeasure" can be seen in the Cree rivers, which flow north instead of south, like those in "the civilized world." She strikes Elijah and tells him that when he accepts God, "He will perform a great miracle" and set their rivers in the right direction. The nun's claims are complete nonsense, and she abuses a small boy simply because he is Indigenous and she considers him a savage "heathen." Similarly, when Xavier and Elijah enlist in the war and must take a train out of Moose Factory, they are stopped immediately as they board. "No Indians in this car," a *wemistikoshiw* man says. "You belong four cars to the back." Since Xavier and Elijah are Indigenous, and thereby seen as uncivilized and less than the *wemistikoshiw*, they are forced to ride in the rear car of the train. Lastly, when Elijah and Xavier are trained as snipers and make several difficult shots across no man's land, their commanding officer, Lieutenant Breech, is dubious. "Was an officer present to verify?" he asks. "Your claim seems a bit exaggerated to me." Breech refuses to give them credit for the kills. Because Elijah and Xavier are Cree, Lieutenant Breech considers them liars and incapable of such impressive shooting.

Elijah and Xavier must endure racist comments from many of the officers and soldiers in their unit, and they feel as if they are the only Native people in the whole war. They aren't, of course, and they soon meet another Indian soldier, an Ojibwe. "There are more Anishnabe than you might guess who wander these battlefields," the man says. Indeed, while it is impossible to ascertain exactly how many Indigenous people fought for Canada during World War I, it is estimated that some 4,000 Native men volunteered, about one-third of the First Nations population ages 18 to 45. Like Elijah, at least 50 medals were awarded to Indigenous soldiers after the war, a fact that

Boyden implies is not widely known. The racism and assimilation that erases Native identities in *Three Day Road* has erased the stories of thousands of Native soldiers as well, which Boyden brings to light through Elijah and Xavier.



LANGUAGE AND STORYTELLING

Three Day Road unfolds in a series of flashbacks and stories, told mostly through Xavier and his aunt, Niska. In a world increasingly whitewashed by the ever encroaching [wemistikoshiw](#), storytelling is a powerful way for Xavier and Niska to connect with their Cree culture. Xavier and his best friend, Elijah, take their traditional stories all the way to France during the war, and they fight to maintain their Indigenous identities through the telling of their stories. But although the positive power of storytelling and language is undeniable in *Three Day Road*, language is also a double-edged sword, capable of isolating and marginalizing the novel's Indigenous characters. Through the portrayal of language and storytelling in *Three Day Road*, Boyden at once underscores the power of language to marginalize and alienate, and simultaneously argues for the power of language and storytelling to preserve Indigenous life and culture.

While storytelling is a way for Niska to uphold her culture, she also believes her traditional stories have the power to preserve Native lives. Niska's father "was the last great talker in [their] clan" and frequently told stories. Niska imagined that her father "weaved his stories all summer" into "invisible nets" that kept them warm in winter. Huddled together, listening to the stories in the collective warmth of her family, Niska claims that her father's stories "were all that [they] had to keep [them] alive" during the cold winter, positioning storytelling as a nourishing, sustaining force. Later, when Xavier comes home from the war, he is consumed by fever and "something far worse," and Niska fears he is dying. On their three-day trip home, Niska tells Xavier the story of her childhood "to keep him alive." Just as her father's stories saved Niska's life, Niska hopes to save Xavier's through her own storytelling.

Xavier likewise uses language to maintain his Native identity while fighting in World War I, surrounded by white people who want to minimize his identity and culture. When the Canadian soldiers march, they sing songs that make very little sense to Xavier. "I have my own songs," Xavier says and refuses to sing. Instead of conforming to *wemistikoshiw* ways, Xavier holds tight to his culture by clinging to songs that are in his language. And even though he can't remember the words to these songs, he resolves to hum what he can remember, tenaciously clinging to whatever part of his Native identity that he can. Xavier begins to learn the English language the longer he is in the *wemistikoshiw* army, but he pretends he doesn't. When an officer speaks to him, he answers only in Cree. By deliberately speaking Cree rather than English, Xavier uses language to cling to his Native identity in an environment that threatens to

stamp it out.

Despite the power of language and storytelling in *Three Day Road*, however, language also causes a great deal of pain and confusion for the novel's Indigenous characters. When Niska sends Xavier a letter during the war, she must dictate it through Joseph Netmaker, a local Cree man. However, Joseph's letter mistakenly implies that Niska has died, and when Xavier receives the letter, he becomes "sour" and loses his "desire for survival." Joseph's poor English causes Xavier undue stress and emotional "damage," highlighting how language can tear down the novel's Native characters just as much as it can build them up. Language is also dangerously alienating on the battlefield. As Sergeant McCaan shows Xavier how to use the periscope in the trenches of World War I, McCaan's movement draws the attention of enemy fire. Xavier notices a split second before the gunfire begins and goes to warn McCaan, but he doesn't know the English words. All that comes out is "a stream of Cree." Although intentionally speaking Cree rather than English is how Xavier maintains his connection to his identity while at war, here his unintentional choice of Cree—unable to grasp the right words in English—alienates him from his comrades. McCaan isn't shot (he suffers only a black eye), but the language barrier nearly costs him his life.

By the end of the war, Elijah is dead and Xavier has lost his leg, and while Niska's stories bring the occasional smile to his face, Xavier's guilt and addiction to Morphine continue to destroy him. Near the end of the three-day journey home, Xavier finally tells the story of Elijah's death—that Elijah had "gone *windigo*" and Xavier was forced to kill him—and once he does, Xavier's fever begins to subside. Like Niska, Xavier is ostensibly (his fate is never revealed) saved by his story, and this too reflects Boyden's overarching argument of the power of storytelling. By telling his story, Xavier purges some of the guilt and pain that consumes him, and for the first time, it appears that he may live.



NATURE, WAR, AND SURVIVAL

Throughout *Three Day Road*, Joseph Boyden juxtaposes survival in the bush of Northern Canada against survival in the trenches of World War I. The novel's protagonist, Xavier Bird, is a Cree Indian, and his deep cultural connection to his indigenous land gives him a unique advantage in the bush and, as it turns out, in the trenches as well. When Xavier first arrives on the front lines and his novice unit is frightened by enemy gunfire, Sergeant McCaan tells the men they are "acting like rabbits" and "it is time to act like wolves." Xavier thinks McCaan's words are "perfect." To Xavier, the "law" of war is much like that of the bush: "turn fear and panic into the sharp blade of survival." Characters in *Three Day Road* must resort to unspeakable acts to survive in both the bush and the war, but Boyden argues there is a fine line between the two. Survival in the bush is approached with respect and honor, but there is little honor to be found in the

wemistikoshiw war.

Survival in the bush means that Xavier and his people must occasionally kill, but each time they do, it is out of necessity and approached with respect. When Xavier is a young boy and is trapping marten with his best friend, Elijah, one of their traps snares a marten but does not kill it. The animal's shrill cries make Xavier sick to his stomach, and he is forced to club it over the head. "We had to do it," Xavier says to Elijah. "We had to." Xavier doesn't want to kill the marten, and he must convince himself to do so, but his family needs the fur to survive. Xavier's aunt, Niska, is the clan's hookimaw, or spiritual leader, and when she constructs her "sweat lodge" to induce the "visions" that will lead them to fertile hunting grounds, she prays to the spirits of bear, moose, and the **lynx**. Niska prays to the very animals her people must hunt to survive, and this reflects her deep respect and gratitude for the animal lives that she takes. Niska's clan is forced to kill a bear or risk starvation during a harsh winter, but the people believe the bear is sacred. Instead of butchering the animal outside as is customary, the bear is "invited inside" their lodge like a "brother" to be readied for roasting. Many prayers of thanks are given, and extreme care is taken in gutting and skinning the animal. The Cree's respect for the bear, its life, and its spirit is mirrored in their tender treatment of the animal.

During the war, both Xavier and Elijah rely on their experience in the Canadian bush to survive in the trenches. After Elijah and Xavier are first ordered to kill, Sergeant McCaan indirectly asks Elijah if he enjoyed killing. "It's in my blood," Elijah answers. Elijah implies that since he is Cree and lives off the land, he is inherently suited to kill during times of war. Elijah and Xavier are trained as snipers, and they are taught to blend into their surroundings and stalk their enemy from afar. "It is just like hunting," Xavier thinks. "It is hunting." Because of Xavier and Elijah's cultural connection to the land and their experience hunting, they excel as snipers. Elijah and Xavier are often ordered to hunt the enemy at night, and this is "what [they] are best at." In the darkness, Elijah and Xavier are like "owls or wolves" due to "many night hunts over the years." Elijah explains to Thompson that "hunting" makes a good sniper, "and hunting is what [Elijah and Xavier] have done all [their] lives." Again, Elijah suggests that because they are Cree men, and therefore skilled hunters, they are specifically engineered for war.

But Xavier is the one who is "really from the bush," not Elijah, and he is "the only one who has truly hunted for a lifetime." Elijah spent much of his childhood on the reserve in Moose Factory, but Xavier went to live with Niska in the bush at a very young age. Xavier is a true "bush Indian," and he quickly learns that war is not "just like hunting." The soldiers kill "casually" and think very little about the lives they take. Mounting casualties and personal kills are considered badges of honor, and Elijah even scalps his kills when able, collecting their hair like bloody

trophies. Xavier completely loses his taste for war after he mindlessly guns down a female civilian, seemingly on autopilot after so many months spent killing, and by the time his leg is blown off by an enemy grenade, he loses his will to survive. Unlike the Canadian wilderness, “there is nothing sacred” about the war and, according to Xavier, no honor in the killing that goes on there.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



BIRDS AND AIRPLANES

Birds are symbolic of the connection between nature and the Anishnabe people in *Three Day Road*, and the similarities between Indigenous characters and birds highlights their cohesion with the natural world in contrast to their alienation from *wemistikoshiw* (European) society. Xavier’s last name is Bird, and Elijah’s last name, Weesageechak, is mispronounced by the *wemistikoshiw* as Whiskeyjack, a common name for the Canadian grey jay. In Anishnabe culture, the weesageechak is a legendary “trickster” figure who can take different forms at will. *Wemistikoshiw* settlers saw such a trickster in the bold grey jays that stole food and “loved to hear [their] own voice.” Elijah, too, is reflected in this description of the grey jay. Elijah is a “trickster,” always looking to crack a joke, and he proves himself brave and bold during the war. It even seems as though he can even take different forms at will, as he is comfortable in both his Indigenous life and the *wemistikoshiw* ways. Elijah is boastful, and he frequently tells stories, sometimes only to “hear his own voice,” much like the incessant chirping of a bird. Indeed, birds are certainly reflected in both Elijah and Xavier, which underscores the deep cultural connection between nature and the Anishnabe people.

Boyden further extends the metaphor of birds and freedom to airplanes during World War I. Whereas birds represent the freedom and contentment that Elijah and Xavier experience in connection to their culture, the planes they experience as soldiers in World War I are the exact opposite. As a soldier during World War I, Elijah watches the military planes “swoop like osprey,” and he dreams of one day being able to fly. “I wish I could fly like that,” Elijah says, “like a bird.” He claims he “would give his left arm”—an interesting choice of words since Xavier later loses his leg—just to fly. Elijah equates birds and flying with freedom but discovers when he gets a chance to fly that he isn’t that free. “I’ve always known men weren’t meant to fly,” Xavier says after the war. Elijah believes that the war gives him freedom to kill without remorse or consequence, and he has little fear of dying himself. Before going up in the plane, Elijah is

fearless; but flying teaches him that he isn’t invincible, and he begins to truly think about death for the first time. The kind of freedom Elijah seeks doesn’t exist, and he only realizes this after he flies. In this sense, airplanes come to replace birds as Elijah’s representation of flying, much like *wemistikoshiw* culture usurps his own Anishnabe traditions. Flying becomes a disconnection from, rather than a connection to, his culture—a shift that makes Elijah realize just how trapped he is in the societal expectations thrust upon him as a soldier.



THE MEDICINE BUNDLE

A medicine bundle is a collection of sacred items wrapped together, usually given during spiritual ceremonies, and they are symbolic of Native Cree identity in *Three Day Road*. In Anishnabe culture, medicine bundles are given to keep Indigenous people connected, and Niska gives Xavier a medicine bundle before he leaves for World War I. Xavier’s medicine bundle contains “protective herbs” and the tooth of a **lynx**, Niska’s spirit animal, and he never takes it off the entire time he fights in France for the Canadian Army. In the whitewashed army, Xavier is given a *wemistikoshiw* (European) haircut and clothing, but the medicine bundle given to him by Niska remains a tangible connection to Northern Canada and Xavier’s Indigenous identity. He often “fondles” the medicine bundle around his neck, and he can still smell the smoke from the ceremonial fire when he holds it close to his nose.

Xavier often wants to open the medicine bundle, but he refrains “for fear of losing something important,” so he simply holds it and “dreams of home.” Near the end of the war, Xavier rips his military identification tags from his neck and leaves only the medicine bundle. “That alone is who am I,” Xavier says. Xavier rejects the *wemistikoshiw* ways and culture and instead embraces his own Cree identity. Elijah, too, wears a medicine bundle made by Niska, and after Xavier is forced to kill Elijah after he is infected by the windigo (an evil Anishnabe spirit), Xavier removes Elijah’s medicine bundle, “but it does not want to break.” When the medicine bundle finally breaks, it is tangled with Elijah’s military identification tags. Elijah embraces *wemistikoshiw* ways and culture, and his own medicine bundle tangled with the military tags represents his assimilation. Elijah’s culture tries to keep him connected and resists breaking, but for Elijah it simply isn’t enough.



THE LYNX

The lynx is a large wild cat native to Canada, and it represents Niska’s spirituality and her connection to nature in *Three Day Road*. Niska is her clan’s hookimaw, or spiritual leader, and when she builds a matatosowin (sweat lodge) and summons the animal spirits during her very first sweat lodge ceremony, it is the spirit of the lynx that comes to her “most strongly.” The lynx is Niska’s spirit animal, and it

shows her the “secrets of the forest.” When Niska is taken by the wemistikoshiw (European) priest to the residential school, she “fights like a lynx,” “biting” and “scratching,” and when Niska’s heart is broken by the wemistikoshiw trapper, she prays to the spirit of the lynx to “find the source” of her pain and “extinguish it.” As a Cree Indian, Niska has a strong cultural connection to nature and her Indigenous land, which is also the source of her spirituality, and the lynx is highly symbolic of this connection.

As Elijah and Xavier make their way toward Moose Factory to enlist in the war, they track a lynx through the woods and are confused when the tracks suddenly disappear. These mysterious tracks are mirrored in the “trickster” games Niska plays with the wemistikoshiw trapper—she swings from a tree to conceal her tracks—which implies that Niska is never far as Elijah and Xavier make the three-day journey to town. On the last night before Elijah and Xavier join the army, a lynx circles their tent in the woods and cries. The lynx sounds “hurt,” like a “mother who’s lost her children.” Boyden implies that this wounded lynx is the spirit of Niska, mourning the loss of Xavier and Elijah—her “children” for all intents and purposes—as they go off to war. At the end of the novel, as Niska and Xavier climb out of the *matatosowin* for the last time, there is a sense of hope and optimism as a lynx in the distance keeps “watch with her yellow eyes.” Niska and Xavier are protected by the spirit of the lynx as they complete their journey home, suggesting that their spiritual connection with nature as Indigenous people is what gives them strength.

This quote appears in the very beginning of the novel when Elijah and Xavier are trapping marten as young boys, and it is important because it introduces the theme of killing to survive. Xavier doesn’t want to kill the marten, this is by the his “sick” stomach, but he must do it in order to survive. Marten fur is valuable and useful; it can be traded for other goods or used to make mittens and collars for coats. Surviving in the harsh Canadian bush requires killing, but this doesn’t make it any easier for Xavier. This quote also harkens to Xavier’s experiences during the war. He doesn’t want to kill Germans (or Elijah), but he is forced to in order to survive.

This passage also lends insight into Elijah’s character. Later, during the war, Elijah tells his commanding officer that killing is “in [his] blood”—meaning that since he is an Indian, he is inherently suited to kill—but here Elijah is unable to do it. Elijah hits the marten several times and does not kill it, and it is Xavier who must “step up” and give the final blow. Xavier never claims that being an Indian means he is an inherent killer. In fact, Xavier is quite the opposite. He is made “sick” by killing and never approaches it lightly. To Xavier, killing is only for survival, and is certainly not something he is particularly suited for. In this way, Boyden argues that Elijah’s sense of Indian identity as innate killers is little more than the racist assumptions of *wemistikoshiw*, who know little about the actual life of a true “bush Indian.”



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *Three Day Road* published in 2006.

Prologue Quotes

☛☛ *Elijah swings again, and again the marten squeals. My stomach feels sick. I pick up a heavier piece of wood, step up, and give it a sharp blow to its head. The hide noose snaps and the marten drops to the ground. It doesn't move. I club its head once.*

Elijah stares at me.

“We had to do it,” I say.

Related Characters: Xavier Bird (speaker), Elijah Whiskeyjack

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

Takoshininaaniwan: Arrival Quotes

☛☛ *Where is he? We spent the whole war together only to lose each other in the last days. A shell landed too close to me. It threw me into the air so that suddenly I was a bird. When I came down I no longer had my left leg. I've always known men aren't meant to fly*

Related Characters: Xavier Bird (speaker), Elijah Whiskeyjack

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs as Xavier begins the three-day trip home to the bush, and it is significant because it introduces birds as a symbol in the novel. Birds are symbolic of Xavier’s connection to nature as a Native Cree, but Boyden also associates birds with freedom and further extends this

metaphor to airplanes during the war. As Elijah watches the airplanes fly above his head in France, he longs to fly and therefore be free. But Elijah is terrified when he finally gets the chance to fly, and for the first time during the war, he begins to fear death. Elijah isn't free in the same way a bird is, and this is reflected in Xavier's comment that "men aren't meant to fly." Xavier's experience with "flying" is bad as well. He is hit by a bomb and is thrown through the air, and he loses his leg in the process.

This quote also reflects the trauma Xavier has endured through the war. Elijah goes *windigo* in France and Xavier is forced to kill him, but he doesn't appear to remember this. Of course, since Xavier has sent Elijah on "the three-day road"—that is, he has sent him to the afterlife—Xavier doesn't technically know where Elijah is. However, Boyden's point seems to be that Xavier doesn't initially accept that he was forced to kill his best friend, and it is part of what is making him sick and killing him. Xavier is only able to come to terms with killing Elijah after he returns home, to both his Native lands and culture. Xavier finds closure and forgiveness during a sweat lodge ceremony, which reflects Boyden's central argument of the importance of preserving Indigenous culture and identity.

sleep in dilapidated barns and crumbling farmhouses, crammed next to countless other soldiers, all crawling with lice and the stink of death and war. Xavier is used to sleeping outside in the open air, but *wemistikoshiw* culture considers sleeping outdoors uncivilized. To Xavier, it is uncivilized to endure such filth and overcrowding when nature is available, but he is forced to live in the custom of the *wemistikoshiw* and thereby abandon many of his own customs.

This quote also highlights the differences between Elijah and Xavier, and the level of Elijah's assimilation to *wemistikoshiw* culture and ways. Elijah was educated on the reserve, and he likely learned world geography, but Xavier was educated in the bush. Elijah believes that Xavier's bush education makes him a "heathen," or savage, and he implies that this is something Xavier should be ashamed of, something that makes him "stupid and small." This racist opinion is obviously shared by the *wemistikoshiw* soldiers since Xavier must listen carefully for "jokes and insults." Xavier initially assumes that killing in war will be like killing in the bush, but he soon learns this isn't the case. Xavier is a talented marksman, and the men do appreciate and respect this, but it doesn't make it any easier for Xavier to kill.

●● I'd much rather be outside on the cool grass, me, but the officers won't allow it. We've been over here in this place that some call Flanders and others call Belgium for three weeks now. I felt stupid and small when Elijah had to explain that Belgium is a country, like Canada, and Flanders is just one small part of it, like Mushkegowuk. I'm still uncomfortable with the language of the *wemistikoshiw*. It is spoken through the nose and hurts my mouth to try and mimic the silly sound of it. I opt to stay quiet most of the time, listening carefully to decipher the words, always listening for the joke or insult made against me. These others think that I'm something less than them, but just give me the chance to show them what I'm made of when it is time to kill.

●● McCaan whispers out to all of us to regain our wits, that this is our first true test as soldiers and that for all we know we may be in enemy territory and that from this moment on our lives hang in the balance. "You are acting like rabbits," he says. "It is time to act like wolves," and these are the perfect words. I can almost hear the backs of the men around me stiffen and the hairs on their necks bristle and it is exactly this, to be the hunter and not the hunted, that will keep me alive. This law is the same law as in the bush. Turn fear and panic into the sharp blade of survival.

Related Characters: Xavier Bird (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 12-3

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Elijah and Xavier have just arrived in Europe for the war, and this passage is important because it underscores the differences between Native culture and that of the *wemistikoshiw* (Europeans). In the army, Xavier is forced to

Related Characters: Xavier Bird (speaker), Sergeant McCaan

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs just as Xavier is arriving on the front lines of World War I, and it is significant because it underscores Boyden's juxtaposition of survival in the bush and survival in the war. Xavier has only just arrived on the front lines, and he and the other soldiers are clearly in fear for their lives. Most of them have probably never been in

such a dangerous and dire situation, and their reaction is understandable. McCaan's comment gives them strength and pumps them up, which reflects the power of language as well. McCaan's words lessen the soldiers' fear by making them feel powerful.

McCaan's analogy also highlights Xavier's cultural connection to nature. He compares the men to rabbits and implies they are weak and docile, but when they act like wolves, they are a force to be reckoned with. Rabbits are prey and are "hunted," but wolves are the "hunters." For Xavier, this is always the case in the bush. Living closely to wild and dangerous animals means that he must always be on guard and must always be hunting or risk being hunted. Here, Xavier falsely assumes that surviving the war will be the same as surviving in the bush, but he quickly learns that it isn't. What is the same, however, is the "fear" and "panic" that both the bush and the war are capable of producing.

☛☛ Smithy shakes his head and looks away. He is small and skinny. He's going bald. He looks like a Hudson's Bay Company man I know back in Moose Factory who teaches Sunday school to the children who live on the reserve and not in the bush, the homeguard children. "That ain't true at all," Smithy mumbles. "There's another Indian feller goes by the name Peggy. Ojibwe, I think." He looks over at me. "He's got close to a hundred kills but no officer wants to give him credit since he likes working alone." Smithy suddenly stops talking and looks embarrassed that he's said so much. "Peggy's salt of the earth," he adds as an afterthought. "Every Canadian enlisted man knows he ain't no liar."

Related Characters: Smithy, Xavier Bird (speaker), Elijah Whiskeyjack, Peggy

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 22-3

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Xavier is meeting a sniper for the first time, a Canadian named Smithy, and another soldier has falsely claimed that Smithy is the most effective sniper in the Canadian Army. This quote is important because it reflects the racism that plagues both Xavier and Elijah as soldiers in the Canadian Army, and it also introduces Peggy, whom Elijah is always trying to measure up to as a sniper. Peggy's officers refuse to "give him credit" because he is an Indian and his word alone isn't enough. Peggy's word is less than that of white soldier, so they simply don't believe him. Smithy's sudden "embarrassment" implies that he

recognizes Peggy's treatment as blatant racism. By claiming Peggy "ain't no liar," what Smithy is trying to say to Xavier, a Cree Indian, is that Smithy isn't a racist like the commanding officers.

This quote also disrupts popular stereotypes and assumptions, which Boyden does throughout the novel. Xavier notes that Smithy is "small and skinny" and "going bald." He reminds Xavier of a middle-aged white guy at the local church, not an effective sniper who has taken several lives in war. Xavier expects a sniper to be physically domineering and obviously tough, but Smithy isn't. Likewise, Xavier's unit expects Xavier to kill easily because he is an Indian, and they also expect him to be a "heathen" and "uncivilized." Xavier is no more uncivilized than Smithy is a physically threatening man, which aligns with Boyden's argument that assumptions and expectations are almost always false.

Noohtaawiy: My Father Quotes

☛☛ The following afternoon my mother and father prepared the bear for us. Normally we did our butchering outside, but the bear was our brother, and so he was invited in. Nothing was rushed. Nothing was to be wasted for fear of angering him. The knife used couldn't touch anything else. Any of the hair that the bear shed was carefully collected from the floor and clothing, and burned in the fire, whispered prayers drifting up with the stinking smoke. My parents carefully laid the animal on his back on freshly cut spruce boughs, talking to him, whispering prayers for what seemed like hours. They rocked back and forth on their haunches, my father sprinkling bits of powder into the flames that brought into the room a sweet smell I recognized as cedar. I was alarmed when at one point my father began to cry. I'd never seen this before and was frightened, but I remained beneath his heavy moose robe.

Related Characters: Niska (speaker), Niska's Father, Niska's Mother

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears when Niska's clan is slowly starving, and they are forced to kill a bear to survive. This passage is incredibly important because it highlights how one must often do unspeakable things to survive in the bush, much like in war, but it also emphasizes the respect and honor found in the bush. Boyden argues that the same respect and

honor is not found in war, and this passage is a clear example of such respect. The bear is “invited in” and treated like a “brother.” Niska’s parents take their time butchering the bear so not one single piece will go to waste. They don’t want to “anger” the bear’s spirit. They want the bear to understand that they had no choice in killing it, and they want their respect for the bear to be clear. It is either kill or die, regardless of the connection they feel to the bear, which is so strong Niska’s father is moved to tears.

The treatment of the bear by Niska’s parents is a stark contrast to the treatment of enemy soldiers during the war. The men in Xavier’s unit kill “easily” and “casually,” while Niska’s parents avoid contaminating the knife they use to butcher the bear, and they burn any parts that can’t be used in a ceremonial fashion. In the war, men are shot and blown to bits by the minute, and then they are thrown in a pile to rot. The soldiers try to give the dead some semblance of burial when they are able, but this isn’t always possible. Many soldiers’ bodies litter no man’s land where it isn’t even safe to retrieve them. There is an absolute disregard for human life during the war, Boyden argues, compared to the respect given the bear by Niska’s parents. They, too, had to kill, but they approached it with honor.

☛ The world is a different place in this new century, Nephew. And we are a different people. My visions still come but no one listens any longer to what they tell us, what they warn us. I knew even as a young woman that destruction bred on the horizon. In my early visions, numbers of men, higher than any of us could count, were cut down. They lived in the mud like rats and lived only to think of new ways to kill one another. No one is safe in such times, not even the Cree of Mushkegowuk. War touches everyone, and *windigos* spring from the earth.

Related Characters: Niska (speaker), Xavier Bird

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs during one of Niska’s stories to Xavier, and it is significant because it reflects Niska’s traditional role as her clan’s *hookimaw* and underscores how assimilation and the encroaching *wemistikoshiw* have stripped Niska of the power associated with her Native identity and role. Most Indigenous people don’t live Niska’s traditional life as an *awawatuk*, or someone who lives according to “the old ways,” and as such, “no one listens any longer” to Niska’s visions and warnings. Many Indigenous

people have given in to the forced assimilation of the *wemistikoshiw*, and like the white settlers, they don’t seem to believe in Niska’s ability to see into the future.

Here, Niska’s visions foretell World War I. She sees “destruction on the horizon” and knows that millions of men, “higher than any of us could count,” would be “cut down” dead. She can see the filth and mud the soldiers are forced to live in in the rat-infested trenches, where they are also covered in lice, and she sees the new and terrible ways they will discover to kill each other. As First Nations Cree of the Mushkegowuk tribe, Xavier and Elijah are sheltered from many of the world’s atrocities, but they can’t escape the war. Niska also implies that war makes everyone mad—all soldiers go *windigo* in a way—which again suggests that the war and the *wemistikoshiw* are the true savages, not the Indigenous people as the racist *wemistikoshiw* assert.

Ntawi Nipahiwewak: Raiding Party Quotes

☛ The next morning after stand-to, Thompson approaches Elijah and me. He talks to both of us, but his words are for Elijah. “What do you think of the last days, Whiskeyjack?” he asks, lighting a cigarette, exhaling and looking at the sky.

I can see that Elijah knows exactly what Thompson’s asking. Thompson is asking if Elijah likes killing. Elijah considers it for a moment. “It’s in my blood,” he finally says.

Thompson smiles, then walks off. He didn’t ask me the same question. Does he sense something? How am I different? A strange sensation, one I do not recognize, surges up my spine.

Related Characters: Elijah Whiskeyjack, Corporal Thompson, Xavier Bird (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Xavier and Elijah have just killed for the first time during the war, and this passage is significant because it reflects Elijah’s opinion that being an Indian makes him particularly suited for killing and war. Thompson’s question is leading, and it is almost like he knows the answer before he asks. Thompson senses that Elijah has enjoyed throwing the Mills bombs into the trench with the German soldiers, definitely injuring and probably killing them, and he too believes the racist assumption that Elijah “likes killing” because his identity as an Indian makes him a savage. But Boyden argues that Elijah “likes killing” because he is mad not because he is an Indian, and Xavier’s own questions are

evidence of this.

Xavier is extremely bothered by throwing the Mills bombs at the German soldiers, and it weighs on his conscience that he has almost certainly killed a man. Thompson doesn't ask Xavier if he has enjoyed the killing, because he knows that he hasn't, and Xavier worries that perhaps this means that he isn't an authentic Indian. Xavier mistakenly believes that his experience hunting, which is deeply enmeshed in his identity as an Indian, will make it easier for him to kill, but this isn't the case. Xavier hates killing, but he, too, is wrapped up in a racist *wemistikoshiw* understanding of Native identity, and he worries what his aversion to killing means for his identity. Xavier has never doubted his identity before, and he therefore feels "a strange sensation," one that he does "not recognize," moving "up [his] spine."

Kipwahakan: Captive Quotes

☝ I know that Xavier wants to talk to me. He goes so far as to let words come out of his mouth when he sleeps. He says very little when he's awake. I'm not able to make out more than the odd sentence when he is sleeping, though, and sometimes when he dreams he speaks aloud in English. I can't help but smile a bit when he does. As a child he was so proud that more than once he claimed he would never speak the *wemistikoshiw* tongue. And now he does even in his sleep. He cannot speak to me yet, and so I decide, here on the river, that I will speak to him. In this way, maybe his tongue will loosen some. Maybe some of the poison that courses through him might be released in this way. Words are all I have left now. I've lived alone so long that I realize I'm starved to talk. And so, as I paddle him gently with the river, I talk to him, tell him about my life.

Related Characters: Niska (speaker), Xavier Bird

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Niska and Xavier have made camp for the night and Niska continues with her stories. This passage is important because it further reflects the power of storytelling within Indigenous culture to nourish and sustain life, and it also underscores the power of language to both empower Indigenous people and marginalize and isolate them. Niska knows that Xavier "wants to talk to [her]." She knows that he wants to share his story, and thereby purge his body and soul of the trauma and "poison" of his experiences during the war, but he isn't yet ready to do this. For now, his desire to speak is only subconscious, and the fact that he speaks in

English is not only ironic but indicative of the assimilation forced by the *wemistikoshiw*.

Xavier has always made it a point to resist *wemistikoshiw* culture and cling to his own language and culture, but the pull of white culture is too great during the war. No one other than Elijah can speak Xavier's language, and Elijah speaks English most of the time. With no one else to speak his language with but Niska, Xavier is losing it—through no fault of his own. This passage also reflects how difficult the isolation of a traditional life in the bush can be. Niska treasures her traditional life, but this doesn't mean that she isn't lonely and "starved to talk." Language is very much therapeutic in this way as well. Niska needs to tell her story just as much as Xavier needs to hear it.

Shakocihew: Seducing Quotes

☝ The *awawatuk* accepted that I was the natural extension of my father, the new limb through which my family's power travelled. By the time I was living my seventeenth winter, men would come to me not for what men usually seek women out for, but to ask questions and advice. Most often, they wanted to know where to find game, and so I divined for them, placing the shoulder blade of the animal on coals and dripping water onto it as I had watched my father do. The rare hunter came to me wanting to understand the symbol of a dream and sometimes to learn his future. If I had not experienced a fit in some time, I constructed a shaking tent and crawled into it, summoned the spirits of the forest animals to come inside and join me, so many of them sometimes that the walls of my tent puffed out and drew in with their breath, becoming a living thing all its own. Most often, though, it was the spirit of the lynx that came to me first and stayed through the night, showing through its sharp eyes the secrets of the forest.

Related Characters: Niska (speaker), Niska's Father

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 120

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs as Niska explains her role as her clan's *hookimaw* and it is significant for several reasons. Through this passage, Boyden makes visible the traditional Native beliefs and culture that *wemistikoshiw* culture seeks to stamp out through assimilation, and it also highlights Niska's deep cultural connection to nature and animals. Here, Niska

explains more thoroughly the sweat lodge ceremony in which she “divines” the location of game through pyromantic scapulimancy: a moose bone, usually from a recent kill, is heated and water is dipped on it, causing the bone to crack. Niska can read those cracks and use them to decipher the location of game.

This passage also references the Cree practice of the “shaking tent.” Shaking tents are part of an ancient Cree ceremony in which a small domelike tent is constructed as a place for a *hookimaw*, or shaman, to “summon” their animal spirits for various reasons, like for guidance or to induce visions. According to Cree legend, when the spirits of the animals arrive, the tent begins to shake. Niska’s tent shakes so much that the walls “puff out and draw in,” like the “breath” of a “living thing.” Boyden frequently implies that the lynx is Niska’s spirit animal, and indeed it is the first animal to arrive in her shaking tent and stays “through the night, emphasizing not only Niska’s connection to nature in general but her connection to the lynx specifically.

Kimociwinikewin: Raid Quotes

☞ The other soldiers often ask Elijah about his name too. And he is happy to talk. His Cree name is Weesageechak. But that is something he doesn't share with the *wemistikoshiw*. Whiskeyjack is how they say his name, make it their own. He has told me that what they do to his name is what sounds to my ears like a longer word for *bastard*, making his name a name without a family.

Related Characters: Xavier Bird (speaker), Elijah Whiskeyjack

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 142-3

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs during the war when the men in Xavier and Elijah’s unit ask them how they got their names, and it is important because it underscores Elijah’s assimilation to *wemistikoshiw* ways and culture. When the men ask Elijah about his name, “he is happy to talk” because Elijah loves to talk and tell stories, but he doesn’t tell them the story of his name. Elijah doesn’t tell the men the story of his name, Weesageechak, because he isn’t interested in embracing his Native culture the same way Xavier is, and he would rather keep the whitewashed version of his name.

The legend of the *Weesageechak* is a shapeshifting trickster, known for humor and benevolence. Some Cree legends claim the *Weesageechak* was created by *Gitchi Manitou*, the Great Spirit, to teach humankind, and it is almost never portrayed as a dangerous or destructive force. This description does not exactly square with Elijah’s character, who is quite dangerous and destructive. Shapeshifting perhaps applies, however, since Elijah has shifted so seamlessly to *wemistikoshiw* culture. But by shifting to *wemistikoshiw* culture, he has left Xavier and his people behind, and this is reflected in the word “bastard.” By rejecting his Native name and embracing a *wemistikoshiw* name, Elijah has abandoned his people and his culture and is “without a family.”

☞ “Whiskeyjacks should fly better,” he says.

Elijah looks at him. “How do you know my name?”

“I don’t,” the man says. “I was dreaming. There was a flock of whiskeyjacks.” He looks confused. “They were pecking at something dead.”

Elijah stands and walks back to me.

“What did the old man say to you?” I ask.

“He knew my name. Claims he was dreaming of whiskeyjacks.”

“It’s a sign,” I say.

“Everything’s a sign to you.” Elijah looks out the window. “Hey, there’s a sign,” he says, pointing outside. “It says Abitibi River. But you wouldn’t know that, considering you’re a heathen.”

Related Characters: Xavier Bird, Elijah Whiskeyjack (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 150-1

Explanation and Analysis

This interaction between Elijah, Xavier, and a stranger occurs aboard the train when Xavier and Elijah leave for war, and it is important because it highlights Elijah’s connection to birds, but it also reflects Elijah’s internalized racism and his poor treatment of Xavier. Here, Elijah bumps into a sleeping Indian who wakes up talking about whiskeyjacks. The man’s dream appears to be a prophecy of sorts, and it foretells the upcoming violence of the war. When the man sees “a flock of whiskeyjacks” “pecking at something dead,” it harkens to Elijah in his sniper’s nest,

“pecking” off hundreds of enemy soldiers with this rifle.

Xavier seems to appreciate the gravity of the man’s dream and sees it as “a sign.” Within Cree culture, signs are everywhere. For example, when Niska performs scapulimancy, she looks for signs in the cracks of the bone, and other signs are likewise seen in weather patterns, the Northern Lights, and the movement of animals. Elijah’s comment that “everything’s a sign” to Xavier is condescending and diminishes their Native culture and beliefs. Elijah would do well to heed the man’s cryptic warning, but he is convinced it is all nonsense. He further insults Xavier when he calls him “a heathen” because he doesn’t read or write English. This, too, speaks to the power of words to both build up and tear down Native identity. Xavier finds empowerment in speaking his Native language, but he is made to feel inferior because of language as well.

Ishinakwahitisiw: Turning Quotes

☝ I lie deep in the trench when the day is calm and think about how the world of the soldier consists of staring up at the sky, crawling upon the earth at night and living beneath it during the day. In the dark of night I think that my life has been divided into three for me by these *wemistikoshiw*. There was my life before them and their army, there is my life in their army, and, if I live, there will be my life after I have left it and returned home. They must have some magic in their number of three. I know that you, Niska, taught me that we will all someday walk the three-day road, and now I’m left wondering what connection there might be between their world and mine. I need to find out if we share something, some magic. Maybe it will help me get through all this.

Related Characters: Xavier Bird (speaker), Niska

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 227

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs in the trenches of World War I when Xavier reflects on the *wemistikoshiw* “obsession” with the number three, and it is important because it lends insight into the book’s title, *Three Day Road*. This quote also reflects the assimilation Xavier faces as a soldier in the Canadian Army and just how deeply the *wemistikoshiw* affect his life. Xavier’s life isn’t his own during the war, which is to be expected. He is told what to do and when to do it, and he has little to no say in anything, but Xavier has little control over his life at all. Xavier’s life has been “divided,” or broken, by the *wemistikoshiw*, and each stage revolves around them, not

Xavier.

Despite the oppression that Xavier suffers by the *wemistikoshiw*, he is surprisingly calm about it. He is abused, marginalized, and demeaned, but he always takes the highroad. He is certainly resistant to assimilation and holds tight to his culture, but Xavier rarely loses his temper and never speaks badly of the *wemistikoshiw*. On the contrary, he wants to find the “connection” between their two worlds, but the only real connection he finds is “the three-day road.” As Niska points out, everyone will walk the road to death someday, and it is a possibility that Xavier is on “the three-day road” himself. His canoe ride home to the bush with Niska is a “three day paddle,” and while the book ends on an optimistic note, Boyden never explicitly says whether Xavier lives or dies.

Ka Nipihat Windigowa: Windigo Killer Quotes

☝ I made Xavier smile with my story of smacking the nun with my paddle, and this gives me hope. Steering the canoe slow through the afternoon I watch him drift into sleep. It is a restless time for him, and his face looks like a scared child’s when he cries out. To try and ease him a little, I start talking again. The story is not a happy one, but something in me has to tell it. There is truth in this story that Xavier needs to hear, and maybe it is best that he hears it in sleep so that the medicine in the tale can slip into him unnoticed.

Related Characters: Niska (speaker), Elijah Whiskeyjack, Xavier Bird

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 240

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs after Niska tells Xavier the story of rescuing him from the residential school, and it is important because it again underscores the power of storytelling in Native Cree culture. Xavier is in incredible pain and is likely dying, but the powerful story of Niska taking Xavier from the school and striking the nun with her canoe paddle brings him some comfort. This is a pleasant memory for both of them—in it they both have the upper hand over the *wemistikoshiw*—and it gives him some spark, some life, as his strength is slipping away. Once again, Niska’s stories are nourishing to Xavier, and they are able to give him life.

Niska hopes to continue to strengthen him through stories, and she is about to tell him the story of when she was forced

to kill a *windigo* when he was just a boy. She is hoping the story will “ease him a little,” and while she knows it “is not a happy one,” she senses that Xavier needs to hear it. Indeed, there is “truth” in Niska’s story, and Xavier does need to hear it. He too was forced to kill a *windigo*, Elijah that is, and Xavier needs to come to terms with this. Niska’s story reminds Xavier that he didn’t have a choice in killing Elijah—it is what is expected of his as a *hookimaw* and a *windigo* killer—and until he accepts this, he will never be able to recover. In this way, Niska’s story is very much “medicine” to Xavier, and he badly needs to hear it.

“Why does she call you Nephew and not your real name?” he asked.

“Nephew is my real name,” you answered. “I am her nephew.”

“Does she ever call you by your Christian name?” he asked.

You shook your head, looked at me nervously. “My name is Nephew.”

“Your name is Xavier,” your friend answered.

It was not said meanly. I could tell from his voice that the boy was simply trying to understand.

“Your Christian name is Xavier,” he said. “And mine is Elijah.”

Related Characters: Xavier Bird, Elijah Whiskeyjack (speaker), Niska

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 248

Explanation and Analysis

This quote also occurs in Niska’s story, when Elijah asks Xavier why Niska always calls him Nephew, and it is significant because it highlights the assimilation and cultural whitewashing Indigenous people are forced to endure and the impact it has on one’s identity. Elijah is confused when Niska calls Xavier Nephew. Elijah has only known life on the reserve at this point and doesn’t realize that even he has an identity that he is not fully aware of. He considers their “Christian names” handed out at the residential school their “real names.” The *wemistikoshiw* have decided what Elijah and Xavier’s names and identities will be, and Elijah sees no reason to question it.

Xavier looks to Niska “nervously” because he is worried that perhaps he doesn’t quite understand who he is, and this question of identity is with him throughout most of the novel. He knows he’s Niska’s nephew, and he feels like Niska’s nephew, but Elijah insists Xavier is someone else.

Elijah insists that Xavier’s true identity is his “Christian name,” but Xavier isn’t a Christian, and he isn’t a *wemistikoshiw* either. Yet the *wemistikoshiw* completely control Xavier’s identity, and they even have some say in how he feels about his Native identity as well. Through the perpetuation of negative Native stereotypes, Xavier’s sense of identity is constantly filtered through another, and he has little sense of what is true.

Tapakwewin: Snaring Quotes

“I remember when he began to explore the places that aren’t safe to explore. I remember him learning to love killing rather than simply killing to survive. Even when he went so far into that other place that I worried for him constantly, he still loved to tell me stories. He never lost his ability to talk. I think it was this ability that fooled the others around us into believing he hadn’t gone mad. But I knew.”

Related Characters: Xavier Bird (speaker), Elijah Whiskeyjack

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 249

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs as Elijah slips further and further into madness during the war, and it is significant because it reflects Elijah’s isolation, but it also underscores the power of language and stories as well. At this point, Elijah is sneaking away from his unit to kill solo in no man’s land, and he repeatedly puts himself in danger to do so. It isn’t “safe” because he is close to enemy territory and in the open where he could be spotted and killed. Furthermore, if Elijah is caught deserting his unit for any reason, he will likely be executed by firing squad. Elijah’s blood lust is so strong that he risks his own life in more ways than one to satisfy his need to kill. He doesn’t kill out of necessity; he kills for pleasure.

But Elijah is able to cover up his insanity and “fool the others” through his storytelling, which again reflects the power within stories and language. He is popular in his unit and everyone loves his stories, and these stories distract the other men from the fact that he has gone completely mad. Xavier can’t be fooled, however, because he is a *hookimaw* and a *windigo* killer. It is in Xavier’s blood to find and destroy *windigos*, and Elijah is no exception. Niska can see *windigos* through walls with a glow like the Northern Lights, and Xavier sees Elijah as well. While Elijah may be able to obfuscate others with humorous stories, Xavier will always

know the truth.

Weesageechak: Hero Quotes

☝☝ Elijah kicks at the ground. "Listen to me, X," he says. "I should never have gotten in that aeroplane. Before that I believed nothing could hurt me over here. But I lost something up there is what it feels like. I need to get it back." Elijah reaches his hand out to a horse. It shies away. "I can see that I went too far into a dangerous place for a while. But I see that." He stops talking, then starts again. "Does that mean something?"

Related Characters: Elijah Whiskeyjack (speaker), Xavier Bird

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 322

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs near the end of the war, right before Xavier is forced to kill Elijah, and it is significant because, for the first and only time, Elijah appears to have some insight into his madness. It also explains Elijah's experience in the airplane and what it means for him in the context of the war. Elijah knows now that he isn't as free as he initially thought, but he has gone too far to turn back now. Xavier was fearless before the airplane. He believed he could kill and never be killed, and now he knows this isn't true. If he is to be an effective killer again, Elijah must get his edge back.

When the horse "shies away" from Elijah, this reflects how far he has gone from his Native identity. His connection to nature and animals here is gone; the horse pulls away and Elijah's connection to birds is all but ruined from his experience in the airplane. Elijah seems to understand that he has completely isolated himself from his Native identity and community, and that the *windigo* has entered him. Elijah "can see" that he has "gone too far into a dangerous place," but he quickly forgets this (almost) tender moment when he later tries to strangle Xavier. Whether or not he is sincere in this moment is unclear, but it is the closest thing to remorse for Elijah.

Oniimowi Pineshish: Little Bird Dancer Quotes

☝☝ "Show us how the grouse danced," Old Francis said, and drunk from the attention, you stood, and made everyone else stand around the fire too. You imitated the big grouse, and everyone lifted their arms and moved around the circle. Do you remember? You called out and we moved around the circle, and then you raised your arms and called out again and we all touched our fingertips above our heads and moved the other way, you rustling your arms like feathered wings and everyone laughing. And that is when I said, "From now on we call you Little Bird Dancer," and everyone laughed and agreed it was a good name for you.

Related Characters: Niska (speaker), Xavier Bird

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 333-4

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears in one of the stories Niska tells Xavier, and it is important because it finally relays the story of Xavier's name. Boyden mentions Xavier and Elijah's names earlier in the book and fully explains Elijah's, but he waits until nearly the end of the book to tell the story of Xavier's name. The grouse is the first animal Xavier kills while hunting as a young boy, and he is extremely proud of his kill. Xavier shoots a large bull moose right after the grouse, but he remains most proud of the grouse. As Xavier's clan celebrates his first kill, they dance and call out like birds, and this too reflects Xavier's deep connection to nature, especially birds.

This passage also lends insight into Xavier's true identity, which he struggles with for most of the book. This is who Xavier is; Niska's nephew and a Cree Indian named Little Bird Dancer. This story is one of joy and empowerment, and it helps Xavier to remember who he is. He has metaphorically lost his identity through the war—both through assimilation in the *wemistikoshiw* army and by assuming Elijah's identity in the hospital—and he can't find true healing and closure until he returns to his Native identity and embraces his traditional life and culture.

Nipiwin: Dying Quotes

☹☹ I do not know how to make them understand who I am. To them I am Elijah Whiskeyjack, sniper and scout. Hero. When I want medicine, I tell the pretty-mouthed nurse that the pain is too bad, that I need a little of it. She leaves for a short time, comes back carrying a needle. I spend hours staring out the window; rubbing at the stub of leg through the pinned-up material of the pajamas, feeling the warm river rushing below me. It is easier not to tell them anything, easier not to explain at all. I allow myself to believe that I am Elijah. In this way he is still alive.

Related Characters: Xavier Bird (speaker), Elijah Whiskeyjack

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 345

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Xavier kills Elijah and takes his identification tags. Xavier is hit by a grenade immediately after he leaves Elijah and wakes in the military hospital, where they assume Xavier is Elijah, and this passage is important because it highlights Xavier's loss of identity. By assuming Elijah's identity, Xavier completely loses who he is, and he doesn't know how to make the wemistikoshiw "understand who [he] is," which is Xavier's main problem throughout most of the novel. But at least as Elijah, they think he is a hero, and he is given some respect.

Xavier is obviously traumatized by what he has done, but he has been traumatized for some time now. The wemistikoshiw have never understood his Native identity, and they have sought to assimilate him through the army. Xavier has tried to resist, but the wemistikoshiw constantly tell him who he is, and even have influence in how he sees his own Native identity. The army has convinced him that being an Indian means being an uncivilized savage and heathen, and that it makes him a violent killer. This isn't who Xavier is at all, but wemistikoshiw stereotypes have left him feeling like he isn't an Indian. If Xavier isn't an authentic Indian, then he doesn't know who he is, so for now, he will be Elijah.

Ntashiikewin: Home Quotes

☹☹ Tonight I do not worry about making camp. I just pull our blankets from the canoe and we curl up in them and watch the fire. In a little while I will have to add more wood to keep the chill away. Nephew breathes calmly. I listen to the sounds of the night animals not so far away. I hear the fox and the marten chasing mice. I hear the whoosh of great wings as an Arctic owl sweeps close by, and after that the almost silent step of a bigger animal, a lynx perhaps, keeping watch with her yellow eyes. I lie here and look at the sky, then at the river, the black line of it heading north. By tomorrow we'll be home.

Related Characters: Niska (speaker), Xavier Bird

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 351

Explanation and Analysis

This is the final passage of *Three Day Road* after Niska cleanses Xavier in the sweat lodge ceremony, and it is significant because it implies that Xavier may live after all. Boyden repeatedly suggests that Xavier is on "the three-day road" moving toward his death, but in this quote, Niska no longer seems worried that Xavier is dying. She doesn't even bother to make camp, she just brings blankets to the fire, which suggests that Xavier is improving and needs less support. He "breathes calmly" for the first time and no longer shows any signs of morphine withdrawal.

The presence of the animals too implies that Xavier will recover after all. The animals, especially the owl, represents Xavier's Native connection to the land, which he appears to have gotten back through the sweat lodge ceremony. Xavier's connection to his culture was beginning to suffer through the forced assimilation of the army, but his return to his Native land and way of life has restored this sacred connection. The presence of the lynx, Niska's spirit animal, further implies that Xavier will live. Niska frequently calls on the lynx to look over Xavier and protect him, and its presence here is incredibly comforting. Niska hasn't recognized their surroundings for nearly a day, but now she seems convinced that they will make it home to the bush.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE

Xavier and Elijah walk through the deep snow along their hunting traplines. Both boys “have lived twelve winters,” and they are best friends. The night has been cold, and the sun is just about to rise. Xavier is sure and silent as he moves through the snow, but Elijah’s feet are “heavy.” The trees “moan and crack” under the strain of the cold, and “the sound is like dying.” As a trapline comes into view, the boys see a marten hanging just above the snow.

Elijah runs excitedly to the marten and grabs it. The animal begins to “struggle” and “twist and snarl.” Elijah and Xavier are startled; neither expected the animal to still be alive. Elijah stops. “What do we do, Xavier?” he asks. “You must club it,” Xavier answers. Elijah picks up a stick and begins to hit the marten, the wounded animal “squealing” with each strike. Xavier’s stomach turns at the sound of the marten’s cries. He finds a heavy chunk of wood and hits the animal over the head. “We had to do it,” Xavier says.

Immediately, Boyden establishes Xavier as a true “bush Indian.” He is confident and capable hunting in the bush, but Elijah is clumsy and unsure. Elijah has assimilated to the ways of the wemistikoshiw (Europeans), and he doesn’t move as easily through the bush as Xavier. Boyden’s language here also foreshadows the death and war to come. Just as in nature, Xavier frequently hears sounds of death on the battlefield.



Elijah and Xavier are both young and inexperienced, yet Xavier seems to innately know what to do. He doesn’t want to kill the marten, and this is reflected by his sick stomach, but he needs the fur to survive in the bush. This passage harkens to Xavier’s experiences at war. He must kill to survive (even though it makes him sick), and when Elijah is infected by the windigo spirit, Xavier must kill him to survive as well.



EKIIWANIWAHK: RETURNING

Niska hides in the woods just outside of town. She has been there for days, waiting and watching. The town is big, and there are more wemistikoshiw than Niska has ever seen before. She leaves the woods cautiously and walks among the cars and people, who “stare and point” as she walks by. “I must look like a thin and wild old woman to them,” Niska thinks to herself, “an Indian animal straight out of the bush.”

Niska approaches the train station and stands near the back of the covered platform. The people eye her suspiciously and move closer to the tracks. They all wear hats despite the high summer sun. Niska does “not understand much of the wemistikoshiw.” The train comes into sight, the whistle “like a giant eagle screaming,” and stops at the platform. Niska’s only living relation, her nephew, Xavier Bird, has “died in a faraway place,” and his friend, Elijah Whiskeyjack, is arriving on the train. Elijah “is as close to a relation” as Niska has, and she “will paddle him home.”

Niska’s traditional life in the bush means that she has very little interaction, if any, with the white settlers. Like Xavier, Niska rejects wemistikoshiw culture, and because of this, she is marginalized by society. The staring and pointing wemistikoshiw are evidence of the widespread racism against Indigenous people seen in the novel.



This too is evidence of the rampant racism faced by Native people. The wemistikoshiw react to Niska as if she has a disease and move closer to the tracks instead of away from them, as is expected. The wemistikoshiw would rather risk falling onto the train tracks than stand near Niska on the platform. The comparison of the train whistle to an eagle’s scream reflects Niska’s connection to nature, which contrasts the lack of connection she feels to the wemistikoshiw world. She is unaccustomed to machinery and automobiles, and she tries to understand them in terms of nature.



The last passenger steps out of the train, but Niska does not see Elijah. She looks again to the train and can see a man moving slowly inside. The man wears a hat like the wemistikoshiw, and one leg of his pants is “pinned up,” hanging “empty” at the knee. He steps onto the platform with his crutches and looks around. Niska is suddenly met with “the ghost of [her] nephew Xavier.”

As Xavier’s eyes meet Niska’s, he falls to the platform. Niska rushes to his side as the wemistikoshiw stare. “I was told you were dead, Auntie,” he says to Niska. “And I was told you were, too,” she replies. She helps him to stand, and they immediately head for the riverbank where Niska’s canoe is waiting. Niska tells Xavier to wait on the riverbank while she wades upriver to retrieve the canoe. As she paddles back, Niska watches Xavier rolls up his sleeve and stick “something into his arm.”

Inside the canoe, Xavier leans against his pack and closes his eyes. Niska watches him closely as she paddles. Xavier “sleeps, but his sleep is not restful.” He twitches and shakes and wakes himself when he cries out. She knows he is “very sick” and can see that “fever is burning him up from the inside.” Their destination, the Great Salt Bay, is “a three-day paddle,” and Niska approaches the riverbank to make camp for the night.

TAKOSHININAANIWAN: ARRIVAL

Rain falls as Xavier sits by the fire. Like Niska, he does not sleep. “Dead friends” Xavier doesn’t “want to see come to visit” in his sleep. When sleep does come, the dead accuse Xavier of “acts [he] did not perform” and “some that [he] did.” Everyone “over there” behaved “in ways it is best not to speak of. Especially Elijah.” Elijah is “truly skilled,” Xavier thinks. “But at one time I was the better marksman. No one remembers that.”

“Where is [Elijah]?” Xavier wonders. They were together the entire war until the last days. Xavier had taken some shell fire and was thrown into the air like a “bird.” When he “came down,” his left leg was gone. “I’ve always known men aren’t meant to fly,” Xavier says. But he was given medicine for the pain and learned “to fly in a new way.” Now, the medicine is nearly gone, and Xavier “will not be able to live without it.”

Elijah’s Native identity has taken a hit during the war, and while he has tried to hang on to hang to his culture, the wemistikoshiw hat is evidence of his forced assimilation by the white army. Typically, Indians only wear hats in the winter, not the summer, and Niska thinks it is odd.



The wemistikoshiw stares are more evidence of racism, and Niska and Xavier are clearly uncomfortable since they waste no time leaving town. Obviously, Xavier is injecting himself with morphine. He has become terribly addicted on account of his injuries, and the fact that he injects it when he thinks Niska isn’t watching suggests that he is ashamed of his addiction. Xavier’s shame, however, makes very little difference at this point; he needs the morphine to survive.



Boyden frequently references their “three-day paddle,” which harkens to Niska’s Cree story of “the three day road,” where the novel also finds its title. Niska claims that the spiritual trip to the afterlife is down a “three day road,” and this suggests that Xavier’s trip home— “a three-day paddle”—is, essentially, his journey toward death.



Xavier’s constant war flashbacks are evidence of his guilt over the unspeakable acts he was forced to commit during the war in order to survive. Xavier speaks of Elijah here in the present tense, as if Elijah is still alive, but he isn’t. Xavier had to kill him, an example of the unspeakable acts he was forced to commit to survive, and he is so traumatized that he seems to have blocked it out.



Xavier’s comment that “men aren’t meant to fly” harkens to Elijah’s bad experience in the airplane. To Elijah, birds are symbolic of freedom, and he dreams of going up in an airplane—the closest he will ever get to flying. But he is terrified up in the air because, as Xavier says, “men aren’t meant to fly.”



Nothing “makes any sense” to Xavier. Niska is alive, and Elijah is “missing.” Xavier “shivers in the cold rain” and stares at the fire. “Oh, this medicine is good,” he thinks. Xavier closes his eyes and can see “broken buildings” lining the edge of a town. He can hear the “big guns” in the distance and knows that he will be in the trenches by the next day. Rifle fire erupts nearby. “Are those our fucking signal flares?” Sergeant McCaan yells. “Can somebody tell me? Are they?”

The company has been in Flanders, Belgium for weeks. Xavier keeps mostly to himself around the other soldiers, but he listens carefully for “jokes and insults.” The others think Xavier is “something less,” but he will “show them what [he is] made of when it is time to kill.”

The next morning, Xavier stands at attention next to Elijah. Elijah fidgets and shuffles his feet and McCaan yells at him to stand still. Xavier can tell that McCaan doesn’t want to yell, but Lieutenant Breech, whom the men call “Bastard Breech,” stands watching. Breech gives the order, and the men begin to march. The men sing as they march but Xavier doesn’t join in. “Me, I won’t sing their songs,” Xavier says. “I have my own songs.”

Without warning, Xavier is thrown into the air by “thunder and a wave of heat.” He lands hard on the ground and is hit with “raining rock” and “globes of red dirt” that he realizes is “the flesh and guts of men.” He tries to move but can’t. Elijah appears and drags him to an upturned wagon. Elijah quickly crawls back through the “flying metal” and returns with Grey Eyes and Sean Patrick, two men from their unit.

Once the shelling stops and the dead and wounded are carted off by stretcher, McCaan again orders the platoon to march. Breech will be waiting outside of town with another unit. “Tiny fucker wants us to march into dangerous land after dark knowing full well we have no goddamn idea where we are,” McCaan yells. “Like fucking virgins into the mouth of a lion!” The night is extremely dark, and the men grow increasingly uncomfortable as they march. A soldier named Fat stumbles and falls.

Xavier’s flashbacks are a form of storytelling, which ties into Boyden’s argument of the power of storytelling to preserve Indigenous life and culture. If Xavier is to live, he must make it back to his Native lands and embrace his Cree culture, but he can’t do that without first telling his story. While Xavier’s story takes place in the past, his vivid war flashbacks make his stories seem as if they are unfolding in the present.



As a Cree Indian, Xavier is a perpetual outsider in the predominately white European army. The other soldiers frequently refer to him as a “heathen” because he speaks a different language and observes a different culture. But Xavier is a keen and talented hunter, and he believes this will make him a good soldier, which is sure to win their favor.



Elijah’s fidgety behavior is likely morphine withdrawal. It is later revealed that Elijah begins taking morphine on the ship to Europe, and by this time he is probably already very deep into his habit. Xavier’s refusal to sing the soldier’s song reflects his resistance to assimilation, and his determination to speak his own language.



Elijah’s actions here speak to his bravery during the war. He is the one to drag Xavier and the others safety. Elijah is fearless. He doesn’t begin to think of dying as a possibility until after he flies in the plane, and since this is early in the war, Elijah repeatedly puts himself in danger to save others because he thinks he is invincible.



As the war drags on, Xavier grows tired of his superior officers putting him in danger while they sit safely on the sidelines, and this passage is one such example. Breech is already (reasonably) safe with the unit near the next town, but it is Xavier and the other soldiers who must risk their lives to get there. Xavier’s commanding officers show little regard for life—including the lives of their soldiers.



“You are acting like rabbits,” McCaan yells. “It is time to act like wolves.” Xavier thinks McCaan’s words are “perfect.” This will keep them alive, Xavier thinks, “to be the hunter” not “the hunted.” This is the same “law” in the woods— “turn fear and panic into the sharp blade of survival.” McCaan calls Elijah and Xavier to the front of the line and orders them to advance and scout the ridge ahead.

Xavier and Elijah crawl into the darkness and quickly lose sight of each other, but just like when they track a moose, each knows where the other is. They come across a group of men speaking the “Belgian tongue.” Elijah asks them in English where the Canadians are, and they learn they are just a half mile over the ridge.

Their unit manages to make it to the next town, and Xavier wakes early the next morning. He is invited to sit with a small group of soldiers. One of the men asks Xavier where he is from. “Near Moose Factory,” he answers. “So you’re an Indian, then?” the soldier asks. “You’re pretty short for an Indian, ain’t ya?” The men all laugh. Xavier looks to one soldier’s rifle; there are small notches cut in the stock. “Smithy here’s a sniper,” one man says. He has thirty-three kills—more than any other Canadian or Brit.

“That ain’t true at all,” Smithy says. “There’s another Indian feller goes by the name Peggy. Ojibwe, I think.” Peggy has nearly one hundred hits, Smithy says, but the officers won’t “give him credit” because he works alone. Xavier sits and doesn’t speak. “Man of few words, eh?” a soldier asks him. “I don’t know much English,” Xavier says. “You don’t need to know much,” replies Smithy, “for the job you been sent here to do.”

MONAHIKEWINA: TRENCHES

Xavier’s unit reaches the front trench where men look through periscopes at the other side. McCaan goes to look for an officer, and Xavier, Elijah, and the others are left with two new soldiers, Graves and Gilberto. Gilberto is a large man, a farmer back home, and Xavier is immediately fond of him because his English is poor. McCaan returns with an officer named Thompson and leads them through the trenches, past the snipers, to their new living quarters. It is little more than a muddy ditch, but the men waste no time trying “to make it into something livable.”

Xavier is convinced that surviving in war is much like surviving in the bush, and Boyden repeatedly compares the two. But by the end of the book, Xavier learns that this isn’t true. There is honor in the bush, but there is little honor to be found in the war, despite the medals and decorations.



The fact the McCaan sends Elijah and Xavier in first to scout ahead is reflective of systemic racism. McCaan could send any of the men, but he sends Xavier and Elijah, which implies he believes their Native lives are worth less than the others. This passage also underscores the vast differences in language, and the power language has to isolate and marginalize. Elijah’s Native language is Cree, but he is forced to speak English, and the Belgians are likely speaking Dutch.



The soldier’s comment that Xavier is “short for an Indian” implies that an ideal Indian exists, and Xavier doesn’t quite live up to the standard. Xavier is a “real” Indian, but his real identity doesn’t fit the soldier’s racist assumptions, which is reflective of the racism of broader society as well. Indians are viewed as savage beasts, and it is therefore assumed that they should have a large physical stature.



Peggy’s experiences are more evidence of the racism within the military. Peggy is obviously a talented sniper, but the officers don’t believe his numbers because Peggy’s word as an Indian, to them, is less than the word of a white soldier, or better yet, a white officer. This also puts Elijah’s future sniping record in perspective. Peggy’s kills are measly compared to Elijah’s 356 confirmed hits.



At this point in the war, Xavier speaks very little English. He did not grow up at the residential school like Elijah, so Xavier wasn’t forced to speak English. But this is a double-edged sword for Xavier; speaking his Native language preserves Xavier’s culture and identity, but his inability to speak English is isolating and marginalizing. Xavier finds a kinship with Gilberto because he, too, is marginalized through language.

Elijah and Xavier watch the **airplanes** circle and learn to tell the difference between German planes and those belonging to allies. The planes “swoop like ospreys” before disappearing in the distance. “I wish I could fly like that,” Elijah says, “like a bird.” At sunset, they are ordered to “stand-to” with their rifles ready. Dusk and dawn are popular times of attack, and the men squat in the trenches waiting for the enemy.

McCaan goes to a periscope and looks across “no man’s land” in the growing darkness. He moves the periscope rapidly back and forth, drawing the attention of the German gunners. Xavier opens his mouth to warn McCaan but only Cree words escape. McCaan is thrown back from the periscope, his eye quickly swelling shut. A large hole has been shot through the periscope. When a medic appears, McCaan “pushes him away.”

Birds underscore Elijah's connection to nature through his Native heritage, but birds also represent ultimate freedom to Elijah because they can fly. He sees that freedom reflected in the military airplanes and grows obsessed over flying in one.



Xavier's inability to speak English nearly results in McCaan's death. Xavier's Native language keeps him connected to his Cree identity, but here it distances him from the men in his unit. While Xavier's alienation doesn't usually affect others, here the consequences are nearly disastrous.



NOOHTAAWIY: MY FATHER

Niska stares at the river water and thinks about her father. Niska’s father “was the last great talker in [their] clan,” and he told many stories. As a child, Niska imagined that the stories her father “weaved” in the summer would keep them warm through the winter. On cold nights, they would gather in their collective warmth and listened to his stories. Often, Niska’s father’s stories “were all that [they] had to keep [them] alive.” Xavier cries out, and it makes Niska think of a story from her childhood. “Now I tell it to you, Xavier,” Niska says, “to keep you alive.”

Niska tells Xavier of a cold and dark winter, long before he was born, when thirty Anishnabe lived in the same camp. They usually wintered in much smaller numbers, but the previous autumn three hunters had been “taken away” (one by rum and two by the North-West Mounted Police), and their families had to be cared for by the tribe. It was early in the winter, but they were yet to take a moose. Without moose meat, they would surely starve.

Just as the tribe began to worry that they would have to “boil [their] moccasins,” the hunters returned with a small bear. They found its den, roused it, and quickly shot it. The hunters claimed they wouldn’t have killed the bear, but they found no other tracks. Some of the camp’s members were from a “bear clan,” and they looked disgusted. “Who would dare disturb a brother’s winter sleep?” they asked. Niska’s father said they would look for more game until the next day. Only then, in the absence of other options, would they eat the bear.

Storytelling is central to Anishnabe culture, and Niska believes that stories are a nourishing and sustaining life force. Niska is kept alive through her father's stories (she speaks of his stories like blankets capable of keeping her warm), and she hopes to nourish and sustain Xavier's traumatized body and soul through her own storytelling. She believes her stories will help Xavier to endure whatever he is fighting inside, reflecting the immense power that language holds for Indigenous people.



Here, Boyden relies on the trope of Indians as alcoholics. One of the tribe members was “taken” by rum—meaning they were an alcoholic—and this aligns with popular racist assumptions that Indians are more prone to alcoholism. Studies overwhelmingly suggest that this isn't true (scholars have dubbed this false assumption “the firewater myth”) but the negative stereotype lives on and is exceedingly damaging to Indigenous people.



This, too, reflects the connection between nature and Indigenous people. The people of the “bear clan” consider the bear a sacred “brother,” and eating one is extremely taboo. Niska's father does not take this connection lightly and will only consent to eating the bear if there aren't any other options. This is evidence of both their respect for nature and animals, but also their cultural identity as a part of said nature.



Game was not found, and the next day Niska's father and mother prepared the bear. Since the bear "was [their] brother," he was "invited in," and they slowly processed the meat. Niska's mother and father prayed before the animal before slitting its stomach and emptying its guts into a pot. Then they skinned the bear and hung it over the fire. "He looked like a small, thin man dangling from his feet," Niska tells Xavier. The bear was roasted, and all thirty members of the camp ate until every bit was gone. Niska's father warned them that nothing should be wasted.

The deep cold of winter soon set in, and the rabbits the camp relied on were scarce. Families began to consider leaving camp, and a young hunter, Micah, was the first to lead his family into the bush. Micah travelled west through deep snow with his wife and baby daughter and set up a small camp. He saw many tracks but no animals, and he feared they would soon starve. During the cold nights, the Wawahtew would wake the baby and she would scream with hunger.

Micah's wife heard "strange sounds" at night, like "groaning and shrieking," and in the morning she found the "tracks of the windigo" outside their lodge. Soon, the baby's cries of hunger stopped, and Micah became "desperate." He cut a hole in the ice and tried to fish. "I will not return to our lodge until I can feed you," he told his wife.

The next morning, after Micah failed to return to the lodge, his wife found him frozen dead by the river. Micah's wife promised herself that if she and her baby survived the cold of the night, the next day she would find a way to feed them. The next morning, Micah's wife woke and built a cooking fire, and with her knife in hand, she looked toward Micah's frozen body.

Back at the camp, food remained scarce, and the hunters asked Niska's father to "divine" for them. He built his fire and they brought him the shoulder blade of their latest moose kill. Niska's father asked the men to describe the day they shot the moose and dripped water onto the bone heated by the fire. Each drop would "sizzle" and "disappear," and he continued this until the fire burned down. Afterward, he told the hunters they would find moose by the Albany River and that they should leave at dawn.

Niska's mother and father have the utmost respect for the bear and are thankful and considerate as they butcher it. This careful respect and attention to detail compared to the "casual" killing of the war highlights the honor of surviving in the bush, and in doing so underscores the depravity of war. This image upsets popular stereotypes of Indians as "heathens" and instead makes the wemistikoshiw appear as savages by comparison.



By leaving his camp for the bush, Micah effectively turns his back on his trip. He is a hunter and a valuable member of the clan; when he leaves, he leaves an already hungry clan with one less hunter to sustain them. Micah sends his people a message that his family's hunger is more important than the collective, which is at odds with traditional Anishnabe beliefs of the importance of community.



The windigo is evidence of the extreme isolation of Micah's family. Not only is the family isolated by the bush, but they have isolated themselves from their tribe as well, and the windigo is preying on them. Most Indigenous clans don't eat fish (unless they specifically come from fish-eating clans), so when Micah resorts to fishing, he is clearly very, very hungry.



Micah makes good on his promise to not return until he can feed his family, and in his death, he ensures their survival. Micah's wife resorts to cannibalism to survive, which dovetails into Boyden's argument of the unspeakable things people do to survive, but in this case, surviving means going windigo, and this seals Micah's wife and baby's fate.



"Divining" the location of game is one of Niska's father's responsibilities as the clan's hookimaw. Niska must later divine for the clan herself, and while it isn't explicitly stated that Xavier is a hookimaw (but it is implied through his identity as a windigo killer), Elijah asks Xavier to divine the location of Germans during the war. Scapulimancy, or divination using a shoulder bone, is an ancient practice used around the world. In this case, Niska's father does pyromantic scapulimancy (he first heats the bone) which is typically only practiced in North America.



The next day, after the hunters had already left, Micah's wife came in from the bush. She was "flushed and healthy-looking," and she claimed Micah was still in the bush but had provided her with lots of meat. Niska's mother and father immediately knew something was wrong, and their suspicions were confirmed when they looked in her pack. Niska's father ordered Micah's wife to be "bound and guarded," and it took four men to secure her.

Micah's flesh was removed from the pack and placed "high in a tree for the manitous to watch over." In the passing days, Niska listened as Micah's wife "fell into madness." In a moment of lucidity, she confessed what she had done. She claimed "a strange man-beast" threatened to "eat her child" if she did not feed the baby. "It was not my fault," Micah's wife cried. "Don't you see?" Micah's wife and baby were both "turning windigo," Niska says.

Niska's mother and father had told her of the windigo—people who turn into "wild beasts twenty feet tall" and eat the flesh of humans—and Niska's father was a widely known "windigo killer." As a young man he had become the clan's hookimaw after killing an entire family of windigos. "He must kill windigos once again," people in camp began to whisper.

"He didn't take long to do it," Niska tells Xavier. Niska hid under an animal pelt as her father approached Micah's wife. He whispered something in her ear, and she became calm. He put a blanket over her face and began to strangle her. She quickly fell still. As Niska watched, he turned to the baby and did the same. "I allowed you to watch, Little One," he said to Niska when he was done, "because one day I will be gone and you might have to do the same."

The hunters came back from their hunt with plenty of moose meat, and the rest of the winter went on without occurrence. In the spring, a local Indian told Niska's father that the Hudson's Bay Company men were looking for him to question him about Micah's wife and baby. They said that he had "murdered" them. Niska's father laughed and ignored the request, but by autumn the wemistikoshiw came for him. They took Niska's father off in handcuffs to their jail and he never returned.

Micah's wife is clearly going mad. She is "flushed and healthy-looking" because she has eaten her fill of Micah's flesh. In this way, Micah has very much "provided her with lots of meat." It appears as if she has blocked out what has happened, and this is further proof of her madness and her windigo status. Having committed this grotesque act, she is more isolated from her people than ever.



In First Nations legend, the windigo is often depicted as a large beast who eats only human flesh. The windigo threatens to eat the child if Micah's wife doesn't feed her, but the only choice Micah's wife has is human flesh. In this way, Micah's wife and baby have been infected with the evil spirit of the windigo by eating human flesh.



Windigo killing is not taken lightly. It is done for the greater good of the clan and only the most revered and important members of a clan are authorized to do it. This again contrasts with the ease with which many soldiers kill during the war. Unlike the war, survival in the bush is approached with much respect.



Like her father, Niska is a windigo killer as well, and she later must kill windigos in much the same way. Niska strangles the awawatuk man from the turtle clan who goes windigo, and Xavier later strangles Elijah with his Mauser rifle when Elijah goes windigo during the war. Micah's wife must die so that the rest of the clan isn't infected by the windigo, and she seems to understand this.



This is evidence of the cultural gap between the Anishnabe and the wemistikoshiw. The wemistikoshiw don't understand Anishnabe culture, nor do they even try. Niska's father didn't "murder" Micah's wife and baby in the way the wemistikoshiw believe, but he is nonetheless punished according to white societal norms, not his own.



By the following spring, word reached the camp that Niska's father was dead, but Niska already knew. Her "convulsions" had returned that winter, and she had seen her father in the tiny room. Niska's mother continued to teach her children the ways of their people, but there was one thing she didn't need to teach Niska—something Niska innately knew. "I am the second to last in a long line of windigo killers," Niska says. "There is still one more."

Niska's "convulsions" are the spontaneous visions she experiences. She describes her visions much like a seizure, complete with an aura. Niska has no control over her visions, and they are evidence of her innate identity as the clan's hookimaw. Xavier is the other windigo killer Niska speaks of, which implies Xavier is a hookimaw as well.



PASITEW: FIRE

Xavier wakes to the sound of Niska's paddle skimming the water. He looks to the riverbank and notices the obvious line "where the great fire tired out and stopped." Xavier tries to sit up. "Elijah and I found a dead moose not far from here," he says. "It had roasted in the fire. We were hungry and ate a part of it." The bush has grown tremendously since the fire. Fire can be "good for the bush" and "makes it come back more fully. Not back in France, though, Xavier thinks. At Ypres and the Somme, "the earth is so wrecked with shells and poison gas that nothing good will ever grow again," Xavier thinks.

In 1916, a massive fire, known as the Matheson Fire, swept through Northern Ontario, Canada. On July 29, several smaller fires converged near Iroquois Falls, Ontario and burned nearly 40 square miles. Many people survived by going into the Black River (like Elijah and Xavier do), but 223 people were killed in the blaze. It is impossible to know if this is the same fire Boyden intended Xavier and Elijah to encounter, but it is still evidence of what it takes to survive in the bush.



Xavier closes his eyes and is back with Elijah in the bush. They are tracking a **lynx**, and after following the tracks all the way to the river, the cat's tracks suddenly disappear. Elijah says the river washed away the tracks. He speaks in English instead of Cree because the wemistikoshiw "tongue is better for lies."

The lynx is Niska's spirit animal, and Niska later plays a similar trick on the wemistikoshiw trapper. She conceals her tracks to confuse the trapper, and here Boyden implies that Niska is keeping an eye on the boys (with the help of her spirit animal) as they travel to town to join the army.



Xavier and Elijah follow the river south. Xavier has never been this far from home. On the horizon, grey clouds hover and bits of ash fall from the sky. Smoke settles over the ground, and it is difficult to breathe. "The world is burning," Elijah says. "Let's paddle closer." Xavier knows this idea is "foolish," but it does little good to argue with Elijah.

The violence of the fire mirrors the violence of the war that Elijah and Xavier are heading into. When Elijah claims "the world is burning," this isn't entirely untrue. Fires burn throughout France, and as Xavier later notes, it is indeed "foolish" to "paddle closer" to France and the war.



After traveling the river for some time, Xavier and Elijah make camp. During the night they hear "booming in the distance like an elder's drum," and Xavier can feel the percussion in his body. "Get up," Elijah yells as ash falls around them. "We've got to get to the canoe!" They jump into the river and float alongside the canoe with their heads just above water to escape the smoke. They place a wet blanket over the canoe to keep it from catching fire and make their way against the current. After pushing the canoe through the flaming bush for what feels like an eternity, the smoke begins to thin. "It's getting lighter out," Elijah says.

Again, the fire mimics the sounds of war. It "booms in the distance" and Xavier can feel the percussion in his body, something that he grows very accustomed to during the war as the bombs and shellfire continually fall. Xavier's comparison of the sounds of the fire to "an elder's drum" also reflects Xavier's cultural connection to nature and land. He understands the natural world in terms of his culture and people.



Elijah and Xavier continue down the river, and Elijah notices a “hulk” on the riverbank. The smell of cooked meat touches their noses and teases their hungry stomachs. It is a huge bull moose, “charred and blackened” by the fire. They pull up to it and Xavier cuts a bit of meat from the animal’s hind end. “Good,” Xavier says after tasting it. They eat their fill and rest for the first time in hours. The bush is scorched for miles and “continues to smoke angrily.” They decide to camp for the night.

This is further evidence of what it takes to survive in the bush. The fire has more than likely chased off most of the game. The smoke spreads for miles, and the chances of Xavier and Elijah finding something else to eat are slim. Xavier is cautious as he approaches the animal (it is not an ideal meal), but he is hungry and must eat the moose to survive.



To pass the time, Elijah teaches Xavier English. The nuns had taught Elijah to speak English at the reserve school and “soon learned to regret” it. They would “just shake their heads hopelessly at the pretty little boy who could speak their tongue like one of their bishops.” Elijah could talk his way out of anything on the reserve and frequently did. “What if they mistake us for Plains Cree and give us horses to ride?” Xavier asks Elijah through the darkness. “Are they going to teach us to fight their way or will they just send us over there?” Elijah is quiet. “I don’t know,” he says.

Popular Indian stereotypes place Indians on horseback, riding the open plains, but many hunting tribes don’t have horses, nor do they know how to ride them. This harkens to the image of the “ideal” Indian that Xavier doesn’t live up to. He is made to feel less authentic because he doesn’t fit the wemistikoshiw stereotypes of Indigenous people. Elijah’s use of English underscores the power of language—Elijah speaks English well and uses it to his advantage.



The cry of a **lynx** wakes Elijah and Xavier. The cries surround them and sound “hurt,” like “a mother who’s lost her children.” They follow the tracks, and again the tracks disappear. Elijah says the cat jumped into the water, but Xavier does “not believe him.” By the end of the day, they arrive on the outskirts of a town. “We’ll camp and go into there in the morning,” Elijah says. Xavier agrees. “Will they make us cut our hair short?” Xavier asks. “I don’t know,” Elijah answers again. “Do you think the Canadians will separate us, Elijah?” Xavier asks. Elijah is quiet for a long time. “They’d better not,” he answers.

Boyden again implies that the lynx is Niska. Niska has (mostly) raised both Xavier and Elijah and they are like her “children.” Elijah and Xavier are going off to war, and Niska understands that they may be killed. The lynx’s cries are Niska mourning the loss of Xavier and Elijah. Xavier’s concern about his hair is like Niska’s experience in the residential school. Elijah and Xavier wear their hair long, in the traditional way, but the army makes them cut it to conform to wemistikoshiw ways.



NTAWI NIPAHIWEWAK: RAIDING PARTY

In the following days, rumors hit the soldiers that a sentry had fallen asleep while on duty the night of the raid. He was taken behind the line and shot by a firing squad. Rumors also spread about new German weapons “filled with poison gas that fall like a plague from the heavens.” Xavier, Elijah, and the others are forced to work long hours wearing gas hoods over their faces. The hoods are soaked in chemicals to “neutralize the gas,” and it gives Xavier a headache. He feels like the hood will “smother” him.

This passage establishes the punishment handed down to soldiers who do not follow orders. The sentry who fell asleep was likely exhausted and didn’t mean to do it. Surely, he doesn’t deserve to die for it, which is interesting when thought of in context with Niska’s father. The wemistikoshiw consider him a “murderer” for killing windigos, yet it is perfectly acceptable for them to execute a tired man for sleeping.



After Xavier and Elijah's "first round in the line," they are sent to reserve to rest. Thompson says the round was relatively "quiet"—only seven casualties. Xavier wonders if the executed sentry is counted in that number, but he doesn't ask. They are billeted with Grey Eyes, who "is a prisoner of the medicine they call morphine," and Elijah is "fascinated" by his addiction. The others in the unit "are drawn to Elijah" and "his endless stories," but Xavier is "a brown ghost."

Back on the line, Elijah and Xavier are given sentry duty the first night. Xavier watches as the sun rises over "no man's land." The ground is charred and blown to pieces and "so empty of vegetation" that it is "impossible to imagine anything once grew." The next night, Thompson wakes Elijah and Xavier in their hole. "Let's go," he says, leading them into a trench where McCaan and Graves wait.

Thompson says little and expects them to follow his lead. He "is very much an Indian this way," Xavier thinks. He blackens his face with charcoal and leads them out of the trench. Everyone knows a group of soldiers went into "no man's land" yesterday and never returned. "We're going over the top," Elijah says excitedly in Cree. "We're going Fritz hunting in the craters."

They move across "no man's land," jumping from crater to crater, when a flare lights up the sky. Xavier can make out the color of Canadian uniforms in a nearby crater. The men are injured, and Sean Patrick and McCaan help the men get back to the trenches. Suddenly, the gunfire and bombing intensify. "They've got us just about pinned," Thompson says. "Got to get out of here." They run for another crater and hide among the dead bodies. The gunfire soon lets up. "The good news, as you can tell, gentlemen," Thompson says, "is that the bombardment is done [...]. I vote that we find more agreeable accommodations before it's too late."

Xavier, Elijah, and Thompson find a crater that does not contain corpses, and they "lie still beside one another." An **airplane** flies above; it is a Canadian observation plane. Once it is dark, Thompson leads them out of the crater and back toward the trenches. "I've got a feeling they'll be coming this way soon enough to look around," Thompson says as he stops. "If you hear them scrounging about," he says to Xavier and Elijah as he hands them two Mills bombs, "pull the pins and throw these in."

The other soldiers being "drawn to Elijah" and his stories underscores the power of storytelling. Elijah's stories bring the men together for a bit of entertainment and distraction during difficult times, energizing them and enriching their comradery. Xavier's existence as "a brown ghost" speaks to his erasure as an Indian. Elijah has assimilated to wemistikoshiw ways, but Xavier hasn't. Thus, the other men ignore Xavier.



The charred battlefields are a stark contrast to the dense woods Xavier comes from. To him, it seems as if nothing will ever grow again, but Xavier later learns he's wrong when blood red flowers begin to grow from skulls and corpses. Nature continues regardless of the carnage, and it cares very little how many men are killed.



Elijah begins going windigo very early in the war. He relishes the chance to kill and looks forward to it. He refers to the Germans as "Fritz," and he has very little regard or respect for the lives he takes. This lack of respect, Boyden argues, is the major difference between the bush and the war.



Hiding among rotting corpses to escape intense bombing and gunfire is absolutely unimaginable, but it is the kind of thing Xavier and Elijah are forced to do to survive the war. Surely, Thompson did not kill all of the men in the crater (if any), but he shows very little respect for the human corpses they hide in. He is casual and talks of "good news." Boyden implies that there is very little "good news" to be found in a crater full of human bodies.



Thompson doesn't have to stop and kill more men. They could just as easily continue back to their trenches since they have completed their objective (they helped get the wounded soldiers back), but Thompson orders them to linger and wait for more men to kill. He is completely casual about killing when he tells Elijah and Xavier to just lob bombs at other men, again showing little respect for the lives he takes.



Xavier, Elijah, and Thompson hide for nearly a half hour before the Germans approach. They throw the bombs together and the ground shakes. "Let's go boys," Thompson says. "He kills with such ease," Xavier thinks. As Xavier heads back to his hole to rest, he thinks about how he has changed. "I have killed someone now," he says to himself. The next day, Thompson finds Elijah and Xavier in their hole. "What do you think of the last days, Whiskeyjack?" Thompson asks Elijah. "It's in my blood," Elijah answers.

KISKINOHANAASOWIN: LEARNING

Xavier wakes coughing. "Are you all right, Nephew?" Niska asks. "Do you want to know something, Auntie?" Xavier asks. "So many dead men lay buried over there that if the bush grows back the trees will hold skulls in their branches." He has seen it happen. They once left a battlefield and returned months later to find it full of "flowers redder than blood." The flowers grew everywhere, "even out of rotting corpses." Xavier winces in pain. "Those flowers grew back, but that was all," he says. "Useless things." Niska looks at him. "Sleep, Xavier," she says, and he closes his eyes.

The rain falls relentlessly for five days in the trenches, and it makes Xavier "wonder if manitous are unhappy with [him]." Elijah, however, "is happy." He wears an old German helmet he found in a crater and has begun speaking with an "English accent." The other men think he is hilarious, but Xavier thinks Elijah "wants to become something that he's not." To the other soldiers, Elijah is "a hero," but Xavier "won't give in to this army's ways so easy." He learns their language but pretends he doesn't. When an officer speaks to him, Xavier answers in Cree.

Xavier dreams of home and holds the **medicine bundle** that hangs from his neck. Grey Eyes tries "to talk Elijah into going to the medicine world with him," but Xavier doesn't think Elijah has tried any yet. Sometimes, Grey Eyes takes so much medicine that he "goes unconscious." Other times, he takes only a little and is "glassy-eyed and calm." Xavier wonders what Grey Eyes will do if the trench is raided while he is unconscious.

Elijah implies that because he is an Indian, he is innately suited to kill, but Xavier, the true "bush Indian," can't sleep because he is responsible for taking a life now. Elijah isn't a true Indian in the same way Xavier is. Elijah believes being an Indian means upholding many of the racist assumptions of the wemistikoshiw, but Xavier does not live up to these same stereotypes.



Xavier's comment of the dead left behind on the battlefield underscores the just how violent and deadly the war was. WWI was one of the bloodiest wars in history with over 10 million soldiers killed in combat, which equals to about 6,000 soldier deaths per day. (When civilians are included in the death toll, it increases dramatically). Despite this widespread death, however, the flowers continue to grow. Here, nature has complete disregard for the carnage of war and the evil human beings of capable of.



Elijah's German helmet, which he obviously took from a dead soldier, suggests that he is already going windigo. Elijah approaches killing nonchalantly, like a game, but Xavier worries that he has angered the manitous and is being punished for his own involvement in the war. This also speaks to Elijah's level of assimilation. He wears the helmet, symbolic of wemistikoshiw dress and culture, and even speaks like a wemistikoshiw. Xavier claims that not only is Elijah not the wemistikoshiw he presents himself to be, but he is not a "hero" either.



Xavier's medicine bundle, given to him by Niska before he left for war, is symbolic of his Native identity and culture. Xavier constantly "fondles" and holds the medicine bundle close during the hardest days of the war, and he obviously finds great comfort and strength in his Cree identity. This passage also suggests that Xavier doesn't know Elijah as well as he thinks he does. Elijah has already begun to take morphine (he does so on the ship to Europe), but Xavier doesn't know this yet.



Elijah and Xavier's unit are relieved for rest after ten days. "I'll miss the excitement," Elijah says. "But yes, it will be good to relax." They rest and go back to the front lines, and this continues until spring turns to summer. They are sent to Saint-Eloi, and Thompson begins to teach Elijah and Xavier "the art of the sniper." They practice for hours each day, and Thompson teaches them to account for distance, wind speed, and trajectory. He is "an excellent teacher, patient and calm."

Thompson teaches Elijah and Xavier to blend into their surroundings, and they become "a part of the earth." They wrap their rifles in rags to avoid glinting off the sun, and they learn to only shoot when they know they can kill. They must move immediately after shooting so as not to give away their position by the smoke from their rifles. "I am made for this," Xavier thinks to himself.

Elijah and Xavier construct a shooting "nest" that is impossible to see and wait for hours on end, looking down their scopes. "There," Xavier says in Cree and motions toward the bobbing head of a German soldier. Elijah fires, and the soldier's head "explodes." Xavier leans over and vomits. Elijah smiles. "I got him, didn't I?" Elijah asks.

Saint-Eloi is a reference to a series of battles fought from late March to mid-April 1916, near the city of Ypres in Belgium. Saint-Eloi was a complete disaster for the Allied forces. The British arrived before the Canadians, and communication between the two was poor to nonexistent. The city couldn't be held, and the Germans were victorious. In the end, 1,373 Canadian soldiers were killed during the battles of Saint-Eloi.



The ease with which Elijah and Xavier become "a part of the earth" is reflective of their deep cultural connection to nature. Xavier may very well be "made for" being close to nature, but he doesn't end up being "made for" killing like Elijah, which continues to upset popular racist stereotypes of Indians as savage killers.



This, too, speaks to Elijah and Xavier's differences. Elijah is excited to kill and seems proud, whereas Xavier becomes physically ill. Xavier certainly isn't "made for" killing here. Also, Boyden's use of the word "nest" to describe their shooting platform symbolically evokes birds, nature, and freedom. This passage perfectly captures Elijah's understanding of "freedom"—the freedom to kill without consequence or remorse.



KIPWAHAKAN: CAPTIVE

"After the death of my father, your grandfather, Xavier," Niska says, "our people were directionless." Many went to Moose Factory and "learned to stomach the wemistikoshiw food and ways," but a small group decided "to go into the bush instead." There, Niska's mother showed Niska "the magic deep in that bush that is as real, as alive as the flashing glow of the Wawahtew." But the Hudson's Bay Company ["instilled in the Cree a greed for furs that nearly wiped out the animals," and the land could no longer sustain them. They were forced to go to Moose Factory.](#)

Niska's father was killed when he wouldn't assimilate. Niska and her mother also resist assimilation but are forced to conform (by going to Moose Factory) through excessive hunting, trapping, and trading initiated by the wemistikoshiw. The wemistikoshiw are determined to stamp out Native culture through any means necessary. Boyden's language also points to Niska's deep connection to nature and the bush. She speaks of "magic" that is "alive" like the Northern Lights and has a spiritual connection to her land much like the wemistikoshiw and their religion, yet the white settlers still disregard this connection when they force Niska into Moose Factory.



Eight of them arrived in Moose Factory, including Niska, her mother, and Rabbit. “So ye all come for handouts now, do ye?” the man at the Company store said. “Do ye bring furs to trade me, or are ye like the rest of them devils that expect to live on credit?” They traded furs for a bit of food and “scattered around the reserve to different relative who had room.”

Rabbit wanted to go to school with the other children on the reserve, but Niska refused. Soon, word hit the wemistikoshiw that an Indian girl was running around Moose Factory “as uncivilized as an animal.” A priest came and took Niska to the reserve school. “She is all I have,” Niska’s mother said in English.

Niska fought the priest “like a **lynx**” and tried to run, but she was overpowered. At the school, the nuns kept Rabbit, now called Anne, away from Niska. They washed Niska’s mouth out with lye soap if she spoke Cree, and they did not give her food for days. When the nuns cut her hair, they cut it shorter than the other girls. That night, Niska snuck down to the room where they cut the hair and shaved her head down to “a stubbly field.”

As punishment for shaving her head, the nuns threw Niska in a basement room like the one from her vision where her father had been imprisoned by the wemistikoshiw. The nuns said she would not come out until her hair grew back, and Niska knew there was no escape. In the small room, Niska again had visions; this time of being in a canoe with a young man she did not recognize. Niska’s hair began to grow, and she “waited and dreamed and plotted.”

One day, Niska heard the breaking of glass far above her head, and “with a flourish of long hair,” Niska’s mother appeared at the room’s only window. She ordered Niska to throw her the bedsheet and pulled her up out the small window. “Did you see Rabbit?” Niska’s mother asked quickly. “Will she come with us?” “She is called Anne now,” Niska answered, and her mother understood. “My mother and I walked out of there and back into the time of our ancestors,” Niska tells Xavier, “living on what the land would give and slowly becoming wild like the animals around us.”

This is too is evidence of racism in the novel. Niska’s family doesn’t even want to be on the reserve, but they are nonetheless treated with absolute disgust and are made to feel like beggars. Their lands have been stolen and their way of life forever altered, and it is the wemistikoshiw who expect to be paid.



Niska’s mother’s rights as a mother and a human being are completely disregarded here. Furthermore, their traditional life (which Niska tries to uphold as well as she can on the reserve through refusing the wemistikoshiw school) is viewed as “uncivilized.” What is “uncivilized,” Boyden seems to imply, is taking a child from her mother and forcing her to live according to wemistikoshiw culture.



Again, Boyden makes the connection between Niska and the lynx, which he implies is Niska’s spirit animal. She channels the strength and aggression of the cat to escape the priest but is unsuccessful and is subsequently forced to assimilate. Niska’s shaved head is evidence of her resistance to wemistikoshiw culture (if she can’t have her own hair, she won’t have any) and she is punished for this as well.



Niska is completely abused by the nuns. They treat Niska worse than an animal, which is further evidence of their racism against Indigenous people. The connection between Niska’s punishment and that of her father’s illustrates how widespread this hate and abuse is—they are quite literally all affected by it. Niska’s vision foretells her “three-day paddle” with Xavier, but she doesn’t yet know this.



Rabbit has been completely assimilated to wemistikoshiw ways and does not wish to return to the bush, even if they did manage to find her and sneak away. Niska and her mother return to their Native life and identity by going back into the bush, and their connection to nature is further reflected in Boyden’s language. They become “wild like the animals,” he writes, but this also upholds racist assumptions that Native people are “like the animals” and are therefore uncivilized—an attitude that has been historically used to dehumanize Indigenous people and justify colonialism.



KAKWAPASKINAATOWIN: COMPETITION

Elijah and Xavier are given permission to continue working on their sniper skills, and Thompson is amazed as he watches them work. He can't believe how still they are. Elijah tells Thompson it is because they have hunted all their lives. He is wrong, but Xavier does not correct him. Xavier is "the only one of the two" who has "truly hunted for a lifetime."

By summertime, Elijah's kill number grows. Xavier is "learning to come to terms with what [Elijah] does," and that he is Elijah's "accomplice." As they sit in the dark trenches at night listening to gunfire, Elijah "has the smile of the mysterious on his lips." Xavier notices that Elijah sleeps very little and only talks of hunting. The others in the unit have "begun to treat Elijah like he is something more than them." He brags about his kills and the men think he is a hero.

At nighttime, Xavier and Elijah patrol the line, sneaking up on the enemy. This is what they "like best" and "what [they] are best at." In the dark, Xavier feels like he and Elijah "are **owls** or wolves," and Breech says it is because their "Indian blood" makes them "closer to that of an animal than that of a man." Rumor has it that the war will soon be decided in France, and Elijah is excited to get there. He is "afraid the war will end before [they] arrive."

A British officer is sent in for training, and he asks for the best shooters from each company to step forward so they can determine the best shot. McCaan selects Elijah and Xavier, and they step forward with several other men. They are placed in groups of ten and told to shoot at balloons in the distance. Elijah and Xavier easily hit their balloons. The group of men thins, and they are told to line up behind beef tins 150 yards downfield. Again, Elijah and Xavier quickly shoot the tins.

The officers huddle together and try to think of a new way to challenge the shooters. Elijah clears his throat. "Sirs," he says. "Place matches in the ground twenty paces from us and the man who can light the match with a bullet wins." Elijah smiles "the same trickster grin" he's had since childhood, and Xavier knows why. This is a game that is "impossible to win."

Elijah lived on the reserve until adolescence, whereas Niska came to get Xavier when he was just "four or five winters." Xavier went to the bush about the time he would have begun to learn to hunt had he been born there; Elijah was on the reserve considerably longer and therefore has not "truly hunted for a lifetime." This again underscores the divide between Xavier, who maintains a deeper connection with his Indigenous roots and Elijah, who is more willing to embrace wemistikoshiw culture.



It takes Xavier some time to accept the killing that is expected of them, and he is only able to do this because he convinces himself it is a matter of survival. Elijah, on the other hand, enjoys killing, and his "mysterious" smile is evidence this. He is already going windigo. He has isolated himself from Xavier and his Native identity by conforming to the wemistikoshiw army, and the level of Elijah's conformity is reflected in just how popular he is among the men.



The reference to owls again underscores Xavier's connection to nature. Xavier is good at sneaking up on his enemy because he has experience sneaking up on game in the bush, and Elijah is good at it because Xavier has taught him what he knows. Breech, too, makes the racist connection between Indians and animals, and assumes that Xavier and Elijah's skills are inherent rather than acquired through experience and cultural practice. Elijah's excitement is further evidence that he is going mad and turning windigo.



Again, Elijah and Xavier have spent much more time shooting than the average soldier. In addition to prolonged target practice in preparation for sniping, they both hunt for sustenance. Unlike the wemistikoshiw who get their meat from a market or butcher, Xavier and Elijah must hunt for their dinner.



Elijah knows that Xavier is a better marksman than he is, but Elijah doesn't want the men in his unit to know this. By suggesting an impossible task to decide the best shot, Elijah is confident no one will win, and the men in the unit can go on thinking that he is the best.



The matches are placed and Elijah and Xavier line up. There is only one other man left in the competition. They each take two shots attempting to light the match and miss. The third shot, the British officer says, will decide. If no one lights the match, no one wins. Elijah readies himself and fires. The bullet comes close but clearly misses. Xavier stands at the line, releases half a breath, and fires. A flame bursts from the match and the men begin to cheer.

“Your new name is simply X,” McCaan says to Xavier, smiling, “and when men ask you why, you tell them, X marks the spot on any target you wish to hit!” The company laughs and cheers. “X marks his spot!” McCaan yells again. Xavier stands in the middle of the cheering mob. “None of these who are here today can call me a useless bush Indian ever again,” he thinks. “They might not say it out loud, but they know now that I have something special.”

ONAHAASHIWEW: SNIPER

Sean Patrick is at his sniping post with his spotter, Grey Eyes, who “has the glassy look of the medicine in his veins.” Xavier looks up to the sky and sees an **airplane**, but he doesn’t know which side it belongs to. Suddenly, Sean Patrick is “writhing” on the ground “like a snake and grabbing his neck.” Graves immediately runs to him. “Shot through the neck,” he says as he rolls Sean Patrick over.

“I told [Sean Patrick] to take a break,” Grey Eyes says. “I told him that he’s too tall to be sniping here.” Xavier and Elijah bury Sean Patrick behind the lines that night. Elijah says it was a “Hun sniper” who shot him, and a good one too. The shot that took out Sean Patrick from behind the metal plate of the sniping post must have been extremely difficult, and Elijah is “obsessed” with making a similar shot.

Elijah “goes into another place” when he is sniping. He “forgets his British accent and his bragging,” and becomes “patient.” Sometimes, Elijah tells Xavier what the Germans are doing behind their lines and what movements they will make in the upcoming days. It seems that “Elijah is lifted from his body and carried to the other side where he can float around at will.” Xavier wonders if Elijah is taking medicine from Grey Eyes, but Xavier is sure that he isn’t. At times, Xavier is “tempted to try it” himself.

Xavier’s ability to light the match by firing a rifle at it cements him firmly as the better shot, but the men in his unit seem to quickly forget this, and they continue to treat Elijah as better than Xavier. This certainly bothers Xavier, but here he gets the satisfaction of Elijah knowing the truth—and Elijah doesn’t forget.



Xavier’s nickname as “X” is the only thing that remains in wemistikoshiw memory about this day of shooting. They continue to call him X, but they never treat him as if he is special (like they do Elijah) regardless of his skill, because Xavier resists assimilating to wemistikoshiw culture.



Presumably, Sean Patrick is killed because Grey Eyes is high on morphine and is not paying attention. Sean Patrick is looking only through a scope and can’t pay attention to what is going on around him. That is Grey Eyes’s job, and he failed miserably at it. While there is a code of honor that Native people like Xavier and Elijah follow when hunting in the bush, these standards do not translate in the context of the wemistikoshiw war.



Grey Eyes knows that he shouldn’t be on morphine while on duty, so he tries to displace the blame onto Sean Patrick so he can feel less responsible and be above suspicion. Instead of mourning the death of his fallen comrade, Elijah is concerned only with the shooter, which is further evidence that he is going windigo. Elijah doesn’t want the German sniper to be better than him either, so he must make a similar, or better, shot.



Elijah’s ability to foretell German movement proves he is already taking morphine. When Elijah injects morphine, he can float above his body and assess his surroundings, and he is clearly doing this here. Elijah doesn’t stop bragging and quit using his British accent because of his dedication to being a good sniper; these are things he gradually stops doing as he becomes addicted to morphine, which Boyden implies Elijah already is.



Xavier “adopts Elijah’s ways” and tries to “think like the Hun, particularly the very good one who killed Sean Patrick.” Xavier tells Elijah that it is easiest for him if he thinks of his targets with “antlers on their heads.” Antlers “will make it all the easier when the time comes to shoot one,” Xavier says. Elijah laughs. Xavier jokes, but he spends “[his] hours wondering what [he] will do when it is [his] turn to pull a trigger on a man.”

Xavier hopes that it will make it easier to kill a man if he imagines he is killing an animal back in the bush. But people aren’t animals, and this false equivalency fails to help Xavier adjust to taking human life. Elijah, however, has no problems taking human life. He knows killing men isn’t the same as killing animals, he just doesn’t care.



NAATAMAASOWIN: REVENGE

As Xavier’s unit marches down Ypres Road to the next place they will be billeted, he notices that “socializing now isn’t as easy” without Sean Patrick. Sean Patrick had been “a kind of bridge” between Xavier and the men. Elijah spends most of his time with Grey Eyes. “He likes to test himself,” Xavier thinks. “Elijah spends time with Grey Eyes because he likes the pull of the medicine.”

Elijah isn’t “testing himself” by spending time with Grey Eyes; he is spending time with Grey Eyes to get morphine. Elijah has already surrendered to “the pull of the medicine,” but Xavier refuses to see it. As a result, Elijah isolates himself from Xavier and his culture, further allowing the windigo to enter. Xavier too is doubly isolated. Elijah ignores him, and his racist unit alienates him (Xavier is a “brown ghost”), further isolating him.



Later, Xavier wakes Elijah in the tent he shares with Grey Eyes. “Wake up. It is important,” Xavier says. He tells Elijah he has “made an important realization [...] about the German sniper.” The bullet that killed Sean Patrick “was not shot by someone level with him or even above him,” Xavier says. The bullet had entered below his Adam’s apple and exited at the base of his skull. “How do we know it wasn’t just a ricochet?” Elijah asks. No, Xavier says. The Germans use copper bullets and chances of ricochet are slim. The shot had come from below them. “And the only place that he can do that from is “no man’s land,” Xavier says.

Xavier later finds and kills the German sniper, which again proves that he is the better shot, but Xavier is also the one who figures out where the sniper shot from. This implies that not only is Xavier a better shot than Elijah, but smarter, too. Yet Elijah frequently makes Xavier feel stupid because he doesn’t read or write English and calls him a “heathen.” Because Xavier doesn’t conform to white ways like Elijah does, it is assumed that Elijah is both smarter and a better shot, but neither are true.



Back on the line, McCaan gives Xavier and Elijah permission to spend extra time scoping out “no man’s land.” They sit silently for hours, completely hidden and still, watching. They see plenty of soldiers, “but they are dead, all of them. Everything out there is dead.” Elijah breaks the silence. “Did you know that I tried the medicine, the morphine, on that ship to England?” he asks. Xavier says nothing. “Grey Eyes is to blame,” Elijah says, beginning his story. Elijah doesn’t keep any stories from Xavier. “It is easy, hearing his voice,” Xavier says, “for me to be in Elijah’s stories so that I live them myself.”

Xavier’s comment that listening to Elijah’s stories is like “living them” himself reflects the power of storytelling in Anishnabe culture, but again it appears that Xavier is wrong about Elijah not keeping things from him. He has been living in a trench with Xavier for months now, but this is the first time Elijah tells this particular story. Surely Elijah has plenty of opportunities to tell Xavier about the morphine, but he doesn’t because he knows that Xavier will be angry and disappointed.



When Elijah and Xavier left for the war, Elijah was terribly seasick on the boat to England. Grey Eyes found him on the deck in the cold night air. "You're sick," Grey Eyes said. "You need medicine." Grey Eyes had several vials of medicine but no needles, so he had Elijah cut his arm and stole a syringe from the infirmary when he went for stitches. Grey Eyes injected Elijah in the bend of his elbow, and Elijah began to "float away." He floated over the officers' quarters and the sleeping soldiers, and even over the horses in the belly of the ship.

"That was the one and only time I experienced the morphine," Elijah says and looks across "no man's land." In the distance, he sees the bloated carcass of a horse. "I'm going to check the accuracy of my rifle," he says. He shoots and the horse "disintegrates." Xavier notices movement near the horse, about fifteen feet away, and then a bullet hits the ground between them, showering Elijah's eyes with dirt. Xavier's rifle is "steady," and he pulls the trigger. He waits and looks for movement but knows "that there won't be any." It was the "phantom sniper" who had killed Sean Patrick. "He was hunting us too," Elijah says.

SHAKOC�HEW: SEDUCING

Near dark, Niska finds a place to camp. The first day on the river has been "strange" for her. Twice, Niska did not recognize her surroundings and is "surprised to feel lost." The journey feels "very different" from the one they began. Xavier won't eat, so Niska "feeds him with [her] story instead."

"We weren't always alone out in the bush," Niska says to Xavier. There were others, "roving bands of hunters," who still "lived in the old way." Their Indian name was "awawatuk," and they "had the unfair reputation of being thieves and murderers" because they rejected wemistikoshiw ways.

Here, Elijah squarely blames Grey Eyes for his addiction. Elijah certainly was in no shape to protest this first time, but Grey Eyes presumably didn't need to inject him after that. This also proves that Elijah was taking morphine long before he admits it. He tells Xavier that the morphine made him "float away," which he has already told Xavier he also does over the battlefields, giving him an advantage in combat.



Elijah is lying about the morphine, and he immediately diverts Xavier's attention to the horse, away from his obvious lie. Elijah's unnecessary shooting flushes out the sniper, though, which is their objective. This is the first time Xavier shoots a man. He has thrown bombs in the vicinity of Germans and assumes that some have died, but this is the first time Xavier eyes a man through the scope and pulls the trigger. This form of killing is much more personal, and it deeply bothers his conscience.



Boyden draws a parallel between the "three-day paddle" home and Niska's story of the "three day road," which is the journey through death to the afterlife. Xavier may be dying, which might explain why Niska doesn't recognize her surroundings. Their trip may not necessarily be just another trip down a familiar river, it may be Xavier's journey down the "three day road."



By claiming they "weren't always alone" in the bush, Niska implies that it is difficult, impossible even, to be alone all the time, which lends insight into Xavier's feelings for Lisette later in the book. This passage also reflects the racism of the wemistikoshiw and the ways in which they force Indigenous people to assimilate. Those who refuse are made out to be criminals.



Niska's mother taught Niska to build a matatosowin, or sweat lodge, and showed her which plants have healing powers. She showed Niska which part of the skunk heals "snowblindness" and which portion of the **owl** gives night vision. Niska was seen by the other awawatuk as "the natural extension of [her] father," so she "divined for them." She placed a shoulder blade on the coals as he did and dripped water onto the bone as she "summoned the spirits of the forest." The first night, it was a **lynx** that came to her, and it showed Niska "the secrets of the forest."

Niska first came across the wemistikoshiw trapper in the days following her first "fit" in the matatosowin. She "played tricks on him," putting marten and fox legs in his traps so he would think they had escaped, and she walked his traplines in snowshoes only to "swing clear of [her] own tracks" to "leave him wondering how [she'd] disappeared." Niska was "invisible." One day, she did not hide her tracks but led him straight to her lodge. "The rest of this story belongs only to me," Niska says to Xavier, "and so I let my voice rest."

Sweat lodge ceremonies are done for many reasons in Indigenous culture. Ceremonies are held to purify the body, mind, and soul; or they are done for spiritual purposes, to give thanks or ask for guidance. Here, the ceremony is held so Niska can "divine" the location of game through the cultural practice of scapulimancy. This also highlights Niska's connection to nature, especially the lynx, which seems to be her spirit animal of sorts.



Niska's trick on the trapper harkens to Xavier and Elijah's experience with the lynx tracks. If the lynx is Niska's spirit animal and she can summon its spirit in some way, that explains how the lynx's tracks disappeared so suddenly. Niska's story of the trapper also suggests it is impossible to be alone all the time. As her clan's hookimaw and windigo killer, Niska's life is bound to be solitary and full of pain, just as Xavier's is, but she still craves human contact and must have it occasionally.



MOOSASINIWI PASKISIKAN: RIFLE

McCaan orders Elijah to take Thompson with him and Xavier when they go "to frisk" the sniper Xavier shot earlier in the day. Xavier knows Elijah doesn't want to take Thompson—he doesn't even want to take Xavier—but he must. Elijah prefers to patrol at night alone; however, if Breech finds out, he will surely court-martial him.

Thompson, Xavier, and Elijah cover their faces in charcoal as they always do before "going over the top." Xavier calls it the "wemistikoshiw smudging ceremony," but Elijah just laughs. "No Indian religion for him," Xavier thinks. "The only Indian Elijah wants to be is the Indian that knows how to hide and hunt."

Elijah isolates himself by going out into the field alone, which makes it easier for the windigo to enter. The "frisking" of the sniper's dead body is also evidence of the war's disregard for human life. Xavier and Elijah aren't ordered out to "no man's land" to drag the sniper out because he deserves respect and a proper burial, they are ordered out to the body to "frisk" and rob it.



Xavier superimposes a bit of his Native culture into what the army forces him to do, and it makes him feel connected to his Indigenous identity. Elijah isn't interested in his Indigenous identity, he only wants to embody a stereotypical Indian, which Boyden argues doesn't exist.



The men in the unit think that Elijah is “the resident expert,” but Xavier is “a fine shot too.” Xavier doesn’t “have the killing instinct for men,” and he knows that Elijah noticed him hesitate before he shot the sniper. As they crawl across “no man’s land,” Xavier leads them in the direction of the sniper’s body, and Elijah and Thompson wait in a crater as he searches the corpse. He crawls back to the crater with the sniper’s gun, a Mauser with a scope, and Elijah is instantly jealous. It is the same rifle Elijah has “wanted for a long time.”

Xavier later has a flashback to when he and Elijah are children, and Elijah steals a rifle from a nun at the residential school. Young Xavier tells Elijah that he isn’t sure that taking something that isn’t his is the right thing to do, so it is interesting that Xavier takes a rifle from the German sniper’s body here. The Mauser is a much better weapon than his own rifle, but Xavier already has a rifle and certainly doesn’t need it. It seems that the more Xavier is forced to assimilate (he tries to resist but assimilation can’t be completely avoided), his integrity begins to suffer.



Elijah hears shoveling near the German trench line, and he slips out of the crater to listen more closely. As Elijah creeps across “no man’s land,” he “feels invincible” and “steady.” He has the “focus of an **osprey**” as he moves closer to the enemy line. The Germans are “digging a machine-gun placement,” and Elijah is tempted to sneak up on them and “club them like one would club martens caught in snares.” He closes his eyes and “drifts to them.” Elijah listens as they speak but doesn’t understand. He takes note of “weak points” in their wire and heads back to the crater.

Elijah imagines killing the Germans just like Xavier killed the marten in the beginning of the novel. Xavier, however, didn’t want to kill the marten and approached it with respect. By contrast, there is little respect in what Elijah wants to do to the Germans. Elijah’s desire to kill suggests he is going windigo and has a thirst for blood. Elijah is also very clearly on morphine despite claiming he only took it once. He “drifts” over to the Germans, which is something he is only able to do when he has taken the drug.



The next day, Breech orders Elijah and Xavier to go on a raid with Thompson, Grey Eyes, and Gilberto. Thompson takes the men behind their lines where they practice the raid for hours. As night approaches, the men become restless sitting in a tiny dugout in the rain. Elijah’s leg bounces “up and down, up and down,” until Thompson can’t take it anymore. “Quit your shaking,” he says to Elijah. “You’re making me nervous.”

Elijah’s leg is bouncing “up and down, up and down” because he needs morphine and doesn’t have any. Elijah is addicted, and when he doesn’t constantly feed his body with the drug, he is twitchy and fidgety. All of the men are restless sitting in the dugout, but Elijah finds it impossible to sit still. The morphine heightens the already disturbing bloodlust and disregard for human life that Elijah is exhibiting.



“Dear Henry,” Elijah says to Grey Eyes in a British accent, “would you be a kind chap and make me a cup of tea?” “I’m afraid I’m out of tea, Elijah,” Grey Eyes says. Elijah leaves the small dugout and walks through the trenches looking for Driscoll, the medic. “Can you spare just the tiniest bit of M?” Elijah asks Driscoll when he finds him. Elijah complains of a broken toe, but Driscoll explains that supplies are short. “Just a little bit?” Elijah asks. “If I didn’t know better, I’d report to McCaan that you’re displaying symptoms,” Driscoll says. “But I know better, don’t I, Private?” “Yes, Corporal,” Elijah answers, “you do.”

Elijah’s use of a British accent, (which is evidence of his assimilation even though he considers it a joke) also suggests that Elijah is out of morphine. Elijah doesn’t use the accent when he is high on morphine, Xavier says later, and here Elijah is very clearly asking for morphine using the accent. Driscoll directly implies that Elijah is addicted, which also indicates that Elijah has been lying to Xavier all along.



KIMOCIWINIKEWIN: RAID

The rain continues, but McCaan says they will still go on the raid. Elijah's "stomach is sick," and he feels like vomiting. His head "pounds along with the big guns." McCaan orders Xavier and Elijah to go over the top and take out the machine-gun nest. They are to drop in some Mills bombs, place charges in the nest, and blow the whole thing up before coming back.

Xavier loses sight of Elijah in the darkness, and then he hears gunfire and the explosion of a Mills bomb. He waits for the gunfire to subside and runs to find Elijah. He is on the ground, "covered in red mud." Xavier rolls Elijah over and throws a Mills bomb toward the machine-gun nest. He lights a charge and drops it in the nest and pulls Elijah back to the trenches. McCaan meets them with Driscoll. "Just a few scrapes, possibly a broken arm," Driscoll says as he injects Elijah with morphine. Xavier watches as Elijah looks "different" and goes to a "calmer place."

Elijah "fared better than Thompson," who took a bullet and some shrapnel. He is "close to death" at a hospital far from the line. There is talk in the unit of Elijah getting a medal for "rushing the nest" but nothing of Xavier's efforts to "finish things up for him."

One night, Elijah helps Gilberto write a letter to his wife. Elijah's "desire to help somebody else with his words" makes Xavier think of when he and Elijah were boys. Xavier lived on the reserve for a short time after his mother, Rabbit, gave him up, and he met Elijah there. Elijah taught Xavier some English, and Xavier began "to understand the power of these letters and words." Elijah laughs as he helps Gilberto, but Xavier can see the "strong tide" of the medicine in his eyes. "I know now that it is more than medicine," Xavier says. "Much more."

"And you, X. Xavier Bird," Fat says. "How is it that a man comes by a name like yours?" Xavier explains that he is a "James Bay Cree" and tells Fat "the story of [his] name." He asks about Elijah's name, Whiskeyjack, too. Elijah's Cree name is Weesageechak, but he never tells people this. The *wemistikoshiw* say "Whiskeyjack." That is how they "make it their own," and Elijah doesn't correct them.

Elijah is obviously in withdrawal, and his body is screaming for morphine. He is no longer merely fidgety but is physically ill, and he is expected to go over the top. Elijah is in such bad shape that even standing upright is a chore. His condition shows that, like committing violent acts, morphine use has become a means of survival for him.



Boyden doesn't explicitly state that Elijah deliberately gets hurt to get morphine, but it is certainly implied. Furthermore, Xavier's actions in saving Elijah's life are incredibly heroic but are completely ignored by his superior officers. As Xavier refuses to assimilate like Elijah has, Xavier is a "brown ghost," and his own heroics are completely ignored.



Not only are Xavier's heroic actions ignored here, but Elijah is given praise he likely doesn't deserve. Elijah may have intentionally put himself in harm's way, which endangers the other men in his unit as well.



*This passage reflects the "power" of language. Elijah's own power was stripped when he was born on a reserve and told he was something less than the *wemistikoshiw*, and he attempts to regain some of lost this power through language. While Xavier clings to his Native language to adhere to his cultural identity, English opens doors for Elijah and gives him power. He can more effectively communicate and talk himself out of trouble; Xavier can't do this quite as well as Elijah.*



*Even Elijah's name is evidence of his assimilation. He could keep his actual name and correct the *wemistikoshiw* when they mispronounce it, but he doesn't. He is more than happy to let the *wemistikoshiw* "make [his name] their own." After all, the "only Indian" Elijah wants to be is the kind that can "hunt and hide." He isn't interested in being authentic.*



Weesageechak is a legendary “trickster” in Anishnabe culture and can take “different forms at will.” The white traders could never pronounce the word “with their thick tongues,” but “they saw the trickster in the **whiskeyjack**, the grey jay that loves to hear his own voice, is bold enough to steal food from their hands when they were not watching.”

At the end of August, Xavier and Elijah’s unit rests near Saint-Eloi. Elijah takes Xavier to the estaminet as often as possible, and there they “drink like soldiers.” Xavier notices a girl, and she smiles at him. Elijah notices her, too, and goes to talk to her. “See that one there?” Elijah says when he returns. “She’s the daughter of the owner. Nice girl but not worth the wasted effort when I can just pay one of the others for what I want.” He motions to some women. “Let’s get you a little something special. My treat,” Elijah says. But Xavier isn’t interested. “She smiled at me,” Xavier thinks. “I’m sure of it.”

Xavier meets the girl, whose name is Lisette, the next night, and she takes him to a small pond. Without speaking, she lies in the grass, and Xavier takes his clothes off. They hold each other, and before Xavier knows it, “she is on top of [him], her head back and mouth open.” After, they hold each other without speaking, then Lisette says she must get back before her father knows she has gone. Xavier asks to walk her, and she refuses. “If anyone saw us, I would be in trouble,” she says.

Two days later, Xavier’s unit is sent away from Saint-Eloi to a place called The Brickfields. The “only thing” about The Brickfields that “is not depressing” is the view “straight up in the air.” The world is a “wreck,” but “the **birds** continue to fly above as if nothing has changed.” Xavier watches a flock of sparrows and thinks of the first time he rode the train with Elijah, on their way to fight in the war. “No Indians in this car,” a man said as they boarded. “You belong four cars back.”

In the back of the train, several Indians sit without speaking. Elijah begins to horse around, teasing Xavier. “Look at your moccasins!” Elijah laughs. “That is the real reason we’ve been sent back here with the bush Indians.” The train takes a sudden turn, and Elijah is thrown into the lap of a sleeping Indian man. “**Whiskeyjacks** should fly better,” he says. “How do you know my name?” Elijah asks. “I don’t,” the man answers. “I was dreaming. There was a flock of whiskeyjacks. They were pecking at something dead.”

Elijah is reflected in both the weesageechak and the grey jay. Elijah is boastful and likes to play tricks, and he is sneaky. This also underscores the connection between Indigenous culture and nature. Even though Elijah isn’t particularly interested in embracing his Native identity, he still can’t escape his connection to birds and nature.



Of course, Elijah is lying here, too. The girl is Lisette, and she is a prostitute, not the daughter of a pub owner. Elijah knows that Xavier isn’t likely to solicit a prostitute, so he tricks him. This is incredibly dishonest on Elijah’s part, but it also underscores one of Boyden’s main points: no one can be alone all the time. Xavier is completely isolated in the army, and like Niska’s story with the tapper, Xavier yearns for human contact too.



This, too, speaks to Xavier’s loneliness and isolation. He is eager to be near Lisette but doesn’t know that she is a prostitute who has already been paid by Elijah. This is Xavier’s first sexual experience, and he quickly begins to fall in love with Lisette. Just as Xavier doesn’t take killing and war lightly, he doesn’t take sex lightly either.



This is obvious evidence of the blatant racism that Xavier and Elijah must endure as Indigenous people, but it also reflects Boyden’s use of birds as a symbol of nature. Here, nature is completely indifferent to the war and carries on as if there isn’t mass killing going on below. “The Brickfields” is a reference to a location behind the frontlines along the Somme River in France where the Canadians would rest between battles, which historically places this somewhere in the fall of 1916. From September to October, 20,000 Canadian soldiers were killed in battles near the Somme.



Elijah frequently degrades Xavier because of his bush identity, and here he implies it is why they are forced to sit in the back of the train, not because the wemistikoshiw are racist. The Indian man’s dream foretells Elijah experiences in the war (and it further draws a parallel between Elijah and grey jays), where he is constantly “pecking at something dead” as a sniper for the army.



“It’s a sign,” Xavier says to Elijah. Elijah laughs. “Everything’s a sign to you.” He looks out the window at an approaching railroad sign. “Hey, *there’s* a sign,” he says. “It says Abitibi River. But you wouldn’t know that, considering you’re a heathen.”

Elijah clearly believes the racist assumptions of the wemistikoshiw, who assume that since Xavier doesn't read or write English, he must also be a "heathen." Here, Elijah makes Xavier seem particularly stupid because he doesn't read or write, which also underscores how damaging language can be to Indigenous people.



MAMISHIHIWEWIN: BETRAYAL

“Listen carefully, Nephew,” Niska says to Xavier. The wemistikoshiw trapper, a Frenchman, came to visit often in the bush. Even after Niska moved to her summer camp, he still came. They made love everywhere that summer, and Niska’s mother could tell that Niska had changed. She made Niska drink “bitter tea” to keep her from getting pregnant and warned her daughter with her eyes. The “wemistikoshiw were not to be trusted,” her eyes seemed to say.

Niska says "listen carefully, Nephew" as if she knows Xavier needs to hear this story in particular. Lisette remains a sore spot for Xavier even after he learns she is a prostitute, and Niska seems to be telling him not to be ashamed or think badly of himself for what happened with Lisette. Not only was Xavier lonely, but the wemistikoshiw can't "be trusted."



Winter came, and the wemistikoshiw trapper came to visit again. While he was there, an awawatuk from a nearby clan knocked on Niska’s door. His clan had found little game for the winter, and he had brought a moose shoulder and asked Niska “to divine” for him. She had no choice and told the trapper to leave. It was time to do her work.

Niska's role as the clan's hookimaw takes priority, and she must ask the wemistikoshiw to leave so she can build a sweat lodge and divine. Wemistikoshiw aren't used to be sent away by an awawatuk, and the trapper is clearly offended as he never comes back.



The following spring, the wemistikoshiw trapper did not come to visit Niska. By late summer, Niska packed a canoe and headed to the place she had “promised” she “would never return to.” When she began to smell “garbage,” Niska knew she was close to Moose Factory. She left her canoe in the water and walked through the “Indian part” of town. All the Indians looked “full of food” and “drink,” and they all stared at Niska as she walked by. A woman called her children away, and an Indian man “blessed himself” and shut his door.

The wemistikoshiw don't respect the land in the same way Indigenous people do, and wemistikoshiw garbage litters the riverbed and stinks up the town, yet the wemistikoshiw still maintain that Niska is the "uncivilized" one. They have even convinced the local "homeguard" Indians that the awawatuk are criminals, and this is reflected in the Indian mother who guards her children and the Indian man who prays as Niska walks down the street.



“Ashtum,” whispered an old Indian woman from her door. “Come here.” Niska entered and the woman closed the door. “You are the one,” the old woman said. “You must watch yourself around here. Or the same thing that happened to your father will happen to you.” She gave Niska some brightly-colored clothes and a bandana. “Wear these,” she said. “You must wear them so that you fit in with the others.”

The old woman automatically knows who Niska is. As the clan's hookimaw and windigo killer, the wemistikoshiw would likely consider Niska some kind of evil sorcerer and arrest her like they did her father. The woman gives Niska wemistikoshiw clothing, and in doing so makes Niska less Native, and less noticeable to the both the wemistikoshiw and the "homeguard" Indians on the reserve.



The old Indian woman offered Niska some food. “There is talk that a certain wemistikoshiw trapper was fucking you,” the old woman said. “Be careful of that one,” she continued. “There are little half-French, half-Indian children running around this place that he refuses to claim. [...] This is not the place for you, Little One. You are a hookimaw, from a strong family. Happiness is not yours to have. You are a windigo killer.” When Niska left the old woman, she couldn’t believe what she had heard. The “world was not nearly as secret as [Niska] thought it was or wanted it to be.”

Niska walked through the wemistikoshiw part of town, but no one stared at her dressed in the old woman’s clothes. She walked into a pub and saw the wemistikoshiw trapper at a table. “Niska,” he said. “I missed you.” He offered Niska a drink and motioned to the bartender for another. Niska “choked down” the drink and stood up. “No more,” she said and walked out the door. Without thinking, Niska walked toward the school and church where Rabbit had been taken. The trapper walked up behind her quietly. “This is a good place, a holy place,” he said as he led Niska to the church. “You are a holy Indian, no?”

Niska and the wemistikoshiw trapper made love inside the church, and afterward, the trapper began to laugh. “I fucked the heathen Indian out of you in this church,” he said. [“I took your ahcahk. Do you understand? I fucked your ahcahk, your spirit. Do you understand that?”](#) Niska pushed him away. “You are nothing special,” the trapper said, “just another squaw whore. I took your power away in this place and sent it to burn in hell where it belongs.”

Niska left the church and went directly back to the bush. She slept hard the moment she reached her lodge, and when she woke, she began to construct a matatosowin. She crawled into the steam and “prayed to the four direction and to the earth, the sky, the water and the air,” and then “the spirit animals began to arrive.” The bear and moose came, as well as the fox, but the **lynx** “came to [Niska] most strongly.” Niska prayed to the lynx to “find the source” of her “hurt and extinguish it.”

In the following months, Niska’s mother came to visit Niska at her lodge. She told Niska that she had heard talk of a wemistikoshiw trapper in Moose Factory who had “gone mad” and was “running up and down the street trying to escape pursuing demons.” He had run to the top of a tall building and jumped out. The priest at the church claimed it was a suicide and “refused to give him a Christian burial.”

Like Xavier’s relationship with Lisette, Niska believes her relationship with the wemistikoshiw is more than it really is. The loneliness and isolation of Niska’s life in the bush as her peoples’ hookimaw and windigo killer has led her to crave human contact so much that she will take anything she can get. As Niska is so isolated, she figures her life is a “secret,” but it clearly isn’t, and the wemistikoshiw don’t understand her traditional role.



Niska is invisible in the old woman’s wemistikoshiw clothes. Walking through the streets of Moose Factory in the brightly-colored clothes, Niska is just another assimilated “homeguard” Indian, and no one pays her any attention. The people of Moose Factory only notice her when they think she is an awawatuk—and therefore a “thief and murderer—and they are frightened of her because they don’t understand her traditional culture and lifestyle.



The trapper initially implies that Niska belongs in the church because it is “a holy place” and she is “a holy Indian,” but he is only looking to hurt her. He calls her a “heathen” and tells her she is going to hell (a place Niska knows nothing about) because she is an Indian. The trapper both degrades Niska and strips her of her spirituality and identity.



This again reflects Niska’s connection to nature and animals through her spirituality. She is hurting from her experience with the wemistikoshiw trapper, so she summons the animal spirits for guidance. The lynx again seems to have a special connection to Niska, and she asks it directly for help during the sweat lodge ceremony.



The spirit of the lynx has found “the source” of Niska’s “hurt and extinguished it.” Ironically, the trapper is pursued by “demons” after he damned Niska to hell. The trapper’s religion forsakes him when the priest won’t bury him, and this is a fitting end to the trapper who used Christianity to hurt Niska.



MISTATIMWAK: HORSES

"If I am to take all of it at once and in this way end my pain for good, I will have to do it soon," Xavier thinks as he injects himself with morphine. He doesn't even try to hide anymore, and he takes it right in front of Niska. The medicine is almost gone, and when it is, Xavier doesn't know what he will do. He wants to talk to Niska and tell her everything, but he doesn't. He sits back in the canoe and lets himself "drift back to the comfort of old friends."

In the trenches, McCaan approaches Elijah. He says Thompson won't be back for a while, and in the meantime, Elijah has been promoted to "acting corporal." There is no talk of promoting Xavier. He is "invisible to the officers."

They move to a village called Albert, and Elijah and Xavier are ordered to "move out in an advance position and do what damage [they] can." The Canadians will be attacking a place called Candy Trench in the morning, which supposedly is named for an old candy factory nearby. Xavier and Elijah find an old abandoned farmhouse that gives perfect cover for sniping, and they move in to set up before the sun rises.

"Tell me a story, X," Elijah says to Xavier as they settle in the old farmhouse. Elijah thinks back to the boat ride over to England from Canada on their way to fight in the war. Xavier had decided to sleep with the horses on the ship. He "felt comfortable with animals," and they made him "feel closer to land." While he was sleeping, the horses were tossed with the waves, and two of them broke their legs. Elijah had just come in, and he quickly ran to find an officer with a gun.

By the time Elijah returns with Breech and McCaan, Xavier is smeared with blood and the horses are dead. "My God!" Breech yells. "I'll have you up on charges!" he screams at Xavier. "Now, now," says a colonel standing behind Breech. "It was no mean feat to dispatch two powerful animals with only a knife. What choice did the private have?" The colonel looks at Xavier. "I suggest we commend him for valor," the colonel says. Breech orders McCaan to throw the horses overboard. "You will never become an officer," Breech says to Xavier as he leaves.

Xavier considers taking all his morphine and killing himself because he worries that the withdrawal will kill him. Xavier won't die from the withdrawal of morphine itself, but his symptoms will definitely make him feel like he is dying, and it is possible that certain symptoms, like vomiting and diarrhea leading to dehydration, could result in death. His desperation shows that, rather than communicating with Niska to cope with his suffering, the trauma of war has caused him to want to numb his pain rather than work through it.



The other officers ignore Xavier because he refuses to assimilate to their ways, which is opposite of Niska's experience. Xavier is essentially being punished for not assimilating, and his heroic are efforts ignored.



Again, Elijah and Xavier are sent in before the other soldiers to clear a path, which suggests that the officers believe Elijah and Xavier are more expendable than the other white soldiers. This is likely a reference to the Battle of Flers-Courcelette, a battle fought in the offensives near the Somme. This battle occurred between September 15-22, 1916, when tanks were used for the first time in battle.



Xavier is drawn to the horses on the ship, and this too is evidence of his cultural connection to nature and animals as a Native Cree Indian. Xavier would rather sleep with the animals than in the ship's hold full of hundreds of stinking soldiers and no ventilation. To Xavier, that many men crammed into one place is "uncivilized."



This too is evidence of Breech's obvious racism against Xavier because he is an Indian. Like usual, Xavier doesn't want to kill the horses, but he obviously can't bear to see them suffer. Xavier should be commended, but Breech only insults him. Breech doesn't even care about the horses or respect them in any way (he casually tells McCaan to throw them overboard) but he relishes any excuse to treat Xavier badly.



OMAWAHTONIKEW: COLLECTOR

Elijah climbs a beam in the farmhouse. He can see the German line perfectly. He takes a syringe and injects himself. "I'm just dabbling with it," Elijah says to Xavier. Suddenly, bullets whip through the air and explode in the dirt near the house. "Watch our lines," Elijah says. "Soon you will see us go over the top." Within minutes, swarms of Canadian soldiers run from the trenches and begin to move across "no man's land." They are met with German fire, and Elijah and Xavier quickly take aim at the machine-gun nest and begin shooting.

The firing continues and "dozens" of Canadians are killed, but they continue to advance. "Look, X!" Elijah yells to Xavier. "Look! We are going to take their trenches!" Within an hour, the Canadians have taken Candy Trench, and Elijah can see clear into the trenches beyond. It is far, but he can make out German soldiers, and he is sure he can make the shot. He looks once more and shoots. "He's down," Xavier says. "You hit him the neck." Elijah smiles. "The best shooting I've done," Elijah says, but the gunshot has deafened Xavier and he doesn't hear him.

Back in the Canadian trenches, Elijah finds Breech to report their kills. "Was an officer there to verify?" Breech asks. Elijah confirmed there was not. "Your claim seems a little exaggerated to me," Breech says. Elijah goes back to the dugout he shares with Xavier to sleep. All the men are exhausted. Many are sick with pneumonia, and their feet turn black and rot with trenchfoot. There is death everywhere, and Xavier is sick of all the corpses, but Elijah volunteers for "burial duty." Before he buries a corpse, he looks into the eyes and feels "a strange spark of warmth" in his stomach. Elijah says it "fills his belly when it gnaws for food."

PAHKONIKEWIN: SKINNING

For Christmas, Xavier and Elijah's unit stops at a village to drink and celebrate. They go from house to house and visit with different units and soldiers. A Frenchman named Francis approaches Elijah. "You do not look like the Canadians that I have seen," Francis says. "I'm an Indian," Elijah says. "From the North. This one too," he says pointing at Xavier, "but he doesn't speak much English." Francis asks if Xavier speaks French. "He is a heathen," Elijah answers. "He speaks his own tongue fluently, nothing else."

Elijah is so deep into his addiction that he doesn't even try to hide it anymore (Xavier gets to a similar point with Niska), even though he continues to downplay it. Several units of Canadians stormed the Candy Trenches that day, and they were met with constant machine-gunfire like the men are here. The battle was ultimately a victory for the Allied forces, but the Canadians lost thousands of soldiers. The 22nd Battalion, one of three Canadian units to initially rush the trenches, went in with 800 men, and at the end of three days, there was only 118 of them left.



The image of thousands of men running into machine-gunfire and certain death seems irrational. It is suicide, yet they just keep running into it. This harkens back to Niska's claim that "windigos will spring from the earth" with the war. This level of death and destruction is insane, suggesting that Elijah isn't the only one who has gone mad with self-destructive bloodlust.



Breech treats Elijah much like Peggy's commanding officers treat him. Breech doesn't believe Elijah because he is an Indian, and Breech believes this also makes Elijah a liar. Elijah's obsession with death and corpses is a metaphor for the cannibalism associated with the legend of the windigo. Looking into the eyes of the dead "fills [Elijah's] belly," almost as if he is consuming them. This passage also reflects the additional dangers the soldiers faced besides war. All told, nearly 2 million soldiers died of illness or disease during WWI.



Francis's comment that Elijah doesn't look like a Canadian is a blow to Elijah's whitewashed identity. To Francis, a Canadian is white, and Elijah doesn't fit the bill. This has the opposite affect on Elijah than on Xavier. Xavier clings to his Native identity, but Elijah wants to assimilate to white ways, and Francis's comment makes Elijah feel less authentic. This also reflects Elijah's disrespect for Xavier's (and his own) Native identity and again claims it makes Xavier a "heathen."



"I've heard of one of you Indians, a Canadian too," Francis says to Elijah. "His name is Peggy, and he works alone." Elijah stares. "I hear rumor that he is dead," he says. "No," says Francis, but Peggy's "C.O. refuses to acknowledge all the kills he makes since he doesn't like to work with a spotter." Francis continues. "I know who you are," he says. Francis has heard of Elijah and Xavier and the German sniper. ["Avoid what happens to Peggy." Francis says. "Do what we do. Collect evidence of your kills. Do what my people taught your people a long time ago. Take the scalp of your enemy as proof. Take a bit of him to feed you."](#) Elijah smiles. "They will buy you honour among us," Francis says. "And we are honourable men."

By late January, a call goes out for volunteers to "go over the top," but Xavier has no desire to go. He watches as Elijah and the others put charcoal on their faces, and he thinks about the Frenchman, Francis. Xavier shudders. He thinks Francis is "windigo." When Elijah and the others return, Elijah is eager to tell Xavier his story.

Elijah tells Xavier that he and the others crawled out to the trench that moves toward the German line, and he found a place to slip through the wire fence. He came to a parapet and jumped to a metal roof below, but as he did, the roof collapsed into the trench below. Elijah found himself staring at three Germans and immediately pulled out his revolver. He shot one German in the head and with his free hand swung his war club at the second soldier's head. The club stuck in his skull, and Elijah looked up to see the third soldier "level a rifle" at him. Elijah prepared himself for the blast, but the gun misfired. Elijah raised his revolver and shot the soldier in the head.

Elijah doesn't tell Xavier, but before he ran to join his unit, he took his "skinning knife from its sheath and pulled the man's hair back," scalping him with "careful motions." He put the skin in his pack and slipped out of the trench. Elijah does tell Xavier, however, that the morphine has made him "lose too much weight" and that he hasn't "been able to relieve his bowels in any satisfying way for a long, long time." Xavier thinks Elijah "feels guilty." Without the medicine, Elijah says, he becomes very sick; but with it, he is an "invincible hunter" "using his **osprey's** vision to spot the enemy."

Francis's story of Peggy is very similar to the story Smithy tells earlier. Peggy is an Indian, so he gets no respect for the efforts he puts forth during the war, which Boyden suggests was a widespread problem during WWI. Interestingly, Elijah is given the idea to scalp his enemies—a popular trope in Indian stereotypes—by a Frenchman, who implies the French were the ones to teach the Indigenous people scalping in the first place. This takes the popular trope of Indians as savages who kill and scalp and turns it on its head, instead attributing this bloody act to the wemistikosiw. Here, Boyden seems to imply that scalping is not "honourable," and, as it turns out, not Indian either.



Xavier is losing his taste for war. His conscience is suffering because of all the killing, and he avoids directly entering the fight. He considers Francis to have gone windigo, but he has no idea that Elijah is about to do the very same thing.



Elijah is sure and capable up against the German soldiers, even though he is caught off guard. He easily kills without hesitation, and he doesn't appear to give any thought whatsoever to lives he takes. He also seems strangely accepting of death and has no fear when faced with it. Elijah later claims that he doesn't think of death until flying in the airplane, and that appears to be true here. Death stares Elijah in the face and he is indifferent.



This is when Elijah truly goes windigo. The scalps he takes metaphorically represent the taking and consumption of flesh within the First Nations legend. Elijah's bloody acts further isolate him from Xavier and the others. He can't very well parade his scalps around his unit; he'd be court-martialed for "atrocities at war." Elijah's scalps are just for himself, to satisfy his need for killing and flesh. Elijah does appear to feel guilty about his morphine addiction, but the high helps him to kill. With morphine, Elijah can fly like a bird, giving him more freedom and opportunity to kill.



KIMOTOWIN: STEALING

Around midday, Niska steers the canoe to shore. She builds a fire and makes some bannock, but Xavier refuses to eat. “For now,” Niska thinks, “I will feed him another story.” Niska looks around and thinks again that she doesn’t recognize her surroundings.

Niska’s mother, Xavier’s grandmother, died long before Xavier was born. Illness came and took her quickly, and Niska wrapped her body and placed her high in tree so “her ahcahk was free.” Afterward, Niska lived alone and heard rumors that Rabbit “was a drinker of wemistikoshiw rum and had abandoned her only son to be raised by the nuns in that residential school.”

That year, Niska’s “recurring fits and visions returned.” She knew that the visions were coming “by the change in the light,” and she saw images of a “metal wagon, moving of its own accord, black and shiny and noisy.” She saw “the face of a boy,” about four or five years old, and knew it was Xavier. Niska took the three-day trip to Moose Factory and stood watching the children play at the residential school. It did not take her long to figure out which child was Xavier.

Watching the children play, Niska made “the sound of a grouse,” and Xavier’s “ears perked.” “Nephew,” Niska said. “I am Niska. I am your Auntie.” Xavier was “bold” and seemed to know her. “I came to ask if you would prefer leaving here and going into the forest to live with me.” “Yes, Auntie,” Xavier said without hesitation. The next day, Niska waited for Xavier on the river, and when she saw him approach in a canoe with a nun, she made the call of a whiskeyjack.

Xavier paddled the canoe toward Niska, against the direction of the angry nun, who began yelling at Xavier to go the other way. Niska paddled toward them, letting out “a great wail, the wail of years of hurting,” and the nun, startled, fell into the river. “You paddle home,” Niska said to the nun in the few English words she knew. Niska “clipped [the nun] sharply on the head for emphasis,” and then she paddled Xavier home to the bush.

Again, Niska attempts to nourish and sustain Xavier through storytelling, but it doesn’t appear to be working. Since Niska doesn’t recognize her surroundings, this suggests that Xavier is on the “three day road” towards death.



This relies on the racist trope of Indians as alcoholics, an assumption that has had very real consequences. Studies show that Indigenous people who falsely believe they have a biological tendency for alcoholism actually have a greater chance of becoming alcoholics. Indians as alcoholics is a stereotype perpetuated by wemistikoshiw, and it has been very effective at harming the Indigenous community



Niska is seeing WWI years before it happens. She describes the new tanks introduced during the war and can even see Xavier before she knows him. Interestingly, Niska hasn’t had a vision for some time, which suggests Niska’s visions only come to her when there is something important to see, like Xavier and the war that nearly kills him.



Birds are again symbolic of Niska and Xavier’s connection to nature and, in this case, to each other as well. Niska makes bird calls at Xavier, and he seems to automatically know who she is. Her use of the whiskeyjack call is symbolic as well. It is connected to Elijah and is associated with the trickster; which Niska is as well—especially since she is rescuing Xavier from the residential school.



Niska’s “wail” is more than just her own. It represents the pain of all the Indigenous people who suffered years of separation, assimilation, and abuse at the hands of the wemistikoshiw and their residential schools. Over 150,000 Indigenous children were forced into Canadian residential schools during their years of operation.



ONATOPANIWIW: FIGHTER

For the short time that Xavier lived on the reservation, he was always with Elijah. “He protected me and I protected him,” Xavier says. Elijah and Xavier often made plans to run away. “One of the nuns keeps a rifle,” Elijah said “She keeps a good rifle and lots of bullets. I have seen it in her room.” But Elijah couldn’t get anywhere near it. He “was not good enough at sneaking,” and they were “forbidden” to go in the room. Niska hums softly from the front of the canoe, and Xavier begins to fall asleep.

It is early spring on the frontlines, and Xavier has been suffering a “miserable thing called depression.” To make matters worse, he can’t stop thinking about Lisette. Elijah and Xavier find “what promises to be a good nest,” but Xavier can’t “focus in the field.” Elijah suggests they play a game and keep a “running tally of hits and misses.” Xavier’s Mauser will be the prize, Elijah suggests. “After two weeks we tally our scores and the winner takes the prize.” Xavier smiles. Elijah is always trying to get his Mauser.

After Xavier’s first kill, he had, for the first time, “felt like an ancestor, an awawatuk raider and warrior.” Xavier prayed to Gitchi Manitou and thanked him for allowing him to live. He can shoot now, knowing that it is for survival, “as long as [he] prays to Gitchi Manitou.” Gitchi Manitou “understands,” Xavier says. Xavier’s enemies probably don’t understand when he sends them “on the three-day road,” but they might understand when he “finally meets [them] again.”

In early April, McCaan tells Xavier and Elijah about an upcoming “offensive.” He talks fast and Xavier doesn’t understand. Not because of his English—his English has improved, and he understands most of what is said to him—but because his ears constantly ring. Elijah explains. They are to scout out a place in “no man’s land,” as close to the German line as possible, and take out the machine-gun nests during the attack. “You are going deaf,” Elijah concludes.

It seems odd that Elijah would have a reason to be in the nun’s room, especially since it is “forbidden,” and it is later revealed that the nun is sexually abusing him. Abuse like this was rampant in the residential schools. Children who weren’t abused were neglected and forced to live in substandard conditions, and it has left a legacy of historical trauma that continues to affect Indigenous people today. This trauma could partially explain why Elijah has little empathy for others, since he has clearly been treated without empathy from an early age.



Elijah approaches killing here like playing “a game.” Each tally mark represents an actual person, but Elijah has complete disregard for human life. He thinks only of Xavier’s Mauser. Boyden again uses the word “nest” to describe their shooting platform, which harkens to Xavier and Elijah’s connection to the land. But Xavier can’t concentrate, which implies he is losing this connection and, in a way, his identity.



Xavier has respect for his enemies. He is forced to kill so he must, but he is remorseful and seeks forgiveness. Xavier still associates his Native identity with killing, however, and feels like an awawatuk the first time he kills, which reflects the racist assumptions of the wemistikoshiw. Boyden also references “the three-day road” as the journey toward death, which again implies that Xavier is on his own journey toward death.



The wemistikoshiw have robbed Xavier of his communication in more ways than one. He can finally speak their language (not by choice), but he still can’t communicate because their war has made him deaf. He is also being sent in to scout one of the largest and bloodiest offensives of the war. Xavier is risking his life for the same people who clearly don’t care about him.



The night before the offensive, Elijah and Xavier blacken their faces and crawl out into “no man’s land.” They spot a good place, close to the Germans as ordered, and wait until morning. McCaan said there will be “intense” shellfire as the men storm “no man’s land” and to be prepared. The sun rises, and the shellfire begins, and Xavier hears “the desperate roar of men scrambling their way over the top.” He looks through his scope at the German line. Their trenches have been blown to pieces and there is no sign of movement.

Suddenly, Xavier notices movement on the German line, and men begin to climb out of the blown trenches. “Look at them all!” Elijah yells. Xavier puts his crosshairs on one of the soldiers and fires. The Canadian artillery begins to strike, and “the whole earth is on fire in front of [Xavier].” He shoots again as German machine guns cut down the advancing Canadians. Xavier catches some movement and sees what appears to be a machine-gun nest. He steadies himself and pulls the trigger.

Xavier is thrown back, and he can see the Canadian soldiers more clearly now. They are close—so close to the Germans that the men begin to use their bayonets, stabbing and slicing as they run. Gilberto runs up to Xavier and offers his hand. Just as Xavier grabs for it, Gilberto’s “face blooms into a red flower,” and he falls onto Xavier. He screams and jumps up, pushing Gilberto’s body to the side.

Xavier jumps into a German trench and looks around. A young German charges him with a rifle. Xavier “sidesteps” him and thrusts his bayonet deep into the German’s belly. Xavier turns, to keep from “throwing up,” and a second German, a large man with red hair, charges him. Xavier buries his bayonet in the man’s back and falls as he pulls it out. The man staggers over to him and wraps his large hands around Xavier’s throat. “He is no monster, just a man,” Xavier thinks as he runs out of air. McCaan appears and places his revolver to the man’s temple. He pulls the trigger and “calmly” moves to the next trench, firing as he goes.

ISHINAKWAHITISIW: TURNING

The Canadian lines are “loud and happy.” They had done what the Frenchmen and Englishmen hadn’t been able to do. The Canadians “are an army to be reckoned with” and are “no longer the colonials” to be “looked down” on by Englishmen. They are directly responsible for the first Allied victory. Xavier and Elijah’s unit are billeted near a wrecked village, and on a warm day, Xavier and Elijah sit by the river with Grey Eyes, Graves, and Fat (the only men left of their original unit), and several other new men.

Elijah and Xavier are incredibly close to the German lines, which is certainly a harrowing experience. The amount of trauma that Xavier and Elijah are forced to live through during the war is unimaginable, and it is no doubt part of what is “consuming” and slowly killing Xavier.



The Germans have dug below their trenches and were only waiting to attack, but Elijah sounds almost excited to see them, and begins “pecking” them off like the old Indian man foresees on the train when Elijah and Xavier first leave for the war. Elijah never hesitates, but Xavier takes some time to begin shooting, further highlighting the relative disrespect that Elijah has for human life.



This close, hand-to-hand combat speaks to the raw violence of the war. It is also incredibly personal, and probably much more traumatic than just pulling a trigger. Gilberto’s face blooming into a red flower points to nature, which is again indifferent to the evil ways of humans.



Xavier frequently becomes sick to his stomach when he is forced to kill, and this kill is particularly traumatic. This is definitely a kill or be killed situation—he has to do it, just like he had to kill the marten in the beginning of the novel—but he has to fight the urge to vomit this time as well. There is a huge difference between Xavier and McCaan, who “calmly” shoots a man pointblank in the head. Xavier sees an actual “man,” not a “monster,” when he looks at his enemy. Xavier has a respect for his enemy that his fellow soldiers seem to lack.



The Canadians are empowered by their victory. It makes them feel equal to Britain, and they celebrate this equality; however, this is the same thing the Canadians, or wemistikoshiw, have denied Xavier. They celebrate no longer being looked down on, but then they look down on Xavier. Boyden suggests that since they have been oppressed by another, they should be more aware of their own oppression.



German airplanes appear in the sky and begin shooting at observation balloons. The men cheer as Canadian planes arrive, shooting the German planes from the sky. "I would give my left arm to fly in one of those aeroplanes," Elijah says. Xavier "can't imagine anything more frightening," but Elijah is different. Elijah sneaks out to "no man's land" in the dark and slits the throats of "Hun" in their listening posts. He doesn't tell Xavier that he takes their scalps, too, but Xavier knows this to be true. He also knows that Elijah doesn't speak in an English accent when he takes morphine.

The men watch as a **duck** lands on the water and all decide it would make a great dinner. "I'll bet Whiskeyjack could hit it from here," one of the men says. Elijah stands immediately. He aims and fires, narrowly missing the duck. "Nice shot, anyway," the men say as Xavier stands and aims. He shoots quickly and surely, hitting the duck square. The men are speechless as Xavier goes to retrieve the duck. "Me, I won't let them forget who I am," Xavier thinks.

Months pass, and Xavier can only think of home and the girl named Lisette. If he can't go home, he thinks, then he must see Lisette. He considers walking the thirty-five miles to her village and thinks of ways to sneak off. It occurs to Xavier as he watches the wemistikoshiw soldiers that they do everything in groups of three. "They are obsessed by that number," Xavier thinks. Their army is divided into three—the infantry, artillery, and cavalry—and they do training, and then combat and recovery. They work in threes and "die in threes," and pray to their three manitous, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Xavier too has "begun to see the world in threes." There is his life before the wemistikoshiw army, his life in the war, and, if he survives, his life after the war. Even Niska claims everyone will "someday walk the three-day road." There must be "some magic" in the number, Xavier thinks, some "connection" between "their world and [his]." If Xavier can figure out what it is, maybe he can survive the war.

Elijah carries his scalps with him, "dried out" to "prevent rot" and "strung together." Xavier doesn't know how many he has, but he knows there are many. "I am better than Peggy," Elijah says. "He cannot take a scalp." Elijah's smile "burns" with "an obsession that is frightening."

Elijah's choice of words that he would give his "left arm to fly" is also ironic, as Xavier loses his left leg when a grenade sends him flying in the air. Elijah equates flying with birds and complete freedom, and he wants to feel that freedom. Elijah's lone trips to "no man's land" are further evidence of his madness. As Elijah sneaks out alone, he further isolates himself (which he does with morphine as well), making himself more vulnerable to the windigo.



Elijah tells the men in his unit that he is a bush hunter, and this isn't exactly untrue, but here he fails the test of authenticity. Xavier, however, is a true Indian, and he doesn't want the men to forget it. Xavier is invisible to his unit because he hasn't assimilated like Elijah, but for this one moment, they all see him.



If Xavier deserts his unit for any reason, he risks being punished by firing squad. Elijah risks this too when he sneaks off to "no man's land." The reasons why Xavier and Elijah desert their units are very telling of their differences as characters. Elijah deserts his unit to go kill, but Xavier deserts his unit because he thinks he's falling in love. Elijah risks his life to kill, but Xavier risks his for love.



The wemistikoshiw completely run Xavier's life. His life is divided and decided by them, but he still looks to find common ground. This speaks to Xavier's basic goodness. He has every right to hate the wemistikoshiw, but he always takes the highroad.



Elijah has gone completely mad. He is "obsessed" with being a better sniper than Peggy and proving his worth to the wemistikoshiw. He desperately wants to be accepted in the white world.



By the middle of summer, Xavier doesn't want to fight anymore, and he makes up his mind to go see Lisette. He wraps his head with gauze and hops on a medical convoy headed for the village. When Xavier arrives in Lisette's village, he slips away from the medics and finds Lisette's house. He quietly knocks on the door and waits. Minutes later she answers. "You are hurt," she says. Xavier shakes his head and removes the gauze. "It is me, Xavier," he says. "I remember you!" Lisette says. "You are the Indian boy. [...] You can't stay, Indian boy." She tells him she is "with another" and he must leave.

A British officer appears behind Lisette. "Who are you soldier?" he asks. Xavier reaches out and punches the officer, knocking Lisette down in the process. He runs "as fast as [he] can" back to his unit and makes it right before morning roll call. "You went to find that girl, didn't you," Elijah whispers in line. "I could have saved you the trouble and told you she was a whore, but you would not have listened."

McCaan and Breech come into the trench to address the soldiers. "An important announcement, gentlemen," McCaan says. They will soon be sent to a "new undisclosed location," but in the meantime, McCaan is "especially proud to note" that Elijah has been awarded "the MM for unmatched bravery in the face of the enemy." McCaan dismisses the men. "Private Bird," he yells, "report to me at once!"

Elijah looks to Xavier. "I will come with you," he says. "Just speak in Cree and I will translate." Elijah and Xavier report to McCaan's dugout where he waits with Breech. "Private Bird's English is very poor, sir," Elijah says. "You will need me to translate." McCaan knows that Xavier's English has improved, and he no longer needs a translator but says nothing. "It is a desperate army indeed that allows non-English speakers into it," says Breech.

Breech asks Elijah if Xavier understands that the punishment for desertion is death by firing squad. "I've got an idea," Elijah says in Cree. "Just speak in our tongue and I will do the translating." "I don't give a shit anymore," Xavier says in Cree. "The private says that he went in search of fresh game for the men," Elijah tells Breech. Breech seems less angry now, but he says that leaving without permission is a "dire offence." Elijah nods. "Pretty good lie, eh?" he says to Xavier. "Tell the lieutenant that I fucked his mother last night." Elijah fights a giggle. "And why do they overlook me for all of the honours?" Xavier asks.

Xavier has no idea that Lisette is a prostitute. Not only does Xavier have to suffer the indignity of misunderstanding the situation so badly, but Lisette further insults him by calling him "Indian boy." She knows Xavier's name, but she twice calls him "Indian boy," as if to remind him once more time that he isn't white. Xavier has risked his life to see Lisette, and he could still get caught, and he is crushed by the blow.



This is one of the only times Xavier loses his temper. The British officer is a stand-in for all the officers who have mistreated Xavier, and he lets him have it. Elijah's joke was cruel, but he isn't wrong. Xavier is so lonely and isolated in the army that he probably wouldn't have listened to the truth.



The MM, or Military Medal, is a decoration given by the British, and Elijah doesn't deserve it. Xavier deserves that medal, but instead of being commended, he is threatened and almost punished. Xavier is continually overlooked, almost as if he is invisible—unless he does something wrong.



Again, Breech shows his racism. He implies that Xavier isn't good enough for his army, but he is by far one of the best soldiers. Breech also implies that Xavier is inferior because he doesn't speak English, which again underscores the power of language to oppress Indigenous people.



Xavier is oppressed by language, but he takes some of that power back here. By pretending not to know English, Xavier is empowered, if even for only a short while. Xavier can say what he wants—they don't understand his language—but he understands them, which gives him power over them. Xavier notes earlier that there is immense power in words, and this interaction is a prime example.



"The private has not been himself since our offensive," Elijah tells Breech. He says Xavier took "a tremendous blow to the head" and has been "nauseous" and "forgetful" ever since. Xavier had simply wanted to help feed the men and forgot to tell McCaan, he says. Xavier has not seen the medic about his head because he fears "the English form of medicine." Breech orders Xavier to three days observation in the infirmary. "I will not even dare ask what sorcery this heathen practices in the wild forests back home," Breech says. "You are a lucky bastard," Elijah says in Cree.

Xavier is again insulted and called "a heathen." He is continually accused of being uncivilized, but Xavier proves time and time again that he is more civilized than the wemistikoshiw. Xavier is taken from his comfortable life in the bush to live in filth and disease in a ditch where men kill each other without remorse. Boyden seems to overwhelmingly argue that it is the wemistikoshiw who are the heathens, not the Indigenous people.



KA NIPIHAT WINDIGOWA: WINDIGO KILLER

Xavier smiles as Niska tells him the story of the nun. She asks Xavier if he remembers the day the "awawatuk from the turtle clan" came to visit. "One of us has gone windigo this winter," the *awawatuk* said immediately. He told Niska his nephew went into the woods several weeks ago and came back with human meat. "He has gone mad and threatens to destroy all of us," the man said.

Like Micah and his wife, the awawatuk man goes into the bush alone and goes windigo, which reflects Boyden's overarching argument of the dangers of isolation. The man leaves his tribe, and without them, the windigo is free to enter.



"We will leave at once," Niska told Xavier, and they set out with the old *awawatuk* toward his camp. The man's story was much like Micah's, only it was the man that went windigo and ate his wife. Niska was nervous as they approached the camp. She feared the *windigo* had gotten loose and killed everyone. When they arrived, all was calm. Niska could see the glow of the *windigo* through the lodge walls. "An aura as bright to me as the North Lights pulsed from within a great sadness," Niska says.

The Northern Lights are often seen as the spirits of ancestors in Native culture, which makes sense here. Niska's ancestors guide her to the windigo, who must be killed to save them all. Like her father, Niska approaches windigo killing with the utmost respect and feels a "great sadness" for what she must do.



Niska did not have a plan as she approached the windigo. He remained calm as she slipped the rope around his neck. All she had to do was twist the rope with a stick and it would be over. Niska prayed to Gitchi Manitou and began to twist. He began to buck and struggle, but Niska prayed louder, and he soon fell slack. After, on "shaking legs," Niska told the *awawatuk* man to build a fire and burn the body "until there was nothing left." Later, Xavier asked why she had killed the man. "Sometimes one must be sacrificed if all are to survive," Niska answered.

Niska doesn't have a plan because she innately knows what to do. Plus, she has watched her father kill windigos. Niska's words have special meaning when placed in context with Xavier's killing of Elijah. Like this windigo, Elijah must be "sacrificed" so that Xavier can live. This also reflects Native beliefs of the importance of community—the collective is worth more than the individual.



"I want a friend, Auntie," Xavier said to Niska as he grew. "I am lonely." She agreed to move camp closer to town so Xavier could find other children to play and hunt with. She warned him to stay away from the wemistikoshiw; if they found him, they would take him away. Xavier soon came home with Elijah. His mother was dead, he said, and his father was a trapper whom he'd never known. "Your friend began to return to our camp with a rifle and many bullets," Niska says. She didn't know where Elijah got them from, but she would watch the boys practice shooting at targets.

Any Indigenous child the wemistikoshiw came across was sent to the residential school. Residential schools operated for over one hundred years in Canada, and during that time, it is estimated that nearly one third of all Native children were forced into them. Xavier's desire for a friend again implies that no one can be alone all the time.



Elijah told Xavier that he took the rifle from the nun on the reserve. “What does a nun need with a gun, anyway?” he said. “I don’t know if it is right to take something that isn’t yours,” Xavier said as Niska stuck her head out of the lodge. “Nephew,” she yelled, “the two of you are truly talented marksmen.” Elijah looked to Xavier. “Why does she call you Nephew and not your real name?” he asked. Xavier was confused. “Nephew is my real name,” he said. “I am her nephew.” Elijah shook his head. “Your name is Xavier,” he said. “Your Christian name is Xavier. And mine is Elijah.”

Elijah’s reference to Xavier’s “real name” is again evidence of whitewashing and assimilation. Xavier isn’t Christian and he doesn’t need a Christian name, but one is forced on him anyway. Xavier’s “real name” is Little Bird Dancer (which is why his last name is Bird) but this is taken from him too. The wemistikoshiw have told him he is Xavier, but it certainly is not his “real name.”



TAPAKWEWIN: SNARING

Niska makes camp, and Xavier injects enough morphine to kill the pain, but not enough to kill him. He no longer has enough to commit suicide, and when it is gone, Xavier does not know what he will do. “I must figure out what happened to Elijah,” Xavier says to himself. Elijah will help Xavier—help him to “overcome the pain”—and Xavier will help Elijah overcome the “war madness that swallowed him whole.” Xavier thinks of Elijah’s stories. “He never lost his ability to talk,” and that is why no one noticed he had gone mad. “But I knew,” Xavier thinks.

This reflects the power of language. Through his ability to speak perfect English and his love for stories, Elijah fools his entire unit. He effectively distracts them by impressing them and entertaining them, and while they aren’t looking, he sneaks off and takes scalps. Elijah takes advantage of others through language, and it gives him power.



Elijah slips through a “Hun trench” in late September. He can’t remember how he got there. “More and more” Elijah is “losing pieces of his day.” He is in a wrecked village, near Hill 70, and he has a thin piece of wire in his hands. Now he remembers. The snare. The village is a wonderful place for a rabbit run. He sets the wire. If a man as tall as Elijah runs through, he will surely be caught. “Here Fritz, Fritz, Fritz,” Elijah calls. A German soldier runs through and catches in the wire, kicking and screaming, hanging by his neck. Elijah sneaks back through the trenches and back to his own line. He doesn’t tell anyone where he has been. “Who would believe it?” Elijah wonders.

The word “Hun” is a derogatory word for a German soldier, and it, too, reflects the power of language. By insulting and demeaning the German soldiers, the Canadians are given power over their enemy. It doesn’t amount to much, but it is enough to energize the soldiers and keep them going. Elijah’s madness and his morphine use are obviously worsening. He walks around in a medicated haze and kills in increasingly disturbing ways.



One day, after morning “stand-to,” Elijah removes his sock, revealing a blackened foot. “Loot at that foot, Whiskeyjack!” McCaan yells and orders him to Driscoll. The medic gives Elijah whale oil to rub on his fit and tells him to change his socks twice a day. Driscoll hands Elijah a small bottle of pills and instructs him not to take them before patrol. “You’re looking rather anemic,” Driscoll says. “Are you eating properly?” “Just fine, sir,” Elijah says and “limps” away “whistling.”

Elijah’s drug use has become so bad that he isn’t taking care of himself. He isn’t changing his socks, doesn’t eat, and complains that he “never shits.” He is miserable and slowly falling apart, but he manages to keep up appearances, again finding power in language. Elijah is a skilled liar and has many people believing what isn’t true.



Elijah and Xavier's unit are ordered "over the top" near a town known as Lens. Elijah stands next to Xavier, smiling. Elijah "hums to himself a song that's become popular with the soldiers" as he gets ready. He can feel the vibration of his hum in his chest "and then all goes still." A "shrill whistle" breaks the silence, like the "call of some crazed **bird**," and Elijah feels his "stomach drop." The unit begins to run toward the German line, and Elijah and Xavier throw bombs into the machine-gun nests.

The town is "blasted." The soldiers keep advancing, including McCaan, Graves, Grey Eyes, and Thompson, who has just returned from the hospital. Breech orders Thompson to scout ahead with Elijah and Xavier and report back to him in thirty minutes. They find two snipers shooting up head; one from the ground and one from the steeple of a church. "Well, shoot them," Elijah says to Xavier. Xavier drops them both quickly. Elijah moves toward the church. He tells Xavier to go back and update Breech and says he will hold their position with Thompson.

Alone for a moment, Elijah injects himself with more morphine. "The world shrinks back a little" and the pain in his bowels ("that have not been emptied for years, it seems") subsides. The Germans appear to have retreated, and Xavier arrives with Breech and the rest of the unit. Suddenly, a German soldier wearing a rag around his face appears with a hose and a tank strapped to his back. "Lie down, Graves!" Elijah yells in Cree and flames explode from the end of the hose and "engulf Graves's body." A Canadian soldier shoots the German's tank, and the man explodes.

By the end of the day, the Canadians have taken Hill 70 and are set to enter Lens. Elijah "dreams of Graves" and of Sean Patrick and Gilberto, too. In Elijah's dream, Gilberto speaks to him with brains dripping out of his mouth. "Do what you can," the dead Gilberto says. "There is nothing sacred anymore in a place such as this. Don't fight it. Do what you can."

Elijah learns "to take pleasure in killing." Xavier wants only to go home to Canada, but Elijah tries to convince him that "the freedom of this place will not present itself again." Xavier knows Elijah speaks of the "freedom to kill," but Xavier does not care to have that freedom. Their unit arrives in place called Passchendaele, and Elijah drags Xavier to a pub. "There are other Lisettes," Elijah says. In the pub, Elijah and Xavier see another Indian. He's Anishnabe, an Ojibwe, from the looks of it.

Here, Elijah hums songs popular with the soldiers, which also reflects his assimilation. He happily hums the same songs that Xavier refuses to sing. Elijah pumps himself up for battle by humming the wemistikoshiw songs, which again points to the power of language. What brings Xavier down is empowering to Elijah.



Again, Xavier hesitates when it comes time for him to kill. Elijah even reminds him to do it, which seems unneeded at this point, but Xavier is so resistant to killing that he needs this extra push. Still, Xavier is obviously a skilled shooter and has no trouble hitting his target, but he is still ignored by his officers and passed over for commendation, furthering underscoring the ongoing prejudice he faces.



In the heat of the moment, Elijah inadvertently speaks Cree instead of English, and Graves is killed. While this clearly isn't Elijah's fault, the language barrier hinders his ability to warn Graves of trouble. Elijah speaks English well, like "a bishop" Xavier notes, but his slipup here reflects his true identity as a Cree. Elijah likes to pretend he is completely comfortable with wemistikoshiw ways, but this suggests otherwise.



Gilberto's message seems to tell Elijah to keep killing. Since "nothing is sacred anymore," he has nothing to worry about. He is surrounded by killing, so what he does makes little difference. Gilberto tells him not to "fight it," which Elijah sees as permission to continue his blood lust.



The war gives Elijah the freedom to kill without remorse or consequence, which to Elijah is the epitome of freedom. Of course, Elijah later learns that he isn't as free as he thinks, but for now, to kill without restraint is Elijah's only source of pleasure (besides morphine) and he will keep killing until Xavier stops him.



“Wachay, wachay,” Elijah says to the Indian. The Indian, a corporal, looks at them. “Three Anishnabe in the same place,” he says. “Some things are beyond chance.” Elijah assumes the man is Peggy and says as much. “You mistake me for someone else,” he says. “There are more Anishnabe than you might guess who wander these battlefields. We all want to be warriors again.”

“My guess is that you are Whiskeyjack,” the Indian says, “and this drunk fellow beside you is Bird. [...] Your reputation walks ahead of you,” the man says to Xavier. “From what I hear, you are one of the good ones.” The Indian asks Elijah how many kills he has. “One hundred ninety-four to date,” Elijah says proudly. “There is another one, a Métis,” the Indian says. “He’s from Alberta and the rumor is he has killed more than you, even.” Elijah is “sick of hearing about the feats” of other Indians. “What do you really want from me?” Elijah asks the Indian. “Think of me as your conscience,” the Indian says and smiles. “And you can be mine.”

MASINAHIKEWIN: WRITING

Xavier tells Niska that his medicine is almost gone, and when it is, he will turn into “the worst child [Niska] has ever seen.” His heart will probably stop, if the pain doesn’t kill him first. Niska sits next to Xavier and takes his head in her lap. She looks at his “empty pant leg” and cries. “How will he survive in the bush?” she asks herself. She bends down and feeds him a bit of broth with her mouth. He doesn’t throw up.

“Elijah,” Xavier suddenly says. “Do you know how many he killed? I’ve killed many too. But Elijah, he is truly talented.” Niska looks at Xavier. “What has happened to Elijah?” she asks. Xavier tries to stand and falls. “Nephew,” Niska says. “Let me tell you a story. It will help to pass this night.”

By the end of Elijah’s first summer with Xavier and Niska in the bush, he had to return to the residential school. In Elijah’s absence, Niska taught Xavier to build a sweat lodge, and she taught him to “divine” with a shoulder bone over the fire. By the next summer, Elijah returned. He no longer had to go back to the residential school, he said. The years passed, and Niska was “shown tormented visions” of dead men. She soon understood. “A war has started in that place called Europe,” Elijah said. “The Canadians have entered it.”

This is one of Boyden’s central arguments. Thousands of Indigenous men risked their lives during WWI, and they get little to no recognition. By writing Three Day Road, Boyden rights this wrong a bit and makes these brave soldiers visible.



The Indian is the only other soldier to give Elijah recognition for what he has done and the bravery he has displayed. Xavier is invisible to the white soldiers—he says he is a “brown ghost”—but the Indian sees him. The Indian also sees Elijah and implies that Elijah needs someone to be his “conscience.” There will always be someone who has killed more people, and the Indian tries to remind Elijah of this, but he clearly isn’t listening.



By losing his leg in the wemistikoshiw army, Xavier’s life will continue to be affected by the wemistikoshiw long after the war. As Niska points out, surviving in the bush will be difficult without his leg. Hunting alone will be nearly impossible. If Xavier does survive the acute stages of his withdrawal, long-term survival will be a constant struggle.



Niska again cuts directly to storytelling when it is clear that Xavier is struggling. She senses that something awful has happened to Elijah, but she doesn’t know exactly what.



Likely, Elijah hasn’t been excused from the school, but has finally ran away rather than continue to endure their abuse. He is physically beaten and sexually abused, so he lies to Niska and Xavier and tells them he doesn’t have to go back. Elijah appears to be the one who is first excited about the war. He embraces wemistikoshiw culture, so enlisting in the army is an easy decision for him.



Elijah and Xavier wished to enlist in the war and asked for Niska's blessing. "You must do what you must do," she said. On the day Elijah and Xavier left, she gave them **medicine bundles** with "protective herbs" and the tooth of a **lynx**. She prayed to the lynx to watch over the boys, but it did not answer. Word came of the war. The "wemistikoshiw had gone mad" it seemed and had new inventions used to kill that "were beyond belief." A local awawatuk told Niska that much news of the war came to the trading post in Moose Factory, and she knew that she must go.

When Niska arrived in town, the people again stopped to stare. She went directly to the trading post where the proprietor, Old Man Ferguson, yelled at her in incomprehensible words. Joseph Netmaker, an Indian man Niska remembered from long ago sat in the trading post. "They think you are a witch and a heathen and say you must leave here now or you will meet a violent end," he translated. Niska wanted only to know about Xavier in the war, she told him. Joseph spoke in English to Ferguson, who promptly answered. "He says that you are a dirty bush Indian and a sorceress to boot and he will not have you in his store even if you have a hundred relatives in their army."

Ferguson finally agreed to find out about Xavier if Niska agreed to begin trading with the Hudson's Bay Company. "You must sit away from them and you must not touch anything in the store. They say you must leave by week's end and return at winter's end with as many furs as you can." Joseph said. He translated the names of places she did not know, like Saint-Eloi and the Somme, but nothing of Xavier. The trading post received word of all the local boys who had been killed, but Xavier's name was not on the list.

During the winter, Joseph arrived at Niska's camp. There had been word of Elijah Whiskeyjack's heroism, and Joseph has learned the place where Xavier and Elijah are, if they are still together that is. "I wish to do what the wemistikoshiw do," Niska said. "I wish to write him a letter." "I can write it for you!" Joseph said excitedly. He had been "forced" to read and write English on the reserve school as a child.

Joseph began to write as Niska spoke. "You must do what is necessary to survive," she said. Niska told Xavier that Gitchi Manitou will understand if he must kill, and "Elijah must know this too." She told him to pray and make offerings to *Gitchi Manitou* and do everything he had to return home to her. Xavier is "the last in [their] family line," she said, he *must* return home.

The placement of the lynx tooth in the medicine bundles again suggests that the lynx is Niska's spirit animal, but this time it does not come to her as she prays. However, Elijah and Xavier are followed by a lynx as they make their way to town to enlist. The lynx doesn't come to Niska because it is already with the boys, she just isn't aware of this.



This is evidence of the extreme racism faced by Indigenous people. Niska doesn't even know Old Man Ferguson, but he threatens to kill her simply because she dares to enter his trading post. His disrespect is astonishing, and he even refuses to help her once he knows that Xavier is fighting in the war. Ferguson seems to know that Niska is a hookimaw, which is implied in the word "sorceress," and this makes him even more uncomfortable. He doesn't understand Niska or her culture, so he hates her.



Ferguson completely exploits Niska and her desperation to get word about Xavier. He will only help her if it benefits him through furs and money, which speaks to his despicable nature. He further insults her by sidelining her within the trading post. Ferguson could just as easily tell Niska what she wants to know, it costs him nothing, but he is determined to make her suffer.



Cree is not traditionally a written language, so letter writing, while important in wemistikoshiw culture, is not something Niska is familiar with. Storytelling is the Native form of letter writing, and Niska doesn't know where to start.



When Joseph writes Niska's words, he writes that Xavier "is the last in their family line," and Xavier believes that this means Niska has died. Joseph's mistake causes Xavier extreme pain, again underscoring the power of words to break one down.



MICISOW: FEEDING

Xavier's unit is near Passchendaele, and he "has reached the point where nothing makes sense" anymore. No one seems to know what they are doing, and the officers keep sending men to their death. One day, Xavier and Elijah are sent into a wrecked village to search it. It appears deserted, and Xavier enters a demolished building. He sees food on a table and realizes he is starving. As he reaches for the food, a flash of movement catches his eye. Xavier shoots, and a young woman falls dead next to a screaming child.

"I am sorry, I am sorry," Xavier yells reaching for the child. He hears Elijah's footsteps approaching, and just as Elijah enters the room, he fires at the child, killing her. "Mo-na!" Xavier screams at Elijah. "You couldn't tell it was a child?" he yells. "I am trained not to hesitate in situations of danger," Elijah says "coldly" and walks away.

Xavier and Elijah's unit soon heads back to Lens. On New Year's Eve, Elijah goes "missing," but Xavier is the only one who notices. He returns late at night two days later with a pack full of meat. The meat is "gamy" and a bit "tough." "Is it horse?" Xavier asks, tasting the meat. "No. It is human," Elijah says. "German to be exact." Xavier gags and vomits up the meat. "X! Calm down," Elijah laughs. "I am only joking. What? Do you think I'm crazy? I was kidding. It's just horsemeat."

MASINAHIKAN: THE LETTER

Winter in Lens is "quiet." The Americans have entered the war, and the Germans have been pushed back to the Hindenburg Line. Rumors of a trench raid begin to circulate, and soon Xavier and Elijah are ordered "over the top" with McCaan and Thompson. They make it across "no man's land" and through the German's wire fence with ease. They go in different directions as the shell fire erupts, and Xavier quickly loses sight of them.

"Sergeant McCaan!" Xavier yells as he sees movement on his left. Two Germans approach McCaan, who is on the ground. As Xavier watches, a German soldier draws a gun and shoots McCaan in the head. Xavier quickly moves back to the trenches and reports McCaan's death to Breech. By dark, Elijah and Thompson still haven't returned.

This is the moment when Xavier completely loses his taste for war. He is so used to killing, that he kills an innocent woman who is probably just trying to feed her child during a war. She is not Xavier's enemy and she has nothing to do with their conflict, but Xavier has killed her just as easily and quickly as those on the field.



Elijah is a cold-blooded killer, and Xavier knows this will happen to him soon as well. Killing the woman is just the beginning if he doesn't do something. When Xavier kills the woman, it is clear that he is in danger of going windigo, too.



Elijah is gone for two whole days and no one says a thing, yet Xavier is gone for one night, and is nearly executed. This reflects Elijah's preferential treatment. He has conformed, and so he is rewarded. This, too, is proof that Elijah has gone windigo. Elijah claims that he is just joking about the meat, but he is hardly convincing. Xavier doesn't think Elijah is "crazy," he knows that he is.



The Americans don't enter the war until April 6, 1917, but Canada has been fighting since August of 1914. The Canadians are exhausted, and while they have won some key battles, they have suffered a tremendous loss of life. The Americans offer some much-needed respite.



Sergeant McCaan's death is huge loss, both to the unit and to Xavier personally. McCaan is one of only a handful of officers who doesn't treat him terribly. He may ignore Xavier, but at least he doesn't verbally abuse him like Breech does.



Elijah comes back late that night. "I had to hide out in a shell crater not ten yards away from their line all day!" he says to Xavier. "I dragged Thompson out just before Fritz arrived," he says proudly. "McCaan is dead," Xavier says. "I watched it happen." Elijah stares. "I'm glad you're alive," he says.

The next day, Xavier's name is "shouted at mail call." Xavier is shocked; he has never had mail before. "If only your heathen aunt [Niska] could write English," Elijah always said at mail call. Xavier takes the letter to Fat and asks him to translate. "Is says here that you must return home," Fat reads. "This is very difficult to read, X. There is no punctuation and the handwriting is childlike." Fat continues. The letter says Xavier must return home because "he is the last in the family" and he "must raise a child" in the old way. "It says that God understands if you must kill Elijah," Fat reads. "This is nonsensical, X. Kill Elijah! My word!"

The letter is signed by Joseph Netmaker, a man Xavier vaguely remembers. "There is no mention of my aunt [Niska]?" Xavier asks Fat. "No," he says, "it clearly says that you are the last in your family." Xavier is confused as he leaves Fat. "Come with me, X," Elijah says and leads Xavier through the trenches. "I need a big favour from you."

"Let's build a fire," Elijah says to Xavier. Fires in the trench are rare since they give away positions. "I need to get it very hot," Elijah says and hands Xavier a bone. Xavier is again confused. "Where did you find the shoulder blade of a bear?" he asks. "It's not from a bear," Elijah says. "It is a German." He asks Xavier to "divine" for him.

Xavier refuses. This is "different," he says. "What is the difference?" Elijah asks. "To hunt is to hunt." Xavier shakes his head. "I hunt for sustenance," he says. "And so do I," Elijah answers. "You are not yourself, Elijah," Xavier says. "If you want me to divine for you where you can find Hun, [...] I will. They are over there." Xavier motions to the Hindenburg line and walks away.

Xavier's unit is sent for rest, and Xavier takes the time to construct a matatosowin. He climbs in the steam and prays but nothing comes. Xavier sits and thinks of Niska, and "it comes to him," a "simple prayer." "I want to hear. I want to see. I want to hear. I want to see," Xavier whispers. "I want to see what I should do." He pours water on the rocks one last time and climbs out.

Elijah has very little reaction to McCaan's death. He has spent over a year living in close quarters with him, and barely flinches when he is killed, which is further evidence of his madness.



Elijah takes every opportunity he gets to call Xavier a "heathen" and insult his inability to read and write English. Elijah is completely disrespectful and even insults Niska here, a woman kind enough to take Elijah in when he had nowhere else to go. Xavier asks Fat to read the letter, not Elijah, which suggests he is angry over Elijah's insult. The confusion of the letter causes Xavier pain, but he nevertheless needs to hear that "God understands if [he] must kill Elijah."



Xavier assumes that Niska is dead if he is the last one in his family, which seems to be the only reason why Joseph would write him in the first place. This confusion again underscores the power of language. Even when it is unintentional, language can do much damage.



Boyden never does say how Elijah gets the bone or how he knows it's a German, but he likely didn't just stumble across it. This too harkens to the cannibalism of the windigo legend—Elijah takes whatever human remains he wishes.



This, too, suggests cannibalism. Elijah claims that he needs to hunt and kill to survive and that it gives him "sustenance." Elijah metaphorically consumes the men he kills, and they alone are what nourishes him.



Through constructing the matatosowin and conducting a sweat lodge ceremony, Xavier is using his power and identity as a hookimaw to ask for guidance from the manitous. The prayer comes to Xavier when he thinks of Niska because she too is a windigo killer.



“Something carries” Xavier toward the tent where Elijah sleeps. He enters and sits next to Elijah. Xavier opens Elijah’s bag and removes his morphine and a syringe. He draws back the syringe and places the needle in the bruised bend of Elijah’s elbow. “What are you doing?” Elijah says as he opens his eyes. “I am giving you medicine,” Xavier says. “I do not need more right now,” Elijah says and closes his eyes again. Xavier removes the needle and leaves the tent.

Obviously, Xavier goes to Elijah’s tent to kill him, but he can’t bring himself to go through with it. Xavier loves Elijah, and he is his best friend. The anguish Xavier must be experiencing knowing that he has to kill Elijah must be unbearable and is precisely why Xavier seems to have blocked it all out.



PIMINAAWIN: FLYING

On the battlefield, Elijah and Xavier fight two wars— “the one facing the enemy” and “the one facing what they do to the enemy.” Elijah is in his glory. He “runs his tally higher” when he returns from “no man’s land,” “but his word is enough now.” Word reaches them that Thompson has died of his injuries sustained in the last raid. “He was a good man,” Elijah says. “I hope that he died peacefully.”

Ironically, when Elijah was telling the truth about his kills, he was accused of lying. Now that he exaggerates his numbers, his officers believe him. Elijah’s response to Thompson’s death is a little more than his response to McCaan’s death, but he is still rather distant and flippant despite have gone through so much with Thompson.



They are stationed near an airfield, and Elijah watches the **planes** as much as he can. The pilots “become a part of the machine” as they fly into the air, and Elijah envies them. On their last day near the airfield, one of the pilots asks Elijah if he wants to go up in a plane. He has heard of the “Indian sniper” and would be “honored” to fly him. “I would be delighted,” Elijah says, excited that his “dream” is about to be “realized.”

Boyden draws a parallel between birds and airplanes, and Elijah equates airplanes with the freedom of birds. The pilot is “honored” to fly with such a hero, but there is nothing honorable about the way that Elijah fights. Boyden implies that there is little honor in the war at all, least of all with Elijah.



“We’ll keep you well behind the lines,” the pilot says to Elijah, “but keep your eyes peeled still.” They fly high above the battlefields and Elijah can see miles of trenches dug into the earth. He suddenly “panics” that he will fall out as the plane banks sharply, and his arms “wave frantically.” Elijah “has no control” and he begins to feel nauseous. The pilot can see that Elijah doesn’t feel well and begins to land. As he does, a sharp pain erupts in Elijah’s head. He swallows to relieve the pressure, but the pain remains. Elijah vomits as they finally reach the ground. “I am meant to walk on the ground and not fly?” he asks Xavier.

Elijah isn’t free. He wants the freedom to kill in the war without remorse or consequence, but in order to do that, he must be fearless. Elijah is terrified in the airplane and realizes that he isn’t invincible. Elijah can’t think only of killing if he is afraid of dying himself. Elijah’s question is rhetorical; he knows the answer. Just as Xavier says earlier in the novel, “men aren’t meant to fly.”



NIPAHIEWEWIN: MURDER

Elijah’s mother “died of a coughing sickness” when Elijah was just a child, and he met Xavier not long after. The memories of Xavier and Niska in the bush “glow inside” Elijah on the front lines, and even he begins to miss home. Elijah says they will make him “a chief” when he gets back to Canada. Xavier is “not meant for war like Elijah is.” He wants to be back in the bush, “not crawling through mud in search of men.”

Francis Pegahmagabow, the real-life soldier who is Boyden’s inspiration for Peggy, returned home to Canada a hero after the war and became a chief of his people. Elijah isn’t even interested in living a traditional Indigenous lifestyle, but he wants the recognition and power that goes along with being chief.



Elijah and Xavier's unit are sent to a place called Amiens and there is talk that the French army will be there. Elijah wonders if he will see Francis. The next day, they go out to "no man's land," and Elijah and Xavier can see that the Germans are skinny and tired. By that night, the Canadian army has advanced ten miles past the German lines. In the confusion of the fighting, Xavier loses sight of Elijah.

Two days later, Elijah comes back as if he hadn't been gone. "We were beginning to assume you were dead, Whiskeyjack," a soldier says. "Me dead?" Elijah says. "Never." A new officer, Colquhoun, has been sent to take McCaan's place, and he is not so fond of Elijah. "You were absent without leave for two days, soldier," Colquhoun says. "I will have you put up on charges unless you have a very explanation for your disappearance." "I was out killing Fritz," Elijah says. "Just because you have been awarded citations does not mean you have immunity under my command!" Colquhoun yells.

The next day, Elijah finds a good nest up on a ridge and looks through his scope. By his tenth shot, he begins to feel "badly." The killing is "too easy." With no one to see, Elijah continues his "killing spree." He kills 20 men in an hour, bringing his total to 356. Elijah reaches into his bag for a bit of morphine but finds none. He goes in search of a medic.

At the front line, Xavier and Elijah are told to report to Breech's dugout. When they arrive, Grey Eyes is sitting with his head down. "This private brings some serious charges against you and Private Bird, Corporal," Breech says to Elijah. "Among other things, he claims you are an addict of the morphine and that you have been committing atrocities on the battlefield. [...] And what of this claim that you scalp your enemies like your heathen ancestors?"

"He acts out of jealousy and fear," Elijah says to Breech of Grey Eyes. "And jealousy is what prompts you to threaten to court-martial me for doing my job too well." Elijah slowly opens the snaps on the holster of his revolver. "We'll have none of this, now stand down, Corporal," Breech says. Elijah feels pain in his head like in the airplane, and his "rage" grows. He points the revolver at Grey Eyes. Suddenly, "the air is sucked out of the dugout" and "the world goes black."

Elijah is slipping off alone more and more as his insanity worsens. The war is coming to an end, and the Germans can't hang on much longer. Elijah likely senses that his killing spree is coming to an end too, and he wants to get as much out of it as he can before the war is over.



McCaan likely wouldn't have given Elijah trouble for disappearing, but Colquhoun relishes the chance to punish Elijah. When Elijah tells the men that he will "never" die, he seems to be trying to convince himself as much as he is them. Elijah is feeling his mortality at this point, and he senses that things are out of his control, much like the plane ride.



Elijah doesn't feel badly that he kills, he only feels bad that it is so easy and isn't more challenging and enjoyable. Elijah's number is staggering, but Francis Pegahmagabow is credited with 378 kills, the highest of any sniper in WWI. There is always someone who has killed more.



According to Boyden, scalping doesn't come from Elijah's "heathen ancestors" but from the French, which further upsets this popular Indian trope. When Elijah scalps his enemies, it is an "atrocious" and he is a "heathen," but when the Frenchmen do it, it is simply war.



Elijah implies that Grey Eyes is turning him in only to save himself from trouble, and he also suggests that Breech is punishing him because he too is jealous of Elijah's ability to kill. Elijah's fear in this moment is reflected in his sudden headache—he knows that he will be killed if he doesn't kill them first.



When Xavier wakes, Elijah is standing over Grey Eyes with a large piece of wood. “Mo-na!” Xavier yells as Elijah brings the wood down on Grey Eyes’s head. “We’ve got to get the lieutenant to a medic,” Xavier says looking at Breech’s body nearby. “Are you kidding?” Elijah asks. “The little prick knows everything.” Elijah stands over Breech and clubs him in the head with the wood. “Providence,” Elijah says. “And the pain in my head. All gone.”

Xavier crawls out of the dugout and Elijah follows. “We had to do it,” Elijah says. “Don’t you see that we are free of it all now? We have no more worries.” In the coming days, a new lieutenant is assigned to their unit and he ignores Elijah and Xavier. Elijah tells Xavier a story even though Xavier doesn’t want to listen. He tells him about the nun at the residential school who used to bathe him. She would “rub her soapy hands over him,” and he would “get an erection.” She would “scold him and then take his erection in her hands and rub him until his taut penis thumped against his lower belly in spasm.” Months later, Elijah got the chance to steal her rifle and he ran to the bush to live with Xavier and Niska.

WEESAGEECHAK: HERO

Elijah and Xavier are ordered to scout ahead at dawn. As they sneak through the “crushed” city, Xavier watches Elijah. Elijah has “crossed the line,” Xavier thinks, “crossed it long ago.” Xavier wonders if it is “up to [him] to stop [Elijah].” Sometimes, Xavier wishes that Elijah would be killed in action. The men in the unit say that Elijah is “brave, a warrior of the highest order,” but to Xavier, Elijah “is mad.”

Elijah is talking to Xavier, but he doesn’t hear him. “Your hearing has worsened, X,” he says. He asks Xavier to go to the medic with him and tell him about his hearing loss. Maybe they will send Xavier “home as a hero,” Elijah says. “I’m not crazy,” Elijah continues. “This is war. This is not home. What’s mad is them putting us in trenches to begin with. The madness is to tell us to kill and to award those of us who do it well. I only wish to survive,” Elijah explains.

“Listen to me, X,” Elijah says to Xavier. “I should never have gotten in that aeroplane. Before that I believed nothing could hurt me over here. But I lost something up there is what it feels like. I need to get it back.” Elijah stares at Xavier. “I can see that I went too far into a dangerous place for a while. But I see that,” he says. “Does that mean something?”

Elijah kills Grey Eyes and Breech the exact same way Xavier killed the marten in the beginning of the novel. Elijah, too, must kill here in order to survive. If Breech walks away, Elijah will certainly be court-martialed and executed before a firing squad.



Elijah’s comment that “we had to do it” again harkens to the day Xavier killed the marten, and it also implies that Xavier has something to do with the killing of Grey Eyes and Breech. While Xavier doesn’t directly have anything to do with it, he is still guilty by association, and Breech’s death probably saves Xavier’s life as well. The army will likely make no distinction between them and Xavier will be executed, too. But this still doesn’t make them “free,” and Elijah’s story about the nun is proof of this. Elijah is traumatized by both the war and the residential school and will seemingly never be free from his pain and fear.



Xavier has known since his sweat lodge ceremony and Niska’s letter that it is his responsibility to stop Elijah. Clearly, Xavier has been hoping that Elijah will be killed and save him the trauma of having to do it himself.



Xavier can’t go home now, and he knows it. He has the perfect excuse, but if he leaves, Elijah will go on killing. Still, Elijah’s explanation isn’t exactly wrong, it is “crazy” to expect men to kill to such an extent and then reward them for it.



Here, Elijah admits to losing his edge. He is afraid for the first time after he flies, and he isn’t free if he is afraid. To Elijah, freedom is killing without consequence, but now he is only afraid of death. Elijah also shows something like remorse here, which also suggests his killing is no longer free of consequences.



ONIIMOWI PINESHISH: LITTLE BIRD DANCER

Niska drags what she needs out of the bush and “panics” when she does not see Xavier. She finds him in the canoe, “sweating” and “shaking without control.” She leaves him and builds a fire and begins to “construct a frame” out of willow wood. Once Xavier is calmer, she drags him near the fire. Niska thinks of her own father and how he would tell her stories when she was “scared” or “hurt.” Niska has “no medicine” to help Xavier, but she will “find something” in her “memories.”

“I cannot let him go without telling him his story,” Niska thinks as she sits next to Xavier and pulls him close. She places her mouth close to his ear and begins to speak. “Nephew,” she says, “before I ever knew you, I had dreams of you.” He struggles against her a bit, and she holds him closer. “And this story that I tell you is the story of you,” she says softly.

Niska begins to tell Xavier of their first winter together, when they had tracked a big bull moose all day. Niska walked ahead, and soon she was out of Xavier’s sight. He had never been alone before, and he began to look uncomfortable, but Niska still had clear sight of him. “I’d warned you before of panic’s danger,” Niska says. “It comes quick like an accident does, out of nowhere. Even then you knew not to let it take you.”

Xavier continued to track the moose, figuring he would find Niska on the way. He came across the huge animal up the way a bit, but it spooked and ran. “If only you had a rifle, you thought to yourself,” Niska whispers to Xavier. He came across a group of **grouse**, “dancing side by side,” Niska continues, and spotted “a straggler,” a female. Xavier drew back his bow and the grouse dropped from a branch. He quickly went to work removing the breast meat and roasted it. “It smells good,” Niska said coming out of the bush. “Will you share with me?”

On the way back to their lodge, Niska and Xavier came upon the bull moose, and Xavier took their “prize” with Niska’s old rifle. At the lodge, all the awawatuk feasted on the moose and asked Xavier of his big hunt. He told them of the **grouse**. The hunters laughed. “From now on we call you Little Bird Dancer,” they said.

NIPIWIN: DYING

Xavier and Elijah are given orders to advance across the field again, but there is a machine gun and “plenty of whiz bangs” firing across “no man’s land.” Xavier wants to “force” the C.O “at gunpoint to go across first.” He angrily rips the military identification tags from his neck, leaving only the **medicine bundle**. “That alone is who I am,” Xavier says.

Niska is constructing a sweat lodge to purify Xavier and bring his body, mind, and soul back into balance. He is in acute withdrawal now, and there is little she can do to help him. Again, Niska only has her stories to heal Xavier, to which she attributes healing and restorative qualities.



Niska knows that Xavier can be saved with the story of his identity. He has lost his identity throughout the course of the war, and if Xavier is ever to recover, he will have to return to his Native culture and traditions.



Xavier is a young boy here, but he is at the age where he is expected to begin hunting so that he can sustain life in the bush, and Niska gives him some space so he can do it on his own. Xavier never does panic, not in the bush and not during the war.



Xavier initially assumes that he needs a rifle to survive—a wemistikoshiw invention—but he is able to provide for himself without it. He is, after all, a true “bush Indian.” This also highlights Xavier’s Native connection to nature, and to birds specifically. The first kill is an important one in Native culture, and Xavier carries this connection with him for the rest of his life.



This is who Xavier really is; an authentic Cree Indian named Little Bird Dancer. Xavier Bird is an identity forced on Xavier by the wemistikoshiw, but Little Bird Dancer accurately reflects who he is.



Here, Xavier finally rejects wemistikoshiw culture once and for all. He is not willing to die for people who don’t care about him. Xavier’s medicine bundle is symbolic of his Native identity, so he keeps it and rips off his military ID.



“Let’s go, gentlemen, shall we?” the lieutenant says coming up behind Xavier. As he walks ahead, there is a loud “thunk,” and the lieutenant’s body flies across the field. Xavier trips over his legs and falls to the ground, narrowly missing gunfire to his head. Elijah appears, firing his revolver. He is “in command now.”

“We can’t stay here forever, boys,” Elijah yells to the men. “[Xavier], you come with me.” He tells the men to start firing. “Ashtum,” he says to Xavier. “Come.” They break out and run down the line, and Xavier’s arms begins to burn. He has taken a bullet at some point. “Is this not beautiful?” Elijah yells over the shellfire.

Xavier finds cover and sits down, and Elijah hands him a cigarette. “You always were the better shot,” Elijah says to Xavier. Xavier can see Elijah’s lips moving, but he can’t hear him. “We have to get out of here,” Xavier shouts. “This bombardment’s too heavy.” Elijah says something but Xavier can’t make it out “We both can’t…” Elijah’s voice trails off. “Are we not best friends, Xavier?” Elijah asks. “Are we not best friends and great hunters?” He looks at Xavier. “It has gone too far,” Elijah says as he puts his hands around Xavier’s throat. “I have gone too far, haven’t I?”

“He is killing me,” Xavier thinks to himself as Elijah strangles him. He hears Niska’s voice: “Do what you have to do.” Xavier picks up his Mauser and places it at Elijah’s throat. He pushes Elijah over until he is sitting on his chest. “Elijah,” he whispers through tears and pushes down on the Mauser. Tears spring to Elijah’s eyes and he tries to speak. “I must finish this,” Xavier thinks. “I have become what you are, Niska.” Xavier grabs the identification tags from Elijah’s neck and leaves his body behind.

Xavier wakes in a hospital bed with only a stump for a leg. He had taken fire after grabbing Elijah’s tags, and now they think he is Elijah. Xavier doesn’t know how to tell them he isn’t, so he says nothing. To the nurses, he is Elijah Whiskeyjack, and they bring him all the morphine he wants. Two officers come and “salute” Xavier. They say he is “decorated soldier” and will be given “comfortable passage” home. The nurse gives him some morphine vials. “Use these carefully,” she says. “Only take a little when you need it, when the pain is too much.”

The sudden death of the lieutenant saves Xavier’s life. Had Xavier not tripped he would have been killed by the machine-gun fire. Xavier can’t leave, since now Elijah can inflict far too much damage unchecked by the chain of command.



Elijah has truly gone mad. He believes that the carnage and death is “beautiful,” and he is clearly separating Xavier from the unit so that he can kill him. Elijah senses that Xavier is dangerous—Elijah knows that he has gone windigo and that Xavier will have to kill him.



Elijah is trying to tell Xavier that they both can’t live. Elijah is a windigo and Xavier is a windigo killer; they can’t both survive. Elijah isn’t insane enough to forget who Xavier is, but though he still loves him, it simply isn’t enough to stop the windigo in him from killing Xavier. There is some remorse here as well, Elijah isn’t completely lost, he has simply “gone too far” to come back.



Ironically, Xavier strangles Elijah with the very gun he tries so hard to get from Xavier for most of the war. In this moment, Xavier knows that he, too, is a windigo killer. Xavier kills Elijah because he has to in order to survive. Not only will Elijah try to kill Xavier, but Xavier will risk going windigo himself if he doesn’t kill Elijah.



When Xavier assumes Elijah’s identity, he has officially lost his own. The trauma of the war and Elijah’s death have left him unsure of who he is. He has slowly been assimilated during the war—he speaks English now and dresses like a wemistikoshiw. Despite realizing that he is a windigo killer, Xavier is moving further and further away from his Native identity and culture.



NTASHIIHKEWIN: HOME

It is nearly night as Niska heats the stones and carries them into the matatosowin. She helps Xavier to the river and takes off his wemistikoshiw clothes. Niska washes him in the cool water and leads him to the *matatosowin*. She “acknowledges the four directions and then the earth, the sun, the sky, and the moon” and thanks Gitchi Manitou for Xavier’s return.

Niska helps Xavier out of the matatosowin to cool before going in again. She pours water on the rocks to make it hotter and sees visions of “fury and killing.” She feels “pain,” but it is the “fear” that affects her most. Niska again helps Xavier out to cool and then drags him in for a “third round.” This time, Niska feels only Xavier’s pain, and it is so intense she thinks she can’t stand it. Xavier falls to the ground, “moaning and crying,” and Niska fears he isn’t strong enough.

“Forgive me,” Xavier cries. “I had no choice.” He cries and speaks over and over about “killing his friend,” and Niska understands. Xavier grows calm and Niska listens as he “accepts forgiveness.” He continues speaking. “But I cannot forgive everything you did there,” he says. “It is not my place to do so.” Niska feels Elijah’s “presence” and bends down to embrace it. Xavier whispers, “goodbye,” and they are alone.

Niska again carries Xavier out of the matatosowin to cool. “Just one more round, Nephew,” she says. “it will not feel as painful or as hot.” They climb back in and the visions hit Niska immediately. She sees two small boys, “happy” and “naked” in the sunlight. Their hair is long down their back and is “braided with red cloth.” Niska knows “this isn’t the past” but the future, and she knows who the boys are, too.

When Niska and Xavier crawl out of the matatosowin it is dark. Niska doesn’t bother to make camp. She brings blankets from the canoe and covers Xavier by the fire. Xavier “breathes calmly” as an **Arctic owl** “sweeps close by” and a **lynx** in the distance keeps “watch with her yellow eyes.” Niska settles in next to Xavier in front of the fire. “By tomorrow,” Niska thinks, “we’ll be home.”

Niska strips Xavier of his wemistikoshiw clothes and washes him in the river before dragging him into the sweat lodge. She has to cleanse him of his wemistikoshiw influence and identity for the ceremony to work.



Niska takes Xavier’s pain and fear onto herself. She can see the war as she does so, and she can feel the intense, ever-present fear Xavier felt during the war. By taking Xavier’s pain and fear, Niska is further purifying Xavier’s body and soul from wemistikoshiw influence and pain, bringing him closer to his Native identity and culture.



This is the moment in which Xavier finally takes responsibility for Elijah’s death and asks for forgiveness. The spirit of Elijah appears in the matatosowin (he was summoned by Niska) and he directly relieves Xavier of his crippling guilt. Xavier had to return to his Native culture and identity to reach this point, which underscores Boyden’s central argument of the power in embracing one’s Native identity.



Boyden implies that Xavier is on “the three-day road” and is potentially dying, but Niska’s vision suggests that Xavier may live after all. Niska knows that these children are Xavier’s and they, too, are being raised in the traditional Cree way. Xavier not only embraces his culture; he teaches his children to embrace it as well.



Boyden ends on a note of optimism. Xavier is calm, and a bird is close by. Even a lynx, Niska’s spirit animal, keeps watch in the distance, ensuring their safety and happiness through their ongoing spiritual connection with nature. Niska hasn’t recognized her surroundings in nearly a day, yet she seems convinced now that they will make it home.





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