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I Heard the Owl Call My Name

In the novel, *I Heard the Owl Call My Name*, Margaret Craven introduces the reader to the lives, culture and history of the Kwakiutl Native Americans, whose village, Kingcome, is located in British Columbia.

In the beginning of the novel, the reader finds out that Mark, a vicar, is dying. He has no more than two years left to live, although he doesn't know it. The Bishop, his superior, decided to send him to his "hardest parish," located in the Indian village, Kingcome—without telling him about his dying condition.

With this painful clue, the story continues to unfold. Mark's trip to the village allows him to get to know Jim, a young Indian boy who would also be his guide to the village. Following Jim to the village, Mark gets acquainted with some of the Indian customs, life styles and history.

This is how Mark found out about the legend of the Indian village, Quee (inside place), founded right after the big flood by Khawadelugha, one of the two brothers, the only humans left alive on Earth. He also learns about the "totem," a sacred symbol of the Indians, represented by a

wooden pole with carvings of symbolic characters: the Cedar man, the raven, the killer whale, the wolf etc. Symbols would vary from tribe to tribe and sometimes from totem to totem.

Quee is called today Kingcome, and is a Christian village. From Jim, we also find out that the Indians feel at one with nature and its creatures:

The river is the village, and the black white killer whales...and the salmon. The village is a talking bird, the owl, which calls the name of the man who is going to die, and the silver-tipped grizzly...and the little white speck that is the mountain goat on Whoop-Szo.
(Craven, 19)

The village is also represented by the symbolic totem, which is located next to the church.

Mark noticed that Jim carries a “sadness so deep that it seemed to stretch back into ancient mysteries” (13). The young Indian boy seemed to be aware of the slow death of his culture, unlike the young vicar who is unaware of his close end. From Jim, Mark will also find out that his people drink alcohol and get drunk—one of the negative influences of the “white people.”

When Mark arrived at the village, he learned about the professional mourners and how they mourn their dead day and night, with total dedication. The mourners were shy, so they hid away from the vicar. Horrified, the reader finds out about a young boy’s death and the fact that he couldn’t be buried because the local RCMP official didn’t arrive until ten days after the death. The white people’s intrusion into their lives will be witnessed by the reader—along with the spiritual trip offered by this wonderful book. Generally, the officials will not contribute anything constructive to the villagers’ lives but will only intrude and interfere, as mentioned above. The

reader realizes that the Indian people are not treated fairly to the extent of being almost excluded from society. Finally, after ten days, the official arrived, and the young boy could be buried.

After the burial, the vicar held a religious ceremony. He sensed that the ceremony was unfinished; and that he wasn't a part of it anymore. After he left, the Indian ceremony continued in the language of the ancient Elizabethan Kwákwala, which "the young no longer know" (28). This is a second clue, which indicates the continuing slow death of the ancient Indian culture.

The only other white person in the village was the teacher. He doesn't love the Indians, and he doesn't contribute to their lives in any way. The only reason he's there is because of the benefits the job will bring him: "a year in Greece, studying the civilization he adored" (33). This is such an irony, since he fails to realize that he could help to keep the dying Indian heritage alive, for the next generations to come, rather than study a long dead civilization.

The Indians curiously observed the vicar. They were polite, but they didn't trust him in their lives—at least not yet. He continued his work among the Indian people, going to the other villages, too. Everywhere he went he encountered the same sad eyes, shy smiles and cautious waiting. He realized that if he wanted their trust, he must earn it by proving himself first. So, he decided to cope with the harsh conditions he had to live in, rather than ask for their help—without them offering it.

Slowly, the vicar learned how to salute them in their own language, and he also wanted to learn their names, as much as possible. Mark learned about the death of the "swimmer" (the salmon);

and together with Jim, he went to seek the end of the swimmer, getting closer to understanding death.

He learned that each fall, the Indian families get together to smoke fish, a communal event that they all love. It's a time when men tell old myths, women talk, and children run wild.

Slowly, the vicar became a part of the village, participating in the hunting, understanding the Indian humor, learning to appreciate the long silent moments, seeing the famous Indian custom of smoking the pipe and so much more.

After a few months, the vicar will admit to the Bishop: "I have learned little of the Indians as yet. I know only what they are not. They are none of the things one has been led to believe. They are not simple, or emotional, they are not primitive."

By Christmas, the vicar realized for the first time that the Indians were "the people of his hand, and the sheep of his pasture, and he knew how deep was his commitment to them" (58). For the first time, he was also able to greet each by name, when they arrived at the church.

The vicar learned about the sadness of the old Indian people. They are sad that the young ones "no longer listen to the elders' speak. They go, and soon the village will go also" (62).

From Mrs. Hudson, Mark found out that her granddaughter was getting married to a white man. She was very upset because: "My grand-daughter goes to a world of which she knows nothing. It

will destroy her and I cannot help her. To watch her go is to die a little.” Mrs. Hudson’s words reflect, very well, the general aspects of the Indian culture. Their young people leave the tribes, which in turn are slowly disappearing. The ancient and mythic Indian culture is slowly dying.

When winter was over and the tide was out, the Indian men went to Gilford Village to dig for clams, returning every weekend. The vicar, Mark, witnessed the Grouse Dance, the Moon Dance, the Dog Dance... The people wore masks and they brought to life in a symbolic representation, their ancient Indian wisdom and knowledge.

The vicar will get to know the pride of the Indian families, and what they do when they are being dishonored. When the young daughter of an Indian family left with her future husband, a white man, who will dishonor them by getting her uncle drunk and then make him sell a precious mask for only \$50 (worth \$3000), they decided to exile themselves. The vicar feels helpless that he had no power to change their decision.

In late March, the season of fishing óolachon (the candle fish) starts, and the chief of the tribe has to catch the first fish. It’s a season in the tradition of the Indian people when all the taboos and superstitions are remembered and followed. The pregnant women can’t cross the river, and no body is transported on the river. It’s also a season when the Indian chief re-tells the ancient myths to his tribe.

The vicar will find out, from a RCMP officer that the Indians don’t allow their picture taken. The officer tried it once, and the Indians were polite enough not to tell him anything. They even

helped him back to his boat, but one of the young men managed to drop the camera in the river—a very inventive way to put a stop to an unwanted intrusion.

Mark found out from a RCMP officer that the Indian girl who was supposed to marry the white man was dumped in Vancouver. She died there, three months later, from an overdose of dope, in “a beer parlour.” After this incident, Mark’s eyes started to reflect the sadness of the Indian people.

As Mark was accepted by the Indians as one of them, the reader participates in his first funeral in the ancient language. The Indians decide to help the vicar with his new vicarage. He “suffered with them” (87), and now he was one of theirs, and “nothing will ever be the same again” (87).

As the reader gets closer and closer to the Indian culture, so does Mark, the vicar. He will participate in the re-burial of the dead bodies fallen from the boxes placed in the trees, according to the old Indian custom. The reader wonders along with Mark, about how “had it been in the old days when the magic, and the supernatural spirits, and the cannibal man who lived at the north end of the world had dominated life here in this village? How had it been when the hamatsa had come in the night through the great trees, crying his soft and terrible call?” (118). The only thing we perceive through the vicar’s gained wisdom is that hamatsa “had been freed at last from his holy madness, and was at peace in the deep woods,” along with other bodies re-buried in the cemetery. The vicar was the first white man who made that happen. The vicar’s loneliness helped him to understand the Indians and their ways of living in loneliness over

centuries. The vicar also brings the knowledge to the young Indian children. Some of them are now going to school, a great contribution of the white man, unlike the bad drinking habits.

Along with Mark, the reader understands that the Cedar-man found at the bottom of the great totem, holding up the crests of the tribe, is a metaphorical way of expressing their gratitude towards the indispensable tree (the cedar). In the old times, the Indian people used to make clothes and blankets, built their houses and canoes, carved masks and totems from the cedar tree.

Over time, the vicar gained some of the Indian wisdom, and when his time came, he “heard the owl call his name,” sensing that his end was near. The reader will also find out about the Indian generosity. They will allow the vicar to die among them.

As the young generation decides for a new family, the vicar “leaves” the Indian village. The old carver stayed up all night long, waiting for the spirit of the vicar to return to the village in the “sleek black body of a raven” (159). Life will go on, the swimmer will return to the village, and hopefully, the Indian tribe will survive through times.

Works Cited

Craven, Margaret. *I Heard the Owl Call My Name*. New York: Dell Publishing, 1980.