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Black and Blue: Dispelling the Myth of Racism in Avatar

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“Black and Blue: Dispelling the Myth of Racism in Avatar” by Leah Rachel Bode

Instructor’s Notes

The position paper required students to defend a position about a film of their choice from a group of instructor-selected films. Though the thesis did not have to be limited to one sentence, it was required to state the student’s position and to forecast the paper’s direction. Students were to incorporate various kinds of evidence and to acknowledge and counter opposing arguments. In her paper Leah Rachel chose to defend Avatar against claims of implicit racism. Locate her thesis, and notice how its “forecast” section actually outlines the paper’s organization and development. Note also how Leah Rachel carefully explains and then refutes opposing arguments before establishing support for her position about the film. Stylistically, Leah Rachel’s paper is replete with vivid word choices: circle some of those that you find especially strong.

Writers’ Biography

Leah Rachel Bode will be a senior nursing major at Cedarville University. After graduating, she hopes to pursue midwifery and one day serve God as a medical missionary. She loves the Lord, babies, friends and scrapbooking.

Black and Blue: Dispelling the Myth of Racism in Avatar

In 2009, James Cameron’s Avatar stunned the world with its brilliantly-crafted animation, groundbreaking effects, and cutting-edge technology. Because Avatar demanded more than \$230 million and four years of arduous labor to complete, it is no surprise that it received three Oscars in addition to fifty-four other awards (Ebert, “Avatar”). Taking place in 2154, the story focuses on the indigenous population called the Na’vi who lives harmoniously on the planet of Pandora. When word reaches Earth that Pandora possesses unobtainium, the rock that can sell for \$20 million a kilo, scientists and military personnel attack the planet.

Disguised in an Avatar body, Jake (the main character) befriends the natives with the goal of securing the precious rock. As time will tell, however, Jake's interactions with the Na'vi people radically transform his world. Surprisingly, despite its immense success, critics have pointed their fingers at the film, labeling it a "racist" "Pocahontas story" (Washington). Although James Cameron's Avatar contains stereotypes, the typical "superior-versus-inferior" conflict, and a "white savior," the film does not communicate a message of racism. In fact, several details within the movie blatantly challenge ethnocentrism, imperialism and cruelty. Pandora (the Na'vi homeland) far surpasses Earth with its breathtaking beauty, and it transforms and enlightens the miserable characters arriving from Earth. Although Jake does lead the Na'vi tribe to victory, he continuously relies on the chief's daughter to train him and, in several instances, save his life. Finally, in a crushing blow to the racism accusation, Jake eventually abandons his white race, morphing completely into a full-blooded Na'vi.

Of course, critics do cite valid arguments to support their accusations of the film. One critic in particular, Mitu Sengupta, argues strongly that the message of Avatar is blatantly racist (413). To begin with, the movie does contain several stereotypes and clichés. As in so many other films, the "white men" are brutal, ignorant, and heartless, with no regard for suffering. They refer to the Na'vi as "blue monkeys" and "fly-bitten savages that live in a tree" (Cameron). The animation directors portray the Na'vi people with stereotypical African and Indian features, such as tribal jewelry, dreadlocks, mohawks, and feathers in their hair. Portrayed as animalistic, the natives hiss, growl, and sport cat-like eyes and tails. Critics question Cameron's stereotypical portrayal of the natives, along with his decision to cast African-American and Latino actors as Na'vi characters (Washington). Sengupta in particular refers to the "white man messiah" as the most supportive element for ethnocentrism, objecting strongly to the fact that the Na'vi seem unable to save themselves (413). Actress Robinne Lee comments, "It's really upsetting in many ways. It would be nice if we could save ourselves" (Washington). Although many argue that Cameron's film should be rejected for its messages of racism and imperialism, several details from the film disprove this position.

Throughout Avatar, it is clearly Cameron's intent to

portray the land of Pandora and the Na'vi people as superior to Earth and its inhabitants. In contrast to the intriguing world of Pandora, Jake's spaceship is unappealing and drab, lacking beauty and color. The Marines and scientists rip each other to shreds with their sarcastic and bitter comments, creating a destructive and degrading atmosphere. In contrast, the world of Pandora is magical and enchanting with its glowing vegetation, misty waterfalls, lush ferns, and psychedelic plants. It appears as though a rainbow melted over Pandora, dousing the creatures and natives with vibrant hues of cobalt blue and mossy green. Unlike the team from earth, the Na'vi people extend friendship to Jake and create a sense of an atmosphere of acceptance. Throughout the film, the visual artists purposefully contrast Jake's hopeless surroundings of his spaceship to the intriguing and iridescent world of Pandora.

Discrediting the racism charges even further, *Avatar* suggests that Pandora's power cleanses and renews minds that have been "poisoned" by earth. Although Jake and Grace lead miserable lives at the beginning of the film, both are transformed by Pandora as they spend more time in the cleansing environment. While on earth, Jake suffers from much sorrow and heartache. Paralyzed and confined to a wheelchair, he is unable to move freely or keep pace with the other marines. In addition to his physical limitations, he is also tethered by emotional baggage as a result of the death of his twin brother. Lacking passion, contentment, and friendship, he views himself as "just another dumb grunt" (Cameron). When he first arrives in Pandora, he stands out sorely against the backdrop of this captivating land, taunting the flora and fauna, treading on the natives' tails, and stumbling into perilous situations. Because of his arrogant disrespect and inconsiderate behavior, the Na'vi people greet him with hostility. But as time elapses, Pandora's magic penetrates his heart and frees him, both physically (paralysis has no power in Pandora) and emotionally (Jake finds friendship and acceptance in the Na'vi tribe). Believing that Pandora is superior to Earth, Jake realizes, "Everything is backwards now. Like out there is the true world and in here is the dream" (Cameron). The testy, miserable Grace Augustine also experiences renewal in this nirvana. In the beginning of the film, this demanding, acidic, disrespectful woman has heartened her heart to the plight of the Na'vi people. Her only concern lies with obtaining the prize, no matter the cost or

loss of life. However, her callous heart softens while in Pandora and soon overflows with compassion for the victims. When Grace finally awakens to the destruction looming over the Na'vi tribe, she pleads with her cruel leader Quaritch, "You need to wake up. The wealth of the world is not in the ground. You need to understand them!" (Cameron). Throughout the film, Pandora works like a poultice to draw out the poisons from Earth, healing Jake and Grace.

Despite these facts, however, charges against Avatar continue. Upset by the fact that the indigenous population cannot save themselves and instead rely on Jake to lead them, audience members cite this "white man messiah" element as the greatest indicator of racism. But they deny the fact that, although Jake does step in to lead the native people to victory, he relies extensively on the Na'vi woman who has stolen his heart. It is only because of Neytiri's training and guidance that Jake learns to hunt, speak the native language, and survive off the land. In fact, in the storyline she saves his life on three separate occasions. Without Neytiri's intervention, Jake's first encounter with Pandora's vicious creatures would have cost him his life. At the end of the movie, the fierce heroine battles Quaritch on Jake's behalf and also rescues her unconscious lover from suffocation. In fact, it is Neytiri's arrow that pierces Quaritch's heart, saving Pandora and the entire Na'vi race from destruction.

Delivering the final blow to Avatar's racist accusations, Jake utterly abandons his status as a 6-foot Caucasian man and embraces life as a full-blooded Na'vi. In Pandora, the natives rescue Jake's spirit from his crippled human body, magically transporting it into an agile, gorgeous Na'vi form. This dramatic twist suggests that joining the indigenous race brings more pleasure and fulfillment than continuing to live as a Caucasian individual, which clearly contradicts the typical ethnocentric position.

When James Cameron released Avatar, many critics pointed their fingers and labeled his film racist; however, its messages advocate quite the opposite. The movie cries out against imperialism, encourages Americans to embrace differences among races, warns against the dangers of technology, and applauds environmentalism. The movie raises thought-provoking questions, such as, "How well do we as Americans respect other cultures and the differences within them? Are we allowing arrogance to blind us to the lessons and

blessings found in other races?” Through the stunning film *Avatar*, James Cameron paints a diverse and colorful painting of America, blending together hues of brown, black....and just a hint of blue.

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