

Christopher Columbus



Christopher Columbus

Spanish Exploration of Americas

Early in the exploration of the Americas, Spain used divine sanction from Pope Alexander VI to explore and conquer the New World.

- As history progressed, the Spanish conquest of South America became further fueled by the desire to regain the political and financial power it lost during its defeat in 1588 to Queen Elizabeth I.
- Editors of the text *History of World Societies* note that because of the expulsion of Jews and Muslims during the Fifteenth Century, Spain lost a strong middle class, forcing it as a second-rate world power, monetarily.
- The Pope's sanction in 1493 also opened up other financial investments in the New World — in the beginning of the conquest of the Americas Native people offered a plausible resource for the developing slave trade industry.

Christopher Columbus

Letters and Diary of Christopher Columbus

Mexican novelist and diplomat Carlos Fuentes commented in the Nineties that Columbus was the first writer of magic-realism in literature.

- Magic realism is a genre of literature which began in the Seventies by Colombian novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez—it deals with a surrealistic look at a realistic situation.
- The genre promotes the concept that the world is filled with absurdity and without any sense of logic. Writers in this genre show how history and human events do not make sense and we should not try to find a logic in the development of what we call “reality.”
- In other words, Columbus reinvented the scenes around his voyages merely to promote and embellish his adventures in order to gain money and notoriety from the Spanish court, not to discover new territories.

Christopher Columbus

The first section of your reading opens with a letter from Columbus addressed to either Raphael Sanchez or to Luis de Santangel —your footnotes tell you they were officials in the court of Isabella and Ferdinand.

Using writing styles and trends of the time, the letter promotes a positive image of the trip which the Spanish court funded. From a historical perspective, it does give some slight insight into the mind-set of the explorer himself. Primarily the theme of the letter is the journey, not the man.

Christopher Columbus

In the first paragraph he opens immediately declares the voyage a success, appropriately compliments his patrons the King and Queen, and declares he has possessed numerous islands for the Spanish kingdom. Most importantly, he states “no opposition was offered to me” (*Anthology of American Literature* 15).

- This is a crucial statement which sets up the illicit pattern of colonization and appropriation by the Old World for the next four hundred years.
- By showing how vulnerable the people are, and by showing they lack knowledge of Old World religion, the New World is open for plundering.

Notice the names of the islands he mentions at the close of the first paragraph.

Can you make out a pattern of naming for the islands?

Christopher Columbus

Set in a hierarchy:

San Salvador	(Holy Savior)
Isla de Santa Maria de Concepcion	(Virgin Mother)
Fernandina	(the King)
Isabella	(the Queen)
Isla Juana	(after Prince Juan of Asturias, the heir apparent)

- Of these five islands, only the last do we know for certain—
it became eventually named Cuba.

Christopher Columbus

Notice the construction of the opening paragraphs.

His writing mirrors a strong travelogue, after all, he is enticing his investors with vivid descriptions of the territories in order to confirm his journey was a success.

- His language is rich with details sounding like a vacationing resort brochure.
- In addition, the letter is serving as a form of self promotion, a propaganda.
- He shows the Spanish rulers what is available for their artistic, esoteric minds: beautiful weather, pleasant atmospheres, available agricultures —showing the islands with livable conditions for the average European, an *Eden* of possibilities.
- Notice the conclusion of the third paragraph; he casually mentions the fact that vague metals exist: “In the interior (of the island) are mines of metals”— but that’s all he writes, a short sentence only, as a tease of potential, future references in the remainder of the letter.

Christopher Columbus

Later in the full document, he teases the reader further by sidestepping the evidence of metals, shifts back to the topographical conditions, tells how the area is perfect for raising cattle, for planting and sowing... and then he hits the reader with promise of more valuable metals: “the rivers, many and great, and good waters, the majority of which contain gold” (*Anthology of American Literature* 16).

- Columbus is using a common ploy for his time; early explorers embellish this point as much as possible, enticing other potential investors to supply funds for their schemes.
- He reconfirms the statement with more details: “In this island, there are many spices and great mines of gold and of other metals” (16)—here lies another obvious fiction. This one sentence by itself over embellishes the possibilities for conquest.

Christopher Columbus

In the developing paragraphs he switches his subject to the natives:

The people of the island, and of all the other islands which I found and of which I have information, all go naked, men and women, as their mothers bore them, although some women cover a single place with the leaf of a plant or with net of cotton which they make for the purpose. They have no iron or steel or weapons, nor are they fitted to use them, not because they are not well built men and handsome stature, but because they are marvelously timorous. They have no other arms than weapons made of canes, cut in seeding time, to the ends of which they fix a small sharpened stick. And they do not dare to make use of these, for many times it has happened that I have sent ashore two or three men to some town to have speech, and countless people have come out to them, and as soon as they have seen my men approaching they have fled, even a father not waiting for his son. (16-17)

Christopher Columbus

Columbus even goes to the trouble of stating how gullible and childlike the people are in terms of bartering.

They never refuse anything which they possess, if it be asked of them; on the contrary, they invite anyone to share it, and display as much love as if they would give their hearts, and whatever the thing be of value or whether it be of small price, at once with that ever trifling of whatever kind it may be that is given to them, with that they are content. I forbade that they should be given things so worthless as fragments of broken crockery and scraps of broken glass, and ends of straps, although when they were able to get them, they fancied that they possessed the best jewel in the world. So it was found that a sailor for a strap received gold to the weight of two and a half *castellanos*, and others much more for other things which were worth much less. (17)

Christopher Columbus

The two scenes in particular are carefully crafted.

- Columbus shows how vulnerable the people are in relation to their supposed wealth.
- Furthermore, they are shown naked, without armor and without guns.
- Their main defenses are limited to primitive war-gear.
- They lack knowledge of the value of the metals which exist in abundance around them.

Christopher Columbus

After his first voyage to the Americas, Columbus presented a copy of his private journal to Ferdinand and Isabella as a gift.

- The document outlines in further detail the extent of his journeys.
- Original copies of the work are now lost.
- According to *The Anthology of American Literature (9th Edition)*:
“The only version of the diary known to exist is a copy made by Bartholomé de las Casas in the 1530’s. Las Casas in part copied and in part summarized Columbus’ personal copy of the original journal” (n.1, 19).
- The journal copy details a closer insight to Columbus’ overall plans.
Through Las Casas, the journal shows a slightly different image of the explorer’s goals. Las Casas’ intentions are not self rewarding for himself.
Nor is he aiming to defame Columbus.

Christopher Columbus

- The entry dated **October 11, 1492** describes events of when he first approaches the island he later names San Salvador. Las Casas states as Columbus explored the land:

Numbers of the people of the island straightway collected together. Here follow the precise words of the Admiral: “As I saw that they were very friendly to us, and perceived that **they could be much more easily converted to our holy faith by gentle means than by force**, I presented them with some red caps, and strings of beads to wear upon the neck, and many other trifles of small value, **wherewith they were much delighted, and became wonderfully attached to us**. Afterwards they came swimming to the boats, bringing parrots, balls of cotton thread, javelins, and many other things which they exchanged for articles we gave them, such as glass beads, and hawk’s bells; which trade was carried on with the utmost good will.

Christopher Columbus

But they seemed on the whole to me, to be a very poor people. They all go completely naked, even the women, though I saw but one girl. All whom I saw were young, not above thirty years of age, well made, with fine shapes and faces; their hair short, and coarse like that of a horse's tail, combed toward the forehead, except a small portion which they suffer to hang down behind, and never cut. Some paint themselves with black, which makes them appear like those of the Canaries, neither black nor white; others with white, others with red, and others with such colors as they can find. Some paint the face, and some the whole body; others only the eyes, and others the nose. Weapons they have none, nor are acquainted with them, for I showed them swords which they grasped by the blades, and cut themselves through ignorance. They have no iron, their javelins being without it, and nothing more than sticks, though some have fish-bones or other things at the ends.

Christopher Columbus

They are all of a good size and stature, and handsomely formed. I saw some with scars of wounds upon their bodies, and demanded by signs the [sic] of them; they answered me in the same way, that there came people from the other islands in the neighborhood who endeavored to make prisoners of them, and they defended themselves. I thought then, and still believe, that these were from the continent. It appears to me, that the people are ingenious, and would be good servants and I am of opinion that they would very readily become Christians, as they appear to have no religion. They very quickly learn such words as are spoken to them. If it please our Lord, I intend at my return to carry home six of them to your Highnesses, that they may learn our language. I saw no beasts in the island, nor any sort of animals except parrots.” These are the words of the Admiral.

(Internet Medieval Source Book)

<http://www.fordham.edu/Halsall/index.asp>

Christopher Columbus

Contrasting the journal writing with the letter, some distinctions should be noted:

- in the journal Columbus portrays the people in a positive, friendly manner
- the people are not shown cowardly; they do not run and hide at the sight of the ships and people as he states they do later on the island Juana
- the people would be easily converted to the True Faith; they have the skills and capabilities of becoming *lower* than the working class citizens for Spain, once they realized the true power and superiority of the white-Europeans
- the journal shows the natives in more human-like qualities, less animalistic or barbaric
- he also shows more positive observations regarding their physical characteristics; in this manner, by appearances, they carry an exotic appeal to one wanting property of extraordinary origins

Christopher Columbus

In comparison, over-all a majority of the material echoes the letter.

- both documents show how poor the natives are
- how they lack a sense of civilization by European definitions:
 - > lack of clothing
 - > lack militaristic arms and armor
 - > lack of understanding of value for worldly goods
 - > no evidence of large cities or industries such as ship building
- Although in the journals he implies the natives are intelligent and harmonious, Columbus is looking for slave-labor, or in a more positive sense, servants.
In some translations the material reads that: “I will *take* six of them—”
(*Anthology of American Literature, 9th Ed.* 21) presumably against their will, to display them as trophies of his accomplishments.