

Interpretation of Revard's poem "Discovery of the New World"

The Aliens Among Us

By Laura F. Franklin

Revard's poem "Discovery of the New World" allegorizes the subjugation of the Native American people by white colonists during the nineteenth century; he does this by presenting the story of an alien race that colonizes the earth and dominates the existing native culture for their own needs, ignoring the physical and psychological harm it will do to the native race.

This poem has a clear message: in order for humanity to evolve and gain wisdom, we must restrain ourselves from dominating other peoples, and the earth, for personal profit. Revard challenges the reader's perceptions of their own reality: Are we the oppressors, or could we become the oppressed? The poem is narrated by a technologically-superior alien being whose relationship with the human race parallels that historical relationship between Native Americans and white colonists. In this way Revard effectively manipulates the reader into identifying with the oppressed, while simultaneously allowing the reader to feel related to the historical legacy of being an oppressor. Like those white colonists, the alien invaders are morally and philosophically bankrupt, despite their technological superiority.

The alien invaders' actions, and their attitudes towards the conquered race, are a reflection of our own history. Revard shows the invaders' conscious choice to remain ignorant of the natives' intelligence, culture and feelings. The alien speaker feels a twinge of guilt, but justifies the subjugation of the natives by deeming them inferior. The speaker's mission, comfort, and needs far outweigh the suffering of the indigenous race.

The poem parallels historical events in the United States when white colonists took the land from the Native Americans. There are many allusions in the poem that make direct references to events in American history. The lines, "marveled at our green skin, and scarlet eyes" (2-3) is a reference to the reaction Native Americans had to the colonists' white skin, and blue eyes. Other allusions are made: false agreements with the natives (broken treaties); killing their cattle (buffalo); placing them into pens under alien control (governmentally enforced reservations); and the natives' lack of immunity to the invaders' diseases. Unable to relate to the native people, the alien invaders excuse themselves from moral responsibility by claiming that the natives are inferior – based on the differences in culture and language:

They lack antennae
and can't be made to grasp
your proclamation that they are
our lawful food and prey and slaves,
nor can they seem to learn. (4-8)

The poem also alludes to a time in the American history when humans dominated others of their own species:

while we were tasting his brain
in holographic rainbows
which we assembled into quite an interesting
set of legends"
there was, however

a curious visual echo in their history
of our own coming to earth;
a certain General Sherman
had said concerning a group of them
exactly what we were saying to you
about these creatures:
it is our destiny to asterize this planet,
and they will not be asterized,
so they must be wiped out. (18-21, 28-37)

The invaders are aware of the native's history; they even see the irony of the historical situation. Yet that knowledge has little effect on the invading civilization, and they choose to exploit, ostracize, and finally destroy the native culture. With their own version of manifest destiny, the aliens justify their need to acquire and conquer:

If we didn't have this mission it might be sad
to see such helpless creatures die
but never fear
the riches of this place are ours
and worth whatever pain others may have to feel. (52-56)

The aliens are comfortable with their certainty of superiority: "Then we will be safe, and rich, and happy here forever" (59). Or at least until history repeats itself.

Revard's imaginative use of words implies the other-worldly origins of the speaker: "oxygen absorbers" (10), "truth matrices" (27) and, "asterize" (35). The words "Their history bled from one this morning" (17) are an effective symbol of the blood which spilled from Native Americans when the white colonists forcibly took their land.

Revard's poem persuades the reader to contemplate history and humanity. He also suggests that perhaps the only way to stop the oppression of others is to learn to identify with those that are oppressed.