

Columbus vs. cabella de vaca essay



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Gabriela Colon ENGL 1302 Instructor Betsy Toms 6 September 2011

Columbus vs. Cabeza de Vaca The Columbus Letter and The Narrative of Cabeza de Vaca differ in many ways. The main dissimilarity is in the motivations of each of these great explorers. Both accounts are about the New World and its inhabitants but each tells a vastly different story.

Columbus's wrote his letter to gain further support for exploration of the new land while Cabeza de Vaca writes about the difficulties he and the natives experienced during the years he was there. Columbus's motivation was greed and power, for himself and the king.

Cabeza de Vaca motive is less defined, he wished to be more of a vessel to "avail [his] highness" and to receive recognition or reward for all the hardships he was forced to endure (77). Columbus greatly exaggerated the account of his trip to the New World. He writes about a great new land that is "very fertile to a limitless degree" (69) while Cabeza de Vaca often tells of having to eat "prickly pears" and his "hunger never having given [him] leisure to choose" (83). By his own admission, Columbus sets himself up as a man "from heaven" to control the "very marvelously timorous" people he encountered (70).

He assures the king that the land he has found holds great "mines of metals", rivers that contained gold, "honey", "many spices", and people who are naked with no weapons (70). He contradicts himself about the state of the "mines" by saying that the Indian people have no "iron or steel or weapons, nor are they fitted to use them" (70). What would they have possibly done with all that gold and minerals if it really existed? Columbus's reference to an unseen island called "Avan" with "people born with tails" is

an oddity. Perhaps he added this as another little nugget to entice the King to support his endeavors.

Who would not want to see a whole island worth of people “born with tails” (71)? His arrogance shows in his belief that the natives would not rise up and fight when their way of life was threatened. He feeds this naivete to the king with great heaping scoops of assurances and misinformation in an effort to gain support. As a result, many more explorations were sent out on the belief that it was theirs for the taking, costing the lives of many Europeans and natives alike. His fictional report exploited not only the King and his people, but also the native people.

Instead of attempting to tame or civilize a nation that had been thriving for thousands of years, they should have tried learning how to live like them. Rather than learning from their “guileless” and “generous” spirit, they were called “savages” and made into slaves (70). Columbus discovered a nation that lived the Utopian lifestyle, lived off the land, and made themselves into a striving and peaceful nation, without all the trappings of the modern world and he failed to grasp the significance. Instead of seeing liberation, he saw glory, ownership, pride, and it cost whole nations their lives and livelihoods.

Columbus finishes his letter by telling the King that he “was obligated to lighten ship” and that was the reason he failed to bring any of this proof that there was such a huge abundance of gold and riches (73). The Latin words *caveat emptor*, translates as “buyer beware”, can apply here. Columbus came back from the new world selling a dream of wealth and riches with very little proof but his word. If he could have foreseen the devastation and

annihilation of many nations would be the result, would he still have written that letter?

Alvar Nunez, in his letter, emphasizes that he has written his account “ with much exactness” (79). Perhaps he exaggerated too, but towards another end. He wanted to provide the King with a report that enlisted pity and recognition for what he suffered. He painted a picture of hardship and struggle with every story. Some think that he wanted to help the natives to get better treatment by the conquistadores but he also painted them as the savages that many believed they were. Several native tribes, beaten, and starved, enslaved him.

He painted a picture of a vicious and harsh land in which he was forced to experience “ greater hunger and necessity” than he had anticipated (80). He proclaimed himself and his comrades as powerful healers able to “ give health and influence them to make [him] some good return” (80). Many of his comrades died on this trip. He would eventually meet up with some of them but they would be repeatedly captured or killed. Sometimes, he describes a hunger so great he wished for death and then describing how the people showered him and his comrades with food.

The inconsistencies in his story lead the reader to believe little and question everything. Neither of these letters was written during their travels, which leads the reader to suspect an ulterior motive. Columbus was motivated by his desire to impress the King and raise support for further exploration. Alvar was motivated by personal recognition for his hardships, and hoped the King would reward him. The implications of each of these letters and the effect

they had on the exploration movement are significant. Neither explorer could have foreseen what they had accomplished with these letters.

One can only hope that we get fairer treatment from any alien nation that discovers us than we afforded our own human kind. Works Cited Columbus, Christopher. "The Columbus Letter." Belasco, Susan & Johnson, Linck. The Bedford Anthology of American Literature. Vol. One: Beginnings to 1865. Boston - New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008. 68-73. Nunez, Alvar. "The Narrative of Cabeza de Vaca." Belasco, Susan ; Johnson, Linck. The Bedford Anthology of American Literature. Vol. One: Beginnings to 1865. Boston - New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008. 76-85.