Columbus's Fourth Voyage Letter Literary Analysis

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Columbus' entire life was a voyage in itself as he rose to fame as a distinguished navigator and explorer. During his journeys to pass by waters, he wrote letters to different people documenting his discoveries and experiences. His letter to Ferdinand and Isabella, King and Queen of Spain, on July 7, 1503, in Jamaica is one of them. He had always dreamt of setting sail to Asia but could not manage it because of the lack of financial support. To overcome this obstacle, he approached the King and Queen of Spain to get funding for his trip, which they agreed to. However, his plan to set sail to Asia did not turn out as he hoped, and he ended up somewhere he was unaware of. After a few months of his journey to the unknown, Columbus decided to write a letter to the patrons of his voyage to explicitly clarify to them how and why his journey was a success. In his letter to Ferdinand and Isabella, Columbus tried to deliver the relevant information to the patrons of the trip regarding the voyage they financed and also a meticulously crafted argument tending to persuade them to fund future voyages for him. The premise behind the primary source, the letter to the King and Queen of Spain, was to influence the trip patrons, Catholic monarchs Ferdinand II of Aragon and his queen Isabella of Castile, through his pretentious descriptions throughout the letter so that they could invest in his future voyages (MacKie, 1892). The letter details Christopher Columbus's encounters with the Canary Islands during his voyage and describes what he thought of the Indies.

Imagery and the Promise of Economic Gain

Columbus, in an attempt to influence Ferdinand and Isabella through his letter regarding the Fourth Voyage, vividly explained his experiences by using literary devices such as imagery, setting, tone, hyperbole, personification, metaphor, and allusion. He overtly discussed his "successful" voyage to aggrandize how the new land he managed to discover after a lot of hardships was a land "to be desired." He talked about location, land, people, his hardships, and achievements in his letter to point out how the location he discovered was ideal for economic gain, "well adapted for constructing buildings", "numerous harbours on all sides", and how the land had "very broad and healthy-giving rivers" (Columbus, 2009) that were beneficial to the mainland. Through the use of imagery with these words, Columbus provides evidence that his findings in Central America were successful, and he wants more future free-of-cost voyages sponsored by Ferdinand and his wife Isabella to let him explore the world better. Another example of imagery is when he explained to the trip patrons how the storm made him think the world was ending, "I did not put into the harbour, nor could I, nor did

the storm from heaven cease; there was rain and thunder and lightning continuously" (Clay, pp. 617–620). He also gives a clear view of the amount of gold in Ciguare by stating that the people had necklaces from head to shoulders and corals from head to feet and arms.

Hardship, Discovery, and Encounters in Central America

The fourth voyage by Christopher Columbus is remarkable as it offers new insights into exploration in Central America. Columbus, the Italian explorer during his voyage, encountered many cultures, discovered fauna and flora, and witnessed enormous economic potential while setting sail in the "New World." Besides, the letter portrays the cultures of the natives, his resilience, his struggles, and his perseverance, although he failed many times and lost his ships and men (Columbus' journal, First Voyage, excerpts (1492): Encyclopedia of world trade: From Ancient Times to the present-credo reference). The journey began with a fleet consisting of four ships aiming to establish uncharted areas in the Western Caribbean. However, due to the disintegration of the ship, they were stranded and only managed to examine the Southern Central American parts. When he reached Hispaniola, he was rejected and sought to exchange his ship for a better one, but a storm struck, forcing him to anchor his ship. Although the hurricane sank many ships, Columbus's ships remained afloat and arrived safely (Columbus's journal, First Voyage, excerpts (1492): Encyclopedia of world trade: From Ancient Times to the present – credo reference). He had struggled with the storm for 88 days, instilling great fear and pain in the crew members. He stated that the storms were unbearable on their way to the Caribbean. They survived death many times and arrived in Central America safely, where they repaired the ships, replenished their supplies, and discovered the gold mines in Ciamba and Veragua. In Central America, Columbus gives his experience with the Mayan traders who had textiles, weapons, tools made of copper, fermented corn, and wooden swords (Clay, pp. 617–620). Columbus's crew focused on exchanging food/gold and examined the structures of the stones. Before being restricted, the ships reached Jamaica, where they actively established a rapport with the Jamaicans before being retrieved in 1504 (Columbus, Christopher (1451–1506): The Oxford companion to ships and the sea – credo reference).

Hyperbole, Personification, and Self-Aggrandizement

However, Columbus told Isabella and Ferdinand that despite his hard work, toil, and having to persevere and put his life in danger for the nation's benefit, he had not received adequate awards and appreciation. Columbus uses hyperbole/exaggeration in describing different scenes in his letter to give a clear view of the scenes of accomplishments he made. The use of hyperbole in his letter is significant in this regard as he consistently mentions "I" throughout to leave a mark of him as an outstanding explorer of all the lands and most of the riches in order to exaggerate that he was solely

responsible for all the success, discoveries, and positive impacts of the voyage. In another instance, he explains how the storm varied through the voyage, “the sea changed from rough to calm, and there was a strong current which carried me as far as the Hardin de la Reina without the land being sighted” (Clay, pp. 617–620). Hyperbole is further used in the letter when he states that his son’s courage “revived the spirit of the others, and he acted as if he had been a sailor for eighty years” (Clay, pp. 617–620). This vivid description gives the reader a clear view of the storm’s rising and falling (The Norton Anthology of American Literature. 9th ed.). The words “rough” and “calm” also personified the “river”, relating their significance to the “hardships” and “rise and fall” of Columbus throughout his voyage. The idea of personification is further explored in the letter, where the storm is personified. For instance, he states that the storm carried him to Bastimentos harbour. In the statement, “the wind and current with fury drove me back” (Clay, pp. 617–620), the wind and current are personified (The Norton Anthology of American Literature. 9th ed.). He also states that the ‘bad weather’ compelled him to stay for fifteen days. He also used exaggeration in different scenes, such as when he tried to explain his crew’s fear of the hurricane and the painful journey that they encountered by saying that their hearts failed them (The Norton Anthology of American Literature. 9th ed). Imagery, hyperbole, and exaggeration throughout the letter help create a vivid picture of the situation, indicating the severity of the storm and the challenges faced during the voyage.

Religious Allusion, Metaphor, and Fear of Death

Aside from everything, Columbus uses allusion, personification, metaphor, ideology, tone, and setting to drive the intended meaning further and to give a clear account of his journey. He used allusion to address the hardships he came across and the difficulties he internally faced during his voyage without mentioning them explicitly: “alone in my trouble, sick, in daily expectation of death.” The use of allusion as well as exaggeration is so clear when he claims that he was “so separated from the holy Sacraments of Holy Church, my soul will be forgotten” (Columbus, 2009) and wants others to sympathize with him when his “abandoned” soul would leave his body exaggerating his fear of loneliness and death “weep for me” while asking others if they had “charity, truth, and justice.” Furthermore, he uses the metaphor for his faith or religion through words like “holy Sacraments” and “Holy Church” while he “encompassed about million savages,” talking about the cruelty and hatred surrounding him that made him “alone” and “sick.” It is discerning to hear through his letter how Columbus felt while being sick, afraid, and alone “in daily expectation of death” (Beazley, 1907). However, it seems that it is not a sudden desire for religion but a realization for Columbus that he had strayed away from his faith, and therefore, he may have wanted to reestablish the religious connection he had before he began his voyages as he might have realized that his religious fervour had suffered to a great extent during his voyages. The literary figure is further used in the letter when Columbus describes how his son, friends, and brothers’ lives were in danger (The Norton Anthology of American Literature. 9th ed.). For example, he states that his son’s distress racked his soul as he was still young, exhausted, and terrified by the whole experience. In addition to that, he describes how his brother’s ship was in great danger and regretted having forced him to accompany him on the voyage

(Clay, pp. 617–620). He then uses another metaphor of death when he states, “There was I held, in a sea turned to blood, boiling like a cauldron on a mighty fire” (Clay, pp. 617–620).

Ideology, Service, and the Demand for Recognition

Another literary device Columbus explicitly used in the letter is ideology when he gives an account of how he had worked hard to discover resources such as gold in the Caribbean. He made efforts to establish the different cultures and items being traded so that his discoveries could unveil different opportunities for the Europeans (Mann, 2011). He states that he was of great service to the nation, but he had gained only a few benefits from it. He says that he had served for a great period of time but got no recognition. Instead, all the possessions he had were stolen from him; therefore, he puts forward a plea to Ferdinand and Isabella for “the reparation of (his) losses” and the “punishment of him who did this” as he had given a long period of service to the Spanish crown. Columbus asked Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain to punish Alonso de Ojeda and make him endure the same as Columbus endured during his voyage, as Alonso took everything from him. He further states that he began his work of exploration when he was only twenty-eight years old, and now, he has grey hair over his body; therefore, his patrons should take steps for the “restitution of (his) honour” (Columbus 2009). The setting Columbus built in the context of his letter mainly illustrates his main encounters in the sea due to the storm and his interactions with the Natives. The setting explained in the letter helps connect the various scenes to enhance the letter’s plot and the readers’ understanding of the message.

A Broken and Desperate Tone

Delving deep into exploring the tone of the letter, it is disheartening, sad, and broken (Clay, pp. 617-620). Columbus talked to the patrons, Ferdinand and Isabella, in a cynical and negative tone while in a devastated and exhausted state to portray himself as a broken man. He wrote the letter in a state of desperation to show the world how helpless he felt when miserable things occurred to him during the Fourth Voyage that made him go through a mental breakdown as he felt “alone in trouble, sick, in daily expectation of death.” Throughout the letter, Columbus describes how he had undergone dangerous situations that almost broke him, but he remained persistent and resilient (MacKie, 1892). Apart from the suffering he went through, he also put forward his agonized sentiments as he felt sad about his discovered lands and was frightened by who was benefitting from them. He spoke of “weeping” when he passed by the lands he discovered where he was shipwrecked earlier in his voyage as native people were dying on them because they were pretty much barren because of the audacity of Indies taking over lands from the natives of those lands and imprisoning people. He must have felt that his entire life and all his achievements and explorations went up in flames and turned to ashes because people benefitting from his efforts were selfish (Stock, 2015). However, his sad and devastated state must be equated back to the instance when Columbus’ crew asked him to turn back, but he did not allow them to do so. He also shows his sadness for not being recognized for his

excellent job and hard work in service to the nation. Besides, he wanted to reveal to the world that everything was conquered for Spain so that the King and Queen would not be the only ones who would receive the credit for his explorations.

The Letter's Literary Strategy and Final Meaning

All in all, the journey began with a fleet of four ships aiming to establish unexplored areas in the western Caribbean and find a way to align them. Columbus's letter to Isabella and Ferdinand on the voyage gives a view of the Native cultures, the pain and fights that he endured, his strength and persistence throughout the whole voyage, and his desire to "go beyond the line of madness" (Mancall, 1998). In conclusion, in his letter, Columbus used literary devices such as imagery, hyperbole, tone, setting, metaphor, personification, allusion, ideology, and hyperbole to describe what he had experienced realistically. He uses imagery and hyperbole/exaggeration in most parts of his letter to give a clear view of the scene and show the dangers of the storm and the problems faced during the voyage. Allusion, personification, metaphor, ideology, tone, and setting drive the intended meaning much further and give an understandable version of his voyage. The setting helps connect the various scenes to enhance the letter's plot and the readers' understanding of the message, and to put it all together, the letter's overall tone is discouraging, sorrowful, and torn, explicitly depicting that Columbus might wish to go back in the past and decide not to travel to the "New World" as he had witnessed the damage and destruction his endeavour has caused to both himself and his homeland.

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