

Bloom's
**LITERARY
THEMES**

EXPLORATION AND COLONIZATION

Edited and with an introduction by HAROLD BLOOM / Volume Editor: BLAKE HOBBY



Bloom's Literary Themes

EXPLORATION A COLONIZATION

Edited and with an introduction by

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Bloom's Literary Themes: Exploration and Colonization

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Bloom's Literary Themes

EXPLORATION AND
COLONIZATION

 Series Introduction by Harold Bloom:
Themes and Metaphors

1. TOPOS AND TROPE

What we now call a theme or topic or subject initially was named a *topos*, ancient Greek for “place.” Literary *topoi* are commonplaces, but also arguments or assertions. A topos can be regarded as literal when opposed to a trope or turning which is figurative and which can be a metaphor or some related departure from the literal: ironies, synecdoches (part for whole), metonymies (representations by contiguity) or hyperboles (overstatements). Themes and metaphors engender one another in all significant literary compositions.

As a theoretician of the relation between the matter and the rhetoric of high literature, I tend to define metaphor as a figure of desire rather than a figure of knowledge. We welcome literary metaphor because it enables fictions to persuade us of beautiful untrue things, as Oscar Wilde phrased it. Literary *topoi* can be regarded as places where we store information, in order to amplify the themes that interest us.

This series of volumes, *Bloom's Literary Themes*, offers students and general readers helpful essays on such perpetually crucial topics as the Hero's Journey, the Labyrinth, the Sublime, Death and Dying, the Taboo, the Trickster and many more. These subjects are chosen for their prevalence yet also for their centrality. They express the whole concern of human existence now in the twenty-first century of the Common Era. Some of the topics would have seemed odd at another time, another land: the American Dream, Enslavement and Emancipation, Civil Disobedience.

I suspect though that our current preoccupations would have existed always and everywhere, under other names. Tropes change across the centuries: The irony of one age is rarely the irony of

another. But the themes of great literature, though immensely varied, undergo transmemberment and show up barely disguised in different contexts. The power of imaginative literature relies upon three constants: aesthetic splendor, cognitive power, wisdom. These are not bound by societal constraints or resentments, and ultimately are universals, and so not culture-bound. Shakespeare, except for the world's scriptures, is the one universal author, whether he is read and played in Bulgaria or Indonesia or wherever. His supremacy at creating human beings breaks through even the barrier of language and puts everyone on his stage. This means that the matter of his work has migrated everywhere, reinforcing the common places we all inhabit in his themes.

2. CONTEST AS BOTH THEME AND TROPE

Great writing or the Sublime rarely emanates directly from themes since all authors are mediated by forerunners and by contemporary rivals. Nietzsche enhanced our awareness of the agonistic foundations of ancient Greek literature and culture, from Hesiod's contest with Homer on to the Hellenistic critic Longinus in his treatise *On the Sublime*. Even Shakespeare had to begin by overcoming Christopher Marlowe, only a few months his senior. William Faulkner stemmed from the Polish-English novelist Joseph Conrad, and our best living author of prose fiction, Philip Roth, is inconceivable without his descent from the major Jewish literary phenomenon of the twentieth century, Franz Kafka of Prague, who wrote the most lucid German since Goethe.

The contest with past achievement is the hidden theme of all major canonical literature in Western tradition. Literary influence is both an overwhelming metaphor for literature itself, and a common topic for all criticism, whether or not the critic knows her immersion in the incessant flood.

Every theme in this series touches upon a contest with anteriority, whether with the presence of death, the hero's quest, the overcoming of taboos, or all of the other concerns, volume by volume. From Monteverdi through Bach to Stravinsky, or from the Italian Renaissance through the agon of Matisse and Picasso, the history of all the arts demonstrates the same patterns as literature's thematic struggle with itself. Our country's great original art, jazz, is illuminated by what

the great creators called “cutting contests,” from Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington on to the emergence of Charlie Parker’s Bop or revisionist jazz.

A literary theme, however authentic, would come to nothing without rhetorical eloquence or mastery of metaphor. But to experience the study of the common places of invention is an apt training in the apprehension of aesthetic value in poetry and in prose.

 Volume Introduction by Harold Bloom

In my eightieth year I am still not virtuous enough to embrace “post-colonialism”, so this brief introduction will confine itself to the *literary* theme of exploration. Homer’s Odysseus (Ulysses in Latin) is the founder of imaginative exploration, and is prominent not only in *The Odyssey* but in many subsequent masterpieces, sometimes under his own name – as in Tennyson’s dramatic monologue – but also in other beings, including Satan in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, and the genial Leopold Bloom in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*.

Homer’s Odysseus is admirable but dangerous, a great survivor. You would not want to be in the same boat as Odysseus; he would survive, and you, like all his mariners, would drown. Endlessly resourceful, the cunning Odysseus explores from island to island, in his drive to return home to his own island kingdom of Ithaca, and to his wife Penelope and son Telemachus. Since the sea-god Poseidon is determined to destroy him, the exploratory drive of Odysseus becomes a model for survival in a very difficult cosmos.

In the *Inferno*, Dante revises Ulysses into an explorer of unknown realms, too restless in his settled existence to enjoy what he had struggled to reattain. Placed down in Hell as an evil counselor of his final shipmates, he is punished eternally for his last voyage into a forbidden knowledge. And yet his journey of exploration has a clear analogue in Dante’s own voyage, in the *Commedia*, through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise.

This ambiguity is explored superbly by Alfred Lord Tennyson in his *Ulysses*, where the Greek hero recounts his own final voyage. Satan, in *Paradise Lost*, heroically had explored chaos on his way to view Eden, there to revenge himself upon God by bringing about the Fall of Adam and Eve. Tennyson’s Ulysses echoes Satan’s: “And courage

never to submit or yield/ And what is else not to be overcome?" This transmutes to Tennyson's hero ending by crying out: "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

The grand culmination of the Ulysses Theme of Exploration, Endurance, and Survival comes on Bloomsday in Joyce's *Ulysses* when the ordinary yet quietly heroic Poldy gloriously sustains the hazards of city life in Dublin. Curious, kind, gentle, infinitely humane Poldy finds his spiritual son in Joyce's surrogate, Stephen Dedalus, the artist as a young man. What Poldy triumphantly explores is still our daily round of urban life, a century later.

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THE WORKS OF BARTOLOMÉ DE LAS CASAS



“Preface”

by Sir Arthur Helps, in *The Life of Las Casas:
The Apostle of the Indies* (1868)

INTRODUCTION

Bartolomé de Las Casas, first Bishop of Chiapas, bore witness to the first of many European efforts to colonize, exploit, and subjugate other cultures. In the excerpt below, Sir Arthur Helps praises Las Casas's humanitarian sympathies and his intellect, both of which helped change the colonizing practices of Spain. As Helps reports, Las Casas was praised even by his enemies, one of who describes him as “most subtle, most vigilant, and most fluent, compared with whom the Ulysses of Homer was inert and stuttering.” Such qualities made Las Casas an ideal recorder of Spain's efforts to explore and colonize the New World.



The life of Las Casas appears to me one of the most interesting, indeed I may say the most interesting, of all those that I have ever studied; and I think it is more than the natural prejudice of a writer for his hero, that inclines me to look upon him as one of the most remarkable

Helps, Sir Arthur. “Preface.” *The Life of Las Casas: The Apostle of the Indies*. London: Bell and Daldy, 1868. v–xv.

personages that has ever appeared in history. It is well known that he has ever been put in the foremost rank of philanthropists; but he had other qualifications which were also extraordinary. He was not a mere philanthropist, possessed only with one idea. He had one of those large minds which take an interest in everything. As an historian, a man of letters, a colonist, a missionary, a theologian, an active ruler in the Church, a man of business, and an observer of natural history and science, he holds a very high position amongst the notable men of his own age. The ways, the customs, the religion, the policy, the laws, of the new people whom he saw, the new animals, the new trees, the new herbs, were all observed and chronicled by him.

In an age eminently superstitious, he was entirely devoid of superstition. At a period when the most extravagant ideas as to the divine rights of kings prevailed, he took occasion to remind kings themselves to their faces, that they are only permitted to govern for the good of the people; and dared to upbraid Philip the Second for his neglect of Spanish and Indian affairs, through busying himself with Flemish, English, and French policy.

At a period when brute force was universally appealed to in all matters, but more especially in those that pertained to religion, he contended before Juntas and Royal Councils that missionary enterprise is a thing that should stand independent of all military support; that a missionary should go forth with his life in his hand, relying only on the protection that God will vouchsafe him, and depending neither upon civil nor military assistance. In fact his works would, even in the present day, form the best manual extant for missionaries.

He had certainly great advantages: he lived in most stirring times; he was associated with the greatest personages of his day; and he had the privilege of taking part in the discovery and colonization of a new world.

Eloquent, devoted, charitable, fervent, sometimes too fervent, yet very skilful in managing men, he will doubtless remind the reader of his prototype, Saint Paul; and it was very fitting that he should have been called, as he was, the "Apostle of the Indies."

Notwithstanding our experience, largely confirmed by history, of the ingenuity often manifested in neglecting to confer honour upon those who most deserve it, one cannot help wondering that the Romish Church never thought of enrolling Las Casas as a saint, amongst such fellow-labourers as Saint Charles of Borromeo, or Saint Francis of Assisi.

His life is very interesting, if only from this circumstance, that, perhaps more than any man of his time, he rose to great heights of power and influence, and then, to use a phrase of his own, fell sheer down "into terrible abysses." His spirit, however, almost always rose indomitable: and the "abysses" did not long retain him as their captive.

Among his singular advantages must be mentioned his great physical powers, and tenacity of life. I do not remember that he ever mentions being ill. He exceeded in his journeyings his renowned master and friend, Charles the Fifth, and he lived fully as laborious a life as did that monarch.

When Charles, a youth of sixteen, came to the throne. Las Casas was a man of about forty, of great power and Influence, He soon won the young king's attachment; during the whole of whose active life he worked vigorously with him at Indian affairs; and when, broken in health and in spirit, Charles retired to San Yuste, Las Casas was in full vigour, and had his way with Philip the Second, not, however, without the aid of the Imperial recluse. For almost the last business which Charles attended to was one in which the dying monarch gave his warm support to his friend Las Casas.

With Charles's grandfather, Ferdinand the Catholic, Las Casas had also worked at Indian affairs; and, with his usual sincerity, had not failed to inform that king of many truths which concerned his soul and the welfare of his kingdom.

Columbus, Cardinal Ximenes, Cortes, Pizarro, Vasco Nuñez, Gattinara the great Flemish statesman, were all known to Las Casas: in fact, he saw generations of notable men—statesmen, monarchs, inventors, discoverers, and conquerors—rise, flourish, and die; and he had continually to recommence his arduous conflict with new statesmen, new conquerors, and new kings. He survived Ferdinand fifty years, Charles the Fifth eight years, Columbus sixty years, Cortes nineteen years, Ximenes forty-nine years, Pizarro twenty-five years, and Gattinara thirty-seven years.

He was twenty-eight years old when he commenced his first voyage to the Indies; and he was still in full vigour, not failing in sight, hearing, or intellect, when, at ninety-two years of age, he contended before Philip the Second's ministers in favour of the Guatemalans having Courts of Justice of their own. Having left the pleasant climate of Valladolid, doubtless excited by the cause he was urging, and denying himself the rest he required, he was unable to bear up

against that treacherous air of Madrid, of which the proverb justly says, "though it will not blow out a candle, it will yet kill a man," and so, was cut off, prematurely, as I always feel, in the ninety-second year of his age.

His powers, like those of a great statesman of our own time, decidedly improved as he grew older. He became, I believe, a better writer, a more eloquent speaker, and a much wider and more tolerant thinker towards the end of his life. His best treatise¹ (in my judgment) was written when he was ninety years of age, and is even now, when its topics have been worn somewhat threadbare, a most interesting work.

To show that I have not exaggerated his great natural powers as well as his learning, I need only refer to his celebrated controversy with Sepulveda. This Sepulveda was then the greatest scholar in Spain, and was backed, moreover, by other learned men; but Las Casas was quite a match for them all. In argument he was decidedly superior. Texts, quotations, conclusions of Councils, opinions of fathers and schoolmen were showered down upon him. He met them all with weapons readily produced from the same armouries, and showed that he too had not in vain studied his Saint Thomas Aquinas and his Aristotle. His great opponent, Sepulveda, in a private letter describing the controversy, speaks of Las Casas as "most subtle, most vigilant, and most fluent, compared with whom the Ulysses of Homer was inert and stuttering." Las Casas, at the time of the controversy, was seventy-six years of age.

The reader of this introduction will perhaps think that if Las Casas is such a man as I have described, and his life is of such exceeding interest, it is strange that, comparatively speaking, so little has been heard about him. This, however, can be easily explained. His life can only be fully portrayed after reference to books, manuscripts, and official documents of the greatest rarity, not within the reach even of scholars, until recent years. The government of Spain has of late years thrown open to all students, in the most unreserved manner, its literary treasures, and afforded every facility for their study. In modern times, too, the Americans have taken great pains to investigate the early records of America, and have always been remarkably generous, in the use they have allowed to be made of the documents which they have rescued and brought together.²

There are few men to whom, up to the present time, the words which Shakespeare makes Mark Antony say of Caesar, would more apply than to Las Casas:—

“The evil that men do lives after them,
The good is oft interred with their bones.”

At one inauspicious moment of his life he advised a course which has ever since been the one blot upon his well-earned fame, and too often has this advice been the only thing which, when the name of Las Casas has been mentioned, has occurred to men's minds respecting him. He certainly did advise that negroes should be brought to the New World. I think, however, I have amply shown in the “Spanish Conquest” that he was not the first to give this advice, and that it had long before been largely acted upon. It is also to be remembered, that this advice, to introduce negroes, was but a very small part of his general scheme. Had that been carried into effect as a whole, it would have afforded the most efficient protection for negroes, Indians, and for all those who were to be subject to the Spanish Colonial Empire.

However, Las Casas makes no such defence for himself, but thus frankly owns his great error, saying, in his history, “This advice, that licence should be given to bring negro slaves to these lands, the Clerigo Casas first gave, not considering the injustice with which the Portuguese take them and make them slaves; which advice, after he had apprehended the nature of the thing, he would not have given for all he had in the world. For he always held that they had been made slaves unjustly, and tyrannically; for the same reason holds good of them as of the Indians.”³

This one error must not be allowed to overshadow the long and noble career of one, who never, as far as I am aware, on any other occasion, yielded to worldly policy; who, for nearly sixty years, held fast to a grand cause, never growing weary of it; and who confronted great statesmen, potent churchmen, and mighty kings, with perfect fearlessness, in defence of an injured, a calumniated, and down-trodden race,—a race totally unable to protect themselves from the advance of a pseudo-civilization which destroyed as much as it civilized.

NOTES

1. On Peru.
2. A short letter of Las Casas—of Las Casas who had very often not a maravedi in his pocket—has sometimes been bought by an enterprising American at a sum amounting to more than ten