



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1992 Volume II: Writing and Re-writings of the Discovery and Conquest of America

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## Windows of Time Since 1492

Curriculum Unit 92.02.07  
by C. Casey Cassidy

I. Introduction This year I would like to develop a unit on the historical exploration of the New World in concert with the “celebration” of the Quincentenary of America. My unit will seek to reflect the thoughts and the diverse opinions of the discovery/conquest by both European and American nations alike since 1492. The issues of democracy and conquest as perceived differently by different peoples will highlight intellectual curiosity and controversy.

As an underlying theme of my unit, I will develop the theory of quest extensively. As my unit develops, we will follow Columbus on his New World expeditions. As his emphasis moves toward the coveting of gold and the development of slave trading, we will gauge the reactions of the Spanish Crown. We will also try to understand the plight of the Arawak Indians as their islands are invaded, their peoples are massacred and their lands are ravaged.

As the centuries move along, we will analyze the reactions of peoples and nations across time. In the sixteenth century, the exploits of Columbus are only rarely mentioned. During the seventeenth century, Italy begins its praise of Columbus's achievements and as we move into eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Americans began to hail Columbus as their Immigrant epic hero. But as we approach 1992, Gary Wills writes that “a funny thing happened on the way to the Quincentennial observation of America's discovery. Columbus got mugged. This time the Indians were waiting for him.”(1)

II. Objectives and Strategies My reasons in presenting my unit are several. First, I would like to present my students with the idea of quest; that is, why do men leave home in search of things both material and spiritual? Secondly, I would like my students to gain an appreciation for new literary experiences. Exposure to literature from other times and places will facilitate this objective. These experiences will focus on the early quests from the Holy Grail. Third, we will study man's obsession with gold. This yellow metal has transcended its purely economic value and has attained an importance reserved only for magical and spiritual objects. Fourth, we will travel across the Atlantic and through the Caribbean with Columbus on his voyages as discoverer, explorer, conqueror, and entrepreneur. We will seek to present an overview of his achievements and to accord him his rightful place in history (whatever that might be). Finally, we will attempt to gauge the reactions of the Spanish Crown, the Arawak Indians, and the American people as we cross geographical and chronological lines of time.

My curriculum unit will assist me in many ways in my classroom. At Clemente School, our comprehensive

school plan strongly emphasizes reading and writing skills. Students will be challenged with oral and silent readings to seek out various themes and main ideas, and to identify major characters and their involvement in each story. As we become involved in the quest for the Holy Grail and in Columbus's voyages, the students will employ analytical and comprehensive skills. Daily journals will be encouraged as we read Columbus's navigational log. Finally, the historical application of Columbus's journey will serve to provide students with a better understanding of the accomplishments of these early explorers.

III. Theory of Quest Throughout recorded history, men have attempted to make sense of their lives, to give it meaning through external means. These may be physical, philosophical or religious in nature. Many are the tales of adventures in search of stones of magical ability, fountains of youth, golden amulets of fantastic power, the grail supposedly possessing spiritual and life giving properties, and thousands of other objects that have fired man's imagination and desire. Even in our own time, men continue to search for these same things. These quests are about mankind's search for itself, the immortality of the flesh and spirit.

There may be no profound and grand relationship relating the grail, gold, quests, and the characters and themes found in Columbus's exploration of the New World. Yet I think that a connection exists; a common thread running through each. The knights who quested after the grail, the many adventurers who have searched for treasure and magical things, and Columbus and his crew sailing across the Dark Sea in search of the West Indies and Japan. All these people have essentially been looking for similar things. For some of these men, these things would simply be on the level of material acquisition, such as wealth or power. For a few, these things would transcend material wealth and ascend to a level where the search becomes, as for some of the knights, a Journey of the soul"(2) and for some of the characters "a quest For identity, dignity, and individual freedom."(3)

Throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, there was written a large body of adventure literature dealing with the quest for and attainment of an object of some supposed mystical and religious power. This object was the grail or Holy Grail. This grail was thought to be endowed with food and life-giving properties, wrought with gold and precious stones and emitting a brilliant light. The grail was also thought to be a Reliquary: the dish from which Christ and his disciples ate at the Last Supper, the Cup of that meal or the Vessel in which Joseph of Arimathea received the blood from the wound of Christ. This grail also possessed the mysterious power of being able to appear and disappear automatically. "Ultimately, anyone who succeeded in fulfilling the Quest by obtaining the Holy Grail would obtain much more than the mere possession of an object, they would obtain spiritual enlightenment and the understanding of the deep things of God."(4) Scholars fairly well agree that the grail has come to represent the search for the source of life, life physical, life immortal. That the grail was never located and in fact may never have existed is secondary to efforts, imaginations, dreams, and quests in search of this object. It was the nature of the quest itself that transformed men more than only actual discovery.

Gold, in its real monetary value and in its symbolic representations, has historically served to open literal and "figurative gates".(5) B. Traven's characters in "The Treasure of Sierra Madre" in their search for gold were consciously and unconsciously looking to open these very gates. There are reasons to believe that faith in enchantments was connected to the rise of the power of gold. Gold intrinsically was no more nor less value than many other metals. What then is the force of gold's appeal? How has gold come to represent value? Gold was originally connected in men's minds with magic. It rose to prominence as a charm, a favored method of control of the dreaded, unseen world. The very color of gold became associated with the sun. To most early peoples the sun was an object of worship, as evidenced in Egypt, Assyria, Peru, and by the early inhabitants of our own land. The sun was considered to have magical, life perpetuating properties and gold, sharing with the

sun color and brilliance, became closely associated with these.

“That gold was pleasing to look at was secondary; the important consideration was that it was connected with the sun god.”(6) Gold would, when worn as jewelry, act as a charm and guarantee the wearer good luck, long life and protection against devils and demons. Men would go to any lengths and endure almost any sacrifice to secure gold’s magical protection. This mentality of valuing gold as something sacred and magical carries through even to our own time. The acquisition of this yellow metal has been the motivating spirit behind countless adventures, gold rushes, trade and gold wars. Gold operated like a magnet, an enchantment, even an addiction. The stories of the Spanish conquistadors are filled with revelations of how incredibly strong gold was in acting as an agent of imagination and adventure. Columbus, Pizarro, Ponce de León, and Coronado all gave themselves up to the insatiable quest for gold. In Columbus’s *First Letter From The New World* , he remarks that “these islands are richer than I yet know or can say and hold them all on their behalf and as completely at their disposition as the Kingdom of Castile. In this island of Hispaniola I have taken possession of a large town which is most conveniently situated for the gold fields and for communications with the mainland both here, and there in the territories of the Great Khan, with which there will be very profitable trade.”(7) The Catholic Majesties, Ferdinand and Isabella, were especially pleased with these remarks due to their depleted treasury and their interests in bringing new lands under Spanish rule.

There seems to be a parallel in all these quests throughout history. Those who believed in amulets and sun gods, those who searched for the wondrous grail, those who prospected their entire lives looking for gold, and those who plundered across Central America and the Caribbean were all caught up in this desire to find treasure; a treasure that -surely transcended mere material wealth and became a passion of dreams. This quest is what elevated the man or destroyed him forever.

IV. Overview of Columbus’s Voyages Few stories in history are more familiar than the one of Christopher Columbus sailing west for the Indies and Japan and finding the New World instead. Not a school child in America is unfamiliar with the famous explorer who sailed the ocean blue in 1492 on the *Nina*, the *Pinta*, and the *Santa Mar’a*. “America was discovered by Columbus purely by accident and was named for a man who had nothing to do with it; we now honor Columbus for doing something that he never intended to do, and never knew what he had done. Yet we are right in so honoring him, because no other sailor had the persistence, the knowledge, or the sheer guts to sail thousands of miles into the unknown ocean until he found land.”(8)

The story begins in Genoa in 1451 when Susanna Columbo gave birth to a son named Cristoforo. Little is known about Christopher’s childhood but we do know that at an early age he became very interested in seafaring. By the time that Columbus was in his early thirties, he had arrived as a master mariner, having sailed from above the Arctic Circle almost to the Equator, and from the Eastern Aegean to the outer Azores. His practical navigational skills were excellent and he understood geography and cosmography as well as anyone. The stage was set for Columbus’s journey into history. “His mind was seething with the notion of sailing west to the Orient, acquiring wealth beyond the dreams of avarice, And glory exceeding that of any earlier mariner.”(9)

Columbus departed from the seaport of Palos on Friday, August 3, 1492 bound for the Indies with signed contracts with the Spanish Sovereigns guaranteeing “ten percent of all gold, gems, spices or other merchandise produced or obtained by trade within these domains, tax free; he shall have the right to invest in one eighth of any ship going thither; and these offices and emoluments will be enjoyed by his heirs and successors forever.”(10) Seventy days later, at 2:00 A.M. on October 1st, Rodrigo de Triana spotted land — Watlings Island. Columbus went ashore and gave this island the name San Salvador—Holy Savior.

After his initial landing Columbus continued to explore the Caribbean region, discovering additional islands named in honor of the Spanish Crown and of the Catholic Church. The second island was called Isla de Santa Marina de Conception; the third, Ferrandina; the fourth, La Isla Belles and the fifth, La Isla Juana. In his *First Letter From The New World*, Columbus described in detail the numerous large harbors and rivers as well as the magnificent vegetation with a wide variety of fruits and herbs. There were also many references to many mines of metals and the abundance of gold. However, the islands that he discovered were not rich. The quantities of gold that he claimed he was just about to discover were always on the next island. As for the herbs, the islands had large supplies of aloe and gum mastics but no valuable spices. The only real wealth of this area laid in its human inhabitants who were forced into digging for the non-existent gold almost immediately. Columbus also advocated exporting them to Spain but the Catholic sovereigns frowned on this suggestion and returned the natives to their islands (although slavery for people from Africa and other parts of the world was encouraged). As for Columbus's *First Letter*, it became the most important document for the first voyage since it summarized the Admiral's discoveries and achievements. One should note, however, that it tells nothing of any adverse events because it was, after all, a success story that brought Columbus fame and honor as well as additional funding for his second voyage.

On his return from the first voyage, Columbus rode beside King Ferdinand through the streets of Barcelona. He was accorded great honors for his service to his God and to his King. He enjoyed the unique favor of sitting in the presence of the King and Queen and he was accorded the title "Don".

The following year, Columbus set sail for America with a major expedition of seventeen ships, twelve hundred immigrants and a wide variety of horses, cows, pigs and sheep. The Spanish Crown had directed Columbus to establish a major trading colony, to convert as many natives as possible, and to explore Cuba to ascertain whether or not it was the Asiatic mainland.

Whatever Columbus's skill as a mariner, he was extremely inept in his handling of his men and the inhabitants of the islands. He could not control his settlers in the island of Hispaniola and his relationships with the Arawaks disintegrated rapidly. On their first arrival, the Spaniards were favorably received by the Arawak people, who traded food, water, and a few gold ornaments for brass bells, broken glass and pottery. Since they believed that the white strangers had come down from the sky, they welcomed them with awe and affection. But soon after Columbus had left to return to Spain, it appeared that some of the original thirty-nine men at La Navidad had seized Indian women for sexual purposes. Returning from Spain on his second voyage in 1493, Columbus found the fort burned to the ground and all his men dead.

Though distraught at the loss at La Navidad, Columbus continued his mission sailing eastward to the island of La Isabela in his exploration for gold. But there was little gold to be found and soon the Admiral's empire began to fall apart as the settlers, most of them pardoned criminals, revolted. Several men were imprisoned or hanged. The struggling community of La Isabela was brought to her knees by violence, venereal disease, and a hurricane that destroyed several ships in the harbor. It was a bitter disappointment for Columbus.

Columbus's third voyage to America yielded the discovery of Trinidad and some very strange theories about the shape of the world, but riots and revolts continued as Columbus ruthlessly executed anyone who rebelled against him—Spaniards were executed, men were refused supplies, and Native Indians were enslaved against the direct orders of the Crown. In 1500, Ferdinand and Isabella sent a royal investigator to Espanola where he wasted little time imprisoning Columbus, placing him in chains, and returning him to Spain. Columbus's career as a colonizer was over. He would again sail to the West, but by then he would be only one of several adventurers exploring the Indies.

Columbus labored for the restoration of his awards and remunerations that he had initially contracted with the Sovereigns in April, 1492, and gradually he regained a degree of royal favor. He received substantial monies for that time period but nowhere near the revenues of the original pact.

The last part of the Admiral's life was plagued with illness, probably having contracted malaria or typhus on his voyages, and he died on May 20, 1506 at the age of fifty-five. His body was buried in Franciscan robes, then moved to a monastery in Seville, then shipped to Santo Domingo about 1540, then moved to Havana in 1796, and then back to Seville in 1899. But controversy continues to this day because speculation exists that the wrong bones were moved.

Well, in any case, Columbus continues to be a controversial historical figure. He was a plebeian who rose to nobility. He was not highly educated but he deeply admired learning. He maintained a strong belief that his God would open the sea road to the earthly paradise. And, in the end, he had conquered the Sea of Darkness. "While pursuing one vision, he inadvertently realized another: the outreach of Europe into a hitherto separate, but henceforth vastly wider world. Truly this uncommon Christopher Columbus began a process that, in words from a passage in one of the books of Esdras, 'shook the earth, moved the round world, made the deeps shudder, and turned creation upside down.' (11)

V. Columbus Across Time Columbus's reputation in history has followed a rather curious course. His navigational skills, his persistence, his knowledge and his sheer guts carried Europe across the Sea of Darkness. " 'The Admiral was the first to open the gates of that ocean which had been closed for so many thousands of years before,' wrote Bartolome de las Casas a half-century later in a comprehensive account of the voyages, which remains to this day a major source of knowledge about Columbus." (12) But by the early years of the sixteenth century, the accomplishments of explorers like Vespucci, Cortes, Pizarro, Vasco da Gama and Magellan robbed Columbus of his prominence. Many history books written in this time period either scarcely mentioned him or ignored him altogether.

By the middle of the sixteenth century, Columbus began to emerge from the shadows of history. In 1552, according to "the historian Francisco López de Gomara, 'The greatest event since the creation of the world (excluding the incarnation and death of Him who created it) is the discovery of the Indies. Columbus came to epitomize the explorer and discoverer, the man of vision and audacity, the hero who overcame opposition and adversity to change History.'" (13) By the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth, Columbus was celebrated in poetry and plays, especially in Italy and Spain.

The association between Columbus and America prospered in the eighteenth century as the revolutionary colonists began to distance themselves from England. In Columbus they found a man who had challenged the unknown sea and who had distanced himself from the Old World while finding a vast continent for new beginnings, much as they were attempting to do. By October, 1792, King's College in New York had been changed to Columbia University, the new nation's capital was to be called the District of Columbia, and Columbus had become a national hero.

In 1882, the founding fathers of the Knights of Columbus chose Columbus as their patron because they declared themselves in the mainstream of American social conscience and directly linked to the patriotic ideals of the republic. This organization was instrumental in lobbying for the Columbus memorial in Washington D.C. and in seeking to have Columbus canonized.

The four hundredth anniversary of Columbus's voyage was marked by a year long celebration throughout the United States. President Harrison praised Columbus as a man of progress and vision. In New York, a portion of



Central Park was renamed Columbus Circle, complete with a statue honoring this hero. In Chicago, President Cleveland helped to celebrate the World's Columbian Exposition, an event which covered six hundred eighty-six acres, with forty-seven countries participating, and a paid attendance of more than twenty-one million people. This exposition was considered to be the premier expression of the national spirit of the United States in its day. Columbus had arrived—he was now considered the spirit of American success.

VI. Quincentenary "Celebration" As I noted in the beginning of my unit, Gary Willis remarked that a funny thing happened on the way to the Quincentenary. "Columbus got mugged. This time the Indians were waiting for him." (14) People are speaking not of the discovery of America but rather the conquest or the encounter with the Native Indian populations. In public forums, Columbus is being marked as the precursor of exploitation. In *The Conquest of Paradise*, Kirkpatrick Sale "argues that Columbus was a grasping fortune hunter whose legacy was the destruction of the native population and rape of the land that continues to this day." (15) Descendants of Native Indians and slaves brought to the New World are understandably reluctant to celebrate the Quincentenary. In 1986, the United Nations abandoned its attempt to plan a major celebration. And even in Seville, Spain, at the opening of this year's World's Fair, Columbus and related Quincentenary activities were noticeably absent. Once again, Columbus has become a symbol but this time a symbol of exploitation. VII. Conclusion And so, our unit draws to a close without any clear cut indication as to the merits of a celebration for the Quincentenary of America or the necessity of a time of penitence and apologies. From the European perspective in the late fifteenth century, Columbus and his fellow conquistadors were heroes. In the late nineteenth century, Columbus became a national American epic hero, second only to General Washington. But here in the late twentieth century, it has become very difficult to separate the man from the deed. Are we burdening him with more guilt than we should? And if there is guilt, shouldn't it be shared by others?

As with most situations, only time will tell. Perhaps in years to come, other generations will see Columbus as a man of destiny, a man who was both of his time and beyond his time. But as Samuel Morison has ably suggested, Columbus was indeed one of the greatest mariners of all times. For this, he should be honored.

Lesson #1 This lesson is designed as a followup exercise to oral and silent readings of the *Digest of Columbus's Log-Book*. During class, students will be challenged to answer questions which will employ both analytical and comprehensive thinking skills. They will become involved in daily journal writings of their own as they go about their daily lives. The theory of quest and goal attainment will be discussed both as it pertained to Columbus's expedition as well as their own journey through life and the successes and achievements that they desire for themselves and for their families. Lesson #2 The novel, *Christopher Columbus. Mariner* by Samuel Eliot Morison will become the central focus of our curriculum unit. The text lends itself very nicely to classroom usage because the story is divided into twenty-one chapters. This will permit me to teach this unit over a period of four months, developing one chapter per week.

Students will be challenged with silent readings for homework purposes and selected oral readings during class to seek out various themes and main ideas, and to identify major characters and their involvement in each story. As we travel across the Atlantic and through the Caribbean with Columbus on his voyages, we will seek to present an overview of his "achievements" as discoverer, explorer, conqueror and entrepreneur. Finally, we will attempt to gauge the reactions of the Spanish Crown and the Arawak Native Indians to each voyage as well as to offer some modern day perceptions and reflections of these encounters.

Lesson Plan #3 This year the Knights of Columbus organization based in New Haven is offering a quincentennial exhibit at the Supreme Council Headquarters Museum. This exhibition is entitled "Collecting

Columbus: A Link To Yesterday s World". It will run from May, 1992 through October, 1993. Paintings, engravings, postage stamps, medals, coins, and scholarly texts from all over the world will commemorate Columbus-s expeditions. A special collection of ceramic tiles that were brought to the New World by Columbus in 1493 to decorate the first Christian Church at La Isabela will be on display.

Therefore, a *field trip* to this exhibition is a must. For information regarding group tours, contact the office of the facilities manager at the Knights of Columbus at (203) 772-2130. A twelve page color brochure will accompany the exhibit and admission is free.

Lesson Plan #4 This year at the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute an emphasis has been created to develop projects within the context of units that will highlight the mutual participation of students and teachers alike. As a culminating exercise to our unit of study, each student will be challenged to develop a creative individual project which will reflect the results of their research. Here is a list of some of the suggestions that will be offered to the students, but keep in mind that if they wish to create a project through some other medium, they will be encouraged to do so.

1. A clay model (Perhaps of Columbus s settlements)
2. A mural
3. A travelogue
4. h mobile
5. A map
6. A chronological timeline of Columbus's voyages
7. A classroom play
8. A newspaper from 1492 Spain
9. A tape
10. A creative game
11. A commercial
12. A slide show
13. A photographic display
14. A computer printout
15. A cartoon

I am sure that once these projects have been initiated the classroom spirit and enthusiasm will generate some real opportunities for wonderful learning experiences. Notes

1. Wilford, John N. *Discovering Columbus* . (The New York Times Magazine. August 11, 1991) pg. 47.
2. Waite, Arthur E. *The Holy Grail: The Galahad Quest in Arthurian Literature* . (New York University Books,1961) pg. XVII.
3. Miller, Charles H. *An introduction to The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* . (New York, Knopf Co. 1966). pg XIII.
4. IBID. pg. XII
5. IBID. pg 534.
6. Coblentz, Stanton A. *Avarice. A History* . (Washington, D.C. Public Affairs Press, 1965). pg. 24.
7. Cohen,J.M. *The Four Vovages of Christopher Columbus* . (Penguin Books, 1969) pg. 120.
8. Morison, Samuel E. *Christopher Columbus, Mariner* . (Little, Brown and Company, 1942). pg. 11.
9. IBID. pg. 19.
10. IBID. pg.31.
11. Lyon, Euaene. *Search For Columbus* . (National Geographic. January, 1992). pg. 39.
12. IBID. pgs. 27-28.
13. IBID. pg. 28.
14. IBID. pg.47.
15. IBID. pg.49.

Teacher Bibliography 1. Cohen, J.M. *The Four Voyages of Christopher Columbus* . Penguin Books. 1969.

2. Columbus, Christopher. *Narrative of the Third Voyage of Christopher Columbus to the New World* . 1498-1500.

3. de las Casas, Bartolome. *Digest of Columbus's Log-Book On His First Voyage Made* . 1523.

4. Morison, Samuel. *Admiral of the Open Sea* . Little, Brown and Company. 1942.

5. Morison, Samuel. *Christopher Columbus, Mariner* . Little, Brown and Company. 1942.

6. Waite, A.E. *The Holy Grail: The Galahad Quest in Arthurian Literature* . 1961



7. Weston, Jessie. *King Arthur and His Knights: A Survey of Arthurian Literature* . 1972.

## Student Bibliography

### *Texts*

1. Morison, Samuel. *Christopher Columbus. Mariner* . Little, Brown and Company. 1942.

### Magazines

1. *The Columbia* . Leeney, Robert. Collecting Columbus April 1992.
2. National Geographic. Deagan, Kathleen. *La Isabela* . January, 1992.
3. National Geographic. Lyon, Eusene. *Search For Columbus* . January, 1992.
4. National Geographic. Hemming, John. *Pizarro, Conqueror Of the Inca* . February, 1992.
5. The New York Times Magazine. Wilford, John. *Discovering Columbus* . August 11, 1991.

## Classroom Materials

### *Films*

*The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. 1948, directed by John Houston, based on the novel by B. Traven, videocassette.

*Excalibur*. 1983, directed by John Bourman, based on *The Morte D'Arthur* , videocassette.

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