

**Sarah Mook Contest 2016, Grades 6-8, First Place Winner, “We Should Have Known”**

When I first saw this poem, its two-column shape intrigued me. When I realized that each column represented different speakers, one the ‘conqueror’ and the other the ‘conquered,’ this ambitious poem pleased me even more (\*see page three). By the end of the poem, the reader’s sympathies favor the plight of native peoples, not the conquering Spaniards. To accomplish this, the poet employs repetition and resonant detail concerning the greed of the Spaniards and the innocence of the native Taínos.

Both groups label each other positively, then have a change of heart. The Taíno admire the conqueror’s physical appearance and might, then become horrified at their ruthlessness, while the Spaniards respect the Taíno for their simplicity and generosity, but ultimately they consider the native population, their possessions, and their land as belonging to Spain.

The two voices in the poem, “The Spanish Soldier” on the left side of the page, and “The Spirit of the Taíno Woman” on the right, trade positive impressions. The Spanish explorer comments on the “hard journey” with fears of an “endless sea” or their vessel “dropping off” and disappearing at the end of the world; they “felt relief” when sighting land. While on the right, “The Spirit of the Taíno Woman” vividly expresses views of the Spaniards. They consider them “gods” who “came from across the sea / in great canoes” and “called in a strange tongue.”

This first stanza of the Taíno ends with a powerful refrain: “We should have known / We should have known.” These lines speak to the rueful knowledge that the natives “should have known” that these conquerors would not treat them with fairness or justice, but instead with exploitation and brutality.

The Spaniards’ reply confirms their assumption of ownership. The sailors are “relieved to set foot on land at last” and “feel awe” to discover that this island has “animals and fruit / the likes of which we had never seen.” The “strong, bejeweled natives” live on land that promises “riches for the motherland.” The refrain for the conqueror’s column, “This land is ours / This land is ours,” describes Columbus and his soldiers’ attitude toward the land and people who have lived there for centuries. In the eyes of European royalty, land unsettled by Europeans belonged to them to build upon with the intention of ownership, not merely exploration. Their objective was to gain control—political and economical—over a land and its indigenous peoples; if they had to fight native populations ‘to win’ the land, so be it.

The Taíno’s admiration for the invaders continues in their second stanza. The writer’s inventive description equates the soldiers to beauty and value: “Their skin glowed white and shone silver.” Even “the soldiers’ “great beasts” that are “made to kill and carry” do not dampen the Taíno’s positive view:

Their beauty was so great  
And their weapons so strong.  
Like spirits, we revered them.  
We should have known.  
We should have known.

The Spanish soldiers revel in the adoration from the Taíno natives in the next section:

They treated us as Kings  
Giving freely their riches in exchange  
for the simplest of things: beads and broken glass.  
They offered no resistance.

How easily the Spaniards took advantage of the friendly Taíno, who had little experience with aggression and war. The Spaniards betrayed this innocence with belief in their superiority and entitlement; the refrain “This land is ours for God and King / This land is ours / This land is ours” establishes their arrogance.

At first, the Taíno welcome the Spaniards as “ancestors,” because “they looked in awe at our cities and people.” Eventually, however, the native people understand that it is not ‘awe’ that inspires the invaders, but “greed.” The refrain “We should have known / We should have known” gains power and truth with this knowledge.

The next stanza by “The Spirit of the Taíno Woman” reveals the awful truth of the Spaniard’s’ treachery:

My children, they took  
First by sickness, then by force.  
They dishonored our ancestors  
And forced us to work on stolen land,  
Digging for yellow rock.

Now when the refrain, “We should have known. / We should have known” occurs, exactly *what* ‘should have been known’ is made tragically apparent.

The Spaniards conclude their part of the poem with the braggadocio of victory; they claim they were victorious over a “formidable” foe, when in truth the Taíno were anything but “formidable.” The Spaniards “readied . . . guns as we moved on in force / Our band against their army.” Calling their soldiers a “band” and the native fighters an “army,” speaks to the need for the Spaniards to bolster their egos and for their heroism to be affirmed for Spanish royalty. The Spaniards acknowledge that the natives’ numbers “are great” (that is debatable) but that the Spaniards’ weapons “are greater.” Of course they were; cannon and swords will defeat clubs and bows and arrows any day, even those with poisoned tips. The natives “fell in droves as swords slashed and cannon fired / We conquered as Gods” Ironically, the Spaniards capture the “land” that “is ours” as if they were “gods,” which is sadly what the Taíno thought them to be, albeit a very different kind.

It is important to note that the Taíno are represented by a “spirit” and not by an actual people or person. This reference suggests that their population was overrun and defeated by the Spanish, until very few, if any, remained to attest to the slaughter. The fact that the spirit is a “woman,” points to the staggering losses of males in the population, and also attests to the Taíno woman’s power.

The writer appropriately allows “The Spirit of the Taíno Woman” to have the last word that stings in its directness towards the nature of the ‘gods’ that had conquered them:

We once thought them gods,  
But they were not gods  
Because gods do not bleed.  
We should have known.  
We should have known.

The above refrain now becomes a lament for the Taíno—for loved ones, their heritage, and their land.

With commanding voice, this poet engages our sympathies and emotions. The poem reveals a dramatic conflict using a challenging style, memorable refrains, and yet simple language to tell this history of a people conquered by force and cruelty. Please keep writing! Our world needs your voice.

*Thank you for the privilege of reading your work!*

*\* Because the poem piqued my interest, I thought you might be interested also.*

**Background of Columbus, the Spaniards, and the Taíno people from Wikipedia:**

“The **Taíno** were the indigenous people of the Caribbean and Florida who numbered in the millions. At the time of Columbus' arrival on October 12, 1492, when his crew landed on an island in the Bahamas, they were the first Europeans to encounter the Taíno people.” How ironic that Columbus described the Taínos as a ‘physically tall, well-proportioned people, with a noble and kind personality’ given the cruelty the Spaniards inflicted on them.

“The Taíno became nearly extinct as a culture following settlement by Spanish colonists, primarily due to infectious diseases, to which they had no immunity. A smallpox epidemic killed almost 90% of the Native Americans who had not already perished. The Spaniard’s cruelty cost many lives. Columbus required that the Taino pay him a tribute; a ‘hawks bell full of gold’ every three months, or twenty-five pounds of spun cotton. When the Taíno did not (or most likely, could not) pay this ‘tribute’, the Spanish cut off the hands of the Taíno and left them to bleed to death.”

These and other cruel practices inspired many revolts by the Taíno and campaigns against the Spanish, which resulted in more deaths and the near extinction of this population.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ta%C3%ADno>

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***The Smithsonian says:***

“The Spaniards treated the indigenous population severely, enslaving and exploiting them, forcing them to work in mines to search for gold, in construction, and in agriculture. The Taíno population rapidly declined from the slave labor conditions and the new European diseases for which they had no immunity. Horrific numbers were slaughtered. Some took their own lives to escape the brutalities and indignities that were being repeated on other islands across the Caribbean.”

“In Puerto Rico and other Caribbean islands, actual surviving Native communities and families of Native ancestry are increasingly revealing themselves, and restoring their heritage. A 2002 study by the Smithsonian Institute's National Museum of the American Indian documented families in high mountain regions across the Caribbean where the inheritance and legacy of Taíno ancestors are still present. They live indigenous lives and have preserved traditions that have been passed down through the generations, from very early contact times. These descendants hold land and maintain a social and spiritual culture. They continue traditions such as the preparation of cassava bread, traditional weaving, instrument making, and canoe building. To this day, there are many in Puerto Rico who observe important ceremonies, use medicinal plants and farming methods that come directly from the Taíno heritage.”

<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/ist/?next=/people-places/what-became-of-the-taino-73824867/>

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**Another source notes that:**

“While the history of the Taíno is relatively unknown, their legacy today is recognized worldwide including musical instruments (maraca, guiro), inventions (hamaca/hammock, barbacoa/barbeque), common words (huracan/hurricane, maisi/maiz/corn), animal names (iguana, manatee), and more. The Taíno introduced the Conquistadors to tobacco (Tabaco) and sports played with a rubber ball (batu).”

<http://www.prfdance.org/taino.history.ALL.html>