

Philip Freneau

(1752-1832)

The Indian Burying-Ground (1787)

In spite of all the learn'd have said,
I still my old opinion keep;
The *posture*, that we give the dead,
Points out the soul's eternal sleep.

Not so the ancients of these lands --
The Indian, when from life releas'd,
Again is seated with his friends,
And shares again the joyous feast.

His imag'd birds, and painted bowl,
And ven'son, for a journey dress'd,
Bespeak the nature of the soul,
Activity, that knows no rest.

His bow, for action ready bent,
And arrows, with a head of stone,
Can only mean that life is spent,
And not the finer essence gone.

Thou, stranger, that shalt come this way,
No fraud upon the dead commit --
Observe the swelling turf, and say
They do not *lie*, but here they *sit*.

Here still a lofty rock remains,
On which the curious eye may trace
(Now wasted, half, by wearing rains)
The fancies of a ruder race.

Here still an aged elm aspires,
Beneath whose far-projecting shade
(And which the shepherd still admires)
The children of the forest play'd!

There oft a restless Indian queen
(Pale *Shebah*, with her braided hair)
And many a barbarous form is seen
To chide the man that lingers there.

By midnight moons, o'er moistening dews,
In habit for the chace array'd,
The hunter still the deer pursues,
The hunter and the deer, a shade!

And long shall timorous fancy see
The painted chief, and pointed spear,
And Reason's self shall bow the knee
To shadows and delusions here.

ANALYSIS

Freneau believes in God, but not in human immortality. He begins this poem in the posture of a rebel, a man of the Enlightenment who has remained steadfast in his rationalism against the arguments of theologians with faith in immortality. He asserts that the practice of burying the dead lying down is evidence that even Christians, contrary to their professed faith, are actually resigned to mortality—"the soul's eternal sleep." Melville later makes comparable challenges to Christians early in *Moby-Dick* when Ishmael questions their professed faith in immortality in "The Chapel."

The burial practice of "The Indian" is contrasted to that of the white as evidence of primitivism. This illustrates the tendency of rationalists to categorize broadly, like sociologists do. Actually the burial practices of the hundreds of North American Indian tribes varied widely across the continent. Likewise, in this case, metaphor and myth are reductive: Throughout American literature and popular culture, "The Indian" is a metaphor of Nature, and a mirror of the author's view of Nature.

During the American Revolution, Freneau came to hate the British, who imprisoned him and denied the natural rights of Americans. He is at peace with the Indians because he never had to fight them and because, as he sees them, Indians had been subdued by the natural advancement of civilization, just as "children" are subdued by parents and ignorance is displaced by enlightenment. Where the white "shepherd" would tend a flock or enlighten a reader as Freneau is presuming to do in his poem, the childlike Indians merely "play'd." Freneau's focus on Indians sitting upright in death versus whites lying down is consciously ironic, since in *life* Indians are more pastoral and whites more "vertical" or rational. Seen as children, Indians also are "shorter" than civilized whites.

As a rationalist, Freneau depicts belief in immortality as childish. To him Indians are "a ruder race," unenlightened "children of the forest." Their beliefs are mere "fancies," superstitions and "delusions." Freneau is in effect the shepherd in stanza 7 of the poem, relating to the Indians or children of the forest as if to sheep. The mood of the poem is pastoral, complementing but not balancing the puritan rationalism, which remains dominant in the vertical mode. Stanza 8 moves a step from Neoclassicism toward Romanticism by indulging the fancy, or capacity for make-believe. Coleridge the British Romantic poet later distinguished mere *fancy* from *creative imagination*, whereas Freneau's puritanism of Reason limits his concept of imagination.

Freneau is complimentary in fancying an Indian Queen of Sheba in the New World to parallel the one famous in the Old World. By calling her "Pale" he makes her less alien to white readers, though she remains "barbarous" like other Indians, which separates Freneau from the Romantics whose love of nature leads to sentimental primitivism. Similarly, in *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) Cooper makes the white woman Cora a dark lady to reduce the shock when he depicts her romantic attraction to an Indian, the noble Uncas, whose good character--superior to most Christians--is intended to subvert the taboo against miscegenation. Freneau and Cooper were being liberal by the standards of that time.

Europeans had been idealizing Indians since they first heard of the New World, which many imagined as an Eden. Freneau was undoubtedly familiar with Rousseau and the myth of the Noble Savage. Rousseau and the most extreme Romantics, including many environmentalists today, consider primitivism superior to civilization. On the contrary, Freneau affirms civilization in a hierarchy of Reason over primitivism and fancy. As a democrat advocating for the rights of common people he rejected the traditional concept of the Great Chain of Being that originated with Aristotle and served as the basis for the class structure defended by the Tories he hated. He retained a belief that common people fair best in a democratic civilization.

In his fancy, Freneau adopts for a moment the Indian notion of an afterlife as if reading a romantic tale for entertainment. Years later, Cooper likewise regards Indians as a "ruder race" and idealizes a few as noble, but he is also realistic in depicting many as treacherous barbarians. Freneau is sentimental without primitivism. His poem is a gracious but condescending tribute to Indians as quaint and picturesque like figures in the tapestries adorning the walls of enlightened men: "And Reason's self shall bow the knee / To shadows and delusions here."

Michael Hollister (2015)

