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Miner Hypocrisy in Anthropology

Are foreign cultures really so strange? Horace Mitchel Miner was an American anthropologist, most notable for his satirical essay “Body Ritual Among the Nacirema,” which he published in 1956. In the essay, Miner describes a foreign tribe called the “Nacirema”, and their strange and magical behaviors. At first, it seems as though it is similar to any other anthropological essay, critiquing the unexplained behaviors of previously unknown peoples. However, after a closer analysis the reader is able to see that it is not actually a foreign tribe that Miner is describing, but rather it is just the American people. “Nacirema” is nothing but the word “American” backwards. His satire is Horatian, because the issue Miner is bringing to light is not necessarily unsolvable, and Miner does not aggressively attack his audience in order to convey his point. Throughout the satire, Miner uses *reductio ad absurdum* while simultaneously employing irony and tone in order to highlight bias and exaggeration within the field of anthropology.

Miner satirizes the hypocrisy within the field of anthropology, by using *reductio ad absurdum* to estrange American (or “Nacirema”) culture, and assert that any behavior can be made to look peculiar. Each behavior he criticizes, while we think is supported by reason, is stripped down to an absurd idea which Miner openly critiques. For example, the act of brushing in the morning is common in American culture. It is

additionally supported by science: it helps to remove harmful bacteria from your teeth. However, Miner reduces the habit of brushing into a needless and absurd folly. He describes it as “inserting a small bundle of hog hairs into the mouth, along with certain magical powders, and then moving the bundle in a highly formalized series of gestures” (Miner 3). This interpretation of the habit of brushing describes it to be a form of strange magic. Miner does this in order to point out that every behavior can be made to look different. Another similar example is when Miner describes a visit to the dentist; “One has but to watch the gleam in the eye of a holy-mouth-man, as he jabs an awl into an exposed nerve, to suspect that a certain amount of sadism is involved” (Miner 4). Miner satirizes anthropologists by pretending as if he were the outsider judging society, and coming up with the misrepresenting conclusion that dentists are sadists. He then uses this misrepresenting conclusion to justify that the whole “population shows definite masochistic tendencies” (Miner 4). This was a common theme in the anthropological essays of the early-mid 20th century, with many cultures being judged prematurely by Western society. Miner clearly favors cultural relativism, and that the norms and values of one culture should not be evaluated using the norms and values of another. He feels as though many cultures which he witnessed on his journey in Africa have been misrepresented, and should be able to explain their own traditions instead of being judged by an outsider.

Another significant feature of Miner’s satirical essay is his use of irony in order to satirize the bias and ethnocentrism in both anthropologists as well as their readers. Miner introduces his essay by stating that anthropologists have become accustomed to assuming strange and unusual behaviors in exotic tribal cultures. The Nacirema provide

insight into some of the extremes to which human behavior can go (Miner 1). There is an obvious irony involved with these statements. Anthropologists of the 20th century have been known to display ethnocentrism, and unfairly alienate cultures of foreign tribes and peoples due to seemingly strange behaviors. In response, Miner suggests their own behaviors are not too dissimilar to those of the cultures which they attack, exposing the hypocrisy involved in anthropology. He also satirizes the consumers of anthropology, by using signal words such as “magic” and “strange”. Miner uses this language that evokes a feeling of exoticism in Western readers, but instead of getting that idea, they are forced to feel a sense of outrage at being exoticized themselves. In addition, the readers are exposed to the sort of ethnocentrism that is present in the anthropology that they are accustomed to. Miner concludes that “It is hard to understand how they [the Nacirema] have managed to exist so long under the burdens which they have imposed upon themselves” (Miner 6). Miner is sarcastically explaining that the “Nacirema” are so strange and backward, they should not even exist in the modern age, a common conclusion in many western anthropological essays of the time period looking at other peoples. Although cultures may appear to be strange from an outside perspective, Miner suggests cultural relativism, and that everybody should have the opportunity to explain their ideas. It is ironic that anthropologists describe other cultures as backwards and dysfunctional, while their own seemingly “magical” beliefs prove themselves to be strange.

Miner also uses a formal tone in order to satirize anthropologists and advocate for cultural relativism. He writes the piece as though it were an anthropological essay discovering a truly new culture. He introduces the essay with a third person formal style,

which signifies to the reader that he is an educated speaker who knows about the topic he is discussing. This creates an illusion of belief within the reader. In addition to creating a persona, the tone also clouds the descriptions of some of the follies, which can further confuse the reader into believing that the essay is not about them, when in reality it is directly towards them. This initial confusion convinces the reader of the argument, until they realize that they are the intended audience. This prompts the change that Miner is advocating. He also uses his tone to mimic other anthropological pieces. Miner uses quotations from notable anthropologists of the 1900s, in order to further develop his satire. Miner attacks Bronisław Malinowski, the author of functionalism, by repeating his quote, "Looking from far and above, from our high places of safety in the developed civilization, it is easy to see all the crudity and irrelevance of magic. But without its power and guidance early man could not have mastered his practical difficulties as he has done, nor could man have advanced to the higher stages of civilization" (Miner 6). This is an almost comical conclusion to the satire, because Miner is mocking the hypocrisy and condescendingness of anthropologists like Malinowski, by using their quotes to attack their own culture. By using other anthropologists' quotes and also a formal tone, Miner exposes hypocrisy among anthropologists and further develops his satire.

In conclusion, Miner directly satirizes anthropology, by utilizing *reductio ad absurdum*, irony, as well as tone in order to convey the ethnocentrism and arrogance that his peers have in their writings. In addition, Miner attempts to convince the reader of cultural relativism, and that cultures should have their own right to discuss their behaviors and traditions, rather than being prematurely judged by outsiders.

anthropologists. During the year before he published the satire, Miner worked at a university in Uganda through a cultural exchange program. Here, he discovered completely different cultures, which he felt were unfairly alienated by western societies through their harsh and biased anthropological essays. In response, he decided to satirize western culture, and in doing so expose the hypocrisy in the field of anthropology, which he does in "Body Ritual Among the Nacirema."

Citation:

Miner, Horace. "Body Ritual Among the Nacirema." *American Anthropologist*, vol. 58, 1956, pp. 503-507