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Of Cannibals Michel De Montaigne

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Introduction: Meeting a Renaissance Mind Through a Shocking Title

When you first encounter the title **"Of Cannibals" Michel De Montaigne**, the image that likely springs to mind is one of primal savagery, of rituals performed deep in uncharted forests. Yet, the French essayist Michel de Montaigne, writing in the late 16th century, had something far more subversive in mind. His essay, published in 1580 as part of his monumental work *Essais*, is not a sensationalist travelogue about savage tribes. Instead, it is a razor-sharp critique of European civilization, a philosophical meditation on cultural relativism, and one of the earliest modern arguments against ethnocentrism.

To understand the power of **Of Cannibals Michel De Montaigne**, we must strip away our modern assumptions and step into a world torn apart by religious wars, colonial expansion, and rigid social hierarchies. Montaigne used the figure of the so-called "cannibal" not as a monster to be feared, but as a mirror in which to expose the true barbarism of his own society. This article will explore the historical context of the essay, its core philosophical arguments, Montaigne's use of the "Noble Savage" concept, and why his words remain startlingly relevant in our globally interconnected, yet deeply divided, world.

The Historical Context: Wars of Religion and New World Encounters

To fully appreciate **Of Cannibals Michel De Montaigne**, one must first understand the violence that surrounded its author. Montaigne wrote during the French Wars of Religion, a brutal series of conflicts between Catholics and Protestants that tore France apart for decades. Neighbors turned on neighbors, and acts of torture, massacre, and betrayal were committed in the name of God. It was against this backdrop of European "civilization" at its worst that Montaigne learned about the Tupinambá people of Brazil.

Montaigne never traveled to the Americas. His information came secondhand, primarily from a servant who had lived for several years among the Tupinambá in what is now coastal Brazil. He also spoke with explorers and read contemporary travel accounts, such as those by Jean de Léry and André Thevet. Where other European writers saw only demonic savages or simple brutes, Montaigne saw a society that, in many respects, appeared more virtuous than his own.

The timing of the essay is critical. Europe was in the early stages of colonization, and the encounter with indigenous peoples presented a profound intellectual challenge. Were these people human in the same way Europeans were? Did they have souls? Could they be civilized? Montaigne's answer was radical: perhaps the question should be reversed. Perhaps it was the Europeans who were barbaric.

Defining "Barbarism": Montaigne's Central Thesis

The core argument of **Of Cannibals Michel De Montaigne**revolves around a simple yet revolutionary idea: we call something barbaric simply because it is unfamiliar. Montaigne writes that "we have no other test of truth

and reason than the example and pattern of the opinions and customs of the country we live in." This is the essence of his cultural relativism. He challenges the reader to look beyond their own ingrained habits and consider that other ways of living might be equally valid, or even superior.

The Cannibals as the True "Natural" Society

Montaigne presents the Tupinambá as a society still governed by the "natural laws" that Europeans have corrupted. He describes their simple lifestyle, their lack of complex legal systems, their absence of social hierarchy based on wealth, and their direct connection to the land. He notes that they live in "a country where there is no sort of commerce, no knowledge of letters, no science of numbers, no title of magistrate or political preeminence, no custom of service, no riches or poverty, no contracts, no successions, no partitions, no occupations but leisure ones."

This description is, of course, idealized. Montaigne was constructing a philosophical tool rather than providing an objective ethnographic report. He was using the image of the "cannibal" to critique the artificiality and corruption of European court life, legal systems, and religious institutions. The simplicity of the Tupinambá served as a foil to the decadence of France.

The Horrifying Honesty of the Cannibal Feast

Montaigne does not shy away from the central horror that gives his essay its name: the Tupinambá practice of eating their enemies. A lesser writer might have used this as definitive proof of savagery. Montaigne, however, performs a stunning rhetorical reversal. He compares the cannibalistic ritual to the European practice of torture and execution.

He argues that the Tupinambá eat their enemies after they have been killed in a fair fight, as an act of ultimate revenge and, in a twisted way, respect. The enemy is given a chance to show courage, and his body is consumed not for nourishment but for symbolic victory. Montaigne then asks his European readers: "I think there is more barbarity in eating a man alive than in eating him dead; in tearing by rack and torture a body that is still fully able to feel things, in roasting him little by little, in having him bitten and mangled by dogs and swine (as we have not only read but seen within fresh memory, not among ancient enemies, but among our neighbors and fellow citizens, and what is worse, under the pretense of piety and religion), than in roasting and eating him after he is dead."

This passage is the intellectual hammer blow of the essay. Montaigne forces the reader to confront the fact that European "civilization" routinely practiced far more prolonged and sadistic forms of violence than the supposed cannibals ever did. The cannibal eats the dead; the European tortures the living. Which is truly more barbaric?

The "Noble Savage" and Its Complicated Legacy

Of Cannibals Michel De Montaigneis often cited as a foundational text for the concept of the "Noble Savage," an idea later developed by thinkers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The "Noble Savage" is the figure of the uncorrupted human, living in a state of nature, free from the vices of civilization. Montaigne's Tupinambá fit this mold perfectly in their simplicity, courage, and honor.

However, it is important to recognize the limitations of this view. While Montaigne was remarkably progressive for his time, his perspective was still that of a European outsider looking in. He used the Tupinambá as a rhetorical device to criticize his own society, but he did not fully engage with their culture on its own terms. He projected onto them a purity and naturalness that may not have existed.

Nevertheless, the legacy of the "Noble Savage" is complex. On one hand, it has been used to romanticize and dehumanize indigenous peoples, treating them as timeless symbols rather than complex, changing societies. On the other hand, it has provided a powerful critical tool for questioning the assumptions of Western

civilization. Montaigne's essay stands at the beginning of this tradition, and its influence can be felt in literature, anthropology, and philosophy to this day.

Key Philosophical Themes in the Essay

Beyond the central argument about barbarism, **Of Cannibals Michel De Montaigne**touches on several deeper philosophical themes that are worth exploring in detail.

Cultural Relativism vs. Universal Morality

Montaigne is often hailed as a champion of cultural relativism, the idea that moral and ethical systems are valid only within their own cultural context. He famously asks, "What truth is that which these mountains bound, and which is a lie beyond them?" This suggests that truth and morality are contingent on geography and custom.

However, Montaigne is not a strict relativist. He does believe that the laws of nature provide a universal standard, and that the Tupinambá are closer to that standard than the Europeans. His relativism is a tool for critique, not an absolute philosophical position. He uses it to destabilize European arrogance, but he still holds up a version of "natural law" as an ideal.

The Corruption of Civilization

A persistent theme in the essay is that civilization, with its laws, arts, and sciences, actually corrupts human beings rather than improving them. Montaigne argues that the ingenuity of man has been used to create artificial needs, unjust hierarchies, and cruel punishments. The Tupinambá, in their simplicity, have avoided this corruption.

This is a deeply pessimistic view of progress, one that challenges the Renaissance optimism about human achievement. Montaigne suggests that we have not become better people through our learning; we have simply become more sophisticated in our vices.

The Limits of Understanding

Montaigne is also acutely aware of the limits of his own understanding. He admits that his knowledge of the Tupinambá comes from a servant who was not a learned man, and that the information may be imperfect. He is skeptical of grand claims and prefers the testimony of simple, honest observers over the elaborate theories of scholars. This epistemological humility is a hallmark of Montaigne's entire philosophical approach.

The Essay's Influence on Later Thinkers

The impact of **Of Cannibals Michel De Montaigne**on Western thought cannot be overstated. The essay directly influenced some of the most important figures of the Enlightenment and beyond.

Shakespeare's "The Tempest"

Literary scholars have long noted the echoes of Montaigne's essay in William Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*. Shakespeare almost certainly read John Florio's 1603 English translation of Montaigne's *Essays*. In the play, the character Gonzalo describes a utopian society that closely mirrors Montaigne's description of the Tupinambá: "No kind of traffic / Would I admit; no name of magistrate; / Letters should not be known; riches, poverty, / And use of service, none..." The connection is direct and well-documented.

Rousseau and the Social Contract

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's entire philosophy of the "state of nature" and the corrupting influence of society is deeply indebted to Montaigne. Rousseau's concept of the "Noble Savage" is a direct descendent of Montaigne's Tupinambá. Rousseau's famous opening line of *The Social Contract*, "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains," echoes Montaigne's lament about the artificial constraints of civilization.

Modern Anthropology and Ethnography

Montaigne's essay is also a precursor to modern anthropology. His willingness to take other cultures seriously, his suspicion of ethnocentrism, and his use of first-hand testimony all prefigure the methods of modern ethnography. While his work lacks the scientific rigor of later anthropology, its spirit of open-minded inquiry is a foundational element of the discipline.

Relevance in the Modern World

Why should we still read **Of Cannibals Michel De Montaigne**today? The essay is more than a historical curiosity. Its central insights remain deeply relevant to our contemporary struggles with cultural difference, globalization, and moral judgment.

Confronting Our Own Biases

In a world of instant global communication, we encounter cultural practices very different from our own on a daily basis. Montaigne's fundamental lesson—that we tend to judge the unfamiliar by the standards of the familiar—is as important as ever. Whether the topic is dietary restrictions, marriage customs, or political systems, his call for humility and self-reflection is a necessary antidote to arrogance.

Critiquing Our Own Civilization

Montaigne's essay is also a powerful reminder that the greatest barbarism is often found at home. In an age of drone warfare, mass incarceration, and environmental destruction, can we really claim to be more "civilized" than those we label as primitive? Montaigne's mirror is still held up to us, and it is uncomfortable to see our own reflection.

The Value of Skepticism

Finally, Montaigne's essay teaches us the value of philosophical skepticism. He does not offer easy answers or dogmatic pronouncements. He questions, probes, and invites the reader to think for themselves. In an era of tribal politics and information bubbles, this skeptical, open-minded approach is a vital intellectual virtue.

Conclusion: The Enduring Mirror of Montaigne's Cannibals

Of Cannibals Michel De Montaigneis far more than a strange essay about a distant people. It is a profound meditation on the nature of civilization, the dangers of ethnocentrism, and the possibility of seeing ourselves honestly through the eyes of others. Montaigne's great achievement was to take a subject that most of his contemporaries would have used

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