

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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***Atala*** (1801) from *The Genius of Christianity* 1802  
Francois-Rene de Chateaubriand. 1768-1848

OVERVIEW

**Author** Chateaubriand was born into the France of the *Ancien Regime*, the period of monarchy, privilege, the great families with their inherited wealth, and around them the products of art and literature which had made France the cultural capital of Europe for all the modern centuries. He was born onto the very cusp of the French Revolution, which was destined to become a sustained assault on the complex of attitudes bequeathed by the ancient regime, thus on the established values into which Rene was born. Rene's writings were to reflect the complex values of a time of world shaking historical change.

Rene was initially sympathetic to the Revolution, but as its abuses and violence made themselves apparent he had second thoughts. He experienced an old world passing and thought that nothing of value was there to replace it. In 1791 Chateaubriand made the then increasingly trendy decision to travel to North America, where he found ascensional openings for his spiritual life. He joined a finite but significant element of the Romantic movement, which Chateaubriand was to follow into the vision of the noble savage, already of high potency in European cultures, and to fictionize it into the dynamic of his then fermenting text, *Le Genie du Christianisme*; this text would be published upon his return to France in 1792. In the formation of a pre Romanticism, Chateaubriand's rediscovery of his childhood Christianity blended exotically with his record of enchanting travels in the far south of the newly self-revealing land of America. The novela *Atala* was one of Chateaubriand's contributions to the development of French Romanticism.

**Background** Landing in New York Chateaubriand followed the Mohawk Trail up the Hudson, past Niagara Falls, where he broke his arm and had to spend a month under the care of a local Indian tribe. (Chateaubriand never shies away from depicting native herbs, foods, and rituals—which latter can without doubt have contributed to the author's infatuation with the religious dimensions of the tribes he was encountering.) His kind of anthropological and botanical bent aligns with the French Romantic sensibility of the 18th century, indeed with the century before, as we know from the essays of Montaigne, in the discovery of the exotic lands of his day.) The river networks of eastern North America carried Chateaubriand back to the East Coast by the end of the year 1802, but not without having introduced him to a wide panorama of exotic landscapes. By this point he was carrying a plan for the novela, *Atala*.

SYNOPSIS

A young and disillusioned Frenchman, Rene, has joined an Indian tribe, and taken Celuta as wife. Rene asks Chactas, the elder who has adopted him to tell the story of his life. At the age of seventeen the Natchez Chactas loses his father in a battle, and flees to St. Augustine. He is welcomed in the household of the Spaniard Lopez. Later when his identity is revealed, he is sentenced to be burned alive in the village.

Eventually Chactas finds his way free from his captors, makes the acquaintance of Atala, the daughter of Simaghan, the leader of a rival Indian tribe, and falls in love with her. Atala realizes that she is the daughter of Chactas' adoptive father. Kinship helps Chactas and Atala to fall in love with each other. Atala, however, can not marry—she has taken vows of chastity—but later is brought to realize by Fr. Aubry that vows can be cancelled. Shortly before she is to marry Chactas she dies.

In the epilogue we read that Fr. Aubry is killed by the Cherokees, while Rene and Chactas have been murdered in an Indian raid.

## CHARACTERS

Chactas. Native American who serves as principal narrator, and who adopts Rene  
Rene, Disillusioned Frenchman who travels to America and is adopted by Chactas into the Natchez tribe.  
Celuta. Native American wife of Rene  
Outalissi. Father of Chactas  
Lopez. Spanish man who sheltered Chactas in S. Augustine. Biological father of Atala.  
Simaghan. Head of the group of Muskogee natives who captured Chactas after leaving St. Augustine.  
Miscou. The grandfather of Chactas.  
Atala, lover of Chactas, daughter of Lopez.  
Father Aubry. A hermit and Christian priest.

*Notable moments from the cross country trek of Chactas and Atala*

1. **Chactas finds Atala herself incomprehensible.** The constant struggle between Atala's love and religion, her tender freedom and the chastity of her character and her profound sensitiveness, Chactas loses no occasion to stand in awe of Atala's primal purity.
2. **Chactas delineates the difficulty of trekking through the American wilderness.** The voices of the solitude died; each instant we were on the point of sinking into the quagmire; the desert became silent, and the forests were reposing in the midst of a universal calm. Chactas describes the mini texture of the American land, as he and Atala trek it. The spongy soil trembled around u; insects without number, and enormous bats blinded us; bell serpents were hissing in every direction and wolves, bears, carcajous, and young tigers come to hide themselves in these retreats...
4. **Atala finally meets her Cristian brother, the priest Father Aubry:** By the light of the little lantern the monk was holding in his hand, I saw that his beard and hair were saturated with water, and his fee, and hands were bleeding from the brambles...'. He had sallied forth in the storm to rescue passing travelers.

## THEMES

**Exotic nature.** Chateaubriand, through Chactas, his chief spokesperson, takes the reader through the mind of Rene, through scenes from what the reader is supposed to accept as southern America, Engravings accompany the early text, and urge us to feast on images of filmy engraved characters—style Burne-Jones--drifting through valleys and landscapes of Spanish moss draped over rotting cypresses and mounds of vanished and revered ancestors.

**Christian love** We have traversed a torrential canvas of wild natural acenes, ravines and volcanic pits, but at once, in the distance, Atala and Chactas observe the hut of a hermit or holy man. It is the first glimpse of the world of Father Aubry. The holy father speaks at length with the two wanderers, in the end persuading them to adore the glory of God in the breathtaking scene in which they find themselves.

**Fear** Chactas and Atala wander through the swampy land, struggling to evade their captors, ans as they wander hand in hand, they feel an existential awe as the lightening flashes and the surface of the earth trembles around them. The theme of the smallness of mankind swamps the novela.

## DISCUSSION QUIESTIONS

An important part of the development of European Romanticism springs from the discovery of wild and exotic nature. Already with the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries Europeans were exploring reachable lands of the western hemisphere and familiarizing themselves with the margins of Asia. But for the traveler from European ports a voyage to America was a major undertaking. Put yourself in the young Chateaubriand's shoes around 1800. What provisions would he have had to make for a journey from France to New York?

*Atala* closes with the oneness of Father Aubry and his Indian visitors, Chactas and Atala. Does this novela, which was inserted into *Le Genie du Christianisme*, stamp a Christian tone on the whole of the present work, so much of which closes, after all, on the fascinating richness of the pagan Indian world?