

The Tempest. An Imperialist Heaven or Hell?

Shakespeare lived and wrote in the Elizabethan age, a time when his society was branching out and making itself known throughout the world by colonizing other cultures. Great Britain was reaching for new heights of power. In the play Shakespeare questions the value of this new concept of British imperialism. The Tempest is called Shakespeare's American play, because he calls into question England's right to colonize other nations, much as American colonists did with America 200 years later.

The Tempest was Shakespeare's last play. For his entire life he had written plays to please the Queen. For this play it appears he made a controversial statement by challenging the values of his Queen and his country.

Evidence of this is abundant in the play. The story rotates around the fact that Prospero, a European noble, had imposed himself on an island, already inhabited. Prospero is depicted as a worthy man, who was usurped from his throne. The reader has automatic sympathy for the character. This allows him more leeway for wrong doing by creating room for it within the reader's mind. Prospero came to the island with his daughter to find it already inhabited by two savages. Upon arrival, Prospero brought his "new" ideas with him, and began to force them upon these two savages, Sycorax and Caliban. He believed that his new ideas were better, such as slavery opposed to freedom, which he imposed on Caliban.

"Dull thing, I say so; he, that Caliban,
Whom now I keep in my service."
(Act. I, Sc. II, Ln. 285,6)

This view of whose ideas were better is an obvious matter of opinion, one of the biggest drawbacks to transforming old ideas into new.

Prospero was the first male that Caliban had seen in his life. As a "lower being" Caliban worshipped and praised Prospero, as the quote below shows, until Prospero began to mistreat him.

"I know it by thy trembling: now Prosper works upon thee"
(Act II, Sc. II, Ln. 81-3)

This worship caused Prospero to act as a ruler above him, eventually pushing him to be the tyrant over Caliban, including robbing Caliban of his freedom. Keeping within his worship, Caliban lost his self-confidence and any drive for good deeds. Because Prospero had imposed himself upon Caliban, Caliban's life began to decline. Without drive, or freedom for that matter, Caliban turned to a vegetable only working as a slave to Prospero. Again, the act of asserting that your ideas are superior can cause indelible harm to the recipient of that opinion.

Throughout these ordeals, Prospero thought that he was helping Caliban, (again opinion) while actually destroying him. But these supposed "helpful" teachings to Caliban eventually turned on Prospero. Near the end of the play, Caliban finds Stephano and Trinculo on the island. These men appeared to be much like Prospero in dress, and in speech. Because he had been trained by Prospero to worship and follow, he immediately began to worship Stephano and Trinculo. This is what turned against him. By that time, Caliban had developed a deep hatred for Prospero and sought revenge against him. He discussed killing Prospero in his sleep with Stephano and Trinculo, which they agreed to because they would gain control of the island. Prospero escaped death by a hair, in that he had a sprite, Ariel, to spy on the plotting Englishmen. This was an example of his own imperialistic ideas turned against him, leading almost to his death.

But these wrongs did not stop at Prospero and Caliban. New ideas were imposed also by Ariel, Prospero's servant sprite. Ariel was a lively spirit that was

immortal, and therefor capable of much more than any human. Ariel proposed new ideas to the king, Alonso and all of his men, Gonzalo, Antonio, Sebastian, Adrian and Francisco. These men had perceived themselves as almighty as they paraded around the island in fear of nothing. Ariel enlightened them to their fault and may have even shown them their mistakes.

"You are three men of sin, whom Destiny,---
That hath to instrument this lower world.....
...Your swords are now too massy for your strengths,
And will not be uplifted....
...that you three From Milan did supplant good Prospero:..
...him and his innocent child..."

(Act III, Sc. III, Ln. 53,4/67,8/68-70)

The harshness of Ariel's speech throws the nobles back, but contests their power. As Europeans, they view themselves greater than any, which is challenged by Ariel, who obviously posses more power than them. This is displayed by Ariel forcing them to drop their swords, through his magic. Ariel also brings about their faults, making them seem less divine. Ariel does that by bringing up moral issues, such as their dethronement of a Duke, and his exile into the sea with his sole child, alone. And not only does this bring up the moral issues, but also forewarns them to Prospero's wrath, for Ariel made it clear to the nobles that he was under the assignment of Prospero. This speech obviously raised doubt within the king's, and especially Antonio's mind, as he resigned his position in the end of the play. These new ideas proved to be well worth it, for the great chain of being was to be restored.

New ideas can serve good as well as bad. This is the case with Miranda. Miranda, the sole daughter of Prospero, grew up in a world knowing only her father and a beast. This allotted her only a few of the emotions or experiences normal children have during growth. She had been raised almost as a queen, and knew of nothing else. One of the newest ideas to her was love, which was brought on by Ferdinand. Ferdinand also fell in love with Miranda, who followed him unconditionally for she knew of nothing else, besides her fatherly relationship. This proved to be good for her, for now she had protection as she would soon be entering a new world of community and civilization. But new ideas also may have a poor effect on her.

Because Miranda had no outside contact, she was amazed by the sight of more than one man.

"O Wonder, How many goodly creatures are there here!
How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world, That has
such people in 't!"

(Act. V, Sc. I, Ln. 182-5)

This true amazement and awe for mankind may cause her harm later in life for not all people are as kind to her as she had been treated by Prospero and Fredinand. Specifically, the group that Miranda labeled as "goodly" is a group of corrupt and drunken old men, not men of worth. This proves to us that she is not prepared for the world, and by seeing these men as good, she will have a warped view of evil versus good.

All throughout The Tempest, representations of new versus old are mentioned, most in poor nature, although there remains a small case for transforming old ideas into new, but in general simplicity will work best. I think Shakespeare tried to make a statement with this play that might stir up something in the reader's mind, possibly even question the basic concept of advancing on in life.

