

Can the tempest be read as colonial literature? essay



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As we are reminded by the greatness of many different civilizations and countries all around the world by the documented histories. I believe that no one would ever leave out the British in a historical discussion, especially during the colonial periods. It is one of the most interesting period that is often discussed in many class rooms. Of course one of the most famous colonist documented in human history would have to be the British. They have had their share of good times and bad times, especially during the course of building their great British Empire.

Through out the period of colonialism, the British founded the newfound land, which is present day America. However, colonizing America wasn't as easy as they thought it would be. One of the main obstacle that the British had to overcome was taking care of the original settlers, the native American Indians. The natives prove to be quite a problem for them because the British had to find ways to trick the natives in giving them land. They did what ever was necessary, even killing the natives.

Further more, the first group of pioneers had this idea that they had a sort of divine right to own and make use of the precious land. It was something that they believe that natives didn't have the right to. This was the beginning of a long history of colonialism, slavery and conflict between the British and the natives on the newfound land of America. As great as the history sounds, many writers have written about this issue and one of British's most famous writer during this time would have to be William Shakespeare.

A great poet and writer, William Shakespeare wrote " the Tempest" in 1613, and it was to be his last play. The Tempest is basically a story about a

magical island, which during Shakespeare's time would be compared to the Bermudas. For many years there have been a lot of criticisms about the play and its themes whether it is a type of colonial literature or not. In the following I will try to discuss and analyze whether the play "The Tempest" could be seen as a colonial literature or not. In Shakespeare's "The Tempest", Prospero, a main character, is compared to be a colonist who tries to civilize the natives, which is represented by another character named Caliban. From the start and till the ending Prospero seen as the care taker of the island just as the colonist were during the colonial period.

As for his relationship with Caliban, an ugly creature living on the island, it can be compared to the relationship between the British settlers and the natives. It is a relationship between a master and a slave. Prospero has full authority over Caliban. Caliban himself is pretty much enslaved by Prospero and has to do what he is told.

From this we can already see that The Tempest is a play that Shakespeare himself has embodied the idea of colonialism. In Act 1 Scene 1, Alonso, Sebastian, Antonio, Ferdinand, Gonzalo, Trinculo, and Stefano are on a ship and was hit by a thunderstorm, which was created by Ariel, a spirit-like servant, who takes orders from Prospero. Prospero pretty much uses Ariel to do everything for him. This is another good metaphor where Shakespeare compares the relationship between Prospero and Ariel with that of a colonist or master and his indenture servant during the colonial period.

As soon as Ariel has done enough jobs for Prospero he will be set free just like an indentured servant would be where they would have to work to gain

freedom. However, the situation for Caliban was different. To Prospero, Caliban is seen as an uncivilized native who will never elevate from his present status as a slave. At the start of the play, Prospero's Dukedom was stolen from him by his brother because Prospero was too busy studying his books and did not take any interest in the matter. He believed that by studying he would gain more knowledge and with the valuable knowledge, it would enable him of becoming successful and also gain supremacy.

Power will come with those who have the knowledge, Prospero believed. And gaining something he did. He gained magical skills, which was much more powerful than just royalty. He then wanted to make use of his knowledge in order to civilize and colonize the island. It was the same for the Europeans who believed that they were civilizing the natives.

Caliban was like the natives who were turned into slaves for the colonists. And just like the natives Caliban was forced to learn Prospero's language just like the natives had to learn the English language. In addition, most of the natives were forced to convert their religion, too. This relationship can be compared to the white settlers and the native Indians. When the white settlers came in, they took everything away from the native people.

Setting up new rules and regulations, and taking away their lands. Caliban's speech in Act 1 Scene 2 clearly talks about this issue: "When thou cam'st first Thou strok'st me and made much of me; wouldst give me Water with berries in't, and teach me how To name the bigger light, and how the less, That burn by day and night. And then I loved thee And showed thee all qualities o'th'isle, The fresh springs, brine-pits, barren place and fertile..

.” From the quote, we could see that the relationship between Prospero and Caliban was great when they first met just like it was between the white settlers and natives. The settlers were treated with respect by the natives but later took advantage and exploited the once friendly natives, destroying the beautiful bond they had at the beginning. Just like the colonists, Prospero wanted to take control of the whole island and take advantage of Caliban:”
For I am all the subjects that you have, Which first was mine own king; and here you sty me in this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me the rest o’th’island.

“ Again and again, the theme of colonialism pops up very often throughout the play. Miranda, daughter of Prospero, is another character who is represented as another colonist who attempts to educate the natives as she taught Caliban her language, seen her in Act 1 Scene 2:” You taught me language, and my profit on’t is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you for learning me your language!” Gonzalo is also another example for the colonial theme found in this play. He talked about how he wanted to take control and govern the island.

I think this reflects on the greediness of the colonists and how they could never have enough. He has his own vision of how people should live in the ideal society as he speaks of it in Act 2 Scene 1:” I’th’ commonwealth I would by contraries Execute all things, for no kind of traffic Would I admit; no name of magistrate; Letters should not be known: riches, poverty, And use of service, none; contract, succession, Bourn, bound of land, tilth, vineyard, none; No use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil; No occupation, all men idle, all, And women too, but innocent and pure; No sovereignty-“ Trinculo is another
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character that illustrates how colonists looked down on the natives and think that they are more superior. When he first meets Caliban, Trinculo describes him as a fish and even thought about making profit from Caliban by turning him into a freak show in England. Just like some colonists who brought Indians back to Britain because at the time not many people got a chance to see a real live Indian." What have we here - a man, or a fish? Dead or alive? A fish, he smells like a fish; a very ancient and fishlike smell; a kind of, not-of-the-newest poor-John. A strange fish.

Were I in England now - as once I was - and had but this fish painted, not a holiday - fool there but would give a piece of silver. There would this monster make a man; any strange beast there makes a man. When they will not give a doit to relieve a lame beggar, they will lay out ten to see a dead Indian." In my opinion, this scene exhibits racial discrimination and immoralities of the colonists. Later on, Trinculo and Stephano yearned for power and wanted to take control of the island. They planned to kill Prospero with Caliban in Act 2 Scene 2.

From this scene, we could see how the colonist's greediness and actions cause the natives, like Caliban, to take revenge. Caliban is angry and furious at Prospero for taking his island from him and wants get revenge when the moment came In describing Caliban, Shakespeare uses Prospero and other characters representing colonists to show us what colonists at the time thought of the natives. However, in Act 3 Scene 2, we are shown that Caliban does have a peaceful and civilized side to him. It illustrates that he is capable of understanding moral values. The following quote indicates that

the island is not only beautiful but also well dark and not that delightful as well.

“ Be not afeard, the isle is full of noises, Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not. Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments Will hum about mine ears; and sometimes voices, That if I then had waked after long sleep, Will make me sleep again, and then in dreaming The clouds methought would open and show riches Ready to drop upon me, that when I walked I cried to dream again.” Caliban expresses his appreciation towards the arousing, bliss within the island. Unlike before, we are shown a different side of Caliban, which exhibits a sense of humanity in his thoughts. From my own perspective, I think this shows how ‘ nature’ is capable of unlocking true nature of a person. Finally, at the end Prospero decides to throw away his magic just like Shakespeare decides to stop writing.

However, another way to look at it is that Shakespeare is trying to portray that in the end the colonists themselves would have to leave and return to where they came from and leave the natives alone. Just like Prospero sets Caliban and Ariel free and leave them to live naturally. In conclusion, I think that Shakespeare’s “ The Tempest” strongly portrays the idea of colonialism. Prospero is the colonist who invades the lands of the native Caliban and later takes advantage of Caliban and turns him into his slave, which is similar to what the white colonists did to the native Indians.

As for Ariel, he can be portrayed as the indentured servants during the early colonization. Lastly, I think that not only is Shakespeare showing us the greed of the colonist at the time but also how the colonists benefited from

the natives, land and resources. Then after they have had enough of it like Prospero has, the colonists leaves the land, freeing the natives but already used up most of the resources. I believe that this idea can be adapted and compared to human nature as we are natural consumers that take granted for the valuable resources we have at hand. Another idea seen in the play that indicates the nature and typical behavior of most colonists is the selfishness amongst the colonists themselves.

It was when Trinculo and Stephano planned to kill Prospero in order to rule the island. So, with the supporting ideas that I have mentioned earlier I believe that “ The Tempest”, a great play by William Shakespeare, can be read as a colonial literature.