

# Good the tempest: the downfalls of colonialism argumentative essay example

[Literature](#), [William Shakespeare](#)



Shakespeare exhibits his keen sense of society in *The Tempest*, where he portrays the troubling nature—as well as the consequences—of colonial expansion. Shakespeare participates in the condemnation of colonialism, exposing the potential for mental destruction and inhumanity beyond measure when a colonizer deems himself superior to the colonized.

Furthermore, he reveals the need to reexamine our history and rid ourselves of residual guilt. The aftermath of remorse and disappointment causes us to suppress memories of our colonial past, “often deluded and unsuccessful in [our] attempts to disown the burdens of [our] colonial inheritance” (Ghandi 4). Shakespeare’s play suggests that by acknowledging past behavior, a nation that once engaged in such acts can begin to emancipate itself from its disturbing past and find redemption in the implementing of true respect, cooperation and equality.

*The Tempest* examines the Eurocentric beliefs that spurred “colonial endeavors which could be theorized as bringing progress to an archaic world” (Didea 3). Though in the name of this seemingly progressive goal, both Ariel and Caliban can be regarded as the colonized subjects of Prospero who suffer as a result of his swift tyranny. Prospero ignores the needs of the colonized, and puts the entire island under his control. He deposes Caliban’s mother and treats her like an animal—“incalculable and deprived of full humanity” (Didea 4). Here, we see the similar markings of European imperialists, who caused the dehumanization of the colonized people and treated them as subhuman. The condescension and separation felt by imperialists is mimicked in Prospero’s disdain for the native people. In addition, just as Prospero feels that Caliban should be grateful for his

advantageous assistance. Moreover, Prospero also sees himself as a powerful and beneficial executor of civilization's mission. He felt his aim was of utmost importance to civilization, as colonialism was a "lucrative commercial operation, bringing wealth and riches to Western nations through the economic exploitation of others" (McLeod 7). The fact that capitalism and colonial conquest were "coeval historical processes that were and are intimately related" feeds the negative notions of selfishness and avarice behind colonialism (Krishna 3).

In addition to the tumultuous relationship between the colonizer and colonized, *The Tempest* also shows the opportunities that imperialism brings forth. The nearly unpeopled island offers everyone who lands there the sense of boundless possibility. Prospero finds the island to be a favorable place to educate his daughter. Caliban's mother, Sycorax, practiced her magic on the island after her exile from Algeria. Caliban, now a prisoner to Prospero, bemoans the loss of his once-sovereign position over the island (1. 2. 344-345). Gonzalo creates a utopic vision in his mind about life on the island, and imagines that he will rule over it (2. 1. 148-156). When Caliban proposes that Stephano kill Prospero, Stephano does not hesitate to envisage his own supremacy: "Monster, I will kill this man. His daughter and I will be King and Queen—save our graces!—and Trinculo and thyself shall be my viceroys" (3. 2. 101-103). Every character is swept away by the unrealized potential that the island brings forth.

Alongside the opportunities of imperialism, *The Tempest* also demonstrates the dangerous predicaments that colonialism creates. Racism and intolerance can be a result of the exposure to new and different civilizations

that occurs during colonization. This is exhibited when Sebastian berates Alonso for permitting his daughter to wed with an African. The enslavement and exploitation of native people is also a result of exploration and colonization. This avaricious mentality is shown when Stephano and Trinculo consider capturing Caliban—whom Trinculo calls a “strange fish”—to sell as a novelty back in their country (2. 2. 25).

Stephano also begins to taste his desire to be the eventual king of the isle. In particular, Stephano enjoys the idea of having spirits that make “noises” on the island—“where I shall have my music for nothing” (3. 2. 139-140).

Gonzalo also contemplates about the idyllic civilization he would establish if he had reign over the island: “All things in common nature should produce without sweat or endeavor” (2. 1. 144-157). Regardless of the personality, every character visualizes the island as a space of infinite potential and possibility.

Caliban, deemed “incapable of being civilized,” is a victim of Prospero’s tyranny and represents the greater whole of victims at the hand of colonization (Reeves 5). Prospero views Caliban as a lesser being than himself. In regards to Caliban, he states: “this thing of darkness, I / Acknowledge mine” (5. 1. 274-275). Likewise, Caliban says, “This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother” (1. 2. 3). Prospero even believes he has offered generous charity to Caliban, and believes that Caliban “owes him a debt of gratitude” (O’Toole 1). Prospero states that he treated Caliban with “human care” and even let Caliban reside in his own abode (1. 2. 352).

Miranda supports this superiority, stating that Caliban should be grateful that he was taught their language. Caliban replies, “You taught me language,

and my profit on't is, I know how to curse" (1. 2. 363-364). Prospero gave Caliban the tools of communication and self-knowledge, but failed to give him " the freedom and self-responsibility with which it is necessary to enjoy them" (O'Toole 1).

Caliban refuses to be manipulated into thinking that he was offered a greater advantage than his formerly free reign of the island. Prospero does not even consider the notion that he stole ownership of the island that could have belonged to Caliban; rather, he believes that Caliban's savagery swiftly disqualifies him from proper ownership. On the other hand, it soon dawns on Caliban that Prospero considers him to be of a lower human class, fit only for a life of servitude. Caliban also realizes that he has exchanged his ownership of the island in return for an education based on the values of a pompous, ignorant and condescending man. Consequently, Caliban is filled with bitterness and rage, which only reinforces Prospero's view of him as a savage. Caliban therefore stands for the victims of European imperialism. Shakespeare uses the relationship between Prospero and Caliban to demonstrate the hatred, conflict, and blame that can arise between the colonizer and the colonized. Caliban suffered contempt and dismissal, as shown when Prospero states, " A devil, a born devil, on whose nature / Nurture can never stick" (4. 1. 188-189). Caliban also garners sympathy from the reader when he reveals his true nature and intelligence during his speech about his authentic love for the island. Rather than a savage brute, Caliban is seen as a gentle and well-spoken human being with a sensitivity deeper than those who conquered him. He says, " The island is full of noises, sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not" (3. 2. 127-128). This

opportunity to see Caliban for who he really is allows for the reader to feel sympathy for his lost freedom and dignity. The greater truth of equality and oneness as a human species in spite of racism and prejudice also comes into play. These racial constructs were never sturdy and were “ always threatened not only by the unpredictability of the Other but also the uncertain homogeneity and boundedness of the Self” (Jacobs 3). The instability of racial arguments has lasting effects, with an activist stating that, in her experience, “ it is simply not possible to speak to white liberals about the everyday issues of decolonization or even postcolonialism” (Persram 264).

Shakespeare mixes his remarkable awareness of the human psyche with the events of the time by writing a play that demonstrates the faulty nature of colonialism. He highlights the pomposity that often propels imperialism and the hunger for new lands, as well as the potential for inhumanity that occurs when people begin to value themselves higher than they were created to be. The consequences of patriarchy and colonial expansion are high and notable, with the potential for rebellion and chaos occurring at the hand of disrespectful conduct and contemptuous refrain. Furthermore, our colonial inheritance leaves us vulnerable to repeated mistakes and a perpetuation of baser traits such as power and greed. “ Imperialism is one of the most influential forces which has shaped, and is still shaping, the world;” consequently, we possess the responsibility of handling this force in the most ideal way possible (Bush 7). Shakespeare’s exposition of the nature of colonialism in *The Tempest* presents the opportunity to examine past actions and identify the motives that set those actions into play in order to exchange

them with better decisions that will serve the whole of humanity rather than one idealized segment.

## **Works Cited**

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