

Language in the tempest

Literature, William Shakespeare



Language in *The Tempest* has a strong presence as a method of control, specifically as used by Prospero in his control over Caliban. This method of control can be observed in post-colonial America, from the European colonists to the indigenous people of the country, and is analogous with Shakespeare's play. Colonizers gain control over inhabitants by forcing their own culture onto them and eliminating any contact with the original culture, specifically through language.

During the European conquest over what is now the United States, settlers would use linguistic imperialism in order to unite colonists and eliminate any repercussion from the indigenous colonies as their land was continuously being taken over.

As stated in a journal article in the *Journal of Languages and Culture*, Language is often a central question in postcolonial studies. During colonization, colonizers usually imposed their language onto the people they colonized, forbidding natives to speak their mother tongues. In the early Americas, European settlers would completely strip indigenous people of their own culture in order to conform them to European culture and to isolate them from their home. This tactic was used to restrict the chances of retaliation and to further spread their own beliefs. To further alienate them from their own culture, they would prohibit people from speaking their native tongue and punish them if they did so. Theodore Fontaine, the author of *Broken Circle: The Dark Legacy of Indian Residential Schools: a Memoir* recounts one of the childhood experiences that had left him scarred for life. For about 40 years I was unable to sleep or be in complete darkness. I'd have to have light filtering through a door or blind. This reaction stemmed

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from my earliest days at residential school. Once when we were all in the playroom, I was playing on the floor with several friends, . . . I was startled when Sister S., the supervisor that day, almost knocked me on my back as she wrapped her powerful, bony arm around mine. I'd inadvertently said something in Ojibway. She'd assumed I was referring to her when a couple of boys laughed at my comment. She yelled that she'd wash my mouth out with soap but instead... I was shoved into a closet behind her chair. It was . . . used to store brooms and other cleaning materials. . . I sobbed for a while, to no avail.

Eventually she let me out. Her first word was Tiens! (Take that!) followed by a warning not to speak my savage language.. The effect that this system had on young Theodore lasted 40 years, and all he did was speak in the language of his society. The common excuse between Prospero and the nuns of Theodore's childhood is that they are in some way saving the victim from their savageness, and they should be thanked for their actions. Prospero, Miranda's father and Caliban's master, is seen by many critics as a representation of the European conquerors who violently took over the Americas, as he overthrew Caliban's mother Sycorax and stained Caliban's former life with this new culture and servitude. Prospero tries to take control over the entire play by playing mind games with many characters throughout the book and even seems to break the fourth wall as he expresses to the audience at the end of the play to . . . release me from my bands with the help of your good hands. Gentle breath of yours my sails must fill, or else my project fails, which was to please. Which essentially confirms the notion that he was controlling the island for his and the

audience's enjoyment. Prospero and Miranda claim to be helping Caliban by teaching him their ways and even are surprised when he does not feel grateful for their help. Abhorri? d slave, which any print of goodness wilt not take, being capable of all ill! I pitied thee, took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour (Miranda, 1. 2. 422).

Caliban is just one of Prospero's pawns, but the most recognizable. As a way to take control, Prospero consistently reminds Caliban of who taught him language when he was a child, and although the gift of language would be viewed as gracious in another circumstance, Caliban resents Prospero for teaching him the language of another culture, because Prospero took away Caliban's home and family in the beginning, and his own language was the last cultural identity he held. 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! Caliban's only seen benefit from learning their language is that it taught him to swear at them, rather than morph him more into their own culture. The fact that Caliban sees the language he was taught as a burden rather than something to be grateful for shows how much he resents everything about Prospero and Miranda, regardless of whether they were helping him or tormenting him. To conclude, the act of stripping one's culture from them can result in