

Forgiveness and compassion essay sample



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“ Compassion is what causes us to forgive. Not because someone deserves it, but because they need it” (Giles 1). In the plays Macbeth and The Tempest, Shakespeare poses the questions of humanity and clearly defines it along the lines of the story. Macbeth follows the story of a power-hungry couple and their thirst for power. Eventually murder becomes the means of power, and all the virtues of humanity are forgotten. The Tempest is a play about Prospero and his encounter with his brother whom he despises and wants to seek revenge upon, and his daughter’s encounter with love.

But the spirit Ariel is there to save Prospero and show him what it means to truly be human. Through the misunderstanding in Macbeth and the understanding in The Tempest, Shakespeare defines humanity as the action of forgiveness and recognition of compassion in both plays. The characters, as well as the readers of Macbeth and The Tempest will understand that the essential qualities defining the human are forgiveness and compassion.

In both plays, one must come to the realization that compassion is not mere pity for someone or thing, but it is passionate, caring, divine, and above all, a celebration. In The Tempest, Prospero is initially blinded by a misinterpretation of compassion and his own selfishness: “ Now does my project gather to a head: / my charms crack not; my spirits obey; and time / goes upright with his carriage. How’s the day? ” (Shakespeare The Tempest 5. 1. 2-3). This greeting to Ariel shows that all he cares about is himself from the beginning.

Prospero harbors a great deal of resentment about his treatment back in Milan and is never very far from wanting to exact a harsh revenge Without

Ariel even asking, Prospero feels the need to reiterate how his plans are working perfectly and how he will not change because it is just right. After much observation, it is now that Ariel realizes that Prospero is missing something very important: “ If you now beheld them, your affections / would become tender / Dost thou think so, spirit? ” and Ariel’s reply is heart-wrenching, “ Mine would, sir, were I human” (5. 1. 23-6).

While compassion implies passion, pathos and deep caring arising from the bowels and guts, it also implies an intellectual life [...] To develop such an awareness implies deep study, not only of books, but of nature itself [...] Entering more fully into the truth of the universe in which we live” (Heschel 23-4). Ariel is the very spirit of imaginative illusion and though not even human, he grasps the idea of compassion that Prospero seems to lack. Because Ariel has had such long time to gain an outside perspective on nature and humanity, he reveals this misunderstanding and unawareness of compassion to Prospero.

This is now Prospero’s moment of realization in which he does not feel pity for someone else’s weakness, rather he works from a strength born of awareness of shared weakness. He gives up the desire of revenge and indulges himself in the true quality of humanity. Contrary to Prospero, in Macbeth, Lady Macbeth already recognizes compassion as a key element in her life but then destroys the virtue she knows she holds: “ Come, you spirits / that tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, / and fill me from the crown to the toe top-full / of direst cruelty! (Shakespeare Macbeth 1. 5. 47-50).

“ Egocentricity is an ugly energy that runs even deeper than do lies [...] a pathological state of ego-defense and invulnerability” (Heschel 15). Based on that statement, Lady Macbeth is only attaining immunity in her own mind by being egocentric. She is aware of the virtue of compassion, but is willing to throw it all away, even her own gender, for power which she incorrectly assumes will give all she ever wants.

Lady Macbeth, her icy nerves shattered by the weight of guilt and paranoia, gives way to sleepwalking and a delusional belief that her hands are stained with blood: “ What need we / fear who knows it, when none can call our power to / account? ” (Shakespeare Macbeth 5. 1. 39-41). “ To fail to act out of our kinship with all of creation is to invite brutality that narcissism so easily entertains. An experience of cosmic awareness is a basic ingredient for true compassion. ” (Heschel 18).

She subtly questions humanity when she asks how one can fear anything without taking power into account. She initially relied on power to define herself until she realized she was absolutely nothing without compassion inside her for others. Through the actions of Prospero, Ariel, and Lady Macbeth in *The Tempest* and *Macbeth*, Shakespeare has emphasized the importance of compassion in order to live as a human being. Shakespeare not only believes that compassion is the key in humanity, but forgiveness as well.

In *The Tempest*, Prospero holds a grudge throughout the play due to the fact that his brother Antonio, conspiring with Alonso, the King of Naples, usurped his position as the Duke of Milan: [...] in my false brother Awaked an evil

nature; and my trust, Like a good parent, did beget of him A falsehood in its contrary as great As my trust was; which had indeed no limit (Shakespeare The Tempest 1. 2. 112-6). Coursen believes that Prospero attempts to put Alonso and the other conspirators through a penitential experience, to evoke within each other a ‘ heart’s sorrow’ leading towards redemption.

Prospero assumes that inflicted punishment upon Alonso will lead to his satisfaction. As he later finds out, his assumption is wrong and Ariel is there to help point him in the right direction: “ Mine would, sir, were I human,” then Prospero replies “ the rarer action is / in virtue than in vengeance: they being penitent, / the sole drift of my purpose doth extend / not a frown further (5. 1. 26-38). Again, we see Ariel in the same situation telling Prospero that he needs to forgive these men.

Coursen states that The Tempest exposes not only folly but sin and repentance; and it also exposes the extent and limits of man’s control over the inner lives of other men. Prospero recognizes his mistake and states that it is harder to forgive than to punish, and that understanding along with the importance of compassion ultimately defines Prospero as attaining the definition of humanity. Opposite Prospero is Macbeth in Macbeth who doesn’t understand the meaning of forgiveness at all: “ O, yet I do repent me of my fury / that I did kill them. (Shakespeare Macbeth 2. 3. 124-5).

Prospero says this statement without real meaning because he does not really care for the chamberlains that he killed since they only got in the way. He says it because he has to, to get away with something greater. The lax use of this statement proves that Macbeth neither cares nor understands the

meaning of forgiveness. Macduff, however, seems to realize the importance of forgiveness: “ Within my sword’s length set him; if he ‘ scape, / Heaven forgive him too! ” (4. 3. 74-5).

Macbeth “ succumbs to temptation and never comes to recognize the true error of his ways” (Evans 338). Unlike the ignorance on Macbeth’s part, Macduff understands the idea of forgiveness and even offers it to Macbeth. Later, the Doctor also asks for forgiveness for everyone and especially Lady Macbeth because she is delusional. Prospero found out the easy way to forgive with the help of Ariel in *The Tempest* whereas Macbeth did not know how to forgive in the beginning nor did he learn in the end.

The virtues of compassion and forgiveness are expressed through the political hints of colonialism and imperialism in *The Tempest* and the “ moral idiot” that is Macbeth. In *The Tempest*, Prospero is a European who has taken charge of a remote island and he organizes a life for himself, gets the local inhabitants (Ariel and Caliban) to work for him, and maintains his control mainly by the and promises of freedom some day: “ Here in this island we arrived; and here / have I, thy schoolmaster, made thee more profit / than other princesses” (Shakespeare *The Tempest* 1. 2. 205-7).

In taking charge of a place which is not his and in exerting his European authority over the strange non-European creatures, compelling them to serve him and his values, Prospero, so the argument runs, is obviously a symbol for European colonial power, with which England was growing increasingly familiar during Shakespeare’s lifetime. Because Prospero

achieves a great power, he also forgets about compassion for human beings after feeling so superior to them.

It is this loss that Ariel notices when he tells Prospero that he lacks compassion. After closer observation, it becomes apparent that Caliban is the one affected by this ‘colonialism’: 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’ the island. ” (5. 1. 23-6). “ Caliban, the cannibal represents Man’s basest primitive instincts and his physical sensations” (Beck 2). Because Caliban is just an instinctive being, he doesn’t yet understand any of the virtues of humanity, let alone forgiveness. Prospero recognizes the compassion and forgiveness that he has rejected whereas the instinctive and slavery nature of Caliban has hindered these virtues from his life.

Like Caliban, one challenges the reader to decide whether Macbeth really is a good man: “ The devil himself could not pronounce a title / More hateful to mine ear” comments a young siward after Macbeth states his own name (Shakespeare Macbeth 5. 7. 10-1). “ If we do manage to sympathize with Macbeth, it may be either because we have been misled about his true character or because we recognize him for what he is, a moral cripple, and pity him for his lack of the one attribute that could save him” (Evans 340).

Based on that statement, Macbeth never had the opportunity to ‘find’ humanity ever during this play because he was immoral and did not care about anything but himself from the beginning. In the end he has learned no more than that the only consequences he knew to fear at the beginning are

indeed to be feared. Evans plainly makes it clear that if Macbeth is regarded as a tragic hero, he would no doubt be sympathized with. But if one looks at Macbeth for what he really is, he is going to gain far less sympathy because he is simply a “moral idiot” who cares only about his personal gains and never about anyone else or humanity.

Through colonialism and Macbeth as an ignorant “moral idiot,” one greater appreciates the virtues of compassion and forgiveness because they are lost in such events during the play. One must come to the conclusion that humanity can be defined by two mere virtues: compassion and forgiveness. Shakespeare emphasizes these two qualities in *The Tempest* and *Macbeth* to prove their importance. One cannot have forgiveness without compassion, and without either, a person’s life means nothing. This understanding that Shakespeare gives us for humanity is so enlightening because one truly realizes the significance.

To feel true compassion is to truly be human. To forgive someone rather than punish them is so much more uplifting and an even greater accomplishment. Prospero embodies the compassionate and forgiving at the end because he has succeeded in life by understanding the two most important virtues in life. Macbeth does not achieve anything but grief throughout the play and he consistently thinks about himself too much to consider other human beings. With both characters, along with the many others in both plays, Shakespeare has beautifully illustrated humanity for us on what was once a plain canvas.