

RESEARCH ARTICLE



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MAN AND THE WILD: AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF SHAKESPEARE'S *THE TEMPEST*

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ABSTRACT

The intertwining of the natural landscape and life has been a subject of study for many researchers across the globe. This is because the physical environment plays an intrinsic part in shaping the human being's identity, habits, rituals and ways of life. William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* has more shades to it apart from being just a pastoral romance and ecocriticism is one such prominent shade. This paper explores the relationship between man and the environment and more specifically man and the 'natural order' which can be understood by studying the relationship between Prospero and Caliban. Shakespeare's portrayal of the intersection of man and nature in *The Tempest* has been widely discussed. Caliban has often been referred to as the "natural man" in an Elizabethan society who becomes an instrument in illustrating the hierarchy of God, King, man, woman and beast. My concern here is not the hierarchy although I have used Prospero's character as the representative of the Renaissance man and Caliban's character as the representative of the wilderness in general. I have mainly focussed on the various concepts of contemporary ecocriticism which have been clearly justified by the Prospero-Caliban relationship. Critical readings of *The Tempest* have often revealed Prospero (modern man) to be the superior creature who emerges victorious in the end but I have refuted this notion by highlighting the fact that Caliban, the beast in the facade of being the suppressed, inferior one rises up to the level of remaining undefeated, by rejecting 'civilization'.

**Key words:** Ecocriticism, Deep Ecology, heterotopia, supernaturalism

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*I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.*

-H.D. Thoreau, *Walden*

In the past, American ecocritics tended to celebrate wilderness in their response to nature while their British counterparts often opted for the

more ominous minatory point of view. In America, this field of study is known as 'Ecocriticism' while in the United Kingdom it is known as 'Green Studies'. During the 1990's Green Studies began in UK with Jonathan Bates emerging as the founding figure. However, I would like to begin this paper with a definition penned by Cheryll Glotfelty, who is also the acknowledged founder of Ecocriticism in the USA. Talking about this still emergent branch of

study she wrote in the introductory note to *The Ecocritical Reader*-

*What then is ecocriticism? Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective...ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies. (xix)*

As the title of my paper suggests, here I shall attempt to study the intrinsic relationship between man and nature by exploring specifically the relationship between two of the major characters of Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*. The Shakespearean age was one that was characterised by vast and significant changes. The disappearance of medieval religious beliefs, the rise of the middle class and a centralised government transformed England into a modern nation. The rise of the Renaissance Humanism marked man's domination of nature. Hence man's supremacy over the natural environment was confirmed. He could explore hitherto uncharted territories and could make sure that nature was at his mercy. However *The Tempest*, I am arguing is the story of man's inability to control and 'civilize' nature. If the world of this play is pre-conceived to be a hegemonic structure, then the environment would come across as the unabashed hegemon, the patriarch, the dictator controlling the lives of the puny human beings.

The play opens with an on-going furious storm, accompanied by thunder and lightning which causes the shipwreck. The list of victims comprises of distinguished personages. They are Alonso, the king of Naples, Sebastian, his brother; Antonio, the usurping Duke of Milan, Ferdinand, the son of the king of Naples, Gonzalo, an honest Counsellor and others. The tempest and the sea become important devices that seem to be controlling and supervising the very course of the play. Earlier, after being expelled from the kingdom Prospero with his infant daughter Miranda was left at the mercy of strong waves. The sea eventually deports the father-daughter duo in the hands of the wilderness of an unknown island. As suggested earlier, my focus of this paper would be the relationship between

Prospero and Caliban, which is also symbolic of man's relation with the environment.

Prospero's ability to use his knowledge of magic to create the 'tempest' which changed the lives of all the characters in the play reveals something necessarily Olympian about him and makes him the *dues ex Machina* of the play. But in reality he is the man who in the past had immersed himself in his magic books, ignoring his dukedom, thus allowing his brother to usurp his position and status. Miranda's description of the pre-planned apocalypse directed by her father is poignant and arouses our deepest sympathy.

Miranda: ...The sky, it seems, would pour  
down stinking pitch,  
But that the sea, mounting to th' welkin's  
cheek,  
Dashes the fire out. O, I have suffered  
With those that I saw suffer!

(I.ii.3-6)

Talking about the revolutionary age of Shakespeare, Edward Albert suggests, "In our history this is perhaps the most remarkable epoch for the expansion of both mental and geographical horizons. Now knowledge was pouring in from the East, and new worlds were opening in the West. The great voyagers, whose exploits were chronicled in the immortal pages of **Hakluyt (1552(?) -1616)**, brought home both material and intellectual treasures from beyond the "still-vexed Bermoothes," as Shakespeare called them." (71) Prospero is the ideal symbol of the Renaissance man who has been placed with wonderful powers. He is a kind of 'man-providence' controlling and directing everything according to his will. In fact the sternness that he frequently displays, more particularly in his dealings with Caliban comes across as the least pleasing features of his character. The degree of severity that is meted out towards Caliban is extremely heart-wrenching and in spite of him being a thoroughly detestable character, the readers cannot help but feel the pangs of sympathy for him.

Prospero: ...We cannot miss him: he does  
make our fire,  
Fetch in our wood, and serves in offices  
That profit us. What ho! Slave! Caliban!  
(I.ii.313-315)

This behaviour of Prospero (man) towards Caliban (wild) shouts out an utter contradiction to the theory known as Deep Ecology. According to the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, 'the aim of supporters of the deep ecology movement is not a slight reform of our present society, but a substantial reorientation of our whole civilization.' Hence it calls for an identification with all life and suggests that richness and biodiversity are valuable in themselves and humans have no right to violate it. If Prospero is the ideal symbol of mankind, Caliban is the true representation of nature in its purest and most unadulterated form. A deformed slave, a semi-devil, the son of the witch Sycorax, even his physical appearance is all encompassing, covering every aspect of animal life on earth. He smells like a fish, therefore, is representative of aquatic life, he is an ugly beast, a "mooncalf" (II. II. 104) as described by Stephano therefore representative of the untamed wild in general. At this juncture, I would like to refer to a painting by William Hogarth titled *A Scene from the Tempest (c.1735)*. In this painting Caliban has a deformed forehead and the scales on his legs look like loosened and chipped leaves of gold. "Caliban is primeval earth, but seamed with gold, such as Raleigh hoped to discover in Guiana" (259).

There is certainly something exotic and pure in this creature's uncouth, unrefined distortion which makes us identify him easily with the natural environment. It must be noted that in spite of torturing him mercilessly Prospero admits that Caliban after all is indispensable just as nature is. Just as man has been manipulating the environment for a comfortable living with an inexhaustible supply of natural resources, Prospero does the same with Caliban. Since my focus here is the intrinsic relationship between man and the environment, it is imperative to state the spatial or geographical concept of heterotopia as suggested by the post-structuralist theory of Michel Foucault in a lecture delivered in 1967 called "Different Spaces." Foucault highlights the fact that the natural world and human lives are strongly intertwined with each other. "Heterotopia" refers to the spaces of otherness, "places that are outside all places," a sort of "actually realized utopias," in which other real spaces are represented, contested and reversed"

(178). Hence at a certain level Prospero and Caliban's equation needs to be analysed at a place outside the hegemonic framework of the society, at a rather heterotopic site where the system would work in contradiction to the authoritarian structures of human society. Therefore, no matter how much Prospero tried to train Caliban, teaching him the human language, he could never civilize him. Caliban's attempt to violate Miranda's purity can be justified by stating that just as a storm causes upheaval in the tranquillity of nature, Caliban, like a beastly tempest wished to manipulate the tenderness and innocence of a girl who is highly symbolic of nature at its peaceful best. The behaviour is essentially instinctual and is not guided by any sort of reasoning above that of the most elementary. Therefore Ferdinand's love for Miranda is a cause of 'nurtured' emotions. It is 'fair' and 'noble' love, hence stereotypically 'human' in comparison to Caliban's lust which is animalistic and earthy.

No discussion of *The Tempest* can be complete without delving into the realm of magic and supernaturalism. A comparison of the art of supernaturalism used by both Prospero and Caliban would strengthen my argument further that nature cannot be completely 'civilized' or manicured as per human whims and fancies. The age of Shakespeare has been characterised by a universal belief in magic and supernaturalism wherein ghosts and fairies actively interfered in human affairs. It has often been believed that in the character of Prospero, Shakespeare pictured King James, who had developed a deep interest in demonology. Prospero uses the agency of Ariel to use his own power on the inferior spirits of fire, water and earth. But in the end, Ariel has to be set free because such an earthy element cannot be tamed forever. As stated earlier, Prospero's 'art' has been acquired by self-discipline, temperance and most importantly practise.

Art is an offshoot of the enlightened and refined intellect that can only be found with the advantages that civilization offers. For Prospero his art is a 'desperate remedy' to a desperate situation, a situation where he has to take control of an island, emerge more powerful than nature itself in order to survive. Caliban's mother, Sycorax the witch belongs to the Old World of witchcraft and devil-worship.

She is extremely powerful and has been bestowed with the qualities possessed by classical witches and has carved a space in the contemporary demonological scheme. She is a goetist who serves Setebos, the demon. Caliban's deformity is the result of this evil magic and it becomes a natural 'criterion' by which we can measure the world of knowledge, symbolized by Prospero's 'art' and Ferdinand and Miranda's refined love. Therefore Prospero's world of acquired supernatural art is a complete antithesis to Sycorax's world of natural black magic. "Art is not only a beneficent magic in contrast to an evil one; it is the ordination of civility, the control of appetite, the transformation of nature by breeding and learning; it is even in a sense, the means of Grace. Prospero is, therefore, the representative of art, as Caliban is of Nature." (xlvi). So just like the true devotee of Renaissance Humanism Prospero with the help of "virtue", that is valour and merit could aspire to scale any height. The word "virtue" originates from the Latin root "vir" which literally means "a man" or "a hero" which invariably helps to place Prospero at the height of the social hierarchy. Caliban, the savage one is incapable of higher reasoning and therefore is incapable of understanding "virtue". Prospero's mindless torture of Caliban is symbolic of man's mindless exploitation of nature with the rise of the male mercantile order and capitalism.

Caliban: ...For every trifle are they set upon me;  
Sometime like apes, that mow and chatter at me,  
And after bite me; then like hedgehogs, which  
Lie tumbling in my barefoot way...  
sometime am I  
All wound with adders, who with cloven tongues  
Do hiss me into madness.

(II.ii.8-14)

The relationship between Prospero and Caliban rings a knell that nature cannot be made to dance to man's tunes. One can disrupt the natural order to a certain extent, but cannot totally recreate it. Perhaps that is why it is called the "natural" order. Just as the sun cannot be made to rise from south, sunshine cannot be demanded from the moon and the wind cannot be asked to not to sway the trees, Caliban cannot be 'civilized' enough to behave like a

human being. He cannot be trained to love like Ferdinand or serve like Gonzalo with utmost loyalty. These unchangeable characteristics of this extremely interesting yet barbaric persona of Shakespeare's lights a green spark in the mind and calls for a greener reading of the play *The Tempest*.

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