
RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Tempest: A Postmodern Reading

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ABSTRACT

The works of William Shakespeare have a universal influence and are considered representatives of all times and all ages. Critics, scholars, academics, and students have been rereading, reexamining, retelling, and restaging his plays century after century. This dissertation proposes to examine *The Tempest* as a postmodern text. The postmodern elements: ant-formality, pastiche, intertextuality, paranoia, irony, playfulness, puns, wordplays, conspiracy theories, temporal distortion, and supernatural elements, create an atmosphere in *The Tempest*, which can be described as postmodern. Focusing on Ihab Hassan and Brian McHale's definition and characterization of postmodernism which have created an opportunity to have a postmodern approach to *The Tempest*, this paper illustrates how Shakespeare deconstructs the formal properties of the text and uses pastiche that projects a postmodern connotation of the play. The dissertation also explores the religious, mythological, geographical, and historical references of characters and their names, events, incidents, locations, and places that construct intertextuality and insert paranoia into the play. In identifying postmodernist elements— particularly the presence of a supernatural and dreamy world—this paper examines binaries: natural vs. supernatural and reality vs. dream, which are pivotal postmodern concepts. Based on Foucault's *The Eye of Power*, the study also discovers the Panoptical Gaze of Prospero, who has assigned Ariel—as surveillance to keep an eye on everybody and everything on the island. Finally, this paper aims to reread *The Tempest*—as a postmodern text.

KEYWORDS

Deconstruct, Pastiche, Intertextuality, Panoptical Gaze, Paranoia, Playfulness, Puns, Wordplays, Conspiracy Theories, Natural, Supernatural, Surveillance and Postmodern.

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1. Introduction

Many critics, scholars, and academics consider *The Tempest* the last play of William Shakespeare. The creation of the characters, catastrophe (the storm), plot, and setting of the play make *The Tempest* one of Shakespeare's finest and richest plays. With maturity, knowledge, experience, and skill, Shakespeare portrays his most influential, widely studied, diversely interpreted, and critically challenged play. The present attempt is a new venture to discover *The Tempest* as a postmodern play.

2. Discussion and analysis

To Ihab Hassan (1982), postmodernism fosters "a new aesthetic formation" (CTD in Malpas 2005, p. 6). In his historic work, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* (1982), Hassan compared modernism and postmodernism. Differentiating postmodernism from modernism, he describes postmodernism as a composite of "antiform, play, chance, anarchy, participation, dispersal, text/intertext, misreading, polymorphous, rhetoric, schizophrenia, the Holy Ghost and indeterminacy" (Hassan 1982, pp. 267-268). In *The Tempest*, these characteristics are all present in different degrees and de-center the language and create a polysemous melody in the play. Through a close examination and analysis of all these features in the language of *The Tempest*, which uses disorder, playful and polysemous intonation, it is quite arguable that *The Tempest* can be considered a postmodern text.

Aristotle suggests that in a play, "high characters must speak the high, refined and elevated language, while the low characters should have a low and base diction" (Warrington 1963, pp. 12&26). It is observed that Shakespeare breaks this hierarchy of language in *The Tempest* and allows for the play of anarchy. Through his characterization, Shakespeare keeps projecting his philosophy and understanding of human psychology, social construction, and culture. He uses puns, versal prose, wordplay, and paradox to enrich the play's technique and de-center the language; he creates a chancy, playful, anarchic, mutant, polymorphous, and indeterminate intonation, thus adding a postmodern tone to the play.

Representing Prospero as "god the father" and Ariel as "the holy ghost," Shakespeare deconstructs the Christian Doctrine of the Trinity in *The Tempest*. Ihab Hassan (1982), in his famous project, attributes two interesting features of modernism and postmodernism. To Hassan, "god the father" is referred to by modernism and "the holy ghost" by postmodernism, and Prospero appears to be "god the father" who has complete control over all the events, incidents, and characters on the island. Through his magical power and knowledge, he creates the storm; enslaves Caliban; assigns Ariel to monitor everybody and everything; creates all climaxes; controls everybody's actions; monitors others' activities, and finally possesses the ownership and role of creator of the island. Like God the Father, Prospero promises freedom to Ariel (I.ii.242-250). At the end of the play, Prospero empowers Ariel; sets him free, and fulfills his promise by which he empowers "the Holy Spirit" as God the Father does. Avoiding the role of "the son," Shakespeare deconstructs the doctrine of the Trinity and incorporates postmodern features in *The Tempest*.

Intertextuality—acknowledging previous literary works in a story—is a significant element of postmodern literature. Most postmodern literary critics and theoreticians have accepted the concept, a powerful postmodern writing tool that opens new possibilities and perspectives for constructing a story. This sophisticated writing device refers to borrowing phrases, ideology, a concept, characters, or even rhetoric from other works. Mainly, through borrowing from previous texts, the writers add multi-layers of meaning, interpretation, and understanding to the text. A common example of intertextuality in English literature is James Joyce's *Ulysses* retelling of *The Odyssey*, set in Dublin. We also find that Ernest Hemingway borrowed the language of the metaphysical poet John Donne in naming his novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Above all, the Bible is considered the most illustrious example of intertextuality since the *New Testament* simultaneously quotes passages from the *Old Testament*. Through the characters Caliban and Sycorax, who represent historical, geographical, mythological, and religious figures, events, and places, Shakespeare makes the passage of *The Tempest* intertextual. The action, language, personality, and shape of the characters and their references add multiple layers of allusiveness and intertextuality to the play. The following two paragraphs indicate that Shakespeare borrowed historical, geographical, mythological, and religious references to incorporate intertextuality in *The Tempest*.

Sea voyages, discovery, and exploration of new lands and continents are prominent features of the Shakespearean age. Therefore scholars and critics have found many indications of adaptation of themes and characters; among them, two important references are stated: the first source- Montaigne's essay "Of Cannibals" (1580) is considered to be acknowledged as the only referential work from where Shakespeare borrows the theme of *The Tempest* (Kermode, 1954, p. xxxiv). In 1557, Montaigne made a sea voyage to Brazil. While traveling, he saw life, culture, and inhabitants. To keep an account of his journey, he composed *Essays* (1580) where one of his writings was entitled "Of Cannibals." Many scholars and critics believe that Shakespeare adapted the name of Caliban from Montaigne's essay.

In addition, *Bermuda Pamphlets* (1610) is the second account that narrates the journey of many ships from England to the Virginian colony in America in May 1609. Suddenly, a violent storm carried away one of the ships, which were later found near the Bermuda coast. To save their lives and belongings, the ship's mariners battled hard against the rough seas and wild nature. Miraculously, later in May 1610, the lost ship reached America. Their bravery and heroism drew mass attention. In England, this story was published and spread far and wide within a short time to mark this heroic event. Many scholars and critics consider the names: "Caliban" and "Setebos" (Kermode 1954, I.ii.375, and "still vexed Bermoothes"), brought in *The Tempest* by Shakespeare are adapted from the story of *Bermuda Pamphlets* (1610). Eventually, in *The Tempest*, Shakespeare uses and adapts this theme of the adventure of the mariners and sea voyagers for the 'new world' of his time. Shakespeare further employs the religious, mythological, geographical, and historical references of characters and their names, incidents, events, and locations and places that construct intertextuality in the play.

A reactive state of mind heavily influenced by anxiety and fear is the paranoia that deals with irrationality and delusion, including persecutory thought processes or beliefs of conspiracy concerning a 'perceived threat towards one. In that context, *The Tempest* is to a large extent a paranoid play. For Prospero Caliban's name echoes 'cannibalism', and Sycorax symbolizes 'lust, darkness and evil omen,' which are suspicious characters. The play begins with the human-created storm, which initially lays the setting of the text's next event, incident, and interaction. Prospero uses his magical power and knowledge to create the storm that turns everything disorderly and destroyed. As the passage proceeds, Prospero, with the help of Ariel and his magical power, enslaves Caliban; plays with him; makes him suffer, and represents him as a skeptical character. He assigns Ariel to monitor the movements of Caliban and other characters, thus creating a scary, anxious, and mysterious atmosphere in the play. Ariel's invisible appearance,

ghostly voice, sudden entry, and departure create dreadfulness in the play's diction. Shakespeare sketches a spirit—Ariel as a natural character and represents him as human; on the other hand, Caliban is a supernatural, untouched, and mysterious being. Caliban horrifies Prospero, and Ariel terrifies everybody in the isle except Prospero and Miranda. Prospero's constant negative feelings, mistrust, and wariness for Caliban are paranoid projections and treatment of the character in *The Tempest*.

In the context of Prospero's paranoia and his panoptical power, one may reflect on Michael Foucault's observation that "power and surveillance are tenaciously bound together." In *The Eye of Power*, he describes Jeremy Bentham's eighteenth-century prison concept, the "Panopticon," where the guards can easily monitor the prisoners' movements inside the cells through an inner window facing the tower. It provides an "all-seeing" view of the prison. Through an outer window, daylight enters the cell and makes everything highly visible. Similarly, the island is a prison where all the characters are incarcerated by Prospero, who appoints Ariel as a guard to observe the movements and activities of the royal guests, courtiers, and especially Caliban. Here, the implementation of power becomes automatic, and Ariel represents a postmodern surveillance camera whose gaze is very powerful and structured. Like the prisoners of a cellular, all the characters in the play are uncertain and unaware that they are being watched. According to Foucault, sophisticated societies impose more control and inspection on the citizens in the name of liberty and rights. In *The Tempest* for the royal guests and ordinary Caliban, Prospero enforces the same control and observation, reinforcing the postmodernist features.

Supernatural elements drive the plot of many Shakespearean plays. In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare compares the notion of existence and reality with the supernatural and the dreamy world (Prospero's world). In *The Development of Shakespeare's Imaginary* (1951), W.H. Clemens dedicated a chapter to discussing the various imaginaries portrayed in *The Tempest* and elaborating its influence on the readers and audiences. Clemens finds that "the imaginary in *The Tempest* serves more than just creating an atmosphere or background or intensifying the theme of the play" (Clemens 1951, p. 182). To him, the sea 'imaginary, the animal and vegetation imaginary, and the olfactory imaginary' have added supernatural essence to the play. He also believes that the supernatural elements have played an important role "in creating the strange vision of the 'natural world, making a counterpart to the world of the supernatural in the play" (Clemens 1951, p. 194). Likewise, the postmodernist of our time, Shakespeare, keeps a space for the readers and audiences to question the notion of existence and reality of *The Tempest*.

In *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (1964), Polish Jan Kott promotes a contemporary and postmodern reading of Shakespearean plays. Scholar Kott sketches postmodern elements in Shakespeare rejects the popular autobiographical reading of the play (p. 240) and also deconstructs the idea of reading *The Tempest* as a play of reunion and mercy (p. 238). *The Tempest* signifies a personal, political, social, and cultural conflict and chaos with a dubious treatment of characters. Being a rebel, Caliban is portrayed as a "savage and deformed slave," and being obedient and loyal to Prospero, Ariel enjoys freedom at the end of the play. It is noticed that in *The Tempest*, characters are constructed; the plot is fragmented; actions are controlled; movements are observed, and destiny is predicted. Shakespeare deconstructs form; uses pastiche; portrays paranoia; incorporates intertextuality; projects a panoptical gaze, and illustrates supernatural notions. Therefore, Shakespeare's projection of *The Tempest* is postmodern.

3. Conclusion

William Shakespeare's works are universally acknowledged, considered the representatives of all times and all ages, and influenced global readers and audiences. Therefore, critics, scholars, academics, and students have been rereading, reexamining, retelling, and restaging his plays over the last four centuries. The present venture is a small attempt to examine *The Tempest* as a postmodern text with postmodern elements: anti-formality, pastiche, intertextuality, paranoia, irony, playfulness, puns, wordplays, conspiracy theories, temporal distortion, and supernatural elements create a postmodern aura. Supported by Ihab Hassan and Brian McHale's definition and characterization of postmodernism which have created an opportunity to have a postmodern approach to *The Tempest*, this paper has also illustrated that Shakespeare deconstructs the form: the Christian Doctrine of Trinity and Aristotle's idea of linguistic hierarchy and uses irony and playfulness, puns and wordplays as pastiche which portrayed a postmodern depiction of the play.

Finally, the deconstruction of form; use of pastiche; references to intertextuality and paranoia; projection of the panoptical gaze of Prospero, and the presence of a supernatural and dreamy world in *The Tempest* are especially noteworthy postmodern features. Shakespeare seeks to reveal nature and reality through fantasy and artificiality in an oxymoronic fashion through his play *The Tempest*. Shakespeare, the dramatist of all time and all ages, represents post-modernity in *The Tempest*. Therefore it is quite justified to state that *The Tempest* could be reread as a postmodern text. Portraying *The Tempest* as a postmodern text is a challenging task. Many scholars, critics, and academics do not consider it a postmodern text. They prefer *The Tempest* as a postcolonial play. As there is no previous work on the topic, the researcher has to work hard to prove his point of view. Additionally, the shortage of resource materials hinders the completion of the work. Apart from that, the researcher firmly believes that the present attempt will help future researchers to know more about the Bard of Avon and his works.

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